

L. S. Vygotsky's reader's critique

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Vygotsky's essay on Hamlet (1916) was his first work that was written as a course paper for his undergraduate studies in Shaniavsky University (1914-1917). Considering the investigation lines that the essay opens to the researcher, this paper intends to briefly explore its potential as a psychological study (even though it was not conceived as such), its connections with the contemporary intellectual ambience, particularly the dialogue with the symbolist philosophy of art and Edward Gordon Craig's *mise-en-scène* of Hamlet (1911-1912). Finally I intend to outline interconnections between Vygotsky's analysis and phenomenological aesthetics.

Vygotsky called his critical proposal, presented in *The tragedy of Hamlet, prince of Denmark*, "reader's critique". In his words: "this critique is not nourished by scientific or philosophical knowledge, but by immediate artistic impression. It is an openly subjective critique that does not intend anything; it is a reader's critique." (VIGOTSKI, 1999, p. XVIII). The author outlines its three main characteristics: first, this critique is not concerned with the writer's personality; he considers that "once the work of art is created, it is separated from its author, it is just a possibility that the reader realizes" (VIGOTSKI, 1999, p. XIX). Art is seen as something that possesses inexhaustible symbolic diversity and, thus, cannot be reduced to the interpretation provided by the author, since in aesthetic production "the irrational is more important than the rational" (VIGOTSKI, 1999, p. XIX).

This capacity of comprehending diverse possible contents leads to the second characteristic: the reader's critique does not have to disprove other interpretations. In Vygotsky's words: "when the critic interprets in such a way that his interpretation is one possibility, he is asserting it as a possibility that does not intend to be the only and exclusive. Thus refuses to do critic's criticism." (VIGOTSKI, 1999, p. XXI). The third characteristic refers to the approach of the artistic object. The reader is fundamental, he is responsible for the reproduction, recreation and elucidation of the work. His importance however does not surmount the importance of the objectivity and materiality of the work itself: "In one hand, if the reader is not attached to anything outside the field of the studied work – nor the author's concepts, nor the opinion of other critics – on the other hand, he is entirely attached to the work itself." (VIGOTSKI, 1999, p. XXII). Art possesses an irrational character that does not accept closed and single explanations, so that the act of interpretation has to face its own limitations:

[...] reader's critique does not consider that its purpose is to interpret the work. Interpreting means exhausting and then reading loses its meaning. By recognizing the irrational character of the work of art, the critic is by no means intending to explain it. [...] If Goethe is right to say that "the more inaccessible to reason, more elevated is the work", then elucidating, making it accessible to reason means depreciating it" (VIGOTSKI, 1999, p. XXIV-XXV).

The reader does not intend to provide a definite explanation to the artistic object. He can only offer his subjective impressions, which are intrinsically related to the objectivity of the work. Vygotsky discusses the (im)possibility of transmitting such impressions, the anguish of the word felt by the critic, because “no words are able to transmit that ‘sensitive feeling’ that is alone the real understanding of the work of art [...] James is right to relate this ‘sensitive feeling’ to the field of mystic experiences, marked by what he calls ineffable” (VIGOTSKI, 1999, p. XXV).

Thus the aesthetic experience is parallel with mystic experience: “mystic is inexpressible, the tragic that cannot be transmitted in words [...] the reader-critic is speechless to transmit the ‘inexplicable pleasure’, the unattainable (VIGOTSKI, 1999, p. XXVII). When the critic attempts to talk about the work, he actually does not create, once his discourse cannot resist without the object of study. This discourse is like notes that allow reading. In Hamlet’s case, in particular, Vygotsky indicates that the existing criticism tend to rationalize the tragedy and search for an intelligible link between facts. In his analysis, Vygotsky starts off with the mystery and the unintelligible, without even trying to overcome them.

