SOCIALIST READINGS OF SHAKESPEARE: HARD-LINE VERSUS ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT
This paper sets out to trace the slow emancipation of critical discourse in Shakespeare criticism in Romania from the dominance of Soviet socialist realism in the fifties and sixties. The first section refers to the difficult fifties and the limited ground of independence and negotiation that Romanian academics managed to gain. The second part makes reference to two turning points in the theatre and theatre criticism. Like elsewhere in the socialist bloc, a wedge was gradually driven between Shakespeare studies and Shakespeare performances. The paper, however, intends to suggest that bridges between new approaches in the theatre and in critical readings of Shakespeare were established eventually, yet they didn't occur in the narrowly professional area of academic studies, but rather in that of cultural journalism.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare socialist realism, performances, studies, Eastern Europe, Romania

Hard-line socialist realist readings of Shakespeare

The socialist realist Shakespeare constructed in the 1930s in the Soviet Union was imposed as a form of colonizing discourse all over socialist countries (Mao's China included) in the late forties and fifties. The "prescriptive" definition of Shakespeare (Hilsky 152), first established by Anatoly A. Smirnov in 1934, right after the official imposition of Socialist Realism as official dogma, was extended and refined by Mikhail Morozov and Alexander Anikst. Morozov and Anikst were translated in all the languages of the socialist bloc and were compulsory references in writings on Shakespeare until the early sixties.[1] In Romania it was Anikst that was the major textbook taught at the English department in the fifties and early sixties, replacing any Anglo-American or Romanian approach/criticism.

[1] Morozov was published in Polish in 1950. I could not find any Romanian translation of Morozov's essays; they were not published but were circulated as typed material by the party activists in charge with the theatres and literature.

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Essential to the socialist realist appropriation of Shakespeare was the rhetoric of idealization that configured Shakespeare as a great hero of socialism. Equally important was the embedding of Shakespeare in the "progressive" Renaissance and not aligning him with the reactionary forces of the feudal period.[2] According to the official position, formulated in Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, history, just like "nature," "is in a state of continuous movement and change, of continuous renewal and development," and "the process of development should not be understood as a movement in a circle, not as a simple repetition of what has already occurred but as an onward and upward movement, as a transition from an old qualitative state to a new qualitative state…." The rationale behind the teleological projection of history is the legitimization of the socialist system which replaces the capitalist system "just as at one time the feudal system was replaced by the capitalist system." The process of transition from one system to another is governed by the "law of development" and is a "natural and inevitable phenomenon." Historical change is largely understood as the replacement of "the old" by "the new," these categories being projected in a Manichean opposition and invested with unambiguous moral and political significances. "Old ideas and theories … which serve the interests of the moribund forces of society" and "hamper the development and progress of society" are opposed to "the new and advanced ideas and theories which serve the interests of the advanced forces of society" (Stalin). This grid was both rigid and flexible enough to allow the instrumentalization of social and cultural history to the particular needs and interests of the Stalinist government. For example, one of the reasons for categorizing medieval culture as "reactionary," while Renaissance culture was privileged as progressive, was the fact that the Stalinist ideal society of the thirties was envisaged as the continuation and development of the sixteenth-century century European Renaissance (Ostrovsky 63).

Soviet Shakespeare had to be endowed with the features of the "new man," the ideal revolutionary hero, as he was considered to have anticipated "the progressive man." Consequently, Shakespeare is a "militant," offering support to "revolutionary" actions and to "people of the new era"; his plays openly protest against social exploitation and racial discrimination (Morozov, *Shakespeare on the Soviet Stage*). They promote a "scientific," "objective," rationalist view, fighting religious mysticism and idealism or at least opposing reason to "wild passions."

