

Behind the Scenes: Tracing Shakespearean Discourse from Russian Formalism to Bakhtin's

Theory of the Novel

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Abstract

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At the beginning of the 20th Century, in reaction to the 19th-century emphasis on realism, Russian artistic life became strongly influenced by popular theatrical practices, accentuating masks and clowns as dominant themes. This development created an interconnectedness of the Renaissance theatre, such as *commedia dell'arte* and Shakespearean drama, and the avant-garde culture, whose accent on the elemental presented the traditional masks and stage plots in a new light. As the theater became the governing artistic medium which influenced other media, it also permeated the critical thought of the period. This essay investigates how Shakespearean drama was interpreted and incorporated into the formalist theatrical practices of the time, focusing on Vsevolod Meyerhold's stagings, as well as the theoretical thought of the formalist circle known as OPOYAZ, and traces those influences in Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel. The essay provides an analysis of Meyerhold's experiments with *Hamlet*, followed by a close reading of Viktor Shklovsky's essay "On the Subject of *King Lear*." In the final section, the essay focuses on a close reading of Bakhtin's "notes and additions to *Rabelais*," which contain unfinished ideas and interpretations of *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. Understanding the way Bakhtin re-interpreted formalist ideas about the Shakespearean stage provides new insight into the underpinnings of his theory but also highlights the elements of Shakespearean plays usually left without attention.

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Introduction

As various theoretical movements developed and proliferated throughout the 20th century, many relied on Shakespeare as, arguably, the most canonical author in the history of world literature. The views on the role of Shakespeare's oeuvre in the development of literary theory have been contradictory. Hugh Grady argues that "Shakespeare's status as the most revered, celebrated and ... discussed author in English and, indeed, in world literature, makes his works ideally suited to a study which aims to reveal the underpinnings ... kept hidden beneath the surface of critical discourse" (3). While Grady suggests that Shakespeare can reveal the "underpinnings and supports" of criticism, Jonathan Gil Harris also contends that Shakespeare often is at the core of these underpinnings. He claims that "by reading what theorists have to say in concert with Shakespeare, we can begin to get a sense of how much the DNA of contemporary literary theory contains a startling abundance of chromosomes ... that are Shakespearean in nature" (4). According to Harris, "all the major theoretical movements of the last century – from formalism and structuralism to deconstruction and actor-network theory ... have developed key aspects of their methods in dialogue with Shakespeare" (3). In Harris's view, "Theory is already Shakespearean" (3). Harris's argument is in a curious juxtaposition to Grady's, as together they create what can be called a "theoretical circle" of Shakespearean discourse in theory, a hermeneutic circle that uses Shakespeare as its catalyzing point. Shakespeare is at once on both ends of the theoretical thought: his writing is its origin and its object of investigation. We can find Shakespeare in the genesis of theory and, as Grady suggests, "make use of the unique qualities of Shakespearean criticism in order to investigate and clarify the institutions and cultural forms which produce it," which ascribes a revelatory role to Shakespearean criticism and discourse (1). Given this broad approach to Shakespeare as a background element of theoretical

thought in the 20th century, it seems valid to explore the role of Shakespearean discourse in the thought and practice of the Russian formalists and Mikhail Bakhtin who mostly focus on the novelistic examples to substantiate and develop their claims and refer to Shakespeare mostly in passing or in their personal notes.

Summarizing the presence of Shakespeare in Russian thought of the beginning of the 20th Century, Ludmila Mnich argues that it followed three main paths, where Shakespeare was: 1) "adapted" "to the existing scientific paradigms, for example, Russian literary studies (Russian theory of literature)" reflected in the textbooks on philological studies; 2) "absorbed" by the Russian religious thought and the movement of symbolism, where "the legacy of the English dramatist becomes an important source of discussions on the religious basis of any art"; 3) "instrumentalized" by the formalist movement, who, according to Mnich, *used* Shakespeare "to confirm their conclusions and concepts: in the context of the formalists' poetics, [Shakespeare] legacy was studied not as 'a system of images' but as 'a sum of devices'" (69). It seems, however, useful to go beyond the idea of "instrumentalization" of Shakespeare to confirm the formalists' ideas and adopt a broader hypothesis that Shakespearean ideas also influenced the development of the movement. As Harris argues, "the Greek *theorein* is etymologically related to the word 'theatre.' The theatre is a theoretical space inasmuch as it is a space of *theorein*, of viewing and contemplation" (4). While, perhaps, the idea of linking theater to theory directly is contestable, I argue that the prevailing theatricality of the culture in that period influenced the formation of the theoretical movement as much as the movement used Shakespearean theatre to confirm its ideas.

The notion of the Shakespearean "theoretical loop" is particularly relevant when discussing Russian formalism¹ of the beginning of the 20th century: the movement of mostly

¹ Concerning the use of the term "Russian formalism:" other terms are available in the modern literature on the subject, namely "Russian Theory" is used by Ludmila Mnich, which is a broader term that includes literary and

non-academic literary critics, active in the wake of revolutionary Russia, who proclaimed themselves to be "an act in the 'new theatre of life'" (Lisitsky qtd in Oushakine 12).

While formalism could not be characterized as an integral, holistic movement but rather a system of ideas that centers around certain principles, it seems worthwhile to begin by exploring some of its key elements. The initial movement was launched by Viktor Shklovsky in 1914, and soon a "formalist circle" – OPOYAZ, which stands for Society for Study of Poetic Language, was formed. The circle comprised three principal members: Shklovsky, as well as Boris Eichenbaum and Yuriy Tynyanov. The three members approached the issues they explored from different standpoints but were joined by common goals. Carol Any, in her introduction to Russian formalism, summarizes the movement as “united by their interest in the difference between poetic language and ordinary speech,” adding that the formalists' main claim can be summarized as that "one could neither paraphrase an artistic work nor extract from it a basic message, since the literary form was an indispensable part of that message"(5). While this definition is undoubtedly correct, it seems to attempt to integrate Russian formal thought into the Western theoretical narrative by focusing on its common denominator with its Western counterparts and deemphasizing the ambiguities that are crucial to the movement.

Politics were not at the center of formalism and its preoccupations; however, its roots certainly lay in the aspirations and the preoccupations connected to the revolutionary movement in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century and the eventual Revolution of 1917. One of those preoccupations, which is important in understanding Mikhail Bakhtin’s philosophy as well, was

philosophic movements outside formalism; also “Soviet formalism” is a variant that is more inclusive of formalist movements in other Soviet countries, such as Ukraine. "The formal method" used by Serguey Oushakine includes relevant artistic movements, such as Futurism and Constructivism. However, I will use the term "Russian formalism" or “formalism” to describe the specific movement that includes OPOYAZ, its members and its followers, and use additional terms, such as "Ukrainian Formalism," when appropriate.

the struggle against hierarchies – in the case of formalists, the hierarchy of content and form, where the form is understood to be "instrumental, auxiliary and embellishing" (Oushakine 15). Instead, the formalists argued that form is "essential, effective and determinate – a condensed expression of the material itself, ... an articulation of 'the inner connectedness of things'" (Oushakine 15).

Connected to the struggle against hierarchy was another important founding principle of formalism: its exclusive focus on literary material as its sole and final object of investigation. Yury Tynyanov, one of the movement's core members, argued that "the position of the history of literature remains in the hierarchy of cultural disciplines a position akin to that of a colonial state" (Tynyanov qtd in Oushakine 39). In this state, as Oushakine writes, literature was considered an oppressed entity that was "forced to express itself using a foreign language, realizing itself through alien formats and forms" (40). The formalists aimed to reinstate literature as a cultural discipline in its own right and not subjected to philosophy, theology, or, most prominently in their period, psychology. The endeavor of the movement to avoid "psychologism" in their analysis was one of the most prominent features of their theory, even though critics argue that it was not fully successful.²

Another important feature of Russian formalism that derives from their focus on form is their attention to its particular aspects, such as elemental constituents and the (dis)junctures between them. Its connection to the Revolution of 1917 gave Russian formalist movement its specific flavour that differentiated it from the earlier formalist schools in Europe. According to Shklovsky, "Russia began to disintegrate into its primary multipliers," creating a political and social backdrop for artistic and theoretical explorations of that process (qtd in Oushakine 20).

² For more on the issue of psychologism in formal theory, see Oushakine "Dream Airplanes that Never Took Flight," Holquist "Bakhtin and The Formalists."

Possibly, that rapid and fundamental disintegration is the source of the formalists' "unchanging scientific interest ... in basic elements, connections and structures (dot, line, sound, colour), to that line beyond which further disintegration became impossible" (Oushakine 20). The conceptualization of the elemental also led to the formalists' focus on the connections/disjunctions between the elements: they are deeply engaged with the "incoincidence of the connected" and the "association of far-positioned ideas" (Tynyanov qtd in Oushakine 13). The joining of disjunctures becomes one of the core principles of the movement, which "allows it to achieve 'positive' effects while using 'negative' analytics" (Oushakine 13). Referring to Henri Lefevbre, Oushakine states that "disconnections were the precondition of freedom, creating – opening and exploding – creative spaces" (30). The focus on disconnections and disjunctures is also related to an issue of literary and theoretical lineage or succession. The formalists' view of succession is that of "a constant struggle between old works that have lost their power to engage the public and later works more able to challenge the awareness of readers," or what Holquist formulates as a battle "between the old habits of reading and new procedures of writing" (*Bakhtin and the Formalists* 88). Disconnection, non-linearity of progress is at the center of the formalist way of thinking, epitomized, according to Holquist, by the title of Shklovsky's 1923 essay – "The Knight's Move," where Shklovsky writes that the death of the work happens when "the object or form becomes a dull epigone which our senses register mechanically" (qtd in Holquist *Bakhtin and the Formalists* 88). The need to revitalize the mechanical perception of the habitualized object is the formalists' most widely publicized device – *ostranenie* – "making strange."

