SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

SHAKESPEARE WITHOUT WORDS

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MARK VAN DOREN once said in my company, although I trust without special reference to me, that anyone who keeps writing books about Shakespeare is only wasting time since he is bound to write the same book over and over again. The thought haunts me on this occasion. Over the years I have seized ample opportunities to say my say about Shakespeare, and now that I have been invited to give the Annual Shakespeare Lecture of the British Academy and wish I might prove worthy of the honour, I fear I have nothing to add. Shakespeare is inexhaustible, but his commentators are not. The best I can do is to give new words to an old refrain and try to apply them to a new situation.

The plays of Shakespeare were written to be enjoyed. They would not have been enjoyed if they had offended the moral and religious sentiments prevailing in the audience for which they were designed. A basic conformity with a discernible system of values must be assumed. The system was submitted to tests, in some plays perilously near the breaking point, but only for the purpose of providing greater enjoyment. (Needless to say different ones were designed to be enjoyed in different ways.) The playwright saw the system as in no need of defence, and he felt no inclination to attack it: he respected it, and that was enough. It may be argued that an equivalent attitude is a condition of spontaneous response; that is, we must take for granted the system of values to which the plays conform and feel no impulse to defend or attack it. When we speak of Shakespeare's universality, we imply that such is possible—that the ethical and spiritual conceptions underlying his plays are recognizable and congenial in all times and places. But when we read the testimony of different times and places, as expressed in Shakespearian commentary, we begin to wonder what is meant by 'universality' if it has any meaning at all.

I do not refer to the historical allowances that must be made. Foreigners are willing enough to forgive Shakespeare his political

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insularity, his British nationalism. Certain values are expressed in an idiom of limited currency, and we may properly say that the value implicit in Shakespeare's nationalism is an affection for and a sense of obligation to the society of which one forms a part. It is the anarchist and not the patriotic Frenchman who might logically be repelled by this Shakespearian value. But the penetration to underlying values must have a stopping place. If we find an ultimate acquiescence in anarchy expressed in the history plays, we have not penetrated but punctured them. The same is true if we find a lurking permissiveness toward sexual laxity expressed in the comedies and tragedies. A strict code is subsumed, with chastity accepted as a virtue. We may say that here the underlying value is constancy, as it truly is, but in sexual conduct constancy and promiscuity are incompatible as, in political conduct, good citizenship and nationalism are not. Of course constancy can be rejected as a virtue, but the rejection carries with it an obligation to admit a large element of obsolescence in the comedies and tragedies.

In the history of a work of literary art one or both of two things may happen: we may reject the system of values conditioning its original creation, or we may cease to understand the idiom in which these values are expressed. By effort we can learn the idiom. But by no effort can we recover sympathy with the discarded system of values to the extent that we can enjoy its presence. Spontaneous enjoyment of the work must decrease in proportion to this loss of sympathy, and when the loss is complete the work is no longer alive. It may have a posthumous existence in the library or theatrical museum, providing the attenuated pleasure derived from admiration of its technique. It cannot be revitalized by reinterpretation except in the form of an animated corpse.

Strangely enough, the receding acceptability of a system of values is signalled by those who rise to defend it as well as by those who ignore it and those who try to convert it to the system currently in vogue. As a case in point we may take the code of sexual conduct previously mentioned. Critics have protested too much, or have timidly averted their eyes, or have substituted their own predilections by flat misstatement. An uncertainty of response became apparent when spokesmen of an age not long past began to lecture upon chastity as from a Shakespearian platform; their praises of Imogen's purity would have made Imogen blush and wonder how, as a loving wife and the heroine of the play, they had expected her to behave. Later

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came the tendency to avoid the subject. I have been reading in recent books the praises of Prospero in every conceivable role, symbolical, mythical, and so on, but never as the stern speaker to Ferdinand and Miranda on the subject of pre-marital continence. And now only the other day, I saw Shakespeare listed as one of the world's great pornographers.[1] The writer was evidently aware of the ribald puns in the plays and of the titles of the narrative poems. He needed nothing more but good will.