The mystery and the unintelligible are not veils that involve the tragedy in fog, that should be examined *through* them by lifting them (overcoming them), as it happens in all criticism on Hamlet, but they are the nucleus, the internal center of the tragedy [...] Our starting point is the myth of Hamlet, the reality of Hamlet. Inexplicable original concreteness, the reality of the tragedy is imperiously subjugating due to its inexplicable force of hypnosis and artistic suggestion. (VYGOTSKY, 1999, p. XXIX-XXX)

The undecipherable mystery that permeates the tragedy is not exclusive, but characteristic of every artistic production. Thus the tragedy is untranslatable, as well as the impression it causes. The reader-critic will have to deal with the “anguish of the word” when carrying out his task of “grasping sounds from the inside of the rebellious instrument while he listens with the ‘ear of the soul’ a powerful and sad melody” (VYGOTSKY, 1999, p. XXXV). The critic’s production can be defined as “internal intonations” (VYGOTSKY, 1999, p. XXXVII) of the reading of the tragedy, it is a direction of emotions proposed by the reader-critic.

About the psychological elements that can be identified on the essay, Veresov has indicated the following themes: the idea of individual perception and the impression of the artistic text, and the idea of cultural determinism of the personality (VERESOV, 1999, p. 62). About the perception of the artistic text (what Vygotsky calls “aesthetic reaction” in *Psychology of art*), the author opposes to a certain understanding of the Aristotelic concept of catharsis that is related to purging emotions, since Vygotsky does not seek to overcome the mystery and the unintelligible in the tragedy. The tragic automatism that permeates Hamlet’s actions is not to be explained, but made explicit. The two plans that develop in the tragedy (the concrete world and the other world, represented by the ghost) produce different impressions that are not resolved. For Vygotsky, there is no final purification of emotions, as stated by Aristotle.

Another extremely important point in this critical proposal is the emphasis in the emotional character of the aesthetic experience: “what is important in the tragedy is not

apprehending (unveiling), but sensation” (VYGOTSKY, 1999, p. XXXIV). To develop with this idea, Vygotsky resorts to William James’s studies on mystical experience. According to Kozulin, “Vygotsky’s text is not a scholarly treatise, but rather a case study of the inner experiences of a concerned person – Vygotsky himself – who encounters a cultural phenomenon of mythological proportions” (KOZULIN, 1990, p. 53)

Vygotsky turns to James’s ideas on the mystic experience when referring to the receptor’s sensation before a work of art, “the sensitive feeling” aroused by it, and then when dealing with Hamlet’s mysticism and his inertia. In a footnote he lists all four aspects of the mystical experience identified by James (1999, p. 414-416): 1) ineffability; 2) noetic quality; 3) transiency; 4) passivity. The first aspect was associated with those difficulties intrinsic to the work of a critic, since he has to deal with the impossibility of reporting his aesthetic experience in all its length and power. Also from James comes the idea that the experience has an emotional character, since it is a form of knowledge that occurs through sensitivity. According to James “it resembles the knowledge given to us in sensations more than that given by conceptual thought” (JAMES, 1999, p. 442).

Mysticism in general and its forth characteristic in particular (passivity) are strongly associated to Hamlet by Vygotsky: “Hamlet is a mystic – this determines not only his state of soul in the threshold of a double existence, of two worlds, but also his will in all negative and positive manifestations, in action and in inertia” (VYGOTSKY, 1999, p. 95). For James “the ‘other-worldliness’ encouraged by the mystical consciousness makes this over-abstraction from practical life peculiarly liable to befall mystics in whom the character is naturally passive and the intellect feeble” (JAMES, 1999, p. 450).

It is also noteworthy the absence of all types of psychologization of the artist. Vygotsky does not resort to any psychological models to elucidate the author’s personality and, therefore, his work. This posture will remain unaltered in the future and marks an important position that distinguishes his psychology of art from other approaches. Zenkine indicates the originality of this psychological approach to art that considers the aesthetic point of view in the context of soviet literary criticism (ZENKINE, 1996, p. 31).