Unlike modernist movements in most Western countries, where the cultural development echoes and follows the industrial modernization of society, in Russia in particular, and the Soviet

Union in general, modernists' ideas, including those of the formalists, remained far from any conceivable reality – the dream of the modern new technologies and "the dictatorship of the Academy of Sciences" was destined to remain a dream. This disconnect is what, as Oushakine argues, referring to Lefevbre, renders the Russian branch of modernism and the formal method in particular, "radical modernism" – an unrestrained flight of imagination, not bound to any actuality or temporal frames (37). Its radical character entails its deliberately "unfinished" and "unwhole" character (Tynyanov qtd in Oushakine 37). Despite its insistence on its own unfinished nature and the artistic, non-academic origins of formalism, it also insists on its theory as scientifically rigorous. Catherine Depretto argues that “one of the rules, laid down very early by the formalists and in particular by Tynyanov ... is the distinction, necessary to practice, between what is due to chance, to genesis, and what constitutes a system, can be analyzed, described objectively and obeys laws” (“*Le Formalisme Russe et ses Sources*” 578). Thus, formalism is a movement that originates in amateur literary circles and, in this way, is free from the pressure of the academy and tradition, but which also aspires to the rigour of the academic and expresses hope for the establishment of its own metaphoric “dictatorship.”

Politically, formalism, following its own maxim of rendering the “world that constantly confuses itself,” was both decisively Marxist and with equal decisiveness apolitical (Shklovsky qtd in Oushakine 31). While Lev Trotsky claimed in 1923 that “the formal theory of art” is “the only theory that, on the Soviet soil, pitches itself against Marxism,” defining it as both idealistic and religious in nature, formalists stated that they, as Dziga Vertov stated, aimed to “propose a language for the ‘communist deciphering of the world’” (Trotsky, Vertov qtd in Oushakine 13-14). Its theoretical apparatus is distinct from the Western counterpart in that its “ethics, aesthetic

and institutional organization are based on the presumption of solidarity and refusal of criticism” (Dyogot qtd in Oushakine 32).

Despite its idealistic nature and self-conscious alliance with revolutionary Marxist ideas, the formalists were persecuted, banned, and finally erased from Russian cultural history in the oppressive "purges" of the 1930s. M. Alekseev's comprehensive volume *Shakespeare and Russian Culture*, published in 1965, does not contain a single mention of the formalists. Curiously, it mentions Alexander Blok's response to the 1920 production of *King Lear*, which was published concurrently with a response from Viktor Shklovsky, without any mention of the latter. Even the text of Shklovsky's short response was not available in print until his full *Collected Works* was published in 2018. This erasure is important to understand the context of the formalists' reception at the time they were discovered in the West in 1960s. Catherine Depretto writes that the formalists' re-discovery is part of the structuralist movement in the 1960s and the initial reading of them “consisted in demonstrating how structuralism surpasses formalism” (*Sources* 565). Eradicated in their homeland, they become relevant again but only as a background to another movement and not as a theoretical school in its own right.

While they were re-discovered by Western critics at about the same time, the question of continuity between the formalists and Mikhail Bakhtin remains much debated, even regarding the recognition of authorship of the primary text relevant to this issue: *The Formal Method in Literary Study*, published under the name of Pavel Medvedev in 1928, but generally acknowledged to have been written either solely by Mikhail Bakhtin, or in co-authorship with him. In the preface to the 1982 edition of the book, for the first time published in New York under the name of Mikhail Bakhtin, Konstantin Kustanovich outlines the course of the authorship debates but concludes that, acknowledging the fact that there are "several alarming

issues" which prevent a fully consensual establishment of authorship, "to the present moment there are enough facts confirming the sole authorship [of Bakhtin] of such books as ... *The Formal Method*" (6-7). The book, however, as Michael Holquist argues, is not an objective exploration of formalists' ideas from a Bakhtinian standpoint but Bakhtin's experimental development of his own theoretical system *in dialogue* with the formalists. According to Holquist, the best way to approach Bakhtin's relationship to the formal method is by applying his own concept of dialogism. Quoting Bakhtin, he states that "a meaning only reveals its depths after having encountered . . . another, alien meaning" (82). The aspect of dialogism Holquist uses to reflect on Bakhtin's relation to the formalists is "another's speech," a term that describes "the way the speech of another is appropriated into the discourse of the self" (82). Holquist posits that, unlike most scholars who position Bakhtin either as an inheritor of the formalist tradition or as their opponent, he should be viewed as "both the breaker *and* continuer of their tradition" (84). In addition to the dialogue with the Russian formalists of OPOYAZ, as Catherine Depretto notes, Bakhtin also engages in a "dialogic reappropriation of the 'Western formalism,'" among whom he mentions the German aesthetic artistic theorists such as Riegl, Worringer, Wöllflin (*L'Héritage de Bakhtine* 13). In this way, as Bakhtin addresses the preceding formal theories and critiques them in elaborating his own ideas on their basis, there can be little doubt as to the importance of their methods and concepts for his theory. For example, Bakhtin writes,

"An artistic creation is important in its integrity. The mere creation of the body-sign has primary significance here. Technically instrumental and thus replaceable elements are here reduced to their minimum. The artistic significance here is acquired by the singular reality of the object in all the non-replicability of its traits" (*Formal Method* 22)³

³ Wherever the Russian, Ukrainian or French original text is used, it is presented in my translation.

As transpires from this thought on the interaction of form and essence of the work of art, Bakhtin opposes the formalist idea of the form as a determinative element in the act of creation, but he also acknowledges the formalist emphasis on the importance of device by affirming the “all the non-replicability” of the “traits.” He arrives at the idea of “singular reality” of the object of art, as perhaps, a field where all the elements (devices) of the form and meaning converge. This approach may be interpreted as a variation on the theme of dialogism and polyphony as an interaction of various forces that pervades Bakhtin’s thought.

One of the main concepts that Bakhtin seems to both inherit and oppose in the formalists is their basic concept of *ostranenie* – defamiliarization or difference. Holquist argues that the issue of difference is the “plane on which the contradictions between Bakhtin and the Formalists can interact without eluding each other as mutually exclusive ... where they can both differ *and* agree,” thus converging and building on one another (*Bakhtin and the Formalists* 87). While for the formalists, *ostranenie* is primarily important as a marker of distinction between the literary and the practical language and the way the literary text functions in relation to the reader, Bakhtin, by his term *drugost* – “otherness” articulates multiple additional relationships, such as “given/created, self/other, and ... the discursive non-coincidence that necessitates *heteroglossia*” (Holquist *Bakhtin and the Formalists* 89). Holquist argues that the concept of heteroglossia and the adjacent idea of the dialogic is, thus, based on the formalists' formulation of *ostranenie* – the primary concept of difference and otherness in the literary language. As with the issue of form I have discussed above, Bakhtin seems to take one of the formalists’ foundational ideas and, while negating it in the way the formalists interpret it, use it as a building block for his own theory.

A deep interest in the Renaissance culture seems, at first glance, to be a feature of Bakhtin's work and much less so of the formalists’, who interacted mostly with the contemporary

Futurist movement and Russian literature of the 19th century. However, if observed more broadly, critics have noted the peculiar interconnectedness of the Renaissance theatre and avant-garde culture. At the beginning of the 20th century, Russian artistic life, as Barbara Lönnkvist argues, "underwent a marked theatricalization" (14). The themes that dominate the art of the period include "the circus, clowns, commedia dell'arte, and masquerades;" the role of the artist is equated to that of a circus performer (Lönnkvist 14). Consequently, at this moment, the theatre becomes the dominant artistic medium and influences other media significantly, especially various forms of folk theatre, which "at the time stood outside the canonical [theatrical] tradition" (14). The carnivalesque movement was also central to the *zaum* futurist poetry; for example, Aleksey Kruchenykh leaves only the vowels of the "Pater Noster" prayer in Russian, creating a "parodia sacra" of the carnival and the letter play of the baroque poetry, which also creates an "ironic play with the reader" (Lönnkvist 21-22). These developments provide important context for Bakhtin's theory of carnival in the novel, as the carnivalesque discourse is one of the dominating trends in the period.

Relevant to the issue of carnivalization and Shakespearean productions of the period is the formalists' link to Renaissance popular theatre, namely, *commedia dell'arte*. "Theatricality is of the essence in modernism," argue Martin Green and John Swan in their exploration of *commedia dell'arte* and modernism (79). Central to the modernist movement in theatrical practices at the beginning of the 20th century were Vsevolod Meyerhold in Russia and Les Kurbas in Ukraine, who both referred to the mask as a vehicle of the avant-garde theater, formalist in its essence. Meyerhold and Kurbas broke the theatrical performance into constituent parts and focusing on the mechanics of each part as a method of innovation on the stage. Curiously, *commedia* seems to have been conducive to such experiments more than other forms

of theater. Meyerhold and Kurbas were not the only ones to experiment with *commedia*, as Gordon Craig in England was also highly interested in the phenomenon of the mask, among others. However, there were significant differences: some, as Meyerhold, approached the mask in an ironic way, while others appropriated it on its own terms. Green and Swan claim that the modernist theatre “turned to *commedia*” in different ways, where “Gordon Craig’s vision of the masked, ‘depersonalized’ actor ... fueled by his scholarly resuscitation of the original *commedia*, is quite unlike Meyerhold’s demand for acrobatic, assertively ‘grotesque’ actors in his *commedia* transformations,” accentuating the dissimilarity of Craig’s “scholarly” approach and Meyerhold’s emphasis on the body (Green and Swan 79-80). The marked emphasis on the body is partly due to the peculiarity of the Russian and Ukrainian audience, mostly peasant and working class, that dictated the rules of theatre, but even more interesting is the interest of both Meyerhold and Kurbas in staging Shakespearean tragedies. Irena Makaryk writes that “in 1923, Kurbas ... returned to Shakespeare with the idea of radically questioning the building blocks of theatre itself, including the notion of representation: ‘as it is fractured by the prism of the contemporary revolutionary world-view’” (Kurbas qtd in Makaryk 23). In Kurbas’ *Macbeth*, the actors “performed their roles silently, in gesture, expression and movement,” while the director read the text out loud, thus disconnecting the actors from their lines, the mask from the person (Shatulskyi qtd in Makaryk 23). This emphasized the alliance between the radical modern movement, to which the formalists belonged, and the threads of the Renaissance theatre that focus on the body and the grotesque, which later became crucial for Bakhtin’s theory. The imagery and the general atmosphere related to Renaissance popular culture and Shakespearean theatre passes like a thread through the formalist movement, more noticeable in artistic practice than in theoretical thought. Subsequently, the culture of the Renaissance becomes central to

Bakhtin's theory of the novel. The two threads of “formal method,” theatrical practices and theoretical thought are mutually constitutive. For that reason, it is important to look at both to understand how Shakespearean plays were interpreted and understood in the context of the formal method. The theater of Vsevolod Meyerhold is, first and foremost, a prominent example of the modernist rendition of popular theatrical practices, most importantly, *commedia dell'arte*, that precedes and influences the members of OPOYAZ.

