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Wawel Meets Elsinore.  
The National and Universal Aspects  
of Stanisław Wyspiański's Vision  
of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to show the role, the possibilities and the limits of Wyspiański's national thinking through Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Of particular importance, in this context, is the role the Ghost takes in Wyspiański's celebrated interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. By the Ghost we mean the spirit of history, the ghost of a father, the spirit of the fatherland, the voice of the ancestors, and particularly that of the Polish king Casimir the Great, as well as the Holy Ghost and the Evil Spirit because all these aspects of the Ghost belong to Wyspiański's vision. The play in question bears witness to what the Polish poet calls "the truth of other worlds," as well as the truth of the theatre, which Wyspiański calls the labyrinth. The poet manages to reduce, to some extent, this difficult truth to the truth of the world he cared most about, that is the present and historical reality of Poland, more specifically the city of Cracow, known as Poland's spiritual, that is "ghostly," and only virtual, capital. It is also remarkable that Wyspiański saw the Ghost in *Hamlet* in the context of other Shakespearean ghosts, apparitions and magicians, such as those that appear in *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, *Julius Caesar*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Richard III*. At the same time, Wyspiański realizes that the Ghost, with its irrationalism, offends the spirit of post-medieval times, and as such, is understandably neglected by Hamlet, who for Wyspiański, in anticipation of Harold Bloom, stands for modernity.

**Keywords:** Hamlet, Wyspiański, Shakespeare, the dilemmas of nationalism, old-fashioned heroism vs. modernity.

## I

'Tis dangerous when the base nature comes  
 Between the pass and fell incensed points  
 Of mighty opposites.  
 (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 5.2.60–62)

Wyspiański's study of *Hamlet* is a mixture of critical essay, poetic prose and the author's own translation of selected passages from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The translation used is based on another Polish translation by Józef Paszkowski because Wyspiański did not know English.<sup>1</sup> Finally, Wyspiański's fantastic vision of *Hamlet* is not as Shakespeare wrote it, but as Wyspiański would have written it had he been Shakespeare, or perhaps as Shakespeare would have written it had he been Wyspiański. In this paper, I am going to take into account not only a study of *Hamlet*, but also some of Wyspiański's plays, particularly *Wyzwolenie* (*Liberation*) where the influence of Shakespeare, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is very much in evidence.

Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907), a poet, a playwright, a painter, an architect and a critic is sometimes called Poland's Fourth National Bard. The earlier Three Bards, that is Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), Juliusz Słowacki (1809–49) and Zygmunt Krasiński (1812–59) were all great Romantic poets who form a peculiar group, the conception of which is clearly based on the religious idea of the Holy Trinity. This can also be borne out by their use of lofty and religious, or quasi-religious, rhetoric. They belonged to more or less the same generation, they knew each other well, and they lived mainly in Paris, as members of the so-called Great Emigration. Wyspiański, unlike them, never emigrated<sup>2</sup> and spent almost his whole life in Cracow (Kraków), the old capital of Poland, which was then under Austrian rule.

The title page of the first edition of Wyspiański's study (Kraków, 1905) looks somewhat bizarre. It includes the title of *Hamlet* in English, in fact a facsimile of the title of the First Quarto edition of *Hamlet* (1603), that is: "The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke by William Shake-speare." This is followed by a subtitle in Polish, which

<sup>1</sup> He states this very emphatically when explaining why he rephrases Paszkowski's translation, instead of basing it on the original: "Since I cannot speak English and English is alien to me" (see Wyspiański, *Hamlet* 177). But it should be remembered that Wyspiański was a good linguist and spoke fluent French and German. The translation of certain passages from books originally written in Polish was done by me throughout this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Wyspiański, however, was also, in a sense, a Parisian, he visited Paris four times between 1890 and 1894. He spent several months there, fell in love with that city and often felt nostalgic about it in his later years.

in an English translation reads: “According to the Polish text by Józef Paszkowski, freshly read and thought over by Stanisław Wyspiański.” Prospective readers may become confused as to whether they have Wyspiański’s or Shakespeare’s text, and this confusion will not be entirely dispelled. It is often said that this study addresses the problem of the essence of theatre, or contains the author’s original and innovative conception of the theatre. On the other side of the title page, we indeed find an epigraph dedicated to Polish actors. It goes more or less like this:

To the Polish actors, to the characters acting on the stage on their way through the labyrinth known as the theatre, whose destiny was and is to hold the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and spirit of the time their form and pressure. (Wyspiański, *Hamlet* 3)

Part of it is of course a quotation from Hamlet’s speech to the Players (3.2.20–23)<sup>3</sup> on the nature of theatre and the actors’ art.<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that Wyspiański does not include this part of his dedication as a quotation, and treats Shakespeare’s text as something that he can freely link to his own text. This is indicative of Wyspiański’s somewhat cavalier attitude towards Shakespeare’s masterpiece. It is clear that Wyspiański is not interested in interpreting Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, but rather in appropriating Hamlet for his purposes. This can be seen in a somewhat mysterious statement from the book in question: “In Poland the mystery of Hamlet is the following: what in Poland is there to think about [co jest w Polsce—do myślenia]” (101). The meaning seems to be that Hamlet is there to allow Poles, and first of all Wyspiański himself, as a self-styled spokesman for the then non-existing Poland, to think again, and think in a better way, about Poland. So we should not be surprised that Wyspiański envisions, at some point, his Hamlet appearing on the

<sup>3</sup> This is based on William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Bernard Lott, Harlow: Longman, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> While translating this dedication I introduced two significant changes into the English of Shakespeare. Instead of writing “whose end” I wrote “whose destiny,” and instead of “age and body of the time” I wrote “age and spirit of the time.” Such changes are justified, I hope, by the fact that Wyspiański uses Paszkowski’s translation in which “end” is indeed translated by the Polish word denoting “destiny” and “body” is translated as “spirit.” The Polish text is as follows: “Aktorom polskim, osobom działającym na scenie, na drodze przez labirynt zwany teatr, którego przeznaczeniem, jak dawniej, tak i teraz, było i jest służyć niejako za zwierciadło naturze, pokazywać ncoie własne jej rysy, złości żywy jej obraz, a światu i duchowi wieku, postać ich i piętno.”

fortifications of the Wawel Castle in Cracow, Wyspiański's native city, rather than on those of Elsinore in Denmark.

In the dedication in question, Wyspiański calls theatre "labyrinth," which is his own concept not indebted directly to Shakespeare, but presented as if it were at least compatible with Shakespeare's thinking about theatre. Concerning the motif of the labyrinth we may read:

The Labyrinth "Is truly a tool for transformation, a crucible for change, a blueprint for the sacred meeting of the psyche and the soul, a field of light, a cosmic dance, it is a center for empowering ritual." (Artress)

Perhaps Wyspiański was right to link the idea of the theatre with the idea of the labyrinth, especially if we think of a labyrinth not so much as an architectonic construction, but rather as a ritual, mystical dance.<sup>5</sup> Indeed there is something that could be seen as a dancelike movement in Shakespeare's thinking about the theatre. He (or rather Hamlet) wants the actors' speech to be spoken "trippingly on the tongue" (3.2.2), that is lightly. He warns the actors against excessive emphasis, admonishes them to "use all gently" (3.2.5), but a moment later, he says "Be not too tame neither" (3.2.16). A certain precarious equilibrium between the opposing forces is postulated and expressed in the formula: "suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (3.2.17).

