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## Hamlet and Soviet Humanism

The “thaw” slips farther back into History. Displaced from our attention by the renewed obscurantism, those heady days are seldom studied any more. This is unfortunate. For, it seems to me, it is particularly now, as a counter to the broadening repression, that we should gather and preserve the achievements of that hopeful decade. It is in this vein that I want to go back to the period and recall a dramatic and brilliant expression of the liberal, “thaw” spirit, as well as a splendid contribution to the rich gallery of Russian Aesopian polemics: Soviet Shakespeare criticism and, especially, the revival of sound and insightful commentaries on *Hamlet* by Soviet critics and playwrights.

With the refreshing candor that so distinguished much of the “thaw” writing, Soviet authors themselves explained the virtual ban on the play that Stalin imposed:

The contention during these years was that *Hamlet* could not and should not occupy the same place in the theater that it held, for example, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In contrast with heroes of other great Shakespearean tragedies, *Hamlet*, it was said, with his tragic doubts and indecisiveness, his inability to see concrete ways of eradicating evil, was distant from contemporary Soviet audiences that were filled with active courage, optimism, and a sense of clear purpose in life and that looked to Shakespeare for “a real hero,” not “Hamletism,” for them synonymous with vacillation and passive reflection. One recalls listening to the frequent arguments that took place shortly before the beginning of the Great Fatherland War about the advisability of performing *Hamlet*. Why should the attention of the public be drawn to this image of vacillation, this man standing in doubt before the choice of a means of struggle; why should the public be drawn to this person in that menacing, incandescent atmosphere of imminent war with Fascism, when we had to foster not vacillating, self-doubting temperaments, but sound, manly, heroic personalities, “men of action,” who fearlessly, intrepidly advanced toward their goal? It is enough to recall that an offhand remark by Stalin in the spring of 1941 questioning the performance of *Hamlet* at that time by the Moscow Arts Theater was sufficient to end rehearsals and to postpone the performance indefinitely. In the following years, the very idea of showing on the stage a *thoughtful*, reflective hero who took nothing on faith, who scrutinized intently the life around him in an effort to discover for

himself, without outside “prompting,” the reasons for its defects, separating truth from falsehood, the very idea seemed almost “criminal.”<sup>1</sup>

All this changed radically after Stalin’s death. “From the middle of the fifties the theaters have been seized feverishly by Hamletism,” the author of this revealing passage goes on to say, and the reason for this “immense popularity” was simply that *Hamlet* “answered the most vital demands of the time; it corresponded profoundly to the new mood of society, possessed by an ardent desire to re-establish norms of truth and justice and freed from the yoke of suspicion and disbelief.” One of the most prominent Shakespeare critics in the Soviet Union, A. Anikst, explained the “burning” interest of Soviet audiences in *Hamlet* in much the same way: *Hamlet* “corresponded to the mood of society in the country, intensely engrossed in a decisive struggle against evil and injustice in our life.”<sup>2</sup> In the words, finally, of yet another leading authority in the field, I. Wertzman, “*Hamlet* is nearer to us than any other of Shakespeare’s heroes, both in his strengths and in his weaknesses. . . . If it is so easy to come to love *Hamlet*, it is because we sense in him something of ourselves; and if at times he is so difficult to understand, it is, similarly, because we do not, as yet, know ourselves too well, or rather, like the ostrich, fear such knowledge.”<sup>3</sup>

Stalin liquidated *Hamlet*: there was no place in the closed society for one who questioned and vacillated. Beginning with a Leningrad performance of *Hamlet* in April 1954, under Kozintsev’s direction, *Hamlet* became a “brother-in-arms,” to use Wertzman’s phrase (p. 130), in the arduous and tortuous efforts of Soviet society to liquidate Stalinism. It would unjustly depreciate the value of Soviet Shakespeare criticism to confine it to such narrowly political concerns: there is a far wider relevance, as the quotations in this essay should reveal. Nevertheless, one can hardly avoid the conclusion that this criticism has been greatly influenced by the fate of Soviet man in the Stalinist society and that it is, at least in part, purposely intended as an assault on the remnants of that dreadful era.