Shakespeare's tragedies, let alone the history plays, are "optimistic" (Ostrovsky 62) and affirm a "positive view of humanity" which transcended class bounds and anticipated a socialist culture. The endings of the tragedies are similar to that of the "life asserting," "joyous" comedies.[3] The socialist realist approach to characters

[2] Both Smirnov and Morozov ("The Dynamism of Shakespeare's Characters") devote ample space in their essays to the question whether Shakespeare was an ideologue of the (feudal and therefore reactionary) aristocracy or of the (capitalist and therefore progressive) bourgeoisie.

[3] See also Morozov, *Shakespeare on the Soviet Stage.*

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embraces the same idealizing rhetoric, emphasizing their optimism, and vitality. Questionable characters like Fortinbras and Malcolm are disambiguated and projected as representatives of forces of renewal. Smirnov, for example, had insisted that in Macbeth the only corrupt "cankers" are the title hero and his wife, whereas the body of society is healthy, with Duncan and Malcolm being "wholesome and energetic heroes" (Smirnov 73). The leitmotiv of canonical socialist readings is the "idea of movement and development," so that "dynamism" and "uninterrupted ascent" inform both Shakespeare's plot and character and suggest a dialectical sense of history. This indirectly asserts the continuity between Shakespeare and "socialist man," between Shakespeare's world and that of socialist society; in his readings the plays prefigure "the dreams of the coming victory of humanity" (Morozov, "The Dynamism of Shakespeare's Characters").

The above grid of reading had to be followed to the letter with no changes or omissions accepted. The "keywords" were repeated like a mantra in the Shakespeare criticism all over the Eastern bloc. For example, in the GDR Alexander Abusch rehearsed all the arguments of socialist realist Shakespeare, privileging the idea that his plays represent "history with necessity's iron passage from the feudal past to periods of transition and then to a higher stage of development" (Abusch 23). Abusch turns against "all nihilistic readings of Shakespeare," and he particularly objects to Jan Kott's and Peter Brook's hybridized Shakespeare. To place on the same footing "the great realistic and humanistic Shakespeare with the absurd à la Beckett" is nothing less than "a falsification of Shakespeare" and is to be forcefully rejected. Brook's performance of *King Lear* is an instance of "the latest performance style of late bourgeois decadence." Any failure to condemn this (i.e. Kott's and Brook's) position is tantamount to "opening the door to a bourgeois, reactionary world view;" in other words it will incur dire political consequences. What is at stake is defending the established historicizing approach from Kott's "primitive and violent modernization," which opened up the past to present inquiries and established undesirable links with the present. The temptation to modernize and establish a contemporary perspective, be it in translation, in theatrical performance or critical discourse, was anathema in the eyes of the defenders of socialist criticism. "Contemporary" was readily understood as a codename for political and furthermore was perceived to forge unwanted links with Western/modernist, experimental literature, which "revisionists" like Jan Kott wanted to introduce into the socialist realist template. It is against this background that one should understand Abusch's insistence on the need to "reject all such attempts" at decadent reading.

In Czechoslovakia, Střibrnỳ largely rehearsed the conservative Marxist-Leninist notions of a dialectical sense of history permeating Shakespeare's plays along with "humanism" and optimism: "Shakespeare introduces a sense of dialectical dynamics in history and opens the possibility for man's active intervention in history." In *Richard III* as well as in the Henry plays "Shakespeare was putting the whole of his art into a patriotic interpretation of English history" and "emerges from these plays as the great poet of the people, strengthening the unity of the nation" (Střibrnỳ 29).