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## II

The theme of the theatre, as well as the distinction between "the old" and "the new theatre" make Wyspiański's Hamlet unique—especially if one recalls one of his last plays entitled *Wyzwolenie (Liberation)* (1902). This parallel was recognized by Maria Prussak:

Particularly similar to *Hamlet* is *Wyzwolenie (Liberation)*, which also tackles the problem of the function of the theatre, the problem of the actor's attitude, and unmasks the "old theatre," which is "old," because it is schematic, that is false. *Hamlet* is also a commentary on the poet's own work. (Wyspiański, *Hamlet* xxiii)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Mahiques. Also Robert Graves in his *The Greek Myths* talks about the connection between a labyrinth and an ancient dance (346–47).

<sup>6</sup> The Polish text is as follows: "Najbardziej do *Hamleta* zbliża się *Wyzwolenie*, również podejmujące problem roli teatru, postawy autora, demaskujące 'stary teatr,' który jest stary, bo schematyczny, więc fałszywy. Jest natomiast *Hamlet* również komentarzem do własnej twórczości poety."

It is remarkable in the above quotation that the term *Hamlet* is used in reference to Wyspiański's *Hamlet*, and not Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Yet there are echoes in *Wyzwolenie* of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Shakespeare as such, too. *Wyzwolenie* is a strange, palimpsestic play with virtually no plot. It is focused on patriotic matters, and on the idea of liberation as its title suggests. However, it refers not simply to the political liberation of the Polish nation. The main character is called Konrad, which is an obvious allusion to Mickiewicz's play *Dziady* (*The Forefathers' Eve*), particularly its Third Part, in which the protagonist, also named Konrad, represents Poland's aspiration for independence. Konrad is prepared to rebel against God who is seen as the guarantor of the existing, oppressive order.

Wyspiański's Konrad also has some features of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. At the end of the play, the following dialogue between Konrad and the characters called Old Actor and Director takes place.

KONRAD: So it's you, the actors?

Yes, it's all pretence.

OLD ACTOR: Yes, it is.

DIRECTOR: A moment of illusion.

Now laurels will reward our fictitious toils.

Good night.

KONRAD: In a thought a spark that can start a fire is born!

Good night, my friends.

OLD ACTOR: Good night, my prince!

KONRAD: A theatrical spectacle—look at it, Horatio:

do you know who the theatre is for?; —a mousetrap.

They will reveal themselves: villains and blackguards.

Their conscience will gnaw at them, a blush will betray them.

Let us rejoice, Horatio! (Wyspiański, *Dzieła zebrane* t. 5 175)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The Polish text is as follows:

“KONRAD Ach, to wy aktry! ”

Tak—to wszystko udanie—

STARY AKTOR Tak jest.

REŻYSER Chwila złudy.

Teraz wieńce nagrodzą nam fikcyjne trudy.

Dobranoc.

KONRAD W myśli iskra pożaru się łąże!

Dobranoc, przyjaciele.

STARY AKTOR Dobranoc, mój książę!

KONRAD Sceniczne widowisko—patrzaj się, Horacy:

wieszli, dla kogo teatr?: —pułapka na myszy.

Oni sami się wskażą: nikczemni i podli.

Here Wyspiański gives an explanation, and it is a perfectly Shakespearian one, of the term “labyrinth,” which is used in the dedication to his study on Hamlet. The labyrinth is indeed first of all a trap from which it is difficult, or impossible, to escape. The classical labyrinth, in the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, was used to cage a monster, whereas Hamlet’s “mouse-trap,” that is a play within the play, doctored and directed by Hamlet, is supposed to provoke a seemingly respectable and admirable character, that is the king, to reveal himself as a moral monster. Wyspiański probably had in mind those who might be called “political monsters,” that is traitors and people who cooperated with the so-called partitioning powers, that is Russia, Germany (formerly known as Prussia) and Austria (formerly known as Austria-Hungary). The innovative conception of the theatre, which Wyspiański put forward, included, it seems, the use of theatre for political purposes of which Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in a sense, gives an example.

But, the term “labyrinth” is also explicitly used in *Wyzwolenie*, and it appears in the context of the story of Theseus and Minotaur:

MASK 7: Thread?

KONRAD: Ariadne’s thread.

MASK 7: Leading to the labyrinth.

KONRAD: No, the one that can be used, as you hold it and gradually unwind it from a ball, to penetrate into the secrets of the labyrinth, and reach the remotest passages of the palace. The ones in the upper floors, the underground, the tunnels dug under its walls, and the paths on the vertiginous uplands of the roofs.

MASK 7: What do we mean by the Labyrinth?

KONRAD: Wawel.

MASK 7: And what about Ariadne?

KONRAD: It is pride,

MASK 7: And the ball of thread?

KONRAD: It is love for what is . . .

MASK 7: There?

KONRAD: No, inside myself.

MASK 7: Ah?

KONRAD: And the thing that propels me and leads me.

MASK 7: ?

KONRAD: Is the hatred towards WHAT IS THERE. (79–80)<sup>8</sup>

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Sumienie gryźć ich będzie, rumieniec ich zdradzi.

Radujmy się, Horacy!”

<sup>8</sup> The Polish text is as follows:

“MASKA 7 Nitkę?

KONRAD Nitkę Ariadny.

Wawel then, the old Cracovian castle of the Polish kings, which was only rarely visited by them after the capital moved to Warsaw at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, is to play the role of the labyrinth. Indeed the castle has its labyrinthine aspects. It is one of the biggest castles in Europe, but its famous 16<sup>th</sup>-century courtyard offers a spectacular theatrical space which is often used now for various performances, including Wyspiański's plays.<sup>9</sup> The name of Ariadne is associated with the notion of "pride," understood most probably in a Romantic way, as the justified pride that one takes in one's nation when there are good reasons for such a feeling to arise. No question is asked about Theseus and Minotaur, but it can be surmised that Konrad is to play the role of Theseus, whereas the Minotaur is probably what the poet calls, in Act 3 of the play in question, "the illusion of greatness," that is, the social attitude consisting of the cult of the largely idealized national past, a cult that fails to translate itself into any political action that could be valid for the future. This ineffective and nostalgic patriotism, bewitched by the obsolescent and labyrinthine glory of Wawel, is embodied, in the play, in a symbolic figure called Genius, who is fiercely criticized in the following speech uttered by Konrad:

I know your spells and superstitions, you are a ghastly apparition of the dim and distant past, merely a shadow, you wander around the stones and the columns of the temple. This is Wawel! Wawel! You have set in front of me the tombs and statues of knights sleeping in a stony slumber, their eyelids are closed on our fate and our life. The illusion of great-

MASKA 7 Wiodącą do labiryntu.