What is rotten in Elsinore, in the opinion of Soviet critics, is the deep and pervasive moral corruption of its people, and the cause of this corruption they find not in class relations, in feudal or capitalist exploitation, or in the nature of private property, but in the tyranny of its criminal ruler:

A feeling that the foundations of healthy, normal life have been undermined pervades the entire tragedy. *Hamlet* senses this more acutely than others. He sees signs of the disintegration of life’s foundations in every-

1. N. N. Chushkin, *Gamlet-Kachalov* (Moscow, 1966), p. 309.

2. A. Anikst, “*Gamlet*,” in *Shekspirovskii sbornik* (Moscow, 1961), p. 97.

3. I. Vertsman, “*K problemam ‘Gamlet,’*” in *Shekspirovskii sbornik* (1961), p. 129.

thing, down to the smallest detail, but above all in the corruption of people. . . . He knows that King Claudius is not only an insignificant, paltry human being, but a criminal as well, and that to him belongs the right of determining the fate of all his subjects. Alongside this king and murderer is his prime minister Polonius, a vacuous, banal character, in all things totally obsequious before the powerful of this world. . . . For Hamlet, Polonius is the fullest embodiment of servilism, slavish officiousness before whoever is in power. A murderer rules the country, and he is the norm for all those standing near the throne—Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Osric. Such is the pinnacle of power. Here everything is concentrated in the person of the ruler—a criminal. To him homage is rendered, and in his hands are the fortune or misfortune, life or death for those who live in the land. Hamlet is fully justified in his conclusion: “Denmark is a prison.” Iniquity consumes the body of society. . . . As the King is, so is the society dependent on him. In such a world honesty disappears. . . . What is involved here is not personal relations between individuals, but interrelations having a social character. One man is raised above the others, and the terror of life for Hamlet is the fact that the fate of the people depends on the whim and caprice of those who have not the slightest moral right to that power. (Anikst, p. 75)

Such judgments as these by Anikst can be read over and over again in these Soviet commentaries on the play. For Wertzman, Hamlet is the hero who sees beneath the surface of things into the hidden immoralities of his time, one who is fully aware of the “demagogy” of “tyrants, always ready to kill anyone they want to kill on the pretext that it is ‘for the good of society’” (p. 113). G. M. Kozintsev, the director of the Soviet film of *Hamlet* that so impressed the world, hammered away at this political theme and its moral accompaniment more persistently than anyone else. The following are excerpts from his collection of articles, significantly entitled *Our Contemporary: William Shakespeare*:

The architecture of Elsinore—not walls, but ears in the walls. There are doors so that one can eavesdrop behind them, windows so that one can spy through them. The guards are the walls. Every sound gives birth to echoes, reverberations, whispers, rustling. . . . Claudius and his nobles inhabit something like a vacuum. In this airless space—guards, watchdogs. . . . We must film the king surrounded by flatterers and cowardly courtiers, dull-witted secret police. . . . Polonius, like any minister serving a tyrant, lives in mortal fear of Claudius. Fear—a general, mutual guarantee—is the very air of Elsinore.<sup>4</sup>

With his understandable obsession with the “evil power of the state,” and

4. Grigori Kozintsev, *Nash sovremennik: Viliam Shekspir*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1966), pp. 276, 277, 307, 320.

“the state with its armies, police, and celebrations,” it is no wonder that Kozintsev criticized Laurence Olivier for having in his own production of *Hamlet* “cut the theme of government, which I find most interesting of all” (pp. 289, 326, 286). But no less disturbing than this “prison,” as Kozintsev characterizes Elsinore, is the demoralization of its inmates: “Metaphors for gangrene, decay, and decomposition fill the tragedy. Researches into the poetic images show that concepts of sickness—unto death—and decomposition dominate in *Hamlet*. . . . What is noble and spiritual has disappeared from life. What is dreadful is not the beastly crimes but the day-to-day relationships that lack humanity. Decorative words form merely an appearance of humanity and nobility. And these are lies . . . Hamlet wants to make people stop lying” (pp. 173, 175).<sup>5</sup>

Repeatedly, in paraphrases, analogies, and metaphors, Soviet critics portray and denounce all this “vileness and corruption,” this “moral degeneration” that makes life “a horrible nightmare” in Elsinore.<sup>6</sup> But this impassioned onslaught is only the background for the fundamental concern: Hamlet himself. What should a man of conscience do in this “prison”? Here is the real question that Hamlet poses for the Soviet mind, and by so doing he adds yet another tragic hero to the long list of “heroes of our time” through whom Russian writers have tried so long, desperately, and vainly to discover “What is to be done?” As corruption defines Elsinore, conscience does Hamlet. Hamlet is “a titan of conscience,” in Wertzman’s words (p. 122), and toward the close of his fine article he explicitly associates Hamlet’s moral search both with the familiar obsessions of the earlier Russian intelligentsia and with the most urgent concerns of Soviet society today:

In one way or another, Hamlet’s words are not said in vain. They agitate our minds, turn our vision from “appearances” to “inner reality,” serve as an example of an impassioned, profound, personal response to the ethical problems in life and politics, and evoke in us a persistent skep-

5. Kozintsev seems to consider Polonius and Osric even more repulsively demoralized than the tyrant, Claudius himself. “A terrible image, the power of inertia,” Polonius is the character through whom “Hamlet studies the nature of groveling. He is the habitual spy, who sniffs about, peeks furtively, eavesdrops.” What Polonius is for the present, Osric is for the future, “the new generation of Elsinore.” One of the many “bullies and cowards” in Shakespeare’s gallery, he is typical of the “obsequious, power-hungry, young men” who are above all distinguished by “their mindlessness.” “Osric has no opinion of his own about anything, even about whether or not it is hot or cold or about the shape of the clouds. He is content to be the echo of high-placed judgments. He is one of a generation brought up in the belief that to think is dangerous and to feel, senseless.” *Ibid.*, pp. 262, 269, 330, 214.

