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Aggressive Margins Shaking the Spear of the Canon

The dynamics of the center-margins relationship was often invoked in terms of the canonic battle, as well as in identity issues. A possible model of these complicated processes might be offered by the undulating water waves that roll to the shore and then come back to the starting point to call attention to the kinetic impulse that generated them. This to-and-fro progression of the waves is highly instructive for the ways in which the canonic cores propagate their sway upon the margins, also generating a kind of boomerang effect, as, once legitimated, the margins add new force to the center, or, on the contrary, try hard to challenge it. More often than not, the small cultures look up to the influential ones, which generate such canonic centers, but, when it comes to radical reforms, the second attitude is more likely.

If we examine the influence of the Shakespearean model (designated by Harold Bloom as the very center of the canon) upon Romanian poetry of the twentieth century, both attitudes become obvious. On the one hand, following the example of Eminescu, who revered Shakespeare as a model, the Romanian poets often honored the English dramatist; on the other hand, the pioneers of the surrealist movement allow us to discover a uniquely refreshing attitude towards the Shakespearean figure.

Tristan Tzara (1896-1963), one of the founders of the “Dada” movement, in Zürich in 1916, in his early youth, wrote a poem called *Hamlet – Fragmentary Notes*.¹ He wrote the text in Romanian, between 1912 and 1915, yet never published it in his lifetime. It belongs to the Pre-Dada Tzara and it was discovered in his personal archive kept by Claude Sernet after his death, and included by his editor Sașa Pană in the second edition of his *First Poems* (1971). The young Tzara (when between 16 and 19 years old) was highly obsessed with the character of Hamlet. A manuscript with drawings has been kept in which he apparently was searching for a pseudonym and some versions were Tristan Ruia Hamlet or Hamlet Tristan Ruia. Later on, the manuscript of the poem we analyze here contains the inscription “Hamlet by Tristan Tzara” in an effort to write Hamlet and his chosen name below it, spanning the same length.

The poem belongs to the so called “symbolist” period of Tzara and a number of features confirm this aesthetic orientation, but other elements already anticipate the Dada counter aesthetic demonstration, which he describes as “the great spectacle of disaster, of arson and decomposition.”² Tristan Tzara challenges here the most

¹ *Hamlet – fragmente de ciorne* [*Hamlet – Fragmentary Notes*] in Tristan Tzara, *Primele poeme* [*First Poems*], Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 1971, pp. 92-96.

² Tristan Tzara, *Manifeste Dada 1918* [*Dada Manifestoes, 1918*] in *Dada 3*, Zürich, 1918, p. 2.

renowned play of the most celebrated playwright of all times, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. A poet and playwright himself, the future theorist of the Dada movement examines the Shakespearean world with a clear intention of undermining and breaking the spell of the mythologized world, anticipating his future rhetoric of negation, as well as his ambition to cultivate "counter-art for counter-art's sake" (which was, of course, a paraphrase of Titu Maiorescu's famous aesthetic principle of "art for art's sake.")

The *fragmentary notes* have three variants in which the poetic instruments rapidly glide towards an ever-growing absurd imagery. The first version, which I intend to analyze here, is also the most elaborate and comprehensible, although the poetic mechanisms overflow the limits of the traditional lyrical system of thought and imagination. It provides an almost surrealist reading of the Hamlet and Ophelia pair. That is why I believe that it was written towards the end of the indicated period (maybe even after his arrival at Zürich in the autumn of 1915). His editor placed the text and its variants at the end of the volume, probably having the same feeling that it was a rather "late" poem. Anyway, it is documented that the poet refused to entitle his first volume *Poèmes d'avant-dada*, as Sașa Pană suggested. In a letter to his editor he explained that such a title might be interpreted as a disruption in his poetic development, while he felt a true continuity between his first period of creation and the Dada period.

