

Introductory note to “The King is Naked” by L. S. Vygotsky

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One cannot but be surprised at the fact that Vygotsky has written a laudatory article on Tolstoy’s critical review of Shakespeare. Tolstoy’s infamous essay is fulfilled with strong assertions on the (lack of) merit of Shakespeare’s achievements as a playwright. Not only he does not consider him a genius, but asserts he should hardly be deemed an artist at all. Vygotsky, in his turn, wrote in 1915 an enthusiastic essay on Hamlet, a tragedy that has knowingly made a strong impression on him throughout his life¹. Nevertheless, despite their (at least apparent) fully contradictory positions, in “The king is naked” Vygotsky boldly states that Tolstoy has discovered Shakespeare as Columbus has discovered America. Such statement arises immediate curiosity upon any reader, be it a Shakespeare critic, who refutes Tolstoy’s views, or a specialist aware of Vygotsky affection towards Shakespeare’s oeuvre. First and foremost Vygotsky praises Tolstoy’s literary and formal perception of Shakespeare. He recognizes that Tolstoy’s primary objective was the moral the rehabilitation of religious drama, and this is what explains the Columbus/America metaphor: alike Columbus, Tolstoy discovered Shakespeare *by chance*, aiming a different target.

Vygotsky highly values the *method* employed by Tolstoy to uncover Shakespeare, his so to speak naïve look, not restrained by the extensive literary tradition that lied behind him. The king is naked before Tolstoy’s eyes. He sees through the pompous clothes, reaches the actual artist and his work. Such method of unveiling was for Vygotsky an important feature (and merit) of Tolstoy’s thinking. It enabled him to set himself apart from the tradition of seeing art as allegory, as a pretext to develop some philosophical, political or psychological issue. Such is the tradition that kills creation as it longs for a hidden meaning and misses what is particular to that artistic object. Its task is *interpreting* rather than *understanding*. Indeed, if we examine Tolstoy’s essay we are bound to agree with Vygotsky on that. Although his target was to discuss the future of religious drama, when he critically reviews Shakespeare’s tragedies, his considerations are strictly literary and formal. Not a statement of moral preaching is written; on the contrary, what we see is a close and attentive examination of plot, characters and language. His conclusion that Shakespeare has written artificial dramas derives primarily from literary appreciation, i.e., from the general rule of dramas according to which

[...] the persons represented in the play should be, in consequence of actions proper to their characters, and owing to a natural course of events, placed in positions requiring them to struggle with the surrounding world to which they find themselves in opposition, and in this struggle should display their inherited qualities. (TOLSTOY, p. 48)

Based on this general rule, Tolstoy identifies the arbitrariness of relations established on Shakespeare’s plays, since they cannot be explained either by the characters or by the natural course of events. This artificiality sets the reader away, prevents him from being contagiously affected by what he sees/reads. Another formal fault that Tolstoy sees on Shakespeare is the absence of individuality of language: “All his characters speak, not their own, but always one and the same Shakespearian, pretentious, and unnatural language, in which not only they could

¹ “Lev Semenovich was very fond of the tragedy of Hamlet, and he retained this love his whole life. His library had a large number of works analyzing Shakespeare’s art, and also some of Shakespeare’s own writings. Lev Semenovich carefully collected the various editions of *Hamlet* and often would reread this immortal tragedy both in the original and in its various translations. He knew many pages by heart.” (VIGODSKAYA; LIFANOVA. Lev Semenovich Vygotsky. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*. March-April, vol. 37, n. 2, 1999, p. 33).

not speak, but in which no living man has ever spoken or does speak” (TOLSTOY, p. 53). He does, however, recognize Shakespeare’s capacity to create scenes that depict the play of emotion,

[...] its increase and alteration, and the combination of many contrary feelings, as expressed correctly and powerfully in some Shakespeare’s scenes, and in the play of good actors, evokes even, if only for a time, sympathy with the persons represented. Shakespeare, himself an actor, and an intelligent man, knew how to express by the means not only of speech, but of exclamation, gesture, and the repetition of words, states of mind and developments or changes of feeling taking place in the persons represented. (TOLSTOY, p. 75)

At this point, already towards the end of the essay, again, not a word is said on morals; not a single statement that could be slightly considered Christian preaching. Tolstoy’s gun is aimed directly at Shakespeare unskillfulness in using playwriting techniques to elicit the sympathy of the reader, not at the philosophical or religious content of his works².

This brief summary gives us enough elements to believe that Tolstoy’s accusations can be considered only apparently opposite to Vygotsky’s appreciation. The first convergence that can be pointed out between their views is the methodological approach. Vygotsky, with his “reader’s critique”, tries to expose the making of Hamlet through a close examination of dramatic procedures. In his analysis the whole critical tradition is kept outside of scope. The same is true for Tolstoy: literary tradition (the “eleven thousand tomes” of profound treatises on Shakespeare) is no more than a starting point, and, when he comments King Lear, he is no longer referring to critics, but solely to the tragedy. This is what enabled him to provide us with an original view, a personal outlook: there is only Tolstoy and Lear, face-to-face, and this is precisely what Vygotsky had in mind with his reader’s critique. One could argue that neither of them could fully escape literary tradition. For Tolstoy it worked as a stimulus for the deconstruction of the aura that surrounded Shakespeare; in Vygotsky’s case the dialogue with tradition can be found everywhere in the footnotes, as if he could not resist it, but at the same time did not want to make it interfere with his own analysis. Thus, we can say that Tolstoy and Vygotsky have somehow made their ways through the same path: they approached their object directly and unrestrained by common sense.

What Vygotsky identifies in Tolstoy’s essay as a refusal to subscribe to a critical tradition that seeks to reveal the meaning behind art, i.e. which aims at interpreting it, is also applicable to his own views on art in general and to the “reader’s critique” in particular³. Both follow Shakespeare’s steps in the construction of the drama, and subject them to close formal scrutiny, so that what they make is fully inscribed in the realm of literary criticism.

Vygotsky’s and Tolstoy’s essays are convergent not only in methodological terms and in the nature of their relationship with prior literary tradition; their conclusions can also be

² “Thoughts and sayings may be appreciated, I will answer, in a prose work, in an essay, a collection of aphorisms, but not in an artistic production, the object of which is to elicit sympathy with that which is represented. Therefore the monologs and sayings of Shakespeare, even did they contain very many deep and new thoughts, which they do not, do not constitute the merits of an artistic, poetic production. On the contrary, these speeches, expressed in unnatural conditions, can only spoil artistic work.” (TOLSTOY, L. N. *Tolstoy on Shakespeare*. New York & London: Funk & Wagnalls company, 1906, p. 77)

³ “[...] 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, L. S. *A Tragédia de Hamlet, príncipe da Dinamarca*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1999, p. XXIV-XXV).

compared. What Tolstoy sees as arbitrariness and artificiality is seen by Vygotsky as the internal rule of the tragedy, as the very soul of the dram. According to Vygotsky, absolutely everything in the plot of Hamlet is subject to the “will of the tragedy”. They have both perceived the same phenomenon, the same idiosyncratic mark of Shakespeare’s works. However, Tolstoy was lead to a negative assessment of these characteristics as a result of his insistence on trying to make Shakespeare’s tragedies fit the general rules of drama created precisely by that critical tradition to which he was trying to oppose. Vygotsky developed Tolstoy’s conclusions, took them to the next level as he freed Shakespeare from paradigms inapplicable to his work.