6. Vertzman, “K problemam ‘Gamlet,’” p. 111; Anikst, “Gamlet,” pp. 71, 75, 88; Kozintsev, *Nash sovremennik*, pp. 172–75, 192–94.

ticism toward what others like to call well-being. Although one should not reduce all the "accursed questions" [the classic nineteenth-century phrase] in life to questions of conscience, nor to this alone should the tragedy of Hamlet be reduced, they do nevertheless occupy in it the most important place. And since even now the moral scales are far from having weighed all varieties of hypocrisy and despotism, engendered by the course of history, there is every justification for considering Hamlet our brother-in-arms in the struggle for honesty and justice in human relations. (pp. 131–32)

In an article on inner monologues and ways to communicate them, D. Urnov describes Hamlet's monologues as variations on ultimate concerns: "self-sacrifice, moral duty, the meaning of existence, questions that in the last analysis merge into a choice of 'What is nobler?' It is as a search for an answer to this question that the tragedy unfolds. What is paramount for Hamlet is honesty with himself, the preservation of truth in the court of moral objectivity." And as his guide in this search for what is nobler, his "only counsel is his conscience."<sup>7</sup> As Kozintsev is the most explicit in denouncing the oppression and banality of the state prison, he is also the most dramatic in portraying the individual's response to them:

"Conscience? What is conscience? I make it myself. Then why do I torment myself? From habit. The universal, seven-thousand-year-old human habit. Then we will get out of the habit and we will be gods." (The words of Ivan Karamazov.)

Hamlet defends the universal human habit. He does not permit Claudius and Gertrude the stature of gods. This is his activity, aim, and revenge.

The King and Queen understood that it is not they themselves who manufacture conscience. It is seven thousand years old. (p. 278)

If, as we say, *Othello* is a tragedy of jealousy, *Macbeth* of ambition, then *Hamlet* is the tragedy of conscience. (p. 298)

It was possible to swim with the current, to live without thinking, and even quite comfortably. To accept as necessary what existed in fact, without thinking about it, without searching into the essence of things that were beyond the power of one individual to alter, to be concerned only about oneself or, at best, those nearest one. And then in this cozy little realm one might find peace for oneself. But there were people driven by the force of all that vast life about them, by the force of history: these could not live reconciled to the general injustice they so sensitively felt. And if the conscience of a man did not grow deaf and dumb, then he, with all the strength that was in him, cursed the inhumanity. And he cursed himself if he could not fight it. (p. 208)

7. D. Urnov, "Mysl' i monolog," *Shekspirovskii sbornik* (1961), p. 178.

Summarizing in a sentence this central theme of his thoughts about *Hamlet*, Kozintsev closed his most important article on the play with the line: "Hamlet is a tocsin that arouses conscience" (p. 217). Through it all one hears an echo of Evtushenko's famous lines:

True, twenty years on earth is not so long,  
but I reviewed, reweighed the life I'd led:  
the things I'd said when saying them was wrong,  
the things I didn't say but should have said.<sup>8</sup>

But we are still far from an answer to "What is to be done?" It is fine to criticize those who adjust to prison life, to label their submissive existence a "cozy, little realm" or, as Urnov does, a "sleep" (pp. 177-78) that Hamlet was denied by his merciless conscience, his refusal to let anyone "equate a man with a flute" (Kozintsev, p. 154; Wertzman, p. 123). But what should Hamlet and those who share his burdensome lot do against the sea of troubles? Was he wrong for not at once acting forthrightly and violently? In approaching this perennial issue of Hamlet's indecisiveness, Soviet critics usually turn to Belinsky's three-phase interpretation of Hamlet's development. According to this view, Hamlet progressed from his naïve, Wittenberg-bred optimism, through the pessimism, crippling doubt, and obsessive reflection caused by his shocking encounter with the evils of the world, to a final, mature understanding that permitted him, at last, to act. In spite of their reverence for Belinsky and their ritualistic citations of his treatment of Hamlet, Soviet critics do not accept his portrait of Hamlet's final resolution, mature action, and revived optimism. They acknowledge that conscience crippled Hamlet, as it did not Laertes and Fortinbras, both of whom act boldly and precipitously to revenge *their* fathers.