KONRAD Nie, tę, którą dzierżąc i z kłębka rozwijając, zejść można w labiryntu tajniki i najskrytsze ulice pałacowe przejść. I te górnych pięter, i te podziemu, i te dalekie drogi podkopów, i te ścieżki na wyżynie zawrotnej dachu.

MASKA 7 Cóż dla nas jest Labiryntem?

KONRAD Wawel.

MASKA 7 A Ariadną?

KONRAD Duma.

MASKA 7 A kłębkim?

KONRAD Miłość dla tego, co jest . . .

MASKA 7 Tam.

KONRAD Nie.—We mnie!

MASKA 7 A!

KONRAD A prze mnie tam i pcha, i prowadzi . . .

MASKA 7 ?

KONRAD Nienawieść ku temu, CO JEST TAM."

<sup>9</sup> It is remarkable that Robert Graves thinks of the original Cretan labyrinth as "the labyrinthine palace of Cnossos" by connecting it in a similar way to Wyspiański. The motif of the labyrinth represents a building that stands for the centre of political power. Cf Graves's *The White Goddess* (106).

ness! You want to seduce us into the snare of the beauty that is dead and gone, and you want to awake moaning in our breast, instead of expressions of joy! O delusion! You bind us with a false happiness and you seduce us with visions of false power! The greatness of your statues is entirely spurious! No heart beats there and those stones can inspire us with no impulse, such as contempt, hatred or revenge, that could awake us and turn us into manly men. Begone! You are a lover of ruins and an admirer of godforsaken wilds! You have led us astray into the crossroads of contradictory desires, you seducer! You are a eulogist of false trails and a guardian of labyrinths, you lead our love into temptation and you poison this love! You lead us up blind alleys from which there is no exit, and in which one can see only the glow of rotting wood. (Wyspiański, *Dzieła zebrane* t. 5 169–70)<sup>10</sup>

This angry harangue is, one might say, Hamletian and anti-Hamletian at the same time. Something of this kind could be put into the mouth of Hamlet at the moment when he is particularly cross with the Ghost, like when he calls the Ghost “an old mole” (1.5.162). But Hamlet, on the whole, even though he complains of inactivity and small-mindedness, as well as revenge being long overdue, means his own inactivity and the shirking of duties, and he does not try to blame others.

The Old Actor, from the above scene, later admits that he used to play Hamlet:

I used to seek fame, I used to play Hamlet,  
but now there are new Hamlets, Home—Children—Woman.  
(Wyspiański, *Dzieła zebrane* t. 5 176)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The Polish text is as follows:

“Znam twoje guśla i hasła, widmo upiorne zagasłej przeszłości, cieniu—błądzisz śród głązów i kolumn świątyni. Oto Wawel! Wawel!! Otoś stawil przede mną grobowce, posażne postaci rycerzy—legli w sen kamienny, powieki ich przymknięte na dolę i żywot nasz!

Złudo wielkości! oto chcesz ująć nas sidłem piękna, co zamarło i zgasło, i jęk chcesz obudzić w piersi naszej, a nie wołanie radości!

Złudo! kłamanym wiążesz nas szczęściem i potęgą nas uwodzisz kłamaną! Wielkość ta twoich posągów to fałsz udany i zwodliwy! nie bije tam serce w onych ani z głązu nie drgnie ku nam żądza, by wzgardą, nienawiścią i zemstą chciała nas budzić i czyniła z nas mężę!!

Precz!!

Kochanku ruin i zapadłych uroczysk chwalco! tyżeś nas wwiódł w bezdroże rozstajnych dążeń, uwodzicielu.

Piewco dróg błędnych i stróžu labiryntów, wodzisz na pokuszenie miłość naszą i miłość naszą zatruwasz! w uwodne powiódłszy sienie, sklepiska, skąd wyjścia nie masz, jeno ogniki świecące próchnem.”

<sup>11</sup> The Polish text is as follows:

“Goniłem niegdyś sławę, grywałem Hamleta.

Nowe dzisiaj Hamlety.—Dom.—Dzieci.—Kobieta.—”



He also remembers his father who perished in the January Uprising against Tsarist Russia in 1863 when he says “my father was a hero, and I am nothing” (155). The parallelism here is clear, for “to be a Hamlet” is a condition which is completely inaccessible to the moderns, who avoid lofty ideals, and lead a trivial, everyday existence. A clear semantic shift takes place. Hamlet no longer finds it difficult, or almost impossible, to fit himself into an old fashioned heroic ideal, because he becomes an exact icon of such an ideal.

It is tempting to compare this with T. S. Eliot’s famous *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1911), written several years after *Wyzwolenie*, in which the American poet expresses similar sentiments:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
Deferential, glad to be of use,  
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
Almost, at times, the Fool. (15)

In Eliot’s view it is Polonius as “the attendant lord” who satisfies the requirements of modernity, by being a time-serving hypocrite.

Interestingly enough, in Russia, another poetic appropriation of Hamlet appeared in Alexander Blok’s poem entitled *I’m Hamlet* (1914).

I’m Hamlet.  
And my blood runs cold  
When treachery is up to scheming;  
My only love in the whole wide world.  
Is in my heart, among the living.  
Ophelia, the cold of life  
Has taken you away, my dear;  
The prince of Denmark, in a strife,  
Hit with a blade, I am dying here.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The Russian original is as follows:

“Я – Гамлет. Холодеет кровь,  
Когда плетет коварство сети,  
И в сердце – первая любовь  
Жива – к единственной на свете.

In sharp contrast to either Wyspiański or T. S. Eliot, Blok recognizes Hamlet's condition as quite compatible with modernity. However, he only thinks of it as a tragic predicament of alienation and betrayal, not as a heroic attitude. This point of view is expressed by Shakespeare's Hamlet, who does feel betrayed not only by his alleged friends, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but also by Ophelia, which, incidentally, is a topic that Blok, always romantically in love with his Fair Lady, would probably never appreciate. It might seem that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a need to measure modernity against the challenge and example that Shakespeare's Hamlet represents.

The Shakespearean theme in *Wyzwolenie* is summarized by the following statement of the Chorus:

Shakespeare is not going to move us  
 Because he had no inkling  
 Of our Polish soul,  
 Even though all other things  
 He knew, represented and defined;  
 And yet I shall raise this objection against him,  
 That he did not invent anything Polish;  
 But this is really no disadvantage,  
 Because all those characters live for me,  
 Let me ask you, now that I know the Polish heroes,  
 Is there anything English in you? (172)<sup>13</sup>

In this highly convoluted and somewhat obscure passage, Wyspiański seems to suggest that Shakespeare, after all, does move him, even though,

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Тебя Офелию мою,  
 Увел далёко жизни холод,  
 И гибну, принц, в родном краю,  
 Клинком отравленным заколот.”