Hamlet Outside the Mask: Vsevolod Meyerhold

Alaina Lemon recounts an anecdote about Vsevolod Meyerhold's presentation at a high-level artistic gathering, where he claimed he had discovered an innovative artistic practice manual, from which he quoted to the general approval, until, in a sleight of hand move, Meyerhold disclosed that he was quoting from a carpentry textbook (503). To the chagrin of the learned audience, Meyerhold played with the conditional spaces and formal boundaries of the stage on which he performed – merging the seemingly incommensurable and delineating the seemingly indivisible. The most important feature of Meyerhold's formalist approach to theatre was his emphasis on conditionality – “the theater of theatricality” that reveals its machinery instead of concealing it in illusion (which later feeds into Shklovsky's idea of *King Lear* as a chess game played out in a conditional space). Lemon emphasizes that in opposition to the prevalent ideology of early 20th-century realist theatre, “Meyerhold counterposed the theatre of theatricality, the kind of theatre that acknowledges that art lives according to laws that do not coincide with the laws of life” (Lemon 505). Important for the discussion of Meyerhold's relationship with Shakespeare is his approach to the interplay of theatre and language, namely,

the director's negation of the primacy of language on stage. Meyerhold argues against what he calls the "literariness in theatre" – the hierarchy in which what happens on stage is subordinated to the words of the play. Instead, he posits, a play is an interaction between the actors and the audience, where the former only serves the latter, with the director, and not the playwright, as a mediator (Lemon 506). He considers language as auxiliary in theatrical performance, claiming that “words in theatre are merely ornaments on the canvas of movement” (Meyerhold *Balagan* 527). In this section, I will explore Meyerhold’s unique approach to Shakespeare in his search for the reinvention of the popular theater. Central to his relationship with Shakespeare is the intricate interplay of language and movement on the stage to convey the situation, but also Meyerhold’s idea of the importance of mask and his understanding of the grotesque, later reinterpreted by Mikhail Bakhtin. The mask, for Meyerhold, is a key element of theater, historically and in essence, since it represents the artifice of the role as well as the concepts of concealment and the imaginary on stage.

According to Tatiana Bachelis, Meyerhold jokingly requested that his gravestone bear the writing that said, “Vsevolod Meyerhold, the only theater director who never staged *Hamlet*” (Romanovsky Bachelis 56:21). This request demonstrates one of the most interesting contradictions in Meyerhold’s career: he never staged a single Shakespeare play in the mature phase of his working life, despite being almost obsessed with *Hamlet* and attempting to create a production or a reimagined rendition of it on numerous occasions, all of which ultimately failed to be realized (Fevralsky 1).

In the early stages of his acting and directing career, Meyerhold turned to Shakespeare on multiple occasions, focusing primarily on comedy. He played the Prince of Arragon in *The Merchant of Venice* during his career at Stanislavsky’s Moscow Artistic Popular Theater in 1898

and revisited the role during his directing years in Kherson, Ukraine and Tbilisi, Georgia (then Tiflis) in 1901-1902. He also appeared in Stanislavsky's *Twelfth Night* as Malvolio in 1899. While directing his first company, The Camaraderie of New Drama, in Kherson, Ukraine, Meyerhold also produced *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which, according to the critics of the time, was not a common choice of a Shakespearean play in Russian theater at the time. In the play, where he appeared as Bottom, Meyerhold used Mendelssohn's ballet music and created stage constellations that, according to the critical reviews in Tbilisi papers, surprised the audience and surpassed the traditional theatrical practices of the period (Fevralsky 2).

Notably, Meyerhold prioritized comedic, secondary roles, in which he excelled. His Bottom, Malvolio, and, especially, the otherwise almost negligible role of Arragon, successfully elicited a strong response from the public. Describing the performance, Stanislavsky said, "Meyerhold – my favorite. Read Arragon – wonderfully – some kind of Don Quixote, mannerly, dumb, haughty, long, long, with an enormous mouth and the chewing of the words" (qtd in Fevralsky 2). A contemporary critic N. E. Efros commented on the roles of Morocco and Arragon, noting that they "present stock figures, there is a slight caricature, but it isn't out of place, the roles themselves are written in the tone of a buffonade" (2). The emphasis on the use of stock characters was reinforced in the review of another critic, Sergey Glagol, who stated that the actors managed to create "typical and comic figures and did not recur to excessive accentuation to achieve them" (2). These reviews show that at this stage of his career, Meyerhold began to turn to the popular theater of *commedia dell'arte* and its toolbox to incarnate his stage creations.

It may seem paradoxical that, with the success Meyerhold achieved in the minuscule role of Arragon, he failed miserably in the much richer role of Shylock. He attempted the role while

directing his Kherson company in 1905 in a Tbilisi performance. According to the *Kavkaz* newspaper review, Meyerhold's Shylock was "irritatingly monotone and flat," which, the reviewer claims, can only be explained by Meyerhold's fatigue due to his overload as a director and theatrical entrepreneur (qtd in Fevral'sky 3). However, the explanation for this seeming incongruity can lie on a different plane: unlike Arragon, Shylock is a contradictory, complicated character that, in Shakespeare's version of the plot, deliberately subverts the mask, "I am a Jew," that is imposed on him, claiming the unifying humanity of its carrier in his key monologue: "Hath not a Jew eyes? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons ... as a Christian is?" (III.1.50-55). The mask becomes permeable when the human body underneath it reveals itself, as Shylock asks, "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?" (III.1.55-57), pointing to the corporal human responses of bleeding, laughing and dying. Physical reactions also stand for the deeper human capacities for joy and pain, which are independent of and cannot be reduced to any societal role but that can be ignored through the dehumanizing use of the mask – as a way to conceal the human beneath it. The emphasis on the corporeal in Shylock's monologue echoes the *commedia* theater, which often used tickling, pricking and other seemingly violent actions on stage to elicit laughter. However, the purely comedic is subverted here to accentuate the refusal of the society to recognize the Jew as fully human. Thus, in Shakespeare, the mask plays a double role: as revealing the essential human element and as dehumanizing stereotyping that breeds prejudice, in this case, antisemitism. Shylock's character points most decisively not to the usefulness and eloquence of the mask but, on the contrary, to its detrimental, limiting side. This complication of the approach to mask in Shakespeare seems to be alien to Meyerhold, whose strongest affinity is to *the mask as an instrument of revelation*. Considering the persistence of his struggle with

Hamlet, it seems that even though he constantly drew parallels between Shakespeare and the popular theater of *commedia dell'arte* in his writings, at this point, Meyerhold made a choice between the two, and he made that choice in favour of the mask.

Even though he approached the mask and *commedia dell'arte* from a vastly differing perspective, Meyerhold's interest in the mask allegedly began with Gordon Craig, who was deeply engaged with *commedia dell'arte* and published a magazine dedicated to popular theater called *The Mask*. In her investigation "Harlequinades in the Art [of the 20th century]", Tatiana Bachelis writes that Meyerhold attempted to arrange a spontaneous meeting with Craig in 1907 but failed to find the director in his English studio (248). Another apparent influence is Meyerhold's staging of *Acrobates*, "an obscure melodrama about circus life" by Franz von Schönthan, which he produced in Kherson in the seasons of 1901-2 with tremendous success (Green and Swan 83). Meyerhold himself played Pierrot, a role in which "his defects – insufficient good looks, a peculiar timbre of his voice, a tendency to sharp eccentric characterization – everything he had previously to overcome ... now came to his aid, 'furthered' the role and enhanced it with a nervous, haunting melancholy" (Rudnitsky qtd in Green and Swan 84). In Meyerhold's interpretation, Pierrot became "the new Everyman," in which he "connects the figure of the clown with a theme of 'pathological confrontation': '*Art in its simplicity and naïveté* face to face with the overcomplicated life of our time" (Rudnitsky qtd in Green and Swan 84, emphasis added). Meyerhold's symbolic use of the mask for art, theater and the figure of the artist found resonance in the writings of Alexander Blok. Bachelis writes that "in Blok's poems, Harlequin appears quite early; he is seen as a hazy and troubling symbol of the artist" (249). Finally, the two artists' creative paths merged in the production by Meyerhold of Blok's *Balaganchik* (*The Fairground Booth*), written and staged in 1906. In Bachelis' view, "the

premiere of *Balaganchik* ... opened a whole line in the development of the 20th-century theater” (249). All the characters in Blok’s short play are traditional masks: the trio of Pierrot, Columbine, and Harlequin, as well as Death, Jester, Lovers, Mystics, and Author. Blok’s text suggests the deep symbolism of each character, who, however, never ventures outside their respective masks. By describing Columbine as a woman with a long braid, Blok’s Columbine mask also comprises that of Death, playing on the homonym in Russian of "kosa": as "braid" and as "scythe."

Following his staging of Blok’s play (dedicated to the director by the author), Meyerhold produced one of the principal theoretical writings in his career: his essay "Balagan," published in 1913 but written several years earlier. In the essay, he discusses the importance of genuine theatricality as opposed to the language-based “drama reading” on stage. He laments the “alliance which the public itself has formed with those so-called dramatists who turn literature for reading into literature for the theatre” (Meyerhold Braun 147). In this struggle between language and the theatrical gesture, for Meyerhold, the gesture, or what he calls “primary action, taut struggle,” must prevail for the theater to be considered faithful to its essence: “the words ... should burst spontaneously from the actor gripped in the elemental progress of the dramatic struggle” on stage (148). Another dialectic that Meyerhold explores is the importance of meaning-making and entertainment in the theater. For him,

“The new theatre of masks will learn from the Spaniards and the Italians of the seventeenth century and build its repertoire according to the laws of the fairground booth, where *entertainment always precedes instruction* and where *movement is prized more highly than words*” (Meyerhold Braun 150, emphasis added).