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In Romania theatre critics and scholars duly toed the line in the fifties. A striking example is provided by Tudor Vianu, one of the most prestigious academics in the interwar period, who was first reduced to silence in the early fifties and employed his time translating Shakespeare's Roman plays and then revised his liberal humanist views to suit the times. His essays of 1954 and 1956, later re-published in 1958, show the attempt to negotiate between the hard-line dogmatism of a socialist realist Shakespeare and a more generous view, which would include Shakespeare in a more cosmopolitan perspective and would indirectly recuperate the positions championed before the communist takeover. His approach is a comparative one, Vianu being credited with setting up the discipline of comparative literature, called the "universal history of literature" (following Auerbach and Wellek) in Romania. Reading his essays and stumbling over and again upon doctrinaire definitions of Shakespeare, one becomes aware of the political compromises he had to make in order to have at least a fraction of his views become audible. Thus in 1954, in his essay "The Pathos of Truth," he compares Hamlet to Oedipus and concludes the essay in a strong Stalinist militant tone, brandishing "the old world which defends itself against progressive truth" (Vianu 19). In "Shakespeare and the Anthropology of Renaissance," he turns against the "bourgeois critics" that placed Shakespeare in either the medieval or the baroque period (both equally backward from a Stalinist perspective and hence totally inappropriate for Shakespeare). Important theatre critics before 1948, such as Protopopescu and Ion Marin Sadoveanu (both banned in the fifties), had also placed Shakespeare in this intellectual and cultural background. Vianu has to "break free" of the previous Romanian and international tradition and argue for the humanist features of Shakespeare, that place him firmly in the Renaissance. Shakespeare turns against the medieval spiritualism and asserts a materialist, naturalist vision of man, in line with the "new science" promoted by Francis Bacon (materialist, naturalist, new science, Bacon—were all key words that had to appear in an essay on Shakespeare). Once again, the conclusion of the essay seems to have been written by a party activist, when carefully revising and censoring Vianu's essay:

> thus Shakespeare is related to the renaissance and not to the baroque, a period of regression of the scientific understanding of the world, an age of mysticism and obscurantism. A representative of the baroque was Calderon, a poet of the Spain of the inquisition; Calderon cultivated the superstitious mysticism that raged in his period. With Shakespeare the renaissance prolonged its life into the 17th century.
>
> (Vianu 32, my translation)

Quoting the Soviet critics Smirnov and Morozov extensively seemed to be a strategy that Romanian Shakespeareans adopted in order to carry out a type of research that might have run the risk of being called "formalist" and therefore "decadent." This was Leon Levițchi's approach in an essay published in the newly set up journal of *Romance and Germanic Philology* in 1958. (Mention must be made of the fact that the abstracts of the essays published in the journal were in Russian and another foreign language—English/French or German, which suggested the

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gradual emancipation of the English studies from the dominance of the Slavic and Soviet studies that had preceded them in the Stalinist period). Levițchi committed the serious sin of focusing exclusively on the use of grammatical and stylistic repetitions in Shakespeare's comedies at the expense of an ideologically charged analysis of the social context that any study of Shakespeare had to emphasize. He tried to bolster up his ideologically tenuous position by quoting Smirnov and Morozov in Russian three times, as well as by making reference to essays included in a Soviet *History of Philosophy*, issued in Moscow, 1950. At the same time, his close reading of the text was given further legitimacy by its association with linguistics, which unlike the slippery literary studies enjoyed the prestige of a "positive science."

In the same issue of the journal on Romance and Germanic philology Alexandru Duțu gestured to the political détente and opening up to the West that followed Stalin's death by writing a lengthy review of the first ten issues of *Shakespeare Survey*. (The respective issues are nowhere to be found in the Romanian libraries, which suggests two possibilities: either Duțu translated a review that appeared in another journal or he had managed to acquire some of the issues on his own). The reception of British criticism is duly framed by the emphasis on the dogmatic socialist realist positions: the essays included lacked the necessary social dimension and indulged in sterile formalism. There were some noteworthy exceptions made by Morozov's and other socialist critics' essays from Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland (Duțu 150).

Up until the seventies philological studies on Shakespeare's plays did not go beyond the two timid attempts outlined above to circumvent the restrictions of socialist realist criticism. The most important breakthrough was achieved in the theatre in the sixties and in the journals dealing with theatrical productions of Shakespeare. Socialist realism and attacks against "revisionist positions" still made significant comebacks, but by the late sixties they were reduced to the isolated voices of a few hardliners.