<sup>13</sup> The Polish text is as follows:  
 “Nas przecie Szekspir nie poruszy,  
 bo najmniejszego nie miał cale  
 pojęcia naszej POLSKIEJ DUSZY—  
 choć wszystko inne doskonale  
 znał i przedstawił, i określił;  
 to przecie tę mu wytknę wadę,  
 że *nic polskiego nie wymyślił*;  
 jednak to nie jest żadną wadą,  
 bo dla mnie żyją te postacie.  
 Was, gdy dziś polską znam plejadą—  
 cóż angielskiego w sobie macie?”

in Shakespeare, there was nothing particularly Polish. The failure of Shakespeare to represent the “Polish soul” is paralleled, as it were, by the failure of the Poles to understand the nature of Shakespeare’s Englishness. However, both failures do not prevent Shakespeare’s characters from coming alive on the stage in a way that seems to cut across cultural and national borders. It is significant that Wyspiański does not readily accept the time-honoured but questionable theory of Shakespeare’s universality, which is based on the idea that his works transcend time and space.<sup>14</sup> The Polish poet seems to demand that Shakespeare should become more meaningful in the Polish context, and he assumes that this will be impossible without our, that is Polish, understanding of Shakespeare’s English context.

What we find in *Wyzwolenie* is, in fact, a blueprint for what is included in the study on *Hamlet*. That is a deeply paradoxical conception of Hamlet’s personality, which in *Wyzwolenie* is represented by Konrad’s personality. The paradox consists in showing Hamlet and Konrad as those who appear to fulfil the function that somebody else had masterminded for them. No matter whether this masterful force is the father or the fatherland, or even those who are extremely unwilling to accept that function.

### III

Let us now concentrate on Wyspiański’s study of *Hamlet*. One of its most remarkable aspects is his distinction between two Hamlets in *Hamlet*. The first Hamlet, in Wyspiański’s conception, also called the Hamlet of the old theatre, is similar to his father, and he is “the one who believes in the Ghost-the Father and trusts his words blindly” (22). The other, that is the Hamlet of the new theatre, is much more sparing in gestures and in rhetoric, and is the one who, apparently like Shakespeare himself, “casts doubt on the origin of the Ghost and on his words, and on the belief in his existence, and cannot believe in him unless by assuming that his origin is evil and Satanic” (26–27).<sup>15</sup>

Talking about the two Hamlets in *Hamlet* may refer to the complicated character of the protagonist, as illustrated in the above paragraph, but we should not forget that in the play there are actually two Hamlets, as Hamlet’s father bears the same name as his son. This fact is something

<sup>14</sup> The best known formulation of this widespread conception can probably be found in Ben Jonson’s prefatory verses to the First Folio: “He was not of an age, but for all time !” (see Boyce 323)

<sup>15</sup> The Polish text is as follows: “. . . rzuca podejrzenie na pochodzenie ducha—podaje w wątpliwość jego słowa—i wierę w niego;—nie jest w stanie w niego wierzyć inaczej, jak tylko że zło jest jego początkiem i Szatan.”

that the American critic Harold Bloom makes much of, suggesting that, in the original version of the play, in the so called Ur-Hamlet, Old Hamlet bore his original Danish name Horwendil, and that the later identicalness of their names should be understood in an ironic spirit:

Two Hamlets confront each other, with virtually nothing in common except their names. The Ghost expects Hamlet to be a version of himself, even as young Fortinbras is a reprint of old Fortinbras. Ironically the two Hamlets meet as if the Edda were encountering Montaigne: the Archaic Age faces the High Renaissance, with consequences as odd as any we might expect. (387)

Then Bloom talks about “two Hamlets” in a way that is similar to Wyspiański’s conception of the two Hamlets:

It seems sensible to suspect that Shakespeare’s first Hamlet was much more like Bellerofest’s Amleth: a fortunate trickster of archaic heroism, and reflecting not so much on himself as upon the dangers he had to evade. The second or revisionary Hamlet is not a dweller in an inadequate vehicle, he is at least two beings at once: a folkloric survivor, and a contemporary of Montaigne’s. (392)

The Ghost from the “folkloric” *Hamlet*, according to Bloom, was probably, unlike the later High Renaissance Ghost, a slightly ridiculous figure:

Horwendil the Ghost evidently was rather repetitious, and his cries of “Hamlet! Revenge!”<sup>16</sup> evidently became a playgoer’s joke. Hamlet the Ghost is no joke; he is Amleth the Danish Heracles, a spirit as wily as he is bloody-minded. (388)

The confusion of having two Hamlets and two Ghosts is clearly not as great as it seems. In the earlier conception of the play Hamlet and the Ghost are almost one and the same person. It is only in what Bloom calls the Renaissance *Hamlet* that they become clearly different from each other. Now we seem to have a rehash of the old stereotype in which the Middle Ages, here masked as the Archaic Age, is starkly contrasted with the Renaissance.

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Lodge made fun of a character who “walks for the most part in black under cover of gravity, and looks as pale as the vizard [mask] of the ghost who cried so miserably at the Theatre like an oyster-wife, Hamlet, revenge!” See Friedberg.

The Polish critic Jan Kott, when writing on Wyspiański's *Study of Hamlet*, says the following:

So there are two Hamlets, the old and the new one, combined by Shakespeare into one character. The old Hamlet, who believes in spirits and follows the rules of bloody revenge, and the new, Renaissance Hamlet, who thinks, contemplates and doubts. (389)<sup>17</sup>

It appears that the approaches of Bloom and Wyspiański are similar enough. Bloom may owe a certain unacknowledged debt to Wyspiański, and perhaps also to Kott. Naturally, those interpretations are not completely identical. The first of Bloom's two Hamlets is the Hamlet of *Ur-Hamlet*, which Bloom believes to have been an early play by Shakespeare himself, and not by Thomas Kyd, as is usually assumed. Consequently the dynamic nature of Hamlet, as a character that is in the process of development, in Bloom is, first of all, the matter of maturation of Shakespeare's own mind, while in Wyspiański it is rather a matter of Shakespeare's radical revision of an old and antiquated tradition. This difference, however, is slight, and Kott seems right in attributing to Wyspiański the invention of a dynamic conception of Hamlet's personality:

Wyspiański pieces together his own *Hamlet* on the basis of Shakespeare's scenario, but, at the same time, he looks at Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a work that arose "in theatre and for theatre" from an earlier, pre-Shakespearean scenario. This is what the amazingly pioneering nature of Wyspiański's work consists in. *Hamlet* ceases to be a finished masterpiece, unique and closed, a tragedy that has fallen out of the sky; it is no longer only literature and philosophy, it becomes theatre—or better—a chapter in the history of theatre. (386)<sup>18</sup>

There is, in Kott's thinking, an unstated assumption that what he calls "the theatre" is superior to what might be called mere literature, because "the theatre" is, by its nature, more dynamic and more open to various interpretations

<sup>17</sup>The Polish text is as follows: "A więc jest dwóch Hamletów, stary i nowy, połączonych przez Szekspira w jedną postać. Stary Hamlet, który wierzy w duchy i posłuszny jest prawu rodowej zemsty, i nowy, renesansowy Hamlet, który zastanawia się, myśli i wątpi."