Having established these hierarchies of popular theater as essential to the theater in general, Meyerhold moves to his, perhaps, most crucial point: the juxtaposition of the real and the imaginary in the theater. In the discussion of this struggle, his modernist reinterpretation of the mask becomes fully realized. As an introduction to the subject, Meyerhold presents theater as a metaphoric puppet show in which the puppeteer becomes so engrossed with imitating reality that he eventually “arrives at a far simpler solution to the problem” and replaces the puppets with real people (Meyerhold Braun 151). However, this negates the concept of the puppet theater and turns it into a pale reproduction of reality. Meyerhold’s alter ego, “the second director,” realizes that the puppets’ charm is largely contained in their non-coincidence with reality: the sharpness of their movements, their inability to ever fully achieve their goals, for example, the puppets can never truly embrace each other or consume anything (152). It is in this non-coincidence and accentuated clumsiness that, according to the director, the audience finds the space it needs for the play of the imagination. Naturalism, in this way, by attempting to fully coincide with the true experience, steals the essence of theater by giving too much to reason and too little to the imagination. The mask, in this paradigm, becomes valuable because, by concealing the domination of the real, it opens the avenues for the audience to travel in their minds. Meyerhold discusses Harlequin’s mask: in the visible part of reality, he is “the servant of the miserly Doctor...forced to wear a coat with multicoloured patches because of his master’s meanness; ... a foolish buffoon, a roguish servant who seems always to wear a cheerful grin,” emphasizing the part of the role that reflects real life with its oppression and social hierarchy (153). However, the mask turns this reality upside-down, as Meyerhold asks, “But look closer! What is hidden behind the mask? Arlecchino, the all-powerful wizard, the enchanter, the magician; Arlecchino, the emissary of the infernal powers” (153). Importantly, the mask is the conductor of magic; it is the

concealment (“what is hidden behind the mask”) that makes the transformation possible. In Blok’s play, He (one of the Lovers) claims, “Look, enchantress! I will remove the mask!/ And you shall see that faceless I am!” – the mask contains both the possibility of infinity and the possibility of nothingness (Blok 8). Similarly, Pierrot interprets the white mask of Columbine as a bride – the infinite futurity of human reproduction, but the Mystics see her as Death – the prospect of complete negation of the self. Even though the unfaithful Columbine turns into cardboard in the course of the play, in the end, she is restored in her bodily form, affirming the resurrection of theater in a new form.

Finally, in his apology for the traditional theater of the mask that is focused on gesture, movement, and spectacle, Meyerhold refers to E.T.A. Hoffman's idea of the grotesque to theorize the underlying principle of schematization of the mask – enhancement and distortion as vehicles of originality. He defines the grotesque as “a humorous work which with no apparent logic combines the most dissimilar elements by ignoring their details and relying on its own originality, borrowing from every source anything which satisfies its *joie de vivre* and its capricious, mocking attitude to life” (Meyerhold Braun 158). Notably, the motifs of combining dissimilar elements to enhance the "joyful relativity" of life is key to Bakhtinian philosophy. Similarly, Meyerhold emphasizes another concept important for Bakhtin: the combination of the high and the low, as he states, "the grotesque does not recognize the purely debased or the purely exalted. The grotesque mixes opposites, consciously creating harsh incongruity” (158). For Meyerhold, the incongruity of the mask is necessary because as “art is incapable of conveying the sum of reality” it needs to “dismantle” it through schematization (158). However, instead of being seen an impoverished reality, schematization of the mask encompasses it, by uniting the incongruent sides of life: "the grotesque parades ugliness in order to prevent beauty from lapsing

into sentimentality” (159). Given this distinctive character of the director's approach to the philosophy of the mask, it is interesting to explore how he succeeds and, most peculiarly, fails in his attempts to stage *Hamlet*.

Meyerhold’s most active practical engagement with *Hamlet* took place during his years of teaching in his own acting school between 1913 and 1918. Fevralsky writes that between 1914 and 1915, as a part of the director’s class “Movement on stage,” he prepared two separate scenes from the play: the Mousetrap scene and Ophelia with the letter (4). Curiously, both scenes were staged without words, as pure pantomimes. Their performance in February 1915 was positively reviewed by critics. Meyerhold commented in his theatrical journal *The Love for Three Oranges*, “Any dramatic text, if it truly contains the essential charms of theatricality, can be shown in complete schematization, in a way that even the words that embellish the skeleton of the script can be temporarily eliminated,” and argued that a “schematically and mimically played act can affect the viewer solely because the script of this drama is created on the *traditional basis of theater as such*” (qtd in Fevralsky 3, emphasis added). This suggests that Meyerhold attempted to equate Shakespearean theater to that of Flaminio Scala, the author of *commedia dell’arte* scenarios with their bare outlines of action and room for the professional actors to improvise. While this approach to Shakespeare as *commedia* seemed fruitful in Meyerhold’s context, to achieve the parallel, he had to focus on specific scenes isolated from the play as a whole. In other words, *some* scenes in Shakespeare function in the form of schematized scenarios, while *others* do not. Shakespeare’s plays lend themselves to *commedia* interpretations, but they cannot be reduced to *commedia dell’arte* or situational (scenario-based) plays. The plays re-work the scenarios but they also add specifically Shakespearean approaches and concerns that cannot be removed without destroying the play.

This became even more complicated with Meyerhold's choice of the next experimental scene to stage in his studio – that of Ophelia's madness, which the director staged with the inclusion of language (Fevralsky 4). Despite the grandiose plans of following this experiment by staging the entire play and “finding the key to performing Shakespearean tragedy,” “where laments are audible in the merriest jokes,” these plans never came to pass (4). What seems most peculiar in the case of staging the madness scene is the way Shakespeare's language becomes indispensable in the scene where it is used in an apparently haphazard, confused, fragmented way. Meyerhold's hostility to the emphasis on literary language in theater does not take into account the elemental use of language, where language is almost equal to body movement, physical gesture. Ophelia's song fragments – words that are not even her own but an expression of a popular and thus collective creative consciousness, become the instrument of persuasion without which the scene cannot function. Having troubled the guilty king in her first madness apparition, in the second one, she affects Laertes, who responds to her singing of “They bore him barefac'd on the bier;/ Hey nonny, nonny, hey nonny ...” with a statement, “Hadst thou thy wits, and didst persuade revenge,/ It could not move thus,” emphasizing the importance of the “mad” language Ophelia uses as a vehicle of irresistible persuasion (*Hamlet* IV.5. 161-166).

Perhaps, what attracts Meyerhold to this scene is its deep roots in the *commedia dell'arte* tradition. As Emily Wilbourne suggests, “in *commedia dell'arte* performance, the intersection of sound and identity was the constitutive site of meaning,” adding that “the stock characters were mapped across aural and linguistic axes,” emphasizing the importance of language and sound to the portrayal of the character and situation (10). Ophelia's use of song fragments refers back to the *Innamorata* song tradition, in which “diegetic songs” are “framed as music (or as madness) by the narrative context in which they appear” (Wilbourne 45). Shakespearean scholar Eric

Nicholson in his article “Ophelia Sings like a Prima Donna Innamorata: Ophelia’s Mad Scene and the Italian Female Performer,” argues that “overtly histrionic madness was characterized by a particular combination of strident musicality and mental derangement,” which is transposed by Shakespeare from the *commedia* tradition directly to the English stage as a recognizable “shortcut” (qtd in Wilbourne 82).

As these instances indicate, Meyerhold was particularly drawn to specific episodes in *Hamlet* that can be traced back to the popular theatrical tradition. He divided the play into such separate scenarios, which, as he claimed, lead to “the sum of states” which “creates a scenario that relies on objects – the tools of action” (qtd in Fevralsky 4). The “sum of states” for Meyerhold is a series of situational constellations on stage, certain combinations of space and movement that flow continuously into one another. Conceptualizing his potential production of *Hamlet*, the director claimed that it is important to stage every single scene in the play, stating that “if I must play, I will play it from six in the evening until two o’clock in the morning” (qtd in Fevralsky 7). Thus, he attributed equal importance to every scene in the play, seeing them as indispensable building blocks on which the play relies. However, this approach to *Hamlet* as a “sum of states” makes the play unachievable for Meyerhold, arguably for the same reason that he failed at the role of Shylock. There is a layer of the play’s content that does not fit into the “sum of states” concept, and that additional, “protruding” layer eludes the director who relies on the rules of fairground booth. Bakhtin expresses the idea of humanity that does not fit into the mask later, in his essay “Epic and Novel,” as he states, the “masks and their structure (the noncoincidence with themselves, and with any given situation – the *surplus*, the *inexhaustibility of their self* and the like) have had ... an enormous influence on the development of the novelistic image of man” (*Dialogic Imagination* 36, emphasis added). For Bakhtin, it is this non-

coincidence that forms the core of the novel, for which “one of the basic internal themes ... is precisely the theme of the inadequacy of a hero’s fate and situation to the hero himself” (37). However, Meyerhold seems interested in the purity of the mask and body movement, without the complication of this “surplus.”

Judging Anton Chekhov’s portrayal of Hamlet in a 1924 Moscow Art Theater production as inadequate, Meyerhold criticized Chekhov's focus on interiority, emphasizing his motivations as "something inner, vague; he is a mystic, a hermit" and not a "Hamlet who arrives at the struggle by himself, as an revolutionary individual, a fighter, a disciple of Yorick the Fool, who treats everything that happens to him ironically" (qtd in Fevralsky 6). This optimistic view of Hamlet echoed Meyerhold’s description of his future production in cooperation with Bebutov, who juxtaposed their plans against Craig’s rendition by stating that instead of portraying death as a young maid who follows Hamlet and attracts him to the “sweet dream of non-being,” Meyerhold-Bebutov’s version would accentuate “in opposition to it, the triumph of joyful being” (Bebutov qtd in Fevralsky 4). However, the Hamlet of joyful being persisted in eluding the director, who, in a continuous effort to reimagine the play, arrived at the idea of doubling the protagonist. Meyerhold writes, “I have come up with engaging two actors for the role of Hamlet, where one actor will play one part of the role, and the other actor – another one” (qtd in Fevralsky 6). Unable to contain Hamlet’s character within a single mask, the director attempted to approach him by breaking him into constituent parts, searching for the elemental in Hamlet: the mask, the situation; or, it may be argued, attempting to sequester the unruly, “protruding” parts of the play. Despite these efforts, Meyerhold never achieved a full production of the play by the time of his death in 1940, even though, judging by his gravestone request of “the only

director who never staged *Hamlet*,” he defined himself negatively through his relationship with Shakespeare.

The King is a Fool: Shakespeare and Shklovsky

The connections between Meyerhold’s theater and OPOYAZ are underexplored in scholarship, primarily, because theatrical and literary study have remained largely segregated. Those connections were, however, mutually nourishing in their development. Karina Vengerova writes that “Meyerhold’s articles ‘To the history and technique of theater’ (1907) and, especially, ‘Fairground Booth’ (1912) suggest a commonality of essential and artistic ideas of the formalist school and the great director” (241). Meyerhold’s thought asserts “a change in the vision of the essence of theater” that is incorporated into the formalists’ writings on literature and echoes Meyerhold in its “transformative methodology” (Vengerova 241). Vengerova writes that following these writings that affirm theater’s “intrinsic value as a genre,” Shklovsky’s “Art as Device” (1917) is another “link in the same chain” (241). Therefore, the two movements form a coherent whole of the formal method in theatrical practice and in literary theory.