Here is Ophelia, seen through the lens of an incipient cultural nihilism:

What sort of a woman was Ophelia?
Blond, her hair disheveled like the moon's on
the pillow of the clouds
Like the moon through buckets of waters seen at the nunnery;
 she was tall and slander
A phantom of ice
Like the birch-tree caught the ring stopped at the waist
Like an insect... without a flutter, with her dress
 white as a nurse's breast
Her wing-like hands hung down to the earth
And the gates of Heaven were opening
When she hugged some relative and came to the window at dawn

Her father said she would take good care of her children
That she would fulfill her duties in the world
(...) Like her mother who had many children.³

Contextualized within the entire volume, Ophelia's portrait is not very atypical; many women of Tzara's *First Poems* have blond hair: *the blonde daughter of the innkeeper from Hirșoveni*,⁴ *the blonde Lia* who hangs herself⁵ or *the blonde*

³ Tristan Tzara, *Hamlet – fragmentary notes*, in vol. *Like Diamonds in Coal Asleep. Selections from 20th Century Romanian Poetry*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1985, translation by Andrei Bantaș. pp. 141-142.

⁴ *Cîntec de război* [War Song], in *Primele poeme*, ed. cit., pp. 16-21, my translation.

neighbor from *Sing On*.⁶ Moreover, in a poem called *Sunday*⁷ a girl drowns like Ophelia. The suicide itself makes her an interesting character, as the self-destructive attitude is held dear by Dadaists. The “tall and slender” blond angel, “beautiful, too” soon becomes “a phantom of ice,” flying with “her wing-like hands” through the opened “gates of Heaven,” where she sleeps, with her blond hair “disheveled” on “the pillow of the clouds.” The total absurdity of her entire existence becomes more obvious through the reference of her unborn babies, as her premature death does not allow her to “fulfill her duties in the world,” to be “like her mother who had many children.”

The very texture of the Shakespearean character implies an inherent poetics of incurable despair in total agreement with the surrealist thinking theorized by Breton. The parodic mechanisms are very subtle here. As a genuine Dadaist, the future architect of the movement enters the Shakespearean realm like a Trojan horse; his true intention is to undermine the classical readings of the play and show us the way in which the tragic progressively changes into the derisive. The subversive values of his apparent tribute paid to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* are also visible in Tzara’s option to start his poem by referring to the lesser character of Ophelia.

Beyond some conventional symbolist elements, more obvious in the original Romanian text, the poem reveals a programmatic *reductio ad absurdum* of Hamlet’s dilemmas. It is well known that for this group of artists, or rather counter-artists, brought together by their revulsion of academese, the desacralizing of all the consecrated forms of art was essential as their main purpose was to prove the absurdity of all the literary and artistic conventions. Nicolae Balotă remarked that “for them, the absurd functioned like the dynamite meant to detonate everything: art, culture, society, a kind of Dadaist Apocalypse” as “the Dada counter-poiesis stipulates the liberation of the word from the control of rationality.”⁸ Hamlet is by definition a prince of rationality, who refuses to trust his senses and needs supplementary evidence to confirm the ghost’s irrational story. Could doubting Hamlet himself be brought to the conviction that the world is an absurd place, that would certainly be an important victory of the Dada outlook. And young Tzara tries to do that, to recast *Hamlet* into an absurd play:

Hamlet often dreamt of people entering on their knees
Splashing like dogs in thick vegetable soup left over from dinner
Licking their muzzle eagerly for the matter still sticking there
He wondered, shaking himself without any
Disgust at life
The witch told him: love.

⁵ *Glas* [Voice], in vol. cit., pp. 22-23, my translation.

⁶ *Cîntă, cîntă mai departe* [Sing On], in vol. cit., pp. 74-75, my translation.

⁷ *Duminică* [Sunday], in vol. cit., pp. 31-33, my translation.

⁸ Nicolae Balotă, “Absurdul în aventura dadaistă” [The Absurd in the Dada Adventure] in vol. *Literatura absurdului* [The Literature of the Absurd], Bucharest, Teora Publishing House, 2000, pp. 222-226, my translation.