<sup>18</sup>The Polish text is as follows: "Wyspiański układa własnego *Hamleta* z Szekspirowskiego scenariusza, ale jednocześnie patrzy na Szekspirowskiego *Hanleta* jak na utwór, który powstał 'w teatrze i dla teatru' z wcześniejszego, przedszekspirowskiego scenariusza. I w tym jest właśnie zadziwiające prekursorstwo Wyspiańskiego. *Hamlet* przestaje być arcydziełem skończonym i niepowtarzalnym, tragedią, która spadła z nieba; nie jest już tylko literaturą i filozofią, staje się teatrem—albo lepiej—rozdziałem historii teatru."

than non-dramatic texts. I treat this more like an article of faith than a description of reality.

Another thing that I do not like in this conception of Hamlet by Wyspiański-Kott-Bloom is the easy way in which they contrast the old and new Hamlet, the pre-Renaissance and Renaissance Hamlet. If by “pre-Renaissance” we mean “medieval,” we should be reminded that the literature of medieval Europe was usually Christian, or at least it did not, as a rule, defy openly certain basic principles of Christianity, and this is exactly what the “primitive Hamlet” seems to do. It extols the principle of bloody, clannish vengeance, which is hardly compatible with Christian morality. The mature, “doubting” Hamlet seems unhappy about the mission of revenge imposed on him by the Ghost, but he never openly questions the logic or the morality of that mission. In this way *Hamlet*, as a story, seems to have evolved from an openly un-Christian story, to a story that is neither clearly Christian, nor un-Christian, or anti-Christian, which Harold Bloom confirms by saying that *Hamlet* is neither a Protestant, nor a Catholic play, neither Christian nor non-Christian (391). Medieval ghost stories were different. They implied a strong belief in ghosts, but not in the principle of revenge. On the contrary, the revenant ghosts in religious medieval legends call on their still living relations to achieve some form of reconciliation with their old enemies.<sup>19</sup>

#### IV

What we cannot escape when talking about Wyspiański’s *Hamlet* is his appropriation of Shakespeare’s play for patriotic purposes. Let us return then to Wyspiański’s vision of Hamlet appearing on the fortifications of the Wawel Castle in Cracow:

You can see him as he is walking with a book in his hand in the upper gallery of the royal castle of the Jagiellonians. You can see him as he comes up, around midnight, to the guards, where his friend Horatio already awaits him, on the terraces of Wawel, near the tower of Lubranka, close to the part of the castle built under Casimir the Great, and there the Ghost appears! . . . (14)<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For example, the ghost in the story called *The Burning Spear*, related by the 11<sup>th</sup> century German monk Otloh of St Emmeram, appears to his sons in order to call on them to return to a monastery the land that he had unjustly taken away from it. The father’s ghost in this story shows very graphically how much he had to suffer in the Otherworld for having committed this sin, although we have to assume that he is in Purgatory because the moment his sons do their father’s bidding he is released from torment (Joynes 26–27).

<sup>20</sup> The Polish text is as follows: “Widzicie go: jak idzie z książką w rękę w tej górnej galerii pałacu Jagiellonów. Widzicie go: jak koło północy przychodzi ku strażnikom,

The castle of Wawel is, of course, a place of central importance in Polish history. It was the seat of Poland's power from, more or less, the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the decision was taken, even now considered unwise by many, to move the capital from Cracow to Warsaw.<sup>21</sup> The castle is the necropolis of the Polish kings, and the place of their coronations.<sup>22</sup> Wawel also symbolized Poland's aspirations for independence at the time when no Polish state existed. This was also incidentally the time when Wyspiański lived. In one of his most important plays, called *Wesele* (*The Wedding*), one of the characters, trying unsuccessfully to rouse his compatriots to action, or rather to an armed rebellion, the aim of which is, of course, the restoration of the Polish state, shouts: "To arms! To horses! The court of Wawel is awaiting you!" (Wyspiański, *Dzieła zebrane* t. 4 229).<sup>23</sup> This entirely positive vision of the Wawel Castle contrasts sharply with the sceptical and critical assessment of Wawel which we could see in Wyspiański's *Wyzwolenie* (*Liberation*).

But Wawel was also personally important to Wyspiański since he spent many years as a child living literally in the shadow of that huge castle. His family lived in Kanonicza Street in a house which in the 15<sup>th</sup> century belonged to Jan Długosz, a famous historian, who wrote, albeit in Latin, the most celebrated history of Poland. Długosz was also the educator of the sons of king Casimir IV, as well as those of the Jagiellonian dynasty. Wyspiański also took part in the campaign to get the castle back from the Austrians, who had treated Wawel as a convenient citadel from which they could hold the Polish population of the city under submission, by stationing a permanent Austrian garrison there. The Poles, of course, regarded this as deeply humiliating, especially in view of the fact that Galicia, that is the part of Poland where Cracow is situated, enjoyed considerable autonomy in the Austro-Hungarian empire. Finally, in 1905, the emperor Franz Joseph agreed, for a considerable sum of money, to withdraw the Austrian soldiers from Wawel. This was also the year in which Wyspiański wrote his *Hamlet*, and the year in which he put forward the Acropolis project (never realized), for turning the Wawel Hill into

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gdzie czeka go przyjaciel Horacy na terasach Wawelu około Lubranki, w bliskości części Kazimierzowskiej zamku, i tam duch wstępuje."

<sup>21</sup> Officially, only the king and the royal court moved to Warsaw (in 1596). The capital remained in Cracow until the end of the first Polish state in 1795, but of course the de facto capital was Warsaw.

<sup>22</sup> Only two Polish kings, beginning with Boleslaus the Bold, were not crowned in Wawel. Stanisław Leszczyński and Stanisław August Poniatowski, were crowned in Warsaw, and were both later forced to abdicate, which some people do not consider an accident.

<sup>23</sup> In the Polish original, the quotation goes like this: "Hej, hej, bracia, chycie koni! // chycie broni, chycie broni!! // Czeka was WAWELSKI DWÓR!!!!!"

a kind of national temple. The project was inspired, naturally, by the Athenian Acropolis, but probably also by its association with King Solomon's temple in Jerusalem that used to stand on the Hill of Zion.<sup>24</sup> After all, the Wawel Hill includes, apart from the castle, the Wawel Cathedral, which is the principle church of the Roman-Catholic Archbishop of Cracow. Cracow is sometimes called a "Little Rome," since it contains a great number of important institutions connected with the Catholic Church.