But are Laertes and Fortinbras therefore superior to Hamlet? Do Soviet critics accept Goethe's view, which they often quote, that Hamlet simply lacked the character strong enough to bear this charge of honor vengeance? Long and hard experience in their own Elsinore, which, as we have seen, has led them to acknowledge in Hamlet something of themselves, has made Soviet critics reluctant to take this position. "Laertes demonstrates energy, force, but acting exclusively out of a thirst for vengeance, he merely increases the sum of evil that fills the world," Anikst argues (p. 79). And Kozintsev: "The madness of Laertes: a furious dash toward a senseless goal. . . . A bloody, filthy mask of vengeance, twisted in grimace. The eyes of a madman. The madness of the rebels (crown whom instead of Claudius? . . . Laertes?)" (p. 317). As for Fortinbras, "he fights for a trifle and risks both his own life and the lives

8. From Evtushenko's "Stantsiia zima" as translated in Hugh McLean and Walter N. Vickery, eds., *The Year of Protest, 1956: An Anthology of Soviet Literary Materials* (New York, 1961), p. 122.

of thousands of others for the sake of a bit of land where there is not even room enough to bury all those who would perish in the battle" (Anikst, p. 89). "Hamlet would have been just as out of place in a world of men like Fortinbras as he was in a world of men like Claudius" (Wertzman, p. 124). After all, Anikst reminds us, it was madness in Don Quixote to have "only one solution for all situations in life—to fight," and the usual result of this response, moreover, was that "instead of helping people, he merely caused them harm." Neither Quixote nor Hamlet achieved his end by violence. Quixote "failed to achieve his because he lacked a vital quality—a sense of reality, a knowledge and understanding of it." In Hamlet's case, he

fulfilled his duty of vengeance in the end and killed the king. But did he resolve as well that "higher purpose" that he had set himself? Did he destroy the evil he fought: "the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, . . . the law's delay, the insolence of office, and the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes"? Hamlet takes the life of one after another—Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Laertes, Claudius—all those belonging to the world of evil and acting, willy-nilly, as its tools. But does evil disappear from life along with them? This Hamlet does not know—and here is yet another cause for his melancholy. (p. 82)

Soviet writers in such statements as these show their appreciation of the ominous and uncertain logic of violence, however justified on the surface. Expressing in a somewhat different way the thoughts behind Anikst's statement, M. Astangov writes that even if Hamlet fulfilled his noble obligation and killed Claudius, evil would remain in the form of all the others that made Elsinore what it was.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, to kill Claudius, Hamlet had to kill others far less guilty who stood between him and the king. This included Ophelia—for "one can say what one wants about objective circumstances being at fault, but it remains indisputable that Hamlet, first by rejecting her love, then by killing her father, drove Ophelia to insanity" (Anikst, pp. 87, 92). But the dialectic of violence runs still deeper, since it was Hamlet's "desire to be honest and faithful that, in the last analysis, led to his destruction of Ophelia" (p. 92). Or, in the more general context in which Kozintsev placed Ophelia's fate, "The people driving Ophelia to madness and death love her very much. . . . A tender brother, a loving father, and a passionate lover drive her to the grave in the name of the finest emotions" (p. 288).

There is more to this than the aphorism "The way to hell is paved with good intentions," although, considering Soviet history, this is an important enough lesson. Soviet critics go on to question Hamlet's good intentions themselves, to note Hamlet's disturbing doubts about his own motives. He may be

9. M. Astangov, "Mysli o 'Gamlet,'" *Shekspirovskii sbornik* (1961), p. 167.

a “titan of conscience” fighting for humanity in the state prison, but he is also the one who could say of himself, as Anikst quotes and takes quite seriously, “I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in.” Hamlet, in other words, “senses in himself the potentiality for the same evil that has poisoned the souls of others.” This, in fact, is what most appropriately of all defines the essence of the tragedy for Anikst:

The real problem of Hamlet’s character concerns not his procrastination, but rather the fact that living in a world where evil reigns, he finds himself every moment in danger of succumbing to the general infection. Even while preparing to carry out an act of justified vengeance, he causes, in the process, unwarranted pain. How to remain pure in circumstances where evil is unavoidable—here is one of the major human problems rising from the tragedy. (p. 92)

It is this self-awareness displayed by Hamlet, this courage to acknowledge his own failings, that raises him above his complacent milieu in which everyone is concerned only with self-justification (Anikst, p. 93; Astangov, p. 171). Conscience, therefore, is not only Hamlet’s guide for judging the evils that surround him in the state prison, and the antidote that keeps him from succumbing to their deadly infection, it is also the severe judge of his own defects: “As Herzen said, it is hardly necessary to be a Macbeth in order to encounter the ghost of Banquo. It is enough to be profoundly and honestly doubtful about oneself” (Urnov, p. 178).