She sewed his heart with thread
But for the reader this makes no difference whatever.
The prince had some ship sail away loaded with the past
He introduced unwritten cargoes. Burial. Visits. Books.
The aimless ship was to sink and the sailors could swim;
Rising from the sea here and there were Don Quixote's imaginary treasures.⁹

Like Ophelia, Hamlet too had been mentioned in some of Tzara's *First poems*. The last line of the poem "Nurse" anticipates the fragmentary notes: "And Hamlet from my soul trembles in wind and cold"¹⁰. Another poem, called "Insomnia" strangely uses a plural: "And Hamlets trembling at the creaking of a gate."¹¹ Why was Hamlet so present into the thoughts of the young poet? Later on he explains: "For Dada hesitation comes first, before action and above everything. Dada questions everything."¹² So Hamlet, impersonating this attitude of distrust and hesitation, is definitively an emblematic character. The theme of the simulated madness was also extremely appealing; in fact, what was Dada itself if not a feigned cultural madness? But in his first texts, the poet does not elaborate. So it is the reader who has to interpret Hamlet's recurrent image.

His failure to respond to Ophelia's love seems to be the result of a black magic charm: "The witch told him: love. / She sewed his heart with thread". But that is not important for the *surrealist* reader ("for the reader this makes no difference whatever"), who is more interested in Hamlet's phobic dreams of the sub-human human condition of the courtiers: "people entering on their knees / Splashing like dogs in thick vegetable soup left over from dinner". The inspiration for this irrational image was probably Queen Gertrude's cue from Act IV, Scene 5: "you false Danish dogs."¹³

In his dream, the courtiers-dogs, supposed to protect old Hamlet, his murdered father whom he plans to avenge, pretend that nothing happened and are eager to swallow the royal leftovers in the same manner as they swallowed the lies of the usurper, without questioning the odd death. He wakes up "without any disgust at life", though. That is really an illogical, surrealist 'interpretation' of his neurotic, recurrent dreams. Might this negotiable humaneness account for "to be" equating "not to be", keeping this existential question in perfect balance? The well-known dilemma unveils the universal and profound meanings underlying this Shakespearean character.

His vain, absurd efforts to get rid of the past by loading it on sinking ships spurs our imagination, as the concrete and the abstract disappear as conceptual categories. It likewise happens with Creangă's foolish character who is trying to bring light into his home by carrying it in with a jar. Absurd as it is, the image of

⁹ Tristan Tzara, *Hamlet – fragmentary notes*, in vol. *Like Diamonds in Coal Asleep*, ed. cit., p.142.

¹⁰ *Soră de caritate* [Nurse], in *Primele poeme*, ed. cit., pp. 63-64, my translation.

¹¹ *Insomnie* [Insomnia], in vol. cit., pp. 65-66, my translation.

¹² Tristan Tzara, *Lampisteries précédées des Sept Manifestes Dada*, Paris, J.J. Pauvert, 1963.

¹³ *Hamlet* in *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 1151.

the sinking past recalls both the drowning of Ophelia and Claudius's attempt to get rid of young Hamlet by sending him on a ship to England, with letters requesting his killing. The apparently incomprehensible image created by young Tzara seems to be the result of a typically oneiric condensation of various remnants of consciousness, mainly Hamlet's most traumatic experiences.

Don Quixote's presence is also challenging. The very insignia of the absurd is, in a way, Hamlet's reversed image. While the prince of Denmark denies what he can see and hear, the Spanish chevalier's chimeras question man's relation with the phenomenal world from the opposite direction. He impersonates the consciousness of a new attitude towards novelty, being an important ally of the surrealist rebellion against all the possible forms of academese, of ossified forms of literature, symbolizing a complex of aggressiveness.

Another surrealist Romanian poet, Scarlat Callimachi, born in the same year as Tzara, 1896, also wrote a poem named "Hamlet" in 1922.¹⁴ Here, the famous character survived as a mere cultural and existential sensation in the mind of a traveler, a memento of death, accompanied by the "fatidic, monotonous noise" of the waves, clobbering the marble columns of a deserted castle. The indefinite presence of death, measured by the rhythmic tread of the traveler and the repeated battery of the eroding waters is amplified by a cosmic terror: "On the sky, the groans of the starry eternity fled away in fear." Finally, the voyager (probably a reincarnation of Hamlet himself, just returned from his voyage to England back to the "rotten" kingdom of Denmark) is absorbed more and more deeply into an obsession with death, metaphorically referred to as the "labyrinth of perfidious eternity".