Alternative positions to the socialist realist canonical views

Liviu Ciulei's 1961–1962 production of *As You Like It* signalled not only a major departure from the socialist realistic understanding of Stanislavski's realism on the stage but also an equally important rethinking of approaches to Shakespeare's plays. In the context of the short-lived "mini-liberalization" of the time, the production afforded the luxury of an extended debate on Shakespeare and on how to stage his plays. Some of the reviewers of the play in the journal *Teatrul* were to see "the humanist ideas" of the text abandoned and the "powerful satirical elements and the deep philosophical meditation" made short shrift of the "outcry against despotism and the arbitrary in the play was muted, the plea for freedom, truth and social justice

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could not be heard loud enough" (Alexandrescu 74–78, my translation).[4] The officially prescribed reading of the Shakespearean text was thus perceived to have been betrayed in favour of an experiment in stage design and directing. The introduction of suggestiveness and of theatrical visuality, the two major innovative features of Ciulei's production, was instantly recognized as generating a kind of indeterminacy in Shakespeare's text that could prove ideologically unsettling. The official critics' objections to the *As You Like It* production focused on its "ideological uncertainty."[5] Valentin Silvestri and Mircea Alexandrescu complained about the ideological confusion that Ciulei's "misplaced" emphases and "incorrect" treatment of themes brought about. Love was not only "unduly" foregrounded in the production, but it did not display the necessary "dramatic conflict that suggested social clashes." The courtiers were "duly mocked at," but so were the peasants, the representatives of the people, which rendered the social message confusingly ambiguous.

Other critics hailed Ciulei's defence of autonomous and self-referential art as it articulated the emerging opposition against the deterministic and ideologically fraught historicizing approach of socialist realism. Whereas historicism was perceived as a form of soviet colonization, aestheticizing modernism was associated with dissidence and with the officially maligned yet secretly embraced values of western culture.[6]

Given the particular context of the emergence of Romanian theatrical dissidence and of oppositional readings of Shakespeare, it is not surprising that Brecht's theoretical views on historicizing had a rather limited purchase. Brecht's alienation effects were perceived as too dogmatic on the Romanian stage (Berlogea

[4] Other critics complained that Rosalind had displaced Jacques, who was demoted to the position of a marginal, negative character. They found that the focus on Rosalind and the theme of love prevented the production from giving due credit to "Shakespeare's progressive philosophical position" and marred the understanding of the play "in the light of Marxist-Leninist theory" (Silvestri 77). Jacques was generally considered the embodiment of the Renaissance thinker and anticipated Hamlet. He was most valued for being a satirist of the despotism and "retrograde society in England."

[5] Valentin Silvestri (13) phrased this objection, which along with the reproach with "baroque and eclectic mise-en-scène" could have had disastrous consequences for the production.

[5] Nevertheless, Ciulei always insisted on the importance of the views and concerns of contemporary spectators. One of the reasons why he turned against the naturalistic theatre was that its archaeological reconstruction of the past left out an important component—namely the spectators who are no longer those of the world that is recuperated on the stage. In an interview commenting on the production of a *Midsummer Night's Dream* in Bucharest he stated that he was trying "to identify the questions that our times resonate with" (quoted in Popescu 37).

[5] Cf. Marian Popescu's conclusion that "Ciulei, Pintilie, Esrig or Penciulescu gave meaning to culture under hostile circumstances" (36).

[6] Ciulei defended one of his "inventions," the heroines' appearing barefooted on the stage, by mentioning Peter Hall's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where actors wearing Elizabethan costumes also went barefooted. See Silvestri (4).