Life, and this includes life in Elsinore, is thus too complex to sanction the clear, direct action of a Laertes or a Fortinbras, however admirable they may appear at first glance. There are too many complications, too many unforeseen impediments, stemming both from outside and from within oneself, to permit confident foresight (Anikst, p. 88). Deception and uncertainty prevail in place of the sense of permanence and constancy that happier periods enjoy (Wertzman, p. 111). Above all, one cannot so easily distribute praise and blame: shades of gray, not blacks and whites, are the dominant colors, even in Elsinore. This is no crude morality play with “Hamlet as the embodiment of progress and reason, Claudius the embodiment of despotism and injustice, Gertrude of blind faith and custom,” and so forth (Wertzman, p. 121). Claudius is unquestionably a tyrant and a murderer who can (and this seems to disturb the Soviet critics most of all) smile in apparent innocence in spite of his crimes (Astangov, p. 166; Anikst, pp. 73, 91; Kozintsev, pp. 271, 331). Nevertheless, “if we look attentively into all the episodes, we see that for the most part he does not demonstrate pernicious traits.” He is a rather ordinary person, trying to do his political job and sincerely in love with his wife (Anikst, p. 91). The



same holds for Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, who “are not at all villains. They are not even evil people. The horror is that they are ordinary people: to some degree reasonable, honest, and kind” (Kozintsev, p. 268). And can we really denounce Gertrude with Hamlet’s fervor? True, she did enter into a hasty second marriage, but who can doubt her love for her son? “In her more than in any of the other characters there comes through that unique state of human nature when the line separating good from evil becomes imperceptible” (Anikst, pp. 91–92). And what of Ophelia? She too is drawn into the Elsinore net and spies on Hamlet; but does her crime deserve her destruction by someone who could accuse himself of such things that it were better his mother had not borne him? (Kozintsev, pp. 264, 280). Finally, there is Hamlet himself. In his thoughts and emotions are all in turmoil, and the confusion of his character in the play, Urnov contends, is not a failure on Shakespeare’s part to work out a successful “objective correlative” as T. S. Eliot argued but rather a most appropriate image for Hamlet’s actual state (p. 176).

In a moral world order of such ambivalence and uncertainty, Hamlet’s vacillation and constant reflection are seen not as signs of weakness but rather as proof of superior insight into the real nature of things. In his fascinating analysis of the play Wertzman contrasts this awareness of the radical ambivalences in life with the sanguine optimism of the Renaissance, which assumed a harmony in nature reflected by a corresponding harmony in man. Pleasures of the flesh harmoniously in accord with the instincts of mind and spirit, a world lush with natural beauties and life filled with joy and ease—such were, in Wertzman’s interpretation, the sources of that happy era and of such art as Leonardo da Vinci’s. It was an age of great painting because, as Leonardo theorized, painting reflected an “outer vision” and a fusion with the external world, in whose harmonies it sought its own ideals. The mood of Elizabethan England was fundamentally different. It was an age of poetry, rather than art, because vision was turned inward. The thoughtful men of the time had become disillusioned with the complacent and euphoric ideals of the Renaissance. They had seen reason turn to pride, skepticism, and madness, and had come to a somber recognition of the conflicts between the spirit and the flesh, between nature and civilization. The Renaissance world of youth, grace, and joy vanished: “Man almost at once, it would seem, by a sudden leap, loses his charm and force and shows us his helplessness, his frailty, or, at the other extreme, his cruelty, at times terrible cruelty, and civilization turns out to be a false outer casing of superficial proprieties that hides deception, perfidy, and selfish pride.” It is the “inner vision” of poetry and thought that seeks through reflection to reveal the truth beneath those deceptive appearances of the “outer vision” that the Renaissance had too hastily accepted as reality.

And when the Renaissance died, so did its stalwart, confident heroes, with their "romantic risks," those "proud 'titans' of the Renaissance" whose ambitions had led them "beyond good and evil" (pp. 102–13).

Hamlet is, thus, a "titan of conscience" precisely because he is no longer one of the "proud 'titans' of the Renaissance." He may have been one at Wittenberg, where he indeed lived a lusty and carefree life, but Elsinore crushed all that by disclosing life's hidden corruption (Kozintsev, pp. 196–210). Belinsky had acknowledged that at the play's end, after Hamlet had overcome his indecision and at last struck, there still remained in him "a sadness, but within this sadness a calm was evident, a harbinger of a new and better peace." Anikst quotes this passage, but goes on to draw from this "sadness" another inference: "this sadness will now be with him forever, because however well he may understand things, such knowledge will not in itself turn the bad into the good. Hamlet paid dearly for his knowledge of life and the meaning of man: the unhappiness he suffered was too vast for him ever to free himself from melancholy" (p. 90). Kozintsev shares this view of the play's dénouement: "Hamlet came to understand the world in which he lives. He came to know the soul of his mother and of his beloved, the conscience of his friends, the morality of the courtiers. He came to know himself. And then he dies, because one cannot go on living after having learned all that he has learned" (p. 211).