The poem recalls the symbolic image of Hamlet contemplating Yorick's skull and reflecting upon man's weird existence: "Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning?"¹⁵ Once "a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy", Yorick, the former jester of the previous king, changed into an empty, absurd form, an ideal metaphor of the surrealist look upon the entire cultural tradition. Like him, all the traditional forms of artistic expression are subject to rapid decay and derision.

Some visible long term effects of the surrealist attitude of challenging the Shakespearean model are evident in the future decades, although the majority of the Romanian poets of the second half of the twentieth century continued to revere the British writer, often quoting his most representative figures. Characters like Richard III, Falstaff or Oberon are present, but Hamlet seems to be the favorite of Romanian poets, rivaled only by Shakespeare himself.

The most spectacular example was that of Vasile Voiculescu (1884-1963), who wrote a cycle of 90 texts dedicated to his British predecessor, numbered starting

¹⁴ Scarlat Callimachi, *Hamlet* in *Antologia literaturii române de avangardă* [The Anthology of Romanian Avant-garde Literature], Bucharest, EPL Publishing House, 1969, pp. 147-148, my translations.

¹⁵ *Hamlet* in *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. cit., p. 1156.

from sonnet 155, to suggest the continuation of the 154 real Shakespearean sonnets. They were written between 1954 and 1958, and published posthumously in a volume, entitled: *W. Shakespeare's Last Imaginary Sonnets in Vasile Voiculescu's Fancied Translation*¹⁶, in 1964. The poems prove Voiculescu's spiritual affinity with the Master and maybe his desire to escape from any kind of ideological anchorage in those terrible years of emerging socialism during which his fellow poets were sent to work in factories or mines in order to understand and describe to problems of the working class. As the Romanian critic Alex Ștefănescu remarked in his *History of the Contemporary Romanian Literature 1941-2000*¹⁷ these fancied sonnets are sententious, they transcend time, being driven by a mysterious dramatic quality. They are "genuine lessons of poetry". While in the religious poetry of his youth Voiculescu worshiped God and his angels, the mature poet venerates only the everlasting aesthetic values. Shakespeare appears to him as a God figure, and the association will be enhanced by Marin Sorescu.

Tudor Arghezi (1880-1967), one of the most important Romanian poets of the interwar period, also challenged the canon by writing a short version of Hamlet¹⁸, in 1956, reduced to what he finds to be really important – the tragic conflict and Hamlet's moral dilemma. There is no trace of Ophelia or any other secondary plot, no actors playing the murder scene, no "to be or not to be" interludes.

Emil Botta (1911-1977), a poet actor often distributed in Shakespearean plays, wrote the poem *Oberon*, included in his volume *At the Gate of Paradise*¹⁹, published in 1943. Both the poet and his critics always acknowledged his bookish poetic vocabulary: "my poor old heart is but an inn / where odd strangers put up for the night; / At dawn they leave me in my lonely plight"²⁰. His oneiric phantasmagorias, the sophisticated orchestrations of feelings, the expressionistic dynamism, and the polyphonic confessions of the self-destructive anguish all define a futuristic, almost pathologic sensitivity. G. Călinescu evoked his great romantic hallucinations and his obvious search for an absurdist touch of existence. In fact, all his critics never ceased to compare him with the Shakespearean characters he played on the stage for a lifetime, especially with prince Hamlet. His poem *Oberon* is a visible illustration of this spiritual affinity:

A charm addresses me: "Come on, let's die!"
The deep dark forest is calling me:
"You Shadow, you brother, come on, let's die!"

¹⁶ Vasile Voiculescu, *Ultimele sonete închipuite ale lui W. Shakespeare în traducerea imaginară a lui V. Voiculescu*, in *Poezii*, vol. II, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1983.

¹⁷ Alex Ștefănescu, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane 1941-2000*, Bucharest, "Mașina de scris" Publishing House, 2005, p. 517.

¹⁸ Tudor Arghezi, *Hamlet (Încercare de sinteză)* in *Opere*, I, Bucharest, "Univers enciclopedic" Publishing House, 2000, pp. 638-650

¹⁹ Emil Botta, *Pe-o gură de rai*, Bucharest, National Publishing House "Gheorghe Mecu", 1943.