Before looking at the way OPOYAZ – the Russian abbreviation of “Society for the Study of Poetic Language” formed by Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, and Yuriy Tynyanov around 1916 – approached Shakespeare, it is important to briefly review its context by outlining the general state of Shakespearean discourse in Russia in the 1910s and its relation to the emerging literary and critical movements. Ludmila Mnich argues that at the beginning of the 20th century, Shakespeare was considered essential to Russian culture to the extent that Turgenev claims his work was “integrated into the Russians’ flesh and blood” (qtd in Mnich 28). Many

authors alluded to Shakespearean titular characters in their texts: some notable examples include Ivan Turgenev's short story "Hamlet of the Schigrovsky District" (1848) and Nikolay Leskov's satirical adaptation of the former – "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District" (1865). Turgenev suggests in his story that Shakespearean characters possess such universal nature that "every one of us could recall those Hamlets, those Othellos, those Falstaffs and even Richards III ... we have encountered" (qtd in Mnich 27). Importantly for the investigation of the formalists' approach, there is also a notable tradition in Russia of negative assessments of Shakespeare, most influentially Lev Tolstoy's harsh critique, published in 1906⁴. At times the approaches to Shakespeare seemed to contradict one another even in the views of a single thinker. For example, a literary critic at the beginning of the 20th century, Dmitriy Svyatopolk-Mirsky dismissed Shakespeare as a "representative of the homiletic literature," alien to the modern reader, but, like other critics, he also considered Shakespeare to be a potential force for "mobilizing the proletariat" (Mnich 34). As a mobilizing force, Shakespeare needed to be re-invented, in Svyatopolsk-Mirsky's words, "a *true* Shakespeare must be found" (Mnich 34, emphasis added). The search for the "true" Shakespeare, the one that breaks away from the previous century's dogmatic stagings, informed most thought on the dramatist, including that of the formalists. Another important feature of the period was the desire to instrumentalize Shakespeare, turn his oeuvre into a vehicle of modernity. Despite these intense debates around Shakespeare, the attention he received in different schools of thought varied significantly. In their philosophical thought and search for mysticism, Shakespeare became crucial to the Russian symbolists. By

⁴ In his 1906 essay, Lev Tolstoy denounces Shakespeare as an author of low-level entertainment, unjustly elevated to his high status by Jonann Wolfgang Goethe. Tolstoy critiques *King Lear* with especial vehemence, namely, for "the pompous, characterless language of King Lear, the same in which all Shakespeare's Kings speak" (Tolstoy 3). The essay was widely read and discussed in Russia and may have set a certain "standard" in the general perception of Shakespeare.

contrast, the OPOYAZ formalists paid next to no attention to Shakespearean oeuvre in developing their theoretical experiments.

One supposed reason for the formalists' lack of interest in Shakespeare was his status as a canonical and widely staged author. In this capacity, Shakespearean drama is outside of the formalists' focus on overturning the dominant tradition in search for radical novelty. Following this logic, the focal point of their scrutiny would be the most contemporary and revolutionary literature, which is mostly the case. However, formalists also analyzed the classics, namely, Russian 19th-century classics, quite extensively: Shklovsky writes about Pushkin and Tolstoy; Tynyanov analyzes Gogol; Eichenbaum explores Dostoevsky. Perhaps, the key to their reluctance to discuss Shakespeare can be found in the approach traditionally taken in the Russian exploration of the canonical dramatist – its focus on the irrational, the mystical and the spiritual as the core of the Shakespearean text. Viewed from this angle, Shakespeare was much more relevant to the symbolists. The representatives of symbolism explore Shakespeare as an author of "the higher reality" – *a realibus ad realiora*; Alexander Blok, as Mnich writes, highlights the themes of "darkness and night" in his interpretations of Shakespeare (40).

The formalists, who attempted to veer away from mystical and psychological concepts, thus also distanced themselves from Shakespearean material. This is partially confirmed by the way Viktor Shklovsky introduces *King Lear* in his short review of the 1920 production, "On the Subject of *King Lear*." As a way into the subject, Shklovsky states, "Unfortunately, I don't even have Shakespeare at hand right now, and I cannot go find it yet, but, as is common knowledge, numerous books, like lower animals, can reproduce through gemmation, without fertilization" (*Revolution* 208). He later suggests that numerous texts *about* Shakespeare are such as he has just described: "to this number of books, reproduced by gemmation, belongs the bulk of the

writings on Shakespeare. One book produces another, ten books produce the eleventh, and so on without end" (208). Proving that the formalists were resistant to approach Shakespeare, Shklovsky attempts to distance himself from the rest of Shakespearean criticism, while also producing his own variation of it. However, in the essay's first sentence, it is the text of the play and not a text *about* Shakespeare that he does not have at hand. So, the play is so well-known that one no longer needs the text itself to discuss and comment on it. In his first published essay, "Resurrection of the Word," Shklovsky makes arguments that may elucidate his stance toward Shakespearean text. "Now the words are dead, and language is akin to a graveyard," writes Shklovsky, arguing that the initial, metaphoric and vibrant, or, in his interpretation, "poetic" meanings of words turn into stale and meaningless "prose" from much overuse (*The Formal Method* 107). This initial argument turns into a metaphor about art, as he continues that "the fate of old masters' works is similar to that of a word. They take a trajectory from poetry to prose. They are no longer seen but recognized" (109). Shklovsky posits that this transformation commercializes the old art, "the masses content themselves with market art, but market art demonstrates art's death" (111). The eager and sentimental reception the "old art" provokes in the average reader or spectator is simply a joyful re-confirmation of the familiar. Shakespeare, in the formalist view, needs new forms of interpretation that would facilitate the text's own *ostranenie*.

Shklovsky's stance concerning the Shakespearean text as, conditionally, "a graveyard" of art shows that formalists' disinterest in Shakespeare may also relate to the prevailing Romantic view of Shakespeare where his plays, in the words of Richard Wilson in his discussion of Foucault and the French Romantic tradition, are "valorized as the Gothic ruins of the Dark Ages" (75). I will attempt to show with Shklovsky's essay on *King Lear* that the formalists distance

themselves from anything that resembles "the archaic experience of the dark as the condition of profoundest truth" (Wilson 76). Perhaps, we can speculate that the formalist aspiration to achieve a totalized re-invention of reality and overcome the tradition leads them to be at odds with the content of the Shakespearean drama. As Shklovsky states in "Resurrection of the Word," "only creation of the *new forms of art* can restore to the human the experience of living in the world, can resurrect things and kill pessimism" (*The Formal Method* 111, emphasis added). Wilson writes that, in line with Romantic ideology, the Shakespearean text is interpreted as "the frontier of the archaic world" (76), and it seems logical that the formalist ideology sees itself as far from this frontier as possible. Interestingly, this unwillingness to engage with Shakespeare is countered by the artists of the period, specifically theatrical formalist practitioners, such as Vsevolod Meyerhold and Les Kurbas, who consistently stage Shakespeare – an issue to which I will return later in this work.

However, Shklovsky recurs to Shakespeare on many occasions, and his short essay in response to the 1920 production of *King Lear* can be seen, as Ludmila Mnich argues, "as a manifesto of the Russian formalist ideas exemplified through a Shakespearean tragedy" (199). The essay was produced in response to a call for a wide range of thought on the production of the director Andrey Lavrentyev and published in *Life of Art* newspaper alongside similar responses from Alexandr Blok, Mikhail Kuzmin, Sergey Radlov and Alexandr Belenson (Mnich 200). Characteristically for the period, all the authors delivered their defence of *Lear* with reference to Tolstoy's derogatory pamphlet on Shakespeare, and *King Lear* specifically, but in other respects, their takes on the play were quite different.

In the essay, Shklovsky, in an anti-Aristotelian move, de-emphasizes or even dismisses the intended emotional reaction of the viewer as an integral part of the play: "emotions,

sentiments do not constitute the content of the text” (209). In “On the Subject of *King Lear*,” he states, “The most unimportant thing about *King Lear* ... is that this work is a tragedy” (208).

While Shklovsky makes this definitive statement, he also acknowledges the reaction of negation and disbelief it is bound to cause. He responds that the designation of *Lear* as a tragedy can be traced to Shakespeare’s contemporaries rather than Shakespeare himself. He confirms his idea by evoking other examples of artists and critics who refused to determine a work of art by its emotional effect: “Chekhov wrote to his friends that he had written a merry farce – *Three Sisters*,” adding that Gogol’s comic story “The Government Inspector” has a potential tragic reading and that the Czech-Austrian musical theorist Eduard Hanslick “provides numerous examples of how the same musical composition was perceived as either melancholy or jolly and witty” (209). Shklovsky cites Hanslick, who takes a formalist approach to music and denies the importance of its emotional impact, a believer in the *absolute music* – an approach to music as an expressive means in its own right and not expressing any meaning beyond itself, such as a psychological or situational one. Shklovsky borrows the concept of *absolute music* to insist on the independence of *King Lear* from emotional, psychological meaning.

In another unifying move that echoes Meyerhold’s idea of “the sum of states,” Shklovsky refuses to delineate the notions of form and content, as he argues that “the content of *King Lear* ... is not the father’s tragedy, but a series of situations, a sequence of witticisms, a row of devices, organized in a way that they, in their interrelationships, create new stylistic techniques,” thus uniting the situations of the plot, the language of the play and the methods as one playing field of “content” that produces stylistic novelties, which he summarizes as “*King Lear* is a phenomenon of style” (209). Referring back to the idea I outlined earlier about the formalists’ struggle against

the hierarchy of form and content, Shklovsky does not separate those two concepts or elevate one of them over another – he conflates them into one core where content *is* form.