With this Soviet interpretation of the play and its hero in mind it might seem hopeless for anyone to turn to Hamlet for advice on "What is to be done?" It is all Hamlet can do in the face of inner doubts, outer evils, and kaleidoscopic confusions to decide the question of his own "to be." If he is right to curse the world of Elsinore, he is also right in cursing the fate that chose him to set it right, for he knows he cannot set it right. Worse still, when he does finally act, his bloody thoughts and deeds are desperate gestures that mimic blindly and fruitlessly the thoughtless violence of Laertes and Fortinbras, who were, in their way, as unlike him as was Claudius.

Yet for all this, the Soviet critics know they are right in claiming him for themselves, in finding in him not only something of themselves but also a "brother-in-arms" for their own struggle. He is a hero in the only way one can be a hero in Elsinore: although helpless, he thinks his own thoughts; he "is the spirit of doubt" (Wertzman, p. 122); he refuses to accept the morality of the state prison or to engage in the tempting self-deceptions that ease such acceptance. His life is guided by conscience, not custom. He bears in himself "his own powerful 'categorical imperatives'" (p. 124). He knows

no dogmas, doctrines, preconstructed systems of thought; he is endlessly discontent and searching, with no group, camp, or party behind him, no preacher, teacher, or mentor beside him, bearing a catechism or manual of

regulations in one hand and pointing a finger upward in the other. . . . Never will he let himself be turned into a will-less "flute" from which others can sound wrong notes. . . . Hamlet is educated and well-read, but still more important is his freedom of thought, his boldly critical mind. Constant reflection, a painfully severe sobriety of mind, which rejects the futile solace of sweet illusion, and a refusal to make idols of other people, even those of wealth and power—here is the thread that ties Hamlet to Rousseau, Swift, Shchedrin, and Heine, and one could extend endlessly this list of names so dear to us. (p. 123)

Wertzman represents the judgment of his fellow critics when he rejects Hazlitt's demeaning of Hamlet for his inaction, his calling Hamlet a "hero 'of thought and feeling'; as though this were a small thing!" (p. 126). In Kozintsev's comments on the role of Hamlet's thought, Soviet realities again come through with resounding force:

The inner monologue will be especially interesting if it succeeds in representing an explosive force of thought, dangerous for the government of Claudius. Spies are assigned to shadow and not lose sight of this dangerous man . . . Hamlet—thinks. This is the greatest threat of all. (p. 306)

Shakespeare's time is one of lost childish illusions, of courageous thought. (p. 281)

He is not at all a gentle young man, but an aggressive heretic, burning with the joy of struggle, drunk with struggle—with an unequal struggle: against him is force, his only weapon—thought.

But thought won, echoing through the centuries, and we rapturously proclaim again: "Man is not a pipe." (p. 309)

The tempests of history, the chaos of the iron century cannot bend the "thinking reed." (p. 329)

Conscience, doubt, free thought, and essential alienation from a corrupt and oppressive society—these are the lessons Hamlet holds for the Soviet readers who share so much of his fate, and these are the source of the hope that, in the end, the play inspires in them:

The most pessimistic character in world literature elevates our spirits. By proclaiming the age-old right of man to doubt and to search and by deepening in us a sense of justice and irreconcilability with lies, Hamlet bequeaths to us a legacy over the heads of his contemporaries and through the barriers of his own "iron age" and of all the many "iron ages" of history. . . . In the twentieth century, Hamlet is needed by all who acknowledge their responsibility to society and to individual human beings, by all who understand that one must nurture in oneself a vital, passionate moral sense, and not a readiness to subject oneself dumbly to the formula: "they ordered me to do it." (Wertzman, pp. 132–33)

*Hamlet* is a tragedy of hard times, a tragedy of an epoch of such all-powerful evil that it breeds not merely revulsion toward the given conditions of life, but against life in general. But it is not a tragedy of passive suffering in the face of evil. Even in epochs when the hands of honest people are tied, and those of the dishonest alone are free, the struggle goes on. It continues in the realm of thought. Those who struggle for humanity do battle not only with the unfavorable social conditions that surround them, but also with themselves, since they must overcome both the spiritual weakness and the despair that overwhelms them once they realize that not only the final victory, but even the beginning of real struggle lies far in the future. Perhaps it is only they, martyrs of the spirit, who sense the tragedy suffered by society, while most of the others, in spite of their suffering, understand neither the meaning of the suffering nor the necessity of struggle. Society may even look upon them as mavericks, heap upon them hatred and disdain, but it is in them alone, in their hearts and minds that the progress of humanity continues.