²⁰ Emil Botta, *Visits II*, in vol. *Like Diamonds...*, ed. cit., translated by Bantaș, pp. 241-242.

Hark, the phantom forest is calling me.
“Come to my bosom, hie, hie, hie!”
It’s a bird thus calling its young,
a thrill addressing me in this tongue.
Oh, graveyard where my spring was drowned,
Eagle-forest with a terrible face,
your voices, - sorrowful sound, -
they hit and freeze me, round me they race.
“Come to my bosom, hie, hie, hie!”
The damned forest is calling me,
to the woods symphonic death is calling me:
“Come on at once, come on,! Let’s die!”²¹

Vasile Nicolescu (b. 1929) a highly intellectualized and sophisticated poet, often drawing upon the works of artists he admired, evoked Shakespeare’s place of birth, in his poem *Stratford-upon-Avon*:

I am infected with the dream and sleeplessness of grass,
with its mysterious seeding,
its bridge and smoke, its javelin and stiletto,
its woe, its kiss and spasm,
its pest, and sin, and laughter,
its hobby-horses and its tambourine;
I am infected with its turrets, fetters, girders,
with crickets chirping in its ossuary and ashes,
with tents and broken helmets,
with foaming and fear-snorting horses,
with blood stolen by dews to bury in the earth,
with dews where service-trees are mirrored;
I am infected with the quiet and the ecstasy of grass,
with its last judgment,
with its sad syllables: to be or not to be.²²

Nichita Stănescu (1933-1983) unusually considered the most important Romanian poet of the second half of the twentieth century calls upon Falstaff²³, symbolically represented as an eternally flying bird, “a bird named ‘time, cease!’”, which defies gravitation, time passing and any kind of alteration:

Falstaff, stay and do not go away
no bird is falling down in you;
you are as pure and graceful, you fat boy,
and as know-nothing, you know-it-all
as you were at your birth (...)

²¹ Emil Botta, *Oberon* in vol. cit., translated by Bantaș, p. 241.

²² Vasile Nicolescu, *Stratford-upon-Avon*, in vol. *Like Diamonds...*, ed. cit., translated by Levițchi, p. 296.

²³ Nichita Stănescu, *Falstaff sau evitarea unui mit*, in vol. *Ordinea cuvintelor*, vol II, Bucharest, “Cartea Românească” Publishing House, 1985, p. 182; first published in vol. *Epica magna*, 1978; my translations.

Falstaff, oh, Falstaff
zeppelin with soul of butterfly
air with soul of earth
great being with 'to be' in its core...

He also left a late poem called *Shakespeare*²⁴, published after his death, which is really remarkable as, simultaneously challenging his *local* and his *universal* models, the poet refers both to the Shakespearean famous “kingdom for a horse” and to Eminescu’s equally emblematic linden blossom. Frightened by “the perfidious time, crawling like a snake”, Stănescu is ready to give his poetic *kingdom*, with its “heavenly scent of linden blossom”, for a horse, as he is ready to go for his final journey.

Marin Sorescu (1936-1996), a well-known poet and dramatist, also wrote a poem called *Shakespeare*, which he included in his volume *Don Quixote's Tender Years*²⁵, in 1968, in which he imagines the British writer as a god figure, creating the world:

Shakespeare made the world in seven days.
On the first he made the sky, the mounts and the abysses of the soul.
The next day he made the rivers, seas, oceans
And the other sentiments –
And gave them to Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Anthony
To Cleopatra and Ophelia,
To Othello and others,
That they may own them, they and their descendants,
For ever and ever.²⁶

The Shakespearean characters are thus constituents of the basic mankind typology, created in mythical times. All the upcoming generations just follow the patterns created by this God figure, who, “on the third day” gathered all man to teach them “the tastes” (happiness, love, despair, jealousy, glory). As for the “late-comers”: “The creator sympathetically stroked their heads, / And told them that they could only become / Literary critics / In order to challenge his work.” The theatrical world he creates is also populated with clowns, kings and emperors, with the unhappy King Lear, wearing his crown of straw and the terrible Richard III, made of “a few remnants left from the creation of the world”. Finally, as the creator is exceedingly tired, “He went to die a little”. In another poem, a sonnet called *Hamlet in search for...*²⁷, Sorescu refers to the famous Shakespearean figure, now a ghostly presence himself, in his eternal search for avenge. His wondering, ethereal Hamlet vaguely resembles Callimachi’s Hamlet. In fact, Sorescu, who made his

²⁴ Nichita Stănescu, *Shakespeare*, in vol. cit., p. 324, my translations.