Shakespearian criticism has always been in the main an expression of attitudes toward the system of values implicit in the plays, and is chiefly valuable as an index of cultural history. The more doctrinal the criticism—that is to say the more pronounced the tendency to treat the plays as ethical and philosophical doctrine—the stronger the evidence of a waning spontaneity of response. My concern this evening is with the present moment in cultural history, and what a certain kind of Shakespearian criticism seems to be telling us about it. The kind I have in mind is more doctrinal than nineteenth-century criticism and far more arbitrary. Sometimes we seem to be witnessing a game of critical scrabble, with the contestants each taking a handful of pieces from the plays and arranging them according to taste, with the one who achieves the most novel arrangement declared the winner of the game.

The uniqueness, the very identity of a work of art resides in its composition, in relationships and not in the parts related, whether lines, colours, words, sounds, movements, whatever it may be. To convert a Shakespearian play into doctrine inevitably entails the ignoring of relationships and the selection of parts. At the most elementary level of analysis a play consists of action and accompanying words. To ignore the action is impossible because without it, seen on the stage or visualized in the study, the play reduces itself to a sequence of incoherent remarks. To ignore the words is possible, once the action has been visualized or made available in a synopsis or stage production. I think we must agree, however, that to use the action and ignore the words is an extreme form of selectivity, available only to the most ruthless type of exegete. That such a type has emerged, and that his presence among us is embarrassing if not ominous, I shall presently maintain, but let me first illustrate the mere intelligibility of Shakespeare without words.

I shall give two illustrations: as first, the simplest I can think

[1] Brendan Gill, 'The Unfinished Man', *The New Yorker*, 8 March 1969, p. 119.

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of, the epilogue to *The Tempest*; and as second, one of the most complex, Gloucester's attempted suicide in *King Lear*. The first is simple because it is conventional, and not an integral part of the play but an appendage to it. Viewed purely as an action, it does not affect any preceding action and, of course, no action follows it. First, let us hear the words which we will presently ignore. Prospero has given up his magical powers after using them to right ancient wrongs. His enemies have fallen into his hands, been punished enough to induce penitence, at least in some, and then been forgiven. His daughter is provided with a suitable husband, and he is ready to return to his recovered dukedom:

> Now my Charmes are all ore-throwne,
> And what strength I haue's mine owne.
> Which is most faint: now 'tis true
> I must be heere confinde by you,
> Or sent to Naples, Let me not
> Since I haue my Dukedome got,
> And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell
> In this bare Island by your Spell,
> But release me from my bands
> With the helpe of your good hands:
> Gentle breath of yours, my Sailes
> Must fill, or else my proiect failes,
> Which was to please: Now I want
> Spirits to enforce: Art to inchant,
> And my ending is despaire,
> Vnlesse I be relieu'd by praier
> Which pierces so, that it assaults
> Mercy it selfe, and frees all faults.
> As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
> Let your Indulgence set me free.

The indicated action comes as near as any in Shakespeare to being fully intelligible without words. The one who has played Prospero moves to the forefront of the platform, faces the audience, and makes a gesture of humility. The action is simply a bow. The genesis of a gesture of humility after a display of power, on the stage, on a circus highwire, in a concert hall, is a mystery I shall not try to explain. Perhaps in its origins it is an act of propitiation to the people as the delegates of the gods, but we need think of it now only as a thing of custom—an acknowledgement of or plea for approval. A performer's bow is a brave and hopeful thing, certainly the reverse of a gesture of despair.

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What, then, is a critic to make of it who has been extracting from *The Tempest* the doctrine of despair? This bow will not serve his turn. Needing more than the action, he turns to the words but finds them in this case the exact equivalent of the action. His resort is to proceed without some of them, and he quotes the epilogue thus:

> Now I want
> Spirits to enforce: Art to inchant,
> And my ending is despaire. . . .