(Anikst, p. 81)

Thus Hamlet is not honored for taking up "arms against a sea of troubles": Soviet critics are as far as possible from earlier Soviet presentations of Hamlet as a "briskly energetic, forceful, and vigorously robust character" (Anikst, p. 95). He is honored for his free, critical thought and for the conscience, the personal "categorical imperative" that sustains it.

But conscience, thought, and the courage to be are not enough. While it may be true that, as Kozintsev says, Hamlet's weapon is thought, the publication, performance, and criticism of the play itself indicate a weapon vastly more powerful than thought: Words. Ostensibly describing Russia in the reign of Nicholas I and the impact of the play at the time, Kozintsev writes:

The silence of the thirties [of the nineteenth century!] was imposed. To be mute was to be trustworthy. Careers were built on timidity. How dreadful it was—memory wordless, despair soundless, and anger choking in your throat. Reason gave way to instruction, conscience to ceremony. One was not to think: one must only know his job. The silence was fortified by police and guarded by sleuths. They stifled you by poison if not by the noose, by despair, if not by destitution. . . . And here, in this time of forced silence there resounded in full force, from thunderous outbursts to rasping whisper, a rebellious human voice. . . . A voice of wondrous beauty proclaimed: man must not be equated with a flute. . . . This man showed that one can tear oneself from the system, violate commands, tear away the stifling uniform, refuse to be silent. (pp. 153–54)

If, as we have seen, Kozintsev ends his article on Hamlet with the line "Hamlet is a tocsin that awakens the conscience," he writes near the close of his diary notes on the play, "*I cannot be silent! What is to be done? Who is to*

*blame?*" (p. 338).<sup>10</sup> Although not all the accusations that Soviet writers hurl against their Western counterparts should be taken as seriously intended, they do seem to mean what they say when they criticize those in the West who see *Hamlet* as an existentialist study in universal, essential, and immutable absurdity, and who therefore sanction and honor silence and inaction as signs of higher wisdom (Wertzman, pp. 130–31). Wertzman quotes Karl Jaspers, "Silence is the authentic mode of speech. Only one who knows what to say can be silent." Quite the contrary, Wertzman replies, "clear conscience and silence are incompatible. . . . Even being tongue-tied is better than being mute" (p. 131). (Significantly, Kozintsev quotes from Shakespeare's Sonnet 66: "And art made tongue-tied by authority," p. 206.)

Not silence, but "Words, words, words!"—here is Hamlet's all-important declaration, the cry of a soul drained by suffering. At certain periods, the word may in fact be destined to impotence, but not every word and not always: it may become, as well, a powerful force" (Wertzman, p. 131). It is this theme that is meant by one of Kozintsev's subtitles, drawn from Thomas Beard's reference to Christopher Marlowe as "The Man Who Gave Too Large a Swinge to His Own Wit," and as much as any other of the themes discussed so far, it runs through Kozintsev's articles and diary notes. It is Hamlet's words, "dagger words" (p. 167), that force Gertrude to see the truth: "It is as though words force the sockets of the eye to turn their vision inward, to view conscience: and the clarity of the vision is more tormenting than the strongest of pains" (p. 166). Recalling the "spirit of Wittenberg" and the time when "itinerant scholars roamed between Venice and London, Leipzig and Paris," Kozintsev praised the courage of the humanist intellectuals, "for words led to the stake, since it was with words they fought" (p. 198). But this era came to an end: "While within the university walls fervent minds celebrated the greatness of man, a social system came to power that lowered man, fettered his finest aspirations. . . . One was now punished for free thought. Church and state councils regulated inner motivations and lay in wait for desire. Twisting arms, they forced one to profess that dogma was truth and with the jerks of the rack demanded voluntary confessions of deviations and retrogressions" (p. 204). This was hardly the first or the last such "iron age," periods when "a 'Wittenberg' yielded to an 'Elsinore.'" Kozintsev quotes from Pliny's account of Domitian's reign, when "everything human was reviled, [and] one only desired to forget as soon as possible all that one saw," a time when it was dangerous to speak and "to be silent, despicable" (pp. 206–7).

10. Hamlet's association here with works by Chernyshevsky, Tolstoy, and Lenin (*What Is To Be Done?*) and Herzen (*Who Is To Blame?*) would hardly be lost on Soviet readers.