To clarify his stance on how content equals form in Shakespeare, it is useful to examine the analogy Sklovsky recurs to in his theoretical writing: the chess metaphor. He claims that a psychological interpretation of the play leads to seeing only the "inessential, inconsequential" – seeing Lear as a "type" (209). This interprets the characters as an embodiment of a set of psychological features characteristic of a particular group of people and leads to claims of the play's psychological inaccuracy (why do the characters in the play not recognize their kin?) and attempts to diagnose Lear's mental affliction in real-world medical terms. He dismisses this realistic reading by asking, "it would be curious to know what ails the chess knight: he always moves sideways" (209). This is certainly not the only time Shklovsky refers to the chess knight's move as a metaphor for artistic creation – he writes a book, which is largely a compilation of his essays organized in a non-linear but logically structured fashion, titled *Knight's Move* at the beginning of the 1920s. In his "first introduction," Shklovsky thus explains the metaphor:

"There are many reasons to the strangeness of the knight's move, and the main one is the conditionality of art... I write about the conditionality of art. The second reason is that the knight is not free, - he moves sideways because the direct way is prohibited to him"

(*Knight's Move* 176).⁵

Shklovsky here equates a theatrical play, or any artistic work, with the game of chess that has specific and highly nuanced rules. This allows the game to have infinite variations but also constricts its flow by imposing the limitations of sixty-four squares and the allowed methods of

⁵ The "second introduction" is an essay, "A scroll" is framed (according to Shklovsky, "in the tradition of Hindu literature") with a story of two students visiting Shklovsky to ask about "what art is." Shklovsky's response is a gospel-like series of riddles in parables that flow into one another. In the end, the students conclude, "We have wasted our youth," and leave (*Knight's Move* 177-179).

moving. The knight's is the most complicated move that requires careful calculation and, at times, numerous moves to arrive at a square right next to its current one. The knight is also the only piece that is not restricted by other pieces – it can move "over the heads." The feature that Shklovsky accentuates most is the "sideways" move – the knight's indirection, which can lead to suddenness in his attack. Another crucial element for the application of Shklovsky's analogy is that chess is a game whose plot is divorced from any realistic human activity or interaction: the pieces have names, but they do not represent any actual persons or creatures, there is no good and evil on the board – only opposing forces, and importantly, there is no center or central square for the number of the squares is even. Essentially, what Shklovsky establishes with the chess metaphor is a decontextualization of the play from real human life and activity, such as family relations, human psychological responses, or existential questions. What is important is the space where the play happens, the moves the pieces make, and the situations ("positions") the moves produce, which combine into a whole script of an integral game.

In this view of the play as an intricate sequence of pre-programmed moves, one key concept for Shklovsky is "material." He states, "in art, the artist always follows the device determined by the material" (*King Lear* 209). For him, Shakespeare's material is a complex of several seemingly disjointed elements: "The material, in Shakespeare's theatre, aside from the stage intrigue, was also the double-entendre – the wordplay" (209). In addition to language, "stage intrigue" is "a series of situations (or "positions"), ... a row of devices," that are "organized" in their "interrelationships" (209). To sum up, in contrast with Meyerhold who de-emphasizes language, Shklovsky's literary "material" includes language (especially wordplay), plot (situations, intrigue), motivations that are dictated by the conditionality similar to chess play, and transitions between moves. He makes no distinction between *what* is said and *how* it is

conveyed – arguably, for Shklovsky, there is no *what*, only *how*, and the value of the play is in the high mastery of *how*. For Shklovsky, however, language is still a vehicle of situational expression; therefore, he, like Meyerhold, does not account for the self-consciously literary language that permeates Shakespearean plays.

The most important consequence of this proposition is Shklovsky's interpretation of Lear as a character in the play. He refutes the common take on Lear as a "type" of a tragic father and affirms that "for Shakespeare, King Lear is – an actor ... and a fool," and later in the essay; he reiterates that "King Lear must be played as a master of double-entendre and an eccentric" (209). He emphasizes that "one must not play the type" but "the piece itself must be played; it is essential to reveal its material" (209). Shklovsky suggests that Lear cannot be seen as a person who exists outside the play, outside the language of the play. Transposing Lear onto life (seeing him as a type) would be, going back to the chess metaphor, like looking at a chess king without either the board or the game dynamic, but as a stand-in for a monarch of an existing state. Instead, Shklovsky proposes that Lear is a phenomenon of Shakespearean language: he is a "master of double-entendre" (*kalambourist* in the original, the word that has a flavour of a circus magician), so he is *the revealer* of the material of the play.

The role of language in the play is, however, far from uncomplicated. Shklovsky insists on *King Lear* being "a phenomenon of style" with Shakespearean language at the core of that stylistic endeavour, but the play itself is highly ambiguous as for the concept of style and language. Stephen Orgel, for example, in his commentary on differences between the 1608 Quarto and 1623 Folio texts of the play, argues that the premise of the play is "a debate between style and meaning," where the opening scene is a clash "between rhetoricians and plain-speakers," in which the rhetoricians are the winners and the plain-speakers are the holders of

truth – a highly complicated interplay of language and truth (1481). Orgel comments that this position reflects "Elizabethan distrust of the theatre – the fear that its representations will be taken for, and will thereby undermine or subvert, reality" – a fear that does not seem alien to the early Soviet theatre as well (1481). In a twist of fate, the initial artistic freedom of the newly emerged Soviet state was promptly replaced by the need of the ruling class to instrumentalize art, including theatre, to become a vehicle of propaganda. The state subjugates the language of theatre, and the plain-speakers, avant-gardists and formalists such as Shklovsky, who deliberately uses only simple sentences and direct wording without the traditional Russian elaborate verbiage, are banned and erased – "thy truth then be thy dower." This shows that the formalists and their speech also fall into the paradoxical relationship with language and style that the play elucidates: they affirm new language as a vehicle for creation of a new reality, which never fully realizes itself. Instead, the old bureaucratic reality re-asserts itself by accusing them of misusing language to raise themselves above the people.

On the nature of this paradox, Orgel writes that the play's concept of language is "schematic and reminds us of Macbeth's world of paradoxes" where "the good daughter cannot express her love while the bad daughters are believed; speech is lying, and silence is truth; the *richest reality is nothing* – what Cordelia says, what her dowry is" (1481, emphasis added). In agreement with this thinking, Shakespeare changes the finale of the plot – in the sources, Cordelia is victorious at the end. Thus, for Orgel, *King Lear* is a play where the Macbethian paradox is enacted: he emphasizes "the exceptional bleakness of this conclusion," to which Kent's final speech gives no redeeming moral except acceptance of "the rack of this tough world" (qtd in Orgel 1484). "The world is an instrument of torture, and the only comfort is in the nothing, the never, of death; the heroic vision is of suffering, unredeemed and unmitigated," the

descent into the *nothing* has no worldly counterpoint; the spiritual triumph is not matched by earthly success – only Edgar, who is a rather ordinary rich man’s son character from the outset, achieves redemption through a descent into squalor (Orgel 1484). Shklovsky also writes on the Macbethian language paradox, which he describes as “contradiction [that] is the basis of the motivation of the false impossibility” (*On Theory of Prose* 70). He explicates the pun paradox as a plot vehicle: “many novellas act as an unfolding of a pun,” using the instance of a prophecy: “In the ‘prophecy’ we have an intention of the characters to avoid the prophecy’s fulfillment and by that means they fulfill it (Oedipus’ motive); an example: the witches’ promise to Macbeth” (*On Theory of Prose* 70). The paradox of *false impossibility*, a paradox that can be realized, in *Macbeth* turns into a *true impossibility* in *King Lear* – the impossibility at the core of language to fulfill its purpose.

Seeing Lear in the role of the play’s revealer elucidates Shklovsky’s stance on his character as “an actor and a fool”: “actor” in the meaning of “doer; agent.” Lear is an agent who actualizes the play’s material, which he achieves through performing a clown/fool act. In this context, it is interesting to consider the doubling of Lear-Fool in the text that is present at the outset but collapses later in the play. It is peculiar that many discrepancies in the versions of the play in the 1608 Quarto and 1623 Folio concern the Fool: either the Fool’s speech to Lear – present in the Quarto but not in the Folio – or the Fool’s prophecy – present in the Folio only.

The first significant indication of the Lear-Fool unity happens at the point when Lear thanks Kent for his service with a purse – this gesture is doubled by the Fool who offers Kent his coxcomb and in explanation: “There, take my coxcomb. Why, this fellow has banished two on’s daughters and did the third a blessing against his will. If thou follow him, thou must needs wear my coxcomb” (Q, F 1.4. 101-105). The Fool’s word-play suggests Lear’s example is foolery,

here in the sense of madness. This initially subtle insinuation is made progressively more explicit and emphatic, curiously interrupted by Lear's attempt to silence the Fool for telling him what he does not wish to hear. The Fool replies, "Truth is a dog that must to kennel. He must be whipped out when the Lady Brach may stand by the fire and stink," emphasizing his role as a truth-teller and the way truth-telling is sanctioned in the world of the play (Q, F 1.4.110-12). It is notable that the Fool's license for truth-telling is ensured by his use of language: unlike Cordelia, who asserts "Nothing," the Fool is never direct but employs figurative speech and circumlocution to deliver his points. This emphasizes that truth can be tolerated when it is containable and controllable within the confines of indirection – if multiple interpretations are possible, the danger of meaning-making is mitigated. Initially, in the play, it is Cordelia's plain expression that makes the dog impossible to contain within the kennel and breaks through the rules of the play, which develops into Fool's language. The metaphoric kennel becomes more and more disturbed as (in the Quarto text) the claim of Lear's identity as a Fool becomes more insistent. The Fool gives a short cryptic speech that ends, "That lord that counseled thee/ To give away thy land,/ Come, place him here by me;/ Do thou for him stand" (Q 1.4. 135-140 F - absent). Finally, Lear cuts through the indirection with a direct question: "Dost thou call me fool, boy?" to which the Fool still replies indirectly, though in the affirmative: "All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with" (Q 1.4. 145-7 F – absent). The Fool's response also suggests that Lear's status as a king was a protective shield from holding an identity of a Fool – now that the shield is given away, the inner meaning gradually comes forward. It is in the moment of Lear's impending madness ("My wits begin to turn") that the Fool disappears – the two definitively collapse into one (Q, F 3.2. 68). The Fool's doubling presence, while it seems to keep Lear from falling into insanity, also disallows him access to the truth – Lear's own truth is contained within the Fool

and is thus separated from him. When the Fool disappears, and Lear descends into madness, he becomes one with himself and with his knowledge. In this new position of knowing, Lear accomplishes his role of the revelatory force in the play by going through madness and entering into a new set of relationships with language and truth, as Orgel argues, "unredeemed and unmitigated."