Another important aspect of Vygotsky’s essay that can be described is its strong connection with Russian Symbolism. Vygotsky identifies Hamlet in the threshold of two worlds, one temporal and visible and another that determines the first. The tragedy is divided in two: “words, words, words” (Horatio’s narrative), and the rest – silence. The “rest” is the second meaning of the tragedy that cannot be discovered in ideas, in logical concepts, for it is supernatural. This interpretive key is consonant with symbolist thought, since the “unsaid”, the unspeakable is fundamental to the symbolist understanding of art. For Berdyaev “All art is symbolic. It is a bridge between two worlds; it evokes a deeper reality that is where the real authentic lies. The authentic reality can only be expressed by the symbol. It cannot have an immediate representation in art. Art never reflects empiric reality. It always penetrates another world, but this world is accessible to art only through symbolic transpositions.”

Vassili Tolmachov reminds that “symbolon” (σύμβολον) means linking and, thus, the symbol is a manifestation of a link between imperfection and the ideal or, more precisely, “it is an attribute of the aspiration to superior beauty” (TOLMATCHOV, 2005, p. 20). According to Peterson, Merezhkovsky lists the three most important

elements of symbolist art: mystical content, symbols, and a broadening of artistic sensitivity (PETERSON, 1993, p. 16).

Vyacheslav Ivanov, in its turn, assumes that realism in art is the representation of objects in its essence. Therefore the artist is receptive to his object and does not impose his subjectivity. About Shakespeare, he says that “he is a seer of worldly mysteries and a clairvoyant of the spiritual world” (IVANOV, 2005, p. 208). In Vygotsky’s opinion the myth in Hamlet is not an allegory but reality. For Ivanov: “realist symbolism opens a myth in the symbol. Only from the symbol, taken as reality, can the myth grow as from a seed. For the myth is the objective truth about existence. [...] Not by chance, according to Plato, in the harmony of the anti-individualistic world desired by him, the poet’s task is to ‘create myths if he wants to be a poet’.” (IVANOV, 2005, p. 220).

The object of art for Symbolism is still reality, but this is about a different reality, which is closer to *a realibus ad realiora* (“from the real to the more real”, IVANOV, 2005, p. 229), and poetry is conceived as a way to unveil and know reality. To reach this cognitive objective, artistic form is fundamental: “the Symbolist theory revokes the dualism of ‘form and content’, *signum* and *signatum*. The sign acquires its own meaning and has to be considered together with the content that it reflects (POMORSKA, 1972, p. 83).

Another important event in this cultural environment is Gordon Craig’s *mise-en-scène* of Hamlet in the Moscow Art Theatre, in 1912. According to Stanislavsky, Craig has broadened the tragedy’s inner content. Hamlet is not seen as a madman, but has become different from other men because he could see the “other world”, the opposite side of life. From this moment on, reality got a whole new meaning for him. He was eager to decipher the mystery and the meaning of existence and this burden has led him to perplexity and despair (STANISLAVSKI, 1989, p. 457-8). All these ideas discussed by Stanislavsky were present in Vygotsky’s essay: denial of Hamlet’s madness; other-world versus empirical world; reality of the experience of seeing the other-world. Stanislavsky also mentions the mysticism that involves the ghost apparition, which is also important for Vygotsky’s analysis.

Finally, the essay can be considered a “case of phenomenological or existential psychology *par excellence*”, according to Kozulin (1990, p. 51). To develop possible identification points between Vygotsky’s critical proposal and phenomenological aesthetics, some aspects of the essay on Hamlet will be compared to Mikel Dufrenne (1910–1995) and Moritz Geiger’s (1880–1937) views on art. First, the idea of a reader’s critique itself can be related to Dufrenne’s view that “every reader is a potential critic” (2002, p. 169). Both Dufrenne and Vygotsky consider the human capacity of judging, which precedes and presupposes institutionalized critique.