Can there be any doubt in the light of these quotations that the Soviet critics were practicing what, through *Hamlet*, they preached? They were speaking out against their own Elsinore in the only speech that tyranny permits, tongue-tied speech, the Aesopian language of literary criticism, traditional among the Russian intelligentsia, that ostensibly talks about other places and other times when the real subject is clearly here and now. There is, of course, always a risk in looking behind statements for their motivations and true purport, in talking about Aesopian language and the like. But in this case, when one compares the nature of Soviet reality with the description these critics give of Elsinore and its inhabitants, including Hamlet, the risk does not seem too great. These are highly learned, creative, and sensitive men, who have fully experienced Soviet life. Their awareness of Soviet reality, particularly those aspects of it that pertain to the world of creative art and thought, is the core of their being. So when they denounce over and over again the oppressions of Elsinore, the tyrannically ruled and morally corrupt state prison, the "iron ages," "memory wordless, despair soundless, and anger choking in your throat," and when they eulogize this hero because of his conscience, his courage to be and to doubt, his rebellion against all attempts to "equate man with a flute," what other conclusions are we to draw?

Hamlet's weakness, Wertzman says at one point, "reflects the actual powerlessness of the best people of the time: behind the Danish saga one should see the reality of England in the sixteenth century" (p. 124). Placed in the context of Wertzman's essay, it would hardly seem a bold interpretation to say that he is using Shakespeare as, in his view here, Shakespeare used the Danish saga. "The main theme of the tragedy, its vital meaning," Kozintsev writes, "is reproduced by each generation in its own way" (p. 285). As for his own production: "The tragedy must be played in sixteenth-century costume, but [it must] present current history" (p. 291). Marxist-trained, these Soviet critics are particularly sensitive to the social roots of *Hamlet's* appeal, and its appeal to Soviet society is in part explained by Wertzman's reference to Hamlet as the "brother-in-arms" of those "engrossed in a decisive struggle against evil and injustice in our life." But Wertzman also suggests another source of this interest in Hamlet when, as we have already seen, he discusses the fundamental change from an optimistic "outer vision" to a troubled "inner vision." Focusing on Hamlet's doubt and on the reasons for its appeal, Wertzman recalls that "the people have suffered too many bitter disappointments, even from the progressive revolutions of the past, for the *spirit of doubt*, gnawing at the heart and mind of the people, to lose its force soon and once and for all" (p. 122). We should also keep in mind, in this connection, that Soviet critics give almost all their attention to the causes and consequences of Hamlet's profound disappointment when his hopeful Wittenberg ideals were crushed by the Elsinore realities.

Kozintsev nicely draws together both aspects of Hamlet's appeal—his disappointments and his powerlessness—when he discusses the change in the treatment of Hamlet that occurred during the nineteenth century. Garrick, climaxing the eighteenth-century style, portrayed an “extraordinarily dynamic and ‘effective’ Hamlet,” and, correspondingly, Voltaire's interpretation turned Hamlet's doubts into anticlerical rationalism. The nineteenth-century Hamlets were neither dynamic nor rationalistic. Following Goethe's earlier interpretation, they were brooding, sullen, elegiac spirits. What caused this change? It was due, writes Kozintsev, to the aftermath of the French Revolution, that great embodiment of dynamism and rationalism, when “the most grandiose hopes were replaced by the greatest disappointments,” when “everything lost its meaning in this backward social system and became shameful and sordid,” when “the situation seemed hopeless”:

Goethe saw in Hamlet a contradiction that was vital not only to himself, but to the majority of his contemporaries. The tragedy of Elizabethan humanism turned out to be kin to the drama of humanism of this other age. People who aspired to the ideal of free and active human beings saw the impossibility of realizing their aspirations without revolt, without the destruction of the foundations of the social system. But the possibility for revolt was not yet present in reality itself, and the personalities of the thoughtful lacked the force of will necessary for rebels. (pp. 136–42)

As with so much of this “thaw” commentary on the play, we find ourselves in a fascinating hall of mirrors. Kozintsev is speaking in large part to and for his own people, expressing their own disillusionment, anger, and sense of powerlessness, by showing how Goethe and his nineteenth-century successors used *Hamlet* as a vehicle for comparable sentiments.

If all the eloquent statements quoted throughout this essay pertained only to Soviet Elsinore, their importance, however great, would be far less than it is. Their relevance extends immensely farther, for they concern, in Kozintsev's words, “skirmishes of humanity with inhumanity” (p. 266)—skirmishes that comprise nothing less than the entire history of mankind. While it is absurd to obscure the essential differences between Soviet Russia and Western societies, they now share, to a disturbing degree, the mechanized impersonalism, the bleak conformity, and the massive and mindless power which seem to define our era. Modern Elsinore, in other words, comes in two models, “open” and “closed,” and since astute and sensitive Soviet intellectuals have lived through the very worst of this kind of society, we should not be surprised that they have much to tell us, in their “tongue-tied” way, about its oppressions and corruptions. Indeed, as the quotations in this essay suggest, we might even hope to gain from them guidance and encouragement in the common human struggle against our common “iron age.”