It is hardly possible to know which version of the text was used for the production Shklovsky watched in 1920 as multiple translations circulated at the time and which scenes and dialogues were chosen for the actual staging and which omitted. But, curiously, Shklovsky himself discounts the exactitude of the text from his arguments at the beginning of his essay: "I don't even have Shakespeare at hand right now, nor can I go find it yet" and later adds, "let it be my merit that, commencing to write this note, I do not open the library faucets," positioning himself in opposition to the scholarly approach to Shakespeare (*Revolution* 208). While the language of the play is all-important for Shklovsky and constitutes the core of its material, the specificity of its language is not important at all, which suggests that whatever version of the play one uses, Shklovsky's intuitions apply to it.

Cryptic Shakespeare: Bakhtin's notes on *Rabelais*

The connections between Shklovsky and Bakhtin are more widely investigated than those with Meyerhold and it is possible to argue that the formalists created a methodological foundation that Bakhtin explores, critiques, and utilizes as a base for his own arguments. In Bakhtin's critique of the formalists, he concludes that "formalism played a fruitful role" of "bring to the fore the essential problems of literary study" and "putting them there in such a sharp way that they can no longer be either surpassed or ignored" (*The Formal Method* 232). It

is, consequently, useful to investigate how Bakhtin himself responded to the problems that the formalists, in his words, “brought to the fore.”

The question of Mikhail Bakhtin's sources is complex and, to a large degree, as Brian Poole argues, unanswerable: Bakhtin cites abundantly, but equally often, citations are omitted, or the source is not mentioned (540). Poole writes that "we know little more about Bakhtin's sources than we do about Sir Toby's and Sir Andrew's, although their positions seem to coincide," pointing to a parallel between the unknowable source of Bakhtin's thought and Shakespeare's characters (540). The problem of influences, in case they are not explicitly discussed by the author, is even more oblique and mostly relegated to speculation and inference. However, Bakhtin writes on topics so closely adjacent to the ones his predecessors discuss that it seems valid to derive conclusions about succession from that proximity and speculate on the interconnections of the ideas. In this section, I will demonstrate the way Bakhtin approaches Shakespeare in his lesser-known notes and additions to the work on François Rabelais and discuss their possible connections with Meyerhold and the formalists, arguing that Bakhtin incorporates his predecessors' ideas as fertile soil for his theory while rejecting their self-imposed limitations.

Mikhail Bakhtin's approach to examining and developing others' ideas is prominent in his engagement with the formalists in his earlier work, *The Formal Method in Literary Study*, published under the pen name P. N. Medvedev in 1928.⁶ The book is dedicated to a detailed historically contextualized examination of formalism as an approach to literature and the arts, as

⁶ As Konstantin Kustanovich notes in his introduction to the edition of the book published in New York in 1982, for his pseudonyms, Bakhtin used the names of real people – his colleagues, a literary scholar P.N. Medvedev and a Conservatory professor V.N. Voloshinov -- without ever mentioning his own name even as a co-author (4). Kustanovich writes that "the reasons for this mystification are unclear," but they "likely had a practical character" (4).

well as a nuanced critique of the formalists' principal tenets, which Bakhtin assesses on their own terms, unlike the prevalent annihilating Marxist critique of the era. Speaking of the limitations of formalism, for example, Bakhtin argues that their source lies in the narrow focus of the formalist thinkers on the newly emerged radical avant-garde art. He states, "formalism was defined by the most radical developments of the literary art and the most radical aspirations of the theoretical thought adjacent to that art, where the main part belonged to futurism and, most prominently, to Velimir Khlebnikov," thus positioning one of the creators of *zaum* poetry as the source and inspiration for the whole formalist movement in its Russian incarnation (*Bakhtin Formal Method* 81). Bakhtin also argues that within the confines of the OPOYAZ essays, formalism may be seen as "an object of literary study only as a theoretical program of one of the branches of Russian futurism," also adding that in this lies the biggest difference between the Western-European branches of formalist thought and its Russian counterpart (*Formal Method* 81). It is clear from this short discussion that Bakhtin sees formalism's close affiliation with futurism as an impediment to growth and development rather than an organic, mutually enriching cooperation. He also criticizes the formalists' ideas about poetic language, which is also, as he claims, infused with "futuristic faith in the creation of the new, especially poetic language, which will be a linguistically distinct language, in which ... linguistic attributes (phonetic, morphological, lexical, etc.) will coincide with poetic attributes" (*Formal Method* 113). Bakhtin argues that this project is impossible to realize because any poetic language would no longer be poetic if not used to create poetry and would instead turn into a general language akin to Russian, French or English. Thus, Bakhtin rejects the main supporting structures of formalism – its decontextualizing habit of "tearing the chair out of furniture," (Oushakine quoting Shklovsky), suggesting a focus on elemental constituent parts instead of a holistic approach, or its

“unchanging scientific interest ... in basic elements, connections and structures” (Oushakine 20). Nor is he interested in creating fundamentally new art and literature that would break with the hegemony of the past. Bakhtin views the formalists' radicalism and novelty as an obstacle that is bound to lead to an impasse since he assumes that logical solidity and philosophical strength, and not novelty *per se*, are the ultimate objectives of any literary scholarship. This discrepancy shows that the formalists and Bakhtin operate on a completely different set of assumptions and set themselves apparently opposite goals: the formalists are almost exclusively interested in the novelty of their work and the interruption of continuity with the predecessors, even if this happens at the expense of logical coherence or possibility of realization – the innovative formalists were more interested in creating what Oushakine calls “the dream airplanes” than in putting their ideas into material shape. Bakhtin, on the other hand, has little interest in novelty as an objective *per se*; he rejects the boundaries that it imposes; he is interested in the development of ideas in literature and in testing and tracing those ideas through multiple historical contexts. This difference of approach is exemplified in their respective treatment of Shakespeare: for the formalists (Shklovsky), *King Lear* presents an opportunity to demonstrate how their concept of literary device functions through the conditionality of space and the actions of character figures, whereas for Bakhtin, Shakespeare is rather an original source (or one of them) of the concepts he closely engages with in developing his theory. Shklovsky is interested in what happens in the play and how it is achieved, but Bakhtin explores the phenomena behind the happenings of the play, including the social and cultural concepts that structure it. Nevertheless, Bakhtin also grounds his interpretation on Shklovsky's ideas, as I will show, thus incorporating the “futuristic faith” into his own thinking.

Bakhtin writes his notes on Shakespeare in the mid-40s, when, according to Sergei Sandler, he "takes stock of his works on the novel and on carnival from the previous decade [the 1930s when he wrote his text on Dostoevsky] and seeks to reconnect them with the main ideas of his earlier philosophical studies" (522). While he bases most of his theory of the novel on previous novelistic examples, focusing especially on the Renaissance authors, such as Rabelais and Cervantes, as the "parents" of the modern carnivalized novel, Shakespeare, being a dramatist, seems to be left out of his reasoning. However, as becomes clear from his notes, his thread of thinking flows from many Shakespearean images, scenes, and characters. It is equally characteristic that his notes on Shakespeare while re-working the chapter on laughter (and history thereof) of his book on Rabelais remain omitted from the final version of the text. This shows that Bakhtin prefers to keep his thinking on Shakespeare in the background of his main work: it informs his ideas without being explicitly integrated into them. The change of titles demonstrates the shift in the trajectory of his work on Rabelais: the title of the initial text, Bakhtin's doctoral dissertation⁷ is "Rabelais in the History of Realism," which later becomes (in direct translation of the title from Russian) *The Art of François Rabelais and the Folk Culture of Middle Ages and Renaissance*. This change demonstrates the shift of emphasis from the history of realism as a genre of novelistic form to a broader reach for folk-culture phenomena as they are reflected in the given genre. His prevalent interest in the phenomena aspect of the text is expressed by Bakhtin himself at his dissertation defence. Defending his decision to exclude any specific biographical or descriptive information on Rabelais from his work, he argues,

⁷ In Russia, there are two stages of doctoral work: "candidate" and "doctor," and despite insistent pleas of his proponents and referees to award M. Bakhtin the status of a doctor because his work exceeded all possible requirements for a "candidate" dissertation, Bakhtin was awarded a humble status of a "candidate" which he retained for his remaining career (*Transcript of Defense*).

“I decided to make him an object of my special research, but he nevertheless did not become my hero. He was for me only the brightest and clearest expression of that world. So, the hero of my monograph is not Rabelais, but those folk, festive-grotesque forms, the traditions that are shown, elucidated to us in the oeuvre of Rabelais” (*Transcript of Defense*, my translation).

From the standpoint of exploring the phenomena as they become *expressed in literature*, rather than the literary phenomena *per se*, Bakhtin’s turn to Shakespeare is, of course, highly relevant to his work, as Shakespearean phenomena are similar to those he explores in the novel, only, one may argue, presented in a more condensed form. Bakhtin’s study of the phenomena amounts to a philosophical theory of laughter, or, as Poole argues, “Bakhtin raises comedy, carnival laughter, popular holiday culture – whatever we prefer to call it – to the status of a cultural philosophy in nuce possessing specific epistemological and cognitive characteristics” (540). While there is no evidence to prove it definitively, it seems likely that Shakespeare was also used in his work on *Problems in Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, as so much reasoning Bakhtin develops speaking about the graveyard carnival appears to be closely related to *Hamlet*.⁸ Here, however, in his notes for *Rabelais*, he explores a different theme – that of individuality and its connection with the images of the crown - and analyzes primarily *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. Bakhtin's notes are never included in the main text; they are written for his own reference only, and they are largely in the form of short reminders or keywords without much elaboration. There are places where he goes into more detailed thinking and others that remain cryptic, for example,

⁸ For example, Bakhtin writes, “entire description is permeated with a markedly familiar and profaning attitude toward the cemetery, the funeral, the cemetery clergy, the deceased, the very "sacrament of death" itself. The entire description is built on oxymoronic combinations and carnivalistic mesalliances; it is full of debasing and bringings-down-to-earth' full of the symbol-system of carnival and at the same time a crude naturalism” (138).

where he simply notes on Edmund, "the motif of the illegitimate son (not settled by the official order)," without going into any interpretation of that motif (qtd in Sandler 536).