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77). His work on the epic theatre was translated into Romanian as late as 1968. In point of Shakespearean scholarship, Weimann's ground-breaking work, which reprocesses Brecht's theatrical views, has not been translated at all. In the sixties it was the West German Wolfgang Clemens, Wilson Knight and Jan Kott that were avidly read and mobilized as resources against dogmatic Soviet criticism.

The second important turning point in reading Shakespeare was David Esrig's production of *Troilus and Cressida* in 1965, preceded by an essay ("Fișă pentru un viitor spectacol Shakespearean" / "Outline for a future Shakespeare production") that he published in the weekly cultural journal *Contemporanul* in April 1964. What was novel about the essay was first the undisguised Kottian reading of the play: Kott had hitherto never been directly mentioned in Romania, unless in Mihai Novicov's diatribes against Polish revisionism. Kott's present-oriented Shakespeare readings, grounded in performance, marked a significant breakthrough. Because, rather despite the official rejection, Kott stayed influential with theatre people and the keywords of his reading of *Hamlet*—political manoeuvrings, surveillance, and Fortinbras as a totalitarian ruler—informed most of the productions of *Hamlet* in the Socialist bloc up until the 1989 change in political system.

Esrig took up Kott's and Brook's hybridization of Shakespeare with the Theatre of the Absurd and developed it in the carnivalesque register of the theatre of the avant-garde. The key perspective on his new reading of Shakespeare was the grotesque as developed in the Theatre of the Absurd and Kott's work. Esrig quotes Kott extensively in his essay in *Contemporanul*, relying upon the early French version of *Shakespeare our Contemporary*: "In tragedy the protagonists die, but the moral order is preserved. Their death confirms the existence of the absolute. In this amazing play Troilus neither dies himself, nor does he kill the unfaithful Cressida. There is no catharsis. Even the death of Hector is not fully tragic…. The grotesque is more cruel than tragedy" (Kott 67). The identification of the world as cruelly grotesque will be the catchword for Romanian productions of Shakespeare well into the eighties.

While the more avant-garde minded critics around *Contemporanul* lent their support to Esrig's re-reading and almost rewriting of the socialist realist Shakespeare, others perceived it as defective in discharging the proper ideological function the theatre was assigned in a socialist society. The production's treatment of "the violence and inhumanity of war" was found wanting on account of the overall flippant and "cheerful" atmosphere.[7] A number of directors and actors toed the official line and declared Esrig's production to be "non-educational" and even dangerous.[8] Its distorted representation of Shakespeare's humanist anti-war message threatened to corrupt the response of young people and pervert their relation to Shakespeare. The production was near to being banned and was rescued by the fact that it won a prestigious prize at the festival *Théâtre des Nations*, organized the same year in Paris. The theatrical and political context in which Esrig produced his *Troilus*

[7] See Narti and Pîrvulescu.
[8] See Mugur and Cocea.

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and Cressida was therefore still volatile. One of its greatest achievements was the introduction of a new theatrical and critical vocabulary in both staging and discussing Shakespeare.

By 1968, when Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* was translated into Romanian and reviewed in the most prestigious literary journal, *România literară*, concepts such as the "grotesque" and "political realism" had become deeply entrenched in the literary jargon of Romanian critics. Interestingly, Kott's reviewer, Nicolae Manolescu, was not a Shakespearean but a leading critic of contemporary Romanian literature. The Shakespearean scholars in the academia did not publicly turn against Kott as they did in other socialist countries; they merely ignored the publication of the translation.

Manolescu praises Kott's alignment of Shakespeare with the theatre of the absurd, favouring Ionesco rather than Beckett, who was little known in Romania. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* is further welcomed as an intervention in the debate on the nature of realism carried on in both theatrical and literary journals. The issues identified in Kott's volume, such as history "as a tragic farce," the absence of freedom of choice in the context of a "monstrous [historical] necessity" and the grotesque as another "face of realism" were in fact the most debated topics in Romanian literary and theatrical criticism. One can conclude that, by 1968, Shakespeare had become fully "contemporary."

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