Geiger establishes a classification that distinguishes Aesthetics as an autonomous science, as a subject within Philosophy, and as a field of application for other sciences such as Psychology (GEIGER, 1958, p. 86). Vygotsky develops his ideas in the field of Aesthetics as an autonomous science, since he is concerned with a particular work of art and does not intend to make general assumptions on art or apply psychological concepts to the artistic object. This is also valid for the relation between the work and its author. For Dufrenne, biographical approach “seeks outside the work of art information on the author and ends up by focusing only what enables his understanding or the verification of a general theory of creation.” (DUFRENNE, 2002, p. 194). However neither Vygotsky nor phenomenology authors deny the notion of

authorship; instead they seek this notion in what is presented in the work of art. For Dufrenne the author is not the truth of art, but has his truth *in art* (2002, p. 183).

About the role of the reader/critic, Vygotsky's ideas show parallels with Dufrenne's definition of criticism as "co-daydreaming and deciphering" that updates the primary meaning of imagery or narrative, in a way that "the critic's adventure renews the writer's" (DUFRENNE, 2002, p. 185). Such renewal referred by Dufrenne can be related to Vygotsky's notion of the endless symbolic diversity of the artistic object. The idea that art is an object *for* a conscience is close to Vygotsky's notion that art is a realized possibility, for in both cases there is a non-immanentist view of the artistic object. For Geiger "a sculpture does not have aesthetical meaning as an actual rock, but as something that is given to the contemplator. What matters is appearance not reality" (GEIGER, 1958, p. 88).

The status of art for Vygotsky is parallel to the phenomenological attitude of taking art as a phenomenon. According to Geiger, the key for the construction of Aesthetics as an autonomous science is to turn to the elements that compose the work of art as a phenomenon: "one should not be lead by secondary points of view; it is about effectively sticking to the phenomenon and only to it. This cannot be learned neither through theoretical Aesthetic or Psychology courses, nor by incorporating other's opinions or historical knowledge, but only through one's own activity, one's own analysis" (GEIGER, 1958, p. 98). This extract reveals great affinity between Geiger aesthetical attitude and Vygotsky's refusal of making "critic's criticism".

Dufrenne's idea that the meaning of art "inhabits the words as the essence of the phenomenon: it is there but cannot be extracted to be translated or conceptualized" (DUFRENNE, 2002, p. 197) is close to Vygotsky's view that the critic's activity is limited and art is irreducible to rationality. The mythical character of art is also outlined by Dufrenne: "all great work of art is a myth, the blooming of a symbol in the world. And if the symbol is given to thought, as Kant says, he also refuses thought". For Vygotsky, as a myth art imposes a reality that the reader tries to grasp, but that he will never definitely objectify, for its objectification is the work of art itself.

Dufrenne stands for the idea that art has a meaning, and that this meaning is the critic's horizon. His intention is to apprehend its essence rather than limit himself to listing elements and structures that articulate the work of art. Likewise, Vygotsky's objective is to reach the general spirit of the play, to clarify the mechanism of the tragedy's events, scrutinize the general sense of the tragedy. Such general sense is given in the tragedy itself, it exists in it, in its actions, tone and words. It is the underlying basis of the tragedy, its source.

The sketches of these parallels between Vygotsky's reader's critique and Dufrenne and Geiger's phenomenological aesthetics intended to demonstrate a possibility of dialogue between both proposals, without fully identifying them. It is important to point out the fact that Vygotsky wrote his essay in 1915-16, under the atmosphere of Russian Symbolism and Gordon Craig's *mise-en-scène*. These cultural events strongly marked Vygotsky's impression of Shakespeare's tragedy. In Dufrenne and Geiger's case, the institution of Aesthetics as an autonomous field is at stake, as well as the debate with Structuralism. First and foremost we intended to demonstrate methodological affinities between these proposals.

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