I would be ashamed to offer this illustration were it not that the epilogue was in fact thus used, not once but three times, at the beginning, middle, and end of a chapter in the most fashionable book of Shakespearian commentary of this decade.[1] Now to change the meaning of a sentence by ending it in mid-career, is, as Prince Hamlet would say, as easy as lying, and a proper occasion for rebuke, but who is in a sound position to administer it? There is truly a vein of melancholy perceptible in *The Tempest*, and perhaps past ways of insisting that the play represents Shakespeare 'on the heights' themselves smack of the doctrinal. Strachey insisted that it revealed not a hopeful but a 'bored' Shakespeare, and a hopeless one was bound to emerge. Commonplaces invite that lowest form of originality, commonplaces reversed.

Actually the words of this epilogue defy doctrinal deployment. If they provide no text for the pessimist, neither do they for the optimist, whether Marxian or Christian. Imagine a committee of comrades gazing gloomily at the remainder of the broken sentence—

> Vnlesse I be relieu'd by praier
> Which pierces so, that it assaults
> Mercy it selfe, and frees all faults.

How can anyone be rebuked for omitting this transcendental nonsense, in which the word 'despaire' is coupled with 'Mercy' in an orthodox Christian paradigm? The Christian exegete is equally baffled. As a symbolic action this bow is insufficiently specific, and as a structure of words it is specific in the wrong direction. The words form an ingenious conceit, saying that the breeze generated by applauding hands will fill the sails that are to waft Prospero to Naples. True the Lord's Prayer is paraphrased, but not to pious ends. A theologian might be outraged:

[1] Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, translated by Boleslaw Taborski, New York, 1964, pp. 166, 193, 205.

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this is not Christian doctrine but theatrical blackmail, with failure to applaud this silly play equated with failure to endorse the Lord's Prayer. A number of earnest men have in fact stoutly denied that Shakespeare himself wrote this frivolous epilogue; it is an addition by an inferior hand. Those more relaxed in their responses have enjoyed it as a graceful bow, and one suggesting that Shakespeare, or his audience, or both, were reasonably well-disposed toward Christianity.

As an action becomes more complex, in itself and in relation to other actions in a play, the consequence of ignoring some or all of the accompanying words becomes increasingly spectacular. In *King Lear* we see a ragged young man lead a blinded old one to a spot on a level stage. By his gestures we know that he has deceived the old man into thinking that he stands on the edge of a precipice. The old man gives him a purse, then leaps into the imaginary void, only to fall on his face. Then the young man arouses him, and we know by the gestures that he succeeds in another deception, making the old man believe that he lies at the foot of the precipice, yet miraculously remains alive. What can be made of this action? A young child will see in it something comical. Raggedness is comical, blindness more comical, and falling on one's face most comical of all. That some residue of this relish for distress in others remains in us in later years no one can deny; and if we are the victims of arrested moral development and have come to love cruelty for its own sake, we will find the action fully intelligible as a display of ingenious cruelty. The young man has teased an aged sufferer, and kept him alive so that he may suffer more. Or what if we are practical-minded? We have observed that the young man has received a purse, and we conclude that he is keeping the old man alive not with 'motiveless malignity' but in hope of laying his hands on additional swag.

When this action is viewed in relation to earlier actions in the play, further vistas open. We know that in an earlier action the young man has been misused by the old one, and we conclude that this cruel teasing is his way of getting revenge. Or suppose that we have heard so much of Shakespeare's powers of characterization that we can think of nothing else? In an earlier action the old man was duped by his younger son. In the present action he is duped by his older son. The same old gullible Gloucester—and what a clever fellow Shakespeare is! If we add to the action of this play the action we remember from others, the range of meaning becomes staggering. We watch Shake-

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speare's pair of outcasts, the ragged one leading the blind one, from whom even the comfort of death is ludicrously snatched away; and we have previously been deeply impressed by a piece from the hand of a modern Irish playwright, in which two tramps are displayed as the clownish victims of a senseless cosmic joke, involving their delusions about a better world to come. I am referring, of course, to Lord Dunsany's *The Glittering Gate*,[1] not a profound work to be sure, as its author would have been the first to admit, and yet one containing most of the philosophical stock in trade of the later theatre of the absurd. Seeing the action of Gloucester's attempted suicide in terms of the action of *The Glittering Gate* leads us to a simple conclusion: *King Lear* is advancing the doctrine of Man's destiny as a clownish victim of cosmic cruelty.