²⁵ Marin Sorescu, *Tineretea lui Don Quijote*, Bucharest, “Tineretului” Publishing House, 1968

²⁶ Marin Sorescu, *Shakespeare*, in vol. *Like Diamonds...*, ed. cit., translation by Andrei Bantaș, pp. 328-329.

²⁷ Marin Sorescu, *Hamlet in căutare...* in vol. *Apă vie, apă moartă*, Craiova, “Scrisul românesc” Publishing House, 1987, p. 55.

debut in poetry with a volume of parodies, *Alone amidst Poets* (1963), which was already anticipating his ironic lucidity, has solid roots in Romanian surrealism.

In his turn, Adrian Păunescu (b. 1943) a well known, if controversial, poet wrote his version of *Shakespeare*²⁸ dedicated to “his spirit, which – like a war – / watched so many deaths.”²⁹ He evokes the tragic atmosphere of Shakespeare’s theatrical world and his unique sensitivity to human disasters, which makes him to *shout* his confession, while passing through the *zone of crime*:

Hands covering ten eyes – all seeing
although no longer capable to cry –
of the world yet and still a being,
the poet hurries through the world sky-high.

His glance which he keeps smothering
- for whatever the lips said, still he couldn’t chime -
has learnt the truth about quite everything
and howls to see crime after crime.³⁰

For Păunescu, who overtly combined submissive and subversive attitudes in his markedly political poems, and for other contemporary poets, obviously obedient to the “new values” of socialism, Shakespeare was a form of escapism, of temporary re-connection to the aesthetic normality. For instance, Mihai Beniuc, one of the famous “proletcultists”, also incidentally referred to the Shakespearean model. In an untitled poem he compares himself to “Shakespeare’s gravediggers”, digging a grave for another Ophelia.

Even more interesting is the case of Ion Stratan, a representative poet of the 1980s, who wrote a poem called *The Globe*³¹. Its six sections are entitled: “The Taming of the Shrew”, “The Comedy of Errors”, “King John”, “The Life and Death of King Richard II”, “King Henry IV and King Henry V”, and “The First and the Second Part of King Henry VI”. They all combine the lists of characters with the fundamental actions of each play: *taming, confounding, killing, wounding*. The mechanical repetition of names and actions or states of being activates subversive values and, at the same time, a neo-surrealist attitude towards the Shakespearean figure.

To conclude this research upon Shakespeare’s almost obsessive presence in Romanian poetry of the twentieth century, we have to notice the diversity of manners, themes and lyrical attitudes, as well as the fertilizing power of the canonic cores, their ability in facing up to both time and space.

²⁸ Adrian Păunescu, *Shakespeare*, in vol. *Poezii de până azi*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1978, p. 268.

²⁹ Adrian Păunescu, *Shakespeare*, in vol. *Like Diamonds...*, ed. cit., translation by Andrei Bantaș, pp. 364-365.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ Ion Stratan, *The Globe*, in *Luceafărul*, Bucharest, no. 41/1997; translated by Monica Matei-Chesnoiu in her study “*The Globe: Romanian Poetry and Shakespeare’s Histories*” in vol. *Time Refigured. Myths, Foundation Texts and Imagined Communities*, edited by Martin Procházka and Ondřej Pilný, Prague, Litteraria Pragensia, 2005, pp. 340-343.

Summary

This study investigates the influence of Shakespeare's works and characters upon Romanian poetry of the twentieth century, illustrating a variety of manners and attitudes, which all prove the "productivity" of the Shakespearean canon. While the surrealist generation, especially Trsitian Tzara, is challenging the Shakespearean model in a subversive tone, the majority of the Romanian poets of the second half of the twentieth century revered the British writer, often quoting his most representative figures. Shakespeare's works were continually studied and reinterpreted; they always functioned as an inspiring point of departure for all types of lyrical visions.