Wyspiański's vision of Hamlet on the outer walls of Wawel may have more to it than meets the eye. The author can see him "near the tower of Lubranka, close to the part of the castle built under Casimir the Great" (14). Perhaps it is no accident that Hamlet can be seen on this particular part of the Wawel Hill. Lubranka is also called the Senate Tower, not because the Polish Senate had its sessions there, but because the tower was used as a prison house for the senators. Indeed it is an appropriate place for Hamlet to appear, because he is beset by the phenomenon of criminality in the uppermost echelon of society. His chief enemies are the king, his uncle, and one of the senators, Polonius, on whose servility the criminal king can count regardless of the circumstances. Hamlet's connection with the Senate Tower is also ironic because the Prince of Denmark does not even take into account the possibility of solving his problems by putting his faith in the ordinary course of justice.<sup>25</sup>

The passage in question also invokes the name of Casimir the Great, the only Polish king to be called "great," in spite of the fact that his reign did not coincide with the time of Poland's greatest territorial extent or international position. Wyspiański showed a keen interest in that king, and wrote a poem, or rather a dramatic monologue, entitled *Casimir the Great*. However, although it is clear that this 14<sup>th</sup>-century monarch of the Piast dynasty, the last Polish king from that dynasty, interested Wyspiański mainly for symbolic purposes, the poem says almost nothing about the times of Casimir the Great, or about his life, or personality. Yet there is a clear link between the topic of *Hamlet* and that of Casimir. The latter is shown, in Wyspiański's poem, as a ghost who is transported from the Middle Ages to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The ghost functions as a figure representing the Poles' guilty conscience about their lost chances, their lost independence, and their lost greatness. On the other hand,

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<sup>24</sup> In fact the Jewish patriarch Jacob, who is one of the *dramatis personae* of Wyspiański's *Acropolis* exclaims at some point: "Swing wide, gate of Sion!" ["Rozwierajcie się, podwoje Syjonu!"] (see Wyspiański, *Akropolis*).

<sup>25</sup> It is interesting that in Wyspiański's unrealized design for turning Wawel into a Polish Acropolis, the Senate Tower is situated close to the new Senate building and the headquarters of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences.



however, it is Casimir who is confronted with the crimes committed against Poland, and it is he who feels the desire and duty for revenge against his country's enemies (cf. Wyspiański, *Dzieła zebrane* t. 11 41). The revenge he eventually meets out though is not over an external enemy, but against one of the false prophets, the self-styled leaders of the nation, who, as Wyspiański says, steal that nation's soul (cf. Wyspiański, "Kazimierz Wielki" in *Dzieła zebrane* t. 11 47).

Wyspiański's celebrated design for a stained glass window representing Casimir is rather shocking since it shows a decomposing corpse with a crown, a corpse whose stiffness and size lend it some dignity, but which, at the same time, generally repulses the viewer. This is an allusion to the second burial of Casimir's body in 1869. The finding of the remnants of the king was painted by Wyspiański's master and teacher, Jan Matejko. What happened in 1869 is represented, in Wyspiański's poem, as a kind of second coming of the king. It is similar to what, in mystical terms, was seen in 1869, five years after the ruthless suppression by the Russian authorities, of the so-called January Uprising. The Polish populace can be seen shouting "come back" to the king, hoping for some kind of liberation by the hand of the long dead king. From a Western point of view, the whole story clearly resembles the belief in a return, from the legendary Island of Avalon, of king Arthur who is seen as the liberator of Celtic lands, or of England. The clamoring for a Piast to fill the Polish throne during the free election of 1669 was, we should note, of the same kind. Following such a national catastrophe, a ghost from the supposedly glorious, peaceful and secure past is long awaited.

1869 may also be significant since it was also the year of Wyspiański's own birth. He may have thought of himself as being mystically connected with the symbolic resurrection of the great king. The king would have, thus, become the ghost who fathered Wyspiański, turning the Polish artist and playwright into a deeply Hamletian figure himself.

## V

In one of his poems,<sup>26</sup> Czesław Miłosz, a famous 20<sup>th</sup>-century Polish poet, compares two contemporary Polish figures, Stanisław Wyspiański and the British writer Joseph Conrad. He comes to the unsurprising conclusion that Wyspiański was a much more provincial writer than Conrad, and, unlike Conrad, he was not concerned with the most important issues of Western civilization. Maybe he was not, or at least not as directly as Conrad.

<sup>26</sup> In his poem "Traktat poetycki" ("Poetical Treatise"); see Morawiec (7–11).

Yet it would be a mistake to accept the idea that his interests were simply limited to Polish affairs; in many ways he was a cosmopolitan—profoundly influenced by such foreign writers of his epoch as Ibsen, Hauptmann or Materlinck. But, it is true that his links with the English speaking culture were rather tenuous, and his interest in the Russian culture which he could have been against, just like Conrad, could have been somewhat prejudiced. Nonetheless, Wyspiański's treatise on Hamlet does contain an interesting aspect which has a bearing on Russo-Polish relations. At one point, the author no longer seems satisfied with Wawel as the backdrop for his *Hamlet*, and instead he starts thinking about the Kremlin in Moscow:

I consider it remarkable that, even if in this Shakespearean tragedy there may be no references to contemporary great history and real events—which in this tragedy should have found their expression—at the same time when Shakespeare was constructing this drama, in the years 1601–1604, a great drama and tragedy was taking place, and it was full of many secrets, worthy of Hamlet, it was the MOSCOW TRAGEDY: the tragedy of Godunov, Fyodor, the False Dmitri, over which the Ghost of Ivan the Terrible is hovering. The great dramatic backdrop of events, preceding the drama itself, features the two Titans, fighting something like an Ariostic duel, two titans dueling for power over the two states: Batory and Ivan. And then in the very course of the drama this strange figure of Fyodor, those strange pieces of news about the adolescent Dmitri, about the death of that Dmitri, about that Dmitri having been saved, that constant reappearance of Dmitri embodied in different figures—those increasingly strange rumours and Godunov's anxiety; Godunov, who the whole of Claudius's part could recognize as his own—that young Fortinbras gathering volunteers from various parts of . . . Norway—those strange phenomena in the sky and on the earth, “just like before the death of the great Julius, when Rome was at the height of its power”—that presence of numerous Englishmen in the closed circle connected with the events in Moscow and in the Kremlin, and the reports of those Englishmen—and that THEATRE in London, which is going to SHOW THE VERY AGE AND BODY OF THE TIME their FORM AND PRESSURE . . .<sup>27</sup>

I do not want to say anything more by means of this juxtaposition—but I can't resist the JUXTAPOSITION. And I would consider it proper to juxtapose the ART and the artist's work, on the one hand, and the mere reality of the events, on the other.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Hamlet* (3.2.22–23).