My point is that an action in a Shakespearian play has more meaning, or at least more meanings, without the words than with them. Actually the words are a limiting factor: they restrict our interpretations of an action in the direction of something that can only be called—although this is becoming a forbidden phrase in literary criticism—the author's intention. In the present case, when we restore the words to the action of Gloucester's attempted suicide, we find something equivalent to the appearance of the word 'Mercy' after the word 'despaire' in the epilogue to *The Tempest*; that is, we must again reckon with Christian eschatology. The moment of Gloucester's resolution to commit suicide is signalled by his words,

> As Flies to wanton Boyes, are we to th' Gods,
> They kill vs for their sport.

The words are often cited, their dramatic function rarely. Gloucester has yielded to despair, the unpardonable sin, and stands in danger of damnation. The motive for Edgar's behaviour as the two stand above the imaginary void is supplied explicitly by his words,

> Why I do trifle thus with his dispaire,
> Is done to cure it.

In a religious sense, the void is not imaginary. The cure is successful. Told that the one who had consented to lead him to the brink of the precipice bore the aspect of a fiend, Gloucester abjures suicide,

> . . . henceforth Ile beare
> Affliction, till it do cry out it selfe
> Enough, enough, and dye.

[1] Perhaps S. Beckett's *Godot* and *Endgame* should be cited also.

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The action ends with Edgar's words, 'Beare free and patient thoghts'.

The presence of Edgar in *King Lear* confuses the issue for the modern interpreter—what is a person like him doing in a place like this? Cordelia is less unwelcome since she perishes, but Edgar succeeds, survives, and stands as a power symbol at the conclusion of the play. Observe, however, that he proves none too tractable either as a displaced Christian. He returns good for evil and saves his father's soul—but at the expense of a prodigious amount of deceit, involving a fake miracle. Or is such a judgement really true to the impression conveyed? Is a miracle which succeeds a fake? What is a miracle anyway? Thomas More once wrote of a miracle he had observed with his own eyes.[1] An apprentice and a tradesman's daughter plighted their troths, married, and set up housekeeping in Cheapside, whereupon an amazing thing happened. After nine months of residence in their house, these two people became three. More's straight-faced proof that millions of miracles are happening every day lends a kind of sanction. If a future saint may grow playful with miracles, why not a popular playwright?

I have not tried to demonstrate that *King Lear* preaches the doctrine of Christianity or even of Christian humanism. Those to whom the complex of values referred to as Christian humanism remains recognizable and even dear are prone to praise Shakespeare in its terms. When accused of converting the plays into doctrine and Shakespeare into a theologian, their feelings are understandably hurt, especially when the objection comes from persons who share their ethical and religious loyalties. Here I sympathize with both the accused and the accusers, with the former because they are responding to a stimulus truly present in the plays, and with the latter because they are trying to keep Shakespeare clear of the doctrinal wars. They know that if tested, even by inadvertence, as a theologian, Shakespeare will not pass the test, and there will be laughter under the hills. Their cautionary role is itself open to misunderstanding. The idea that anyone or anything may be non-doctrinally, unmilitantly, moral or Christian seems very hard to grasp. The position is as hard to define as the nature of art itself. Upon one thing I would insist. Those who are aware of Christian humanism as a frame of reference in Shakespearian drama are unable

[1] Thomas More, *A Dialogue concernynge heresyes & matters of religion*, 1528, Chapter 10.

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to misconstrue the plays in anything like the degree of those who are unaware of it or anxious to substitute another.