Central to the notes is Bakhtin's scheme of what he describes as "levels" in Shakespeare (he never explains what is categorized into levels, so I assume that it is levels of meaning similar to Dante's taxonomy in *Il Convivio*, although not as hierarchical). The first level, which he discusses most, is the level of what Bakhtin calls the topographic: spatial, but also cosmic, it is the level of lineage, sequences, and life cycles. Bakhtin claims that "Shakespeare is a playwright of the first (but not the foremost) deep level" and ascribes Shakespeare's ability to reimagine any possible plot "if only it was at least faintly connected to the main topographic stock of characters" (528). The first level is the level of the embodied eternal cycle of space-situated directionality. Hence Bakhtin accentuates the role of gesture on the Shakespearean stage. The stage contains the cosmos – there is heaven and the underworld, and every actor not only uses language but also gestures toward the sphere to which the words are directed. In this, it seems, Bakhtin nods toward Meyerhold's attempt to exclude language from Shakespeare altogether and show the bare bones of bodywork and gesture as the unchanging essence of any Shakespearean scene. Meyerhold takes it to its extreme and ultimately fails to prove his point, but his experiments inform Bakhtin's less radical and more philosophically nuanced approach.

On the second level, Bakhtin places the clashing forces, a conflict that finds no resolution and is thus bound to repeat itself endlessly. He focuses particularly on the tragedy of individuality, a protest against being "a link in a chain of generations": the tragedy of power and crime (527). Bakhtin argues that it is the "suprajudicial crime" of a link "hostilely separating itself, tearing itself apart from what precedes and what follows" is "the deep tragedy of *individual* life itself, condemned to be born and to die" (527). From these remarks, he concludes

that this conflict is embodied in Shakespeare in the image of the crown, which epitomizes the individual: "the ruler, the king, the one crowned is the limit and triumph of individuality, its crown, which realizes all its possibilities" (Sandler Bakhtin 527). On the third level, he places the images made concrete on the plane of historical time, but also hints, allusions and wordplay. (It is not clear from Bakhtin's notes why these belong to this level and how they are connected to its overarching theme.) Concretization and specificity are essential to this level; a general re-occurring conflict finds its expression in specific people and specific time (Sandler Bakhtin 528). It is notable that in this taxonomy, Bakhtin's idea of chronotope finds itself separated into different levels: place belongs to the first level, while time belongs to the third one. The place can be extratemporal as well as temporally bound, but time for Bakhtin is historic and thus is always specific and concrete.

For his analysis, Bakhtin works mostly with the first and second levels: he discusses the "topographical gesture" in Shakespeare's plays and focuses at length on the problem of crowning and decrowning (also depicted as the gestures that find expression in language as *praise* and *invective*) as the phenomenon of the tragedy of individuality in *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. Bakhtin notes, "in Shakespeare's images ... both poles are always given – hell and heaven, ... top and bottom; ... they are topographic, they are cosmic," as he traces the use of ambivalent speech and images through *Macbeth*, where "going through the entire tragedy is the play of: life – *sleep* – death" (531). But while in *Macbeth*, the tragic and inexorable path of crowning through murder clearly exemplifies Bakhtin's concept of individuality as a suprajudicial crime, the issue of crowning and decrowning in *King Lear* is more difficult to navigate, and his notes on the play are less coherent; they contain more complications.

He summarizes the issue in the play as follows: “*King Lear*. The plot itself is remarkable: the transfer of inheritance while alive, to die before death, to peep in on one’s own posthumous destiny, an arbitrary (rather than a voluntary) premature replacement (a suicide of sorts)” (Sandler Bakhtin 528). This brief *compte rendu* of the play’s plot points to a major difference in the structural substance between *Macbeth* and *King Lear*: I would suggest that while *Macbeth* is a play whose central theme is crowning (murderous self-crowning to be precise), *King Lear*’s central theme is decrowning, which occurs on multiple levels and in several stages of the play’s movement. In the context of this fundamental difference between the two plays, it is noticeable that *Macbeth* lacks a significant element of the comic – it is, to a large degree, solely serious, which Bakhtin also points out in the notes, it revolves around the force of fear. The Weird Sisters add an element of the fantastical and folk, and they are the ones who bring about the protagonist's ultimate decrowning and death. In *King Lear*, by contrast, the element of the carnivalesque, or the ambivalent laughter element, is strong and is concretized by the figure of the Fool. In his notes, Bakhtin posits that “true merriment is incompatible with fear,” affirming the power of the laughter element to combat the fear of the power of the crown” (524). Of course, *King Lear* is not, in a direct sense, comedic, but its seriousness is not, in Bakhtin's terms, the officious fear-based "seriousness of power"; rather, it is the "unofficial seriousness of sadness, suffering, and sacrifice" (527). To this seriousness, laughter is added as an opposing force to fear, not in the form of a merry festive celebratory joyfulness, but rather as a carnivalesque element of upside-down figures such as the Fool, Edgar in his feigned madness, and even Cordelia in her otherworldly resistance to the rules.

The play begins with a doubled ritual of self-decrowning: Lear renounces his crown while still alive, and Cordelia refuses to assume the divided crown by saying "nothing."

Repeated many times over the first scene, "nothing" is a negation of any "thing," Cordelia's symbolic choice of death as the only alternative to compromise and conformity with power (resembling the Greek example of Antigone, whose name translates as "against birth"). In Bakhtin's notes, he mentions that "death is something transient that essentially says nothing" (525). Cordelia, in her affirmation of "nothing" as death, performs the ultimate act of self-decrowning, rebelling against the course of "things" such as succession and compliance to affirm the true values of family allegiance and honesty. In this rebellion she "redeems nature from the general curse/ Which twain have brought her to" (*King Lear* IV.6.205-6). If the "general curse" refers to the original sin, an act of disobedience and affirmation of individuality – life outside of the cycle, Cordelia's act of sacrifice is necessary to counter the breach created by her sisters. Here, the double meanings are important: "the general curse" as the disorder caused by Edmund, Regan, and Goneril in the play itself, as well as the original disorder caused by Adam and Eve. Similarly, the concept of "nature" and "natural" has divergent meanings in the play, depending on the character who employs the concept: for Cordelia, Lear, and the Fool, for example, "natural" is what reflects human values, such as familial loyalty and truth. For Edmund and the sisters, on the other hand, "nature" is a pure affirmation of life, the survival of the fittest. As a result of this conflict, when Cordelia dies at the end of the play, her death is the result of the depravity of the world that is unable to contain the truth, but also an affirmation of the concept of life that contains rather than denies death.

In opposition to Cordelia, the characters who affirm "nature" as solely life-affirming are Regan and Goneril and, most prominently, Edmund, who proclaims his self-crowning by saying, "Thou, Nature, are my goddess; to thy law/ My services are bound," asserting nature in a specific sense of the triumph of instinct as a god to be worshipped and served (I.2.1-2). Nature is

understood by Edmund as a relentless force of reproduction, as an assertion of life without its other pole of death. The final stage of Lear's self-decrowning follows the affirmation "I will say nothing," (echoing Cordelia's renunciation in the first scene) amid the storm (III.2.38). In these scenes, nature, rather than being a force of reproduction, is a force of tumult, disruption, and ruination – a decrowning force. The insistent presence of the storm (repeated stage directions "Storm still") is a material expression of the play's clash of forces that leads to Lear's final surrender as he descends into the inner storm of madness – as Bakhtin states, "both poles are always given." It is a paradox at the center of the play that Edmund's self-crowning, which Bakhtin describes as the ultimate "suprajudicial crime" of a link separating itself from the general chain, is framed as worship and bowing to nature. Self-decrowning is framed as an act of becoming that unites the poles – King and Fool merge into one – but is also a surrender to the larger forces of life and death; as Bakhtin writes, in his madness, "for the first time, [Lear] has touched the genuine reality of the world, of life, and of the human being" (529).

The theme of the crown is closely related in the play to the figure of the Fool and the image of madness (notably, madness is also present in *Macbeth*). Bakhtin writes, "Lear in his madness stage ... makes a transition to the role of the fool-king," which echoes Viktor Shklovsky's succinct interpretation of Lear as Fool I discussed previously (533). The king and the Fool merge into one as a result of Lear's decrowning and unification with nature in the form of the storm. The figure of the Fool is a part of Lear's self that he becomes alienated from by virtue of holding a crown that blinds him to a certain side of reality. Nevertheless, this part of him is a constant presence, unlike, for example, the self-crowned ("false king") Edmund, who is not accompanied by a similar ambivalent figure. Under the pressure of the storm, the Lear/Fool, self/other duality disappears. What role does madness play in this erasure of duality and merging

into wholeness? How does madness alter Lear's relation to the crown? Interestingly, in a dialogue with Lear, the Fool asks, "Tell me whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman," to which Lear responds, "A king, a king." (III.6.9-11). After the process of decrowning and descent into madness is complete, Lear is re-crowned with plants, as a stage direction states, "Enter Lear [mad, *bedecked with weeds.*]" (IV.6.80, emphasis added), who proceeds to affirm that he is "every inch a king" (IV.6.107). It transpires from these lines that the themes of madness and crowning-decrowning are interconnected, which is also represented in Edgar's trajectory of going from high to low and back to high at the end of the play, re-asserting the cyclicity of crowning-decrowning as parts of the same cycle. Edgar's madness, though feigned, follows the same rules as the real madness of Lear, except it is recoverable. In this state, the individual disappears to merge with the collective. As Gloucester pleads, "No words, no words! Hush," Edgar responds with the cryptic recital of "Child Roland to the dark tower came;/ His word was still 'Fie, foh, and fum" (III.4.183-185). He uses words, words that are not his own but belong to a larger chain of artistic creation, the words of a tale that do not "make sense" in a way acceptable to the conscious mind. It is the cycle of integration and disintegration, in which the disintegration of the mind means overcoming the separation of self from other and joining the collective mind – songs, verses, collective artistic spirit, anonymous nonsensical words, fragmented or existing in fragments, incoherent but eloquent because speaking directly through and toward the unconscious. This principle lies at the heart of what Bakhtin views as novelistic dialogism.

Shklovsky and Bakhtin look at the same idea of Lear as Fool ("the fool-king" in Bakhtin), but Bakhtin incorporates the concept into his process of creating what Poole refers to as "the humanist revision of the body/soul dualism and the corresponding (or resulting) liberation from medieval hierarchical narrowness personified by Aristotelian cosmology" (541).

Bakhtin emphasizes the dualism already present in the medieval society, from which the dialogic character of the novel emerges: the reversals of the strict hierarchy and the “joyful relativity” of the carnival law, the ambivalent extremes that are fully present in the world of Shakespearean plays. It is difficult to say whether Bakhtin develops his theory using Shakespeare as an example or whether Shakespeare develops a new paradigm incorporating the images and phenomena of the popular theater and folk tradition. However, it seems clear that Bakhtin looks at Shakespeare as one of the sources of the emerging literary drives that lie at the core of the novelistic discourse.

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