And I would say that what the soul of the artist achieved and reached by means of thinking, therefore, what part of the mysteries ART managed to divine—was at the same time TAKING PLACE on the great STAGE OF THE WORLD. (164–66)<sup>28</sup>

Jan Kott quotes the above passage, but only to illustrate Wyspiański's intention of finding a suitable historical backdrop to the story of Hamlet (394). Why this particular backdrop should be suitable, he does not explain.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, it is necessary to discover how we should translate Shakespeare's Elsinore tragedy, into Wyspiański's Wawel tragedy, and that tragedy into the Kremlin tragedy which Wyspiański also imagined. To get a grasp of the situation we should first of all note the importance Wyspiański attaches to the figure of Fortinbras as Hamlet's alter ego:

<sup>28</sup> The Polish text is as follows: "Zastanawiające wydaje mi się, że gdy w tej tragedii Szekspira może i zgoła nie ma żadnego oddźwięku współczesnej wielkiej historii i dziejów rzeczywistych—które by w tragedii tej przecież się wydobyły—to właśnie równocześnie, gdy Szekspir dramat ten budował, w latach 1601–1604 buduje się i rozgrywa na wielkim świecie: dramat i tragedia, równie wiele zagadek obejmująca, zagadek Hamleta godnych—to: TRAGEDIA MOSKIEWSKA: Godunowa, Fiodora, Dymitra Samozwańca, nad którą unosi się duch: Iwana Groźnego. Że to wielkie tło dramatyczne zdarzeń, dramat sam poprzedzające, maluje dwóch Tytanów, zmagających się jakoby w pojedynku ariostycznym, dwóch tytanów w pojedynku o władzę nad państwami dwoma: Batorego i Iwana. A potem w samym już przebiegu dramatu ta dziwna postać Fiodora, te dziwne wiadomości o dorastającym Dymitrze—o śmierci tegoż Dymitra, to znów o tegoż Dymitra ocaleniu—to ciągle pojawiające się—Dymitra w coraz innej postaci—te coraz dziwniejsze z rokiem każdym wieści i niepokój Godunowa; Godunow, który całą rolę Klaudiusza może w każdym wierszu uznać za swoją—ten młody Fortynbras zbierający rotę ochotnicze z różnych zakątków . . . Norwegii—te dziwne na niebie i ziemi zjawiska, 'zupełnie jak przed śmiercią wielkiego Juliusza, gdy Rzym u szczytu stał swojej potęgi'—ta obecność wielu Anglików w zamkniętym kole terenu ówczesnych wypadków w Moskwie i w Kremlu i relacje tychże Anglików—ten TEATR w Londynie, który zamierza ŚWIATU I DUCHOWI WIEKU ukazywać POSTAĆ ICH i PIĘTNO . . .

Niczego więcej przez to zestawienie nie chcę powiedzieć—ale nie mogę się oprzeć—ZESTAWIENIU. I zestawiać sądziłbym tylko SZTUKĘ i dzieło myśli artysty—ze samą tylko rzeczywistością wydarzeń.

I powiedziałbym, że ku czemu doszła i co myślą osiągnęła dusza artysty, a więc co z tajemnic odgadła SZTUKA—to i działo się równocześnie na wielkiej SCENIE ŚWIATA."

<sup>29</sup> It might be considered naïve on the part of Wyspiański to expect Shakespeare to be interested in rather exotic, from his point of view, East European matters, but the Polish poet's mention, in the above quotation, of "that presence of numerous Englishmen in the closed circle connected with the events in Moscow and in the Kremlin, and the reports of those Englishmen" is a means to counter such suppositions. Clearly, Wyspiański was aware of the lively commercial contacts between England and Russia in the times of Elizabeth I and James I. The English reports he mentions may have been those prepared by the envoys of the so-called Muscovy Trading Company, which started its activity in 1555.

Fortinbras has to avenge his father's death.  
 Hamlet has to avenge his father's death.  
 Hamlet is drawn by the Ghost, who wants his son to repeat the course of his own life.  
 Fortinbras continues his father's thoughts, aims, ideas, plans and intentions. (88)<sup>30</sup>

In his own paraphrase of *Hamlet*, Wyspiański lets Hamlet go to Norway, not England, so he can join forces with Fortinbras with the intention of overthrowing Claudius, which would satisfy both Fortinbras's desire to avenge his father, who had been killed by the king of Denmark, and Claudius's brother, as well as Hamlet's desire to kill Claudius, the murderer of his father. What Hamlet fails to notice is that by doing this he is delivering his fatherland into the hands of his traditional enemies, the Norwegians, since Hamlet has no armed forces of his own. What adds spice to the whole situation is that Elsinore is defended by Horatio, who is Claudius's commander-in-chief, and he, Hamlet's closest friend, notices to his horror, that Hamlet is fighting in the ranks of Horatio's, and Hamlet's, fatherland's enemies. When Horatio dramatically accuses Hamlet of high treason, the pressure on Hamlet is so great that he suddenly dies his heart breaks. His best friend has turned against him, and he, trying to defend the honour of his biological father, sometimes called Old Denmark, has turned out to be the murderer of his metaphorical father, that is old Denmark.

It is clear enough that, from Wyspiański's point of view, Denmark and Norway did not matter much, so the historical allegory would have to be read in a different way: Denmark stands for Russia, while Norway for Poland, at a time when Russia and Poland were still nations of comparable power and influence that is at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when *Hamlet* was written. The main conflict in the tragedy of *Hamlet*, as seen by Wyspiański, is not the one between Hamlet and Claudius, but rather between dead men: Fortinbras's father, that is Old Fortinbras, and Hamlet's father, that is Old Hamlet. Old Hamlet, in this conception, seems to represent Ivan the Terrible, the tsar of Russia, while Old Fortinbras is Stephen Batory, the king of Poland. The two, Ivan and Stephen, were indeed deadly enemies who waged a fierce war with each other from 1577 to 1582. Claudius represents, of course, as Wyspiański himself explicitly says, Boris Godunov, the counsellor and suc-

<sup>30</sup> The Polish text is as follows:

“Fortynbras winien pomścić śmierci ojca.

Hamlet winien pomścić śmierci ojca.

Hamleta ciągnie Duch na tę samą drogę, którą sam za żywota kroczył.

Fortynbras podejmuje myśli, cele, zamiary i idee, dążenia, plany ojca.”

cessor of Ivan the Terrible. Godunov, as far as I know, has never been accused of murdering Ivan, whose close collaborator he was. But, he was repeatedly accused of murdering Ivan's youngest son Dmitri, who could have jeopardized Boris's position as a regent during the reign of Ivan's feeble-minded son, Fyodor. Godunov's sister was Fyodor's wife, so he was not Ivan's brother, but still a brother of his daughter-in-law. Later the above mentioned Dmitri would, in a sense, come back to life as the so-called False Dmitri, or rather self-styled Dmitri, who pretended to be Ivan the Terrible's son, and who had miraculously escaped Boris Godunov's hired assassins. There were several of those false Dmitris, but the first was certainly the most successful, and he actually managed, with some help from his Polish friends, to overthrow the tsar, who was not, admittedly, Boris Godunov, but his son, another Fyodor. Young Fortinbras would have to be identified as Sigismundus III, the king of Poland after Batory,<sup>31</sup> or as Sigismundus's son, Ladislaus, who became the later king of Poland, Ladislaus IV. Indeed Ladislaus IV had a good chance of becoming tsar of Russia, an opportunity largely spoiled by his father, who wanted to be the tsar himself. Young Hamlet, in this context, would be, as could be expected, the False Dmitri,<sup>32</sup> or rather the Genuine Dmitri, assuming, even though this is very unlikely, that he really was the son of the dead monarch, that is Ivan. Dmitri indeed managed to cause the death of his uncle, or rather, in this case, the son of a brother of his elder brother's wife, that is Fyodor, the son of Boris. The rule of Dmitri was brief, and ended in his tragic death, as the result of an insurrection, after only eleven months. The above historical analogies are very imperfect, but they must have inflamed Wyspiański's desire to project the story of Hamlet on to the vast scene of East European conflicts.

Seen from this point of view, Wyspiański's *Hamlet* becomes not only a story about the troubled relations between Poland and Russia, but also about the people tragically involved in those relations (such as the "baser natures" coming between the sharp swords of mighty opponents). Specifically, it was a nationalistic tragedy, and a tragedy about the meaning of nationalism and patriotism. In this tragedy, the most dramatic scene takes place between people representing two conceptions of patriotism, one attached to the idea of the fatherland as a place where abstract ideas such as

<sup>31</sup> Sigismundus III was from the Swedish Vasa dynasty, and only distantly related to Batory. He was the son of Catherine Jagiellon, the younger sister of Anna Jagiellon, who was Batory's wife.

<sup>32</sup> It is known that the first of the Dmitiri impostors also pretended to be an illegitimate son of Stephen Batory, the Polish king. Naturally, he could not be both, so presumably he claimed officially that he was Ivan's son, while secretly he thought of himself as Stephen's son, which of course must have made it easier for him to be a Russian patriot in name only, while in fact acting wholeheartedly as a Polish agent.

freedom, law and justice should triumph, and the other attached to the notion of the “Realpolitik” or “political realism,” and the principle of “right or wrong, it is my country.” In Wyspiański’s vision of *Hamlet*, Hamlet himself represents the former, we might say, political version of patriotism, while Horatio represents the latter, let us say the ethnic version of patriotism.

A similar dilemma can be observed in *King Lear* in which Cordelia tries, unsuccessfully, to restore justice and redress the wrongs at the head of a foreign, in this case French army, opposed by a British army in which one of the officers is Edmund, an evidently black character and a protector of the devilish sisters Goneril and Regan, but, in a sense, a defender of the fatherland. Wyspiański certainly did not think of this dilemma only in a historical context. He was facing a very real problem that was slowly coming to a head in the years preceding the outbreak of the First World War—he died seven years before the war began. The problem consisted in whether to back the political and military venture of the commander Józef Piłsudski, who planned to invade the so-called Russian Poland, and to avenge the insurrectionists of the November and January Uprisings, in collusion, however, with the Austrian, and, in effect, also the German army, or to refuse to support this initiative because it would mean helping a hereditary enemy, that is the Germans, in occupying Polish land on the pretext of Poland being torn by a quarrel among the Slavic brothers, that is the Poles and the Russians. As we know, Wyspiański, presumably after a great mental struggle, chose the first option, his Hamletian nature clamouring for revenge.

## VI

What is characteristic of Wyspiański’s interpretation, the interpretation from which he refused to draw all the consequences (echoing Hamlet’s “the rest is silence,” Wyspiański says: I do not want to say anything more<sup>33</sup>), is that it turns Shakespeare’s play into “the drama of ghosts” (Wyspiański, *Hamlet* 20). Yet we should remember that Wyspiański was very unhappy with the rule of ghosts from the past. This is why he contemptuously rejected Goethe’s interpretation of *Hamlet*, according to which Hamlet failed because he was not equal to the task he had been entrusted with by the Ghost. Wyspiański, in effect, says: on the contrary, it was the nature of that task that was not equal to Hamlet, or rather was beneath his dignity, for, as Wyspiański claims, Shakespeare was against seeking revenge

<sup>33</sup> By this I mean, of course, his already quoted: “Niczego więcej . . . nie chcę powiedzieć” (Wyspiański, *Hamlet* 166).

for other people's wrongs, one can legitimately take revenge only for wrongs committed against oneself (Wyspiański, *Hamlet* 20). According to Wyspiański, it was the true reason for Hamlet's delaying tactics. Only when Hamlet realized that the king had been plotting beforehand, by poisoning the points of the swords, and preparing the poisoned cup, for his nephew's murder (cf. Wyspiański, *Hamlet* 122–23, 128), could Hamlet finally carry out his revenge, the revenge for his own death, rather than for that of his father. He no longer acts as an agent of the Ghost, and a servant of the ghosts of the past, but as his own independent self.

Hamlet's decision to take up Laertes challenge of a duel is represented by Wyspiański as an act of elaborate suicide, as an acceptance of Fate, but, at the same time, as an act of rebellion against the roles prepared for him either by his uncle, or his father. This time Hamlet is not the one who has prepared a mousetrap for his wicked uncle, but rather someone who is about to be caught in the mousetrap prepared for him by the same uncle. Yet Hamlet, at least Wyspiański's Hamlet, does not let himself be caught. He is consciously walking into this mousetrap, and therefore capable of turning it, at least partly, against the one who has prepared it. We should not marvel too much at this. The mousetrap is a labyrinth, which, as we have seen, is Wyspiański's metaphor for the theatre. It is Hamlet rather than Claudius who is shown, in Shakespeare's play, as the expert actor and theatre director.

The labyrinthine nature of Wyspiański's interpretation is also visible, as we have seen above, in the Polish poet's ability to see the tragedy of Hamlet in the context of the history of Poland and Russia. It also offers a perspective of the Danish, English, Polish and Russian Hamlets mirroring each other. Plato in his dialogue *Euthydemus* says the following about the labyrinth, which is understood as a way of reasoning:

Then it seemed like falling into a labyrinth: we thought we were at the finish, but our way bent round and we found ourselves as it were back at the beginning, and just as far from that which we were seeking at first. (qtd. in Kerényi 92)

Kerényi adds that

[t]hus the present-day notion of a labyrinth as a place where one can lose [his] way must be set aside. It is a confusing path, hard to follow without a thread, but, provided [the traverser] is not devoured at the midpoint, it leads surely, despite twists and turns, back to the beginning. (93)

The above quotation provides us with a vision of a labyrinth that seems, at the same time, a good description of what Wyspiański does to Hamlet. He multiplies bold interpretations and possibilities of the reading, but they all lead us “back to the beginning,” if by “beginning” we understand both Shakespeare’s text, and the most fundamental questions concerning the relation between the individual and the social group, or nation, to which he or she belongs. The labyrinthine nature of this kind of thinking naturally means that it is dangerous, and, at least, implies the risk of confusion and disorientation.

Unlike many other appropriations of Shakespeare, Wyspiański’s version of *Hamlet*, and his thinking about *Hamlet*, or with the help of *Hamlet*, is never too distant from the original play. On the one hand, Wyspiański seems to have appropriated Hamlet rather radically, for his specific needs, and as a metaphor of himself, that is of someone who embodied the Polish national tradition and, at the same time, rebelled against it. But, on the other, the Cracovian playwright does so always with the original play in hand, even though he only had a Polish translation at his disposal. In that original play, the topic of the protagonist’s troubled relationship with his father, and his social environment, is already represented. As a result, Wyspiański’s appropriation looks like an expansion of the original text, not a narrowing of it motivated by having some personal axe to grind.

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