Those who wish to use Shakespeare's plays for novel doctrinal ends invoke the principle of the autonomy of art. A great work of art is autonomous; it has the chameleon's faculty for changing with its environment, and can be something different in different ages. What it was in its own age, or even in the eyes of its maker, is irrelevant. It is what it is for us. This is a seductive principle because it flatters everyone—the sensitive modern recipient because he figures as re-creator, and the original artist because he wrought better than he knew. It is also convenient, since it lets one palm off one's own creations as masterpieces of the past with dingy surfaces peeled away. I am reminded of Turgenev's Bazarov. Ironically presented as a man with the courage to 'believe in nothing', Bazarov believed firmly in his own ideas. He began by dismissing Pushkin as twaddle, but later proceeded to attribute his own aphorisms to Pushkin; the poet's *prestige* was believable.

The principle of the autonomy of art is not imposing. Even in its own age a work of art is seen differently by different people, with some observers seeing it more justly than others. In practice the principle reduces itself to the truism that objects may be converted from their original use. An incinerator may be used to burn all the books in the British Museum, but we would not speak of the autonomy of the incinerator unless we wished to burn the books. A guillotine might be used to slice ham if we were willing to ignore its inconvenient dimensions. The only test I can think of for determining whether a work of art is being justly seen, in its own age or later, is to observe how much of its data is being taken into account. In the case of a Shakespearian play, this means the actions, the words, and their relationships. Those who speak of the autonomy inherent in its complexity invariably begin to simplify it by a process of reduction. What was art becomes modern doctrine. The ultimate reduction involves dismissal of the limiting function of the words. With the action freely interpretable, any Shakespearian play can be relocated in the modern theatre of the absurd.

The notion of Shakespeare as a writer for the theatre of the absurd is not new. Voltaire saw him more or less in this light, but not with admiration. In 1837 Chateaubriand called *Hamlet* the 'tragedy of maniacs':

> . . . that Royal Bedlam in which every character is either crazy or criminal, . . . and in which the grave itself furnishes the stage with the

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skull of a fool; that Odeon of shadows and specters, where we hear nothing but reveries, the challenge of sentinels, the screeching of the nightbird, and the roaring of the sea.[1]

The work thus piquantly described was available wherever *Hamlet* was staged. Only two conditions need be met, ability to pay the admission fee and inability to understand English. For observe that what is being described is a *Hamlet* without words, a pantomimic *Hamlet* of sights and sound effects. Except for the latter and certain 'reveries'—presumably the detachable soliloquies—we 'hear nothing'.

Although not quite freed from the influence of Voltaire, Chateaubriand was being playful. In what I mentioned a moment ago as the most fashionable book of Shakespearian commentary of the present decade, the reduction of the plays to pantomime with reveries—in this case the critic's own—is not playful. What emerges is a series of history plays in which automaton kings are cranked into lethal action by a senselessly cruel machine. *Macbeth* is one of those history plays, with no distinction perceptible between the occasion of the Thane's killing others and the occasion of his being killed. *King Lear* is a grotesque charade, presenting no tragic hero but a clutch of writhing clowns. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is an exploration of lechery, in particular bestiality. *The Tempest* is a sigh of despair. You will have identified the book as Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. The method of the book is to ignore Shakespeare's words except for those taken out of context, as in the quotation from Prospero's epilogue. Elsewhere an action will be described, postulated as a 'mime', and then a work by some artist other than Shakespeare will be vividly invoked. While Titania and Bottom dream, we get a graphic account of the sexual depravities depicted in Goya's *Caprichos*. By this means Shakespeare becomes 'our contemporary'. A few details are justly described, but these have long since figured prominently in Shakespearian commentary. All that is valid in the chapter on *King Lear* was expressed in one striking image and a brief following paragraph by Ernest Dowden in 1875.

When I read *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* and watched Amurath to Amurath succeeding, and Krafft-Ebing's clinic established in the enchanted forest near Athens, and Prospero dragging his dejected form through the landscape by Hieronymus Bosch, my response was precisely what might be expected from the

[1] François René de Chateaubriand, *Sketches of English Literature*, London, 1837, p. 276.

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elderly innocent I am—angry indignation. But this emotion was soon recollected in relative tranquillity since it was succeeded by curiosity. What would the response to this view of Shakespeare reveal about the temper of our times? A full history of this response would, as I soon discovered, require the labours of a multi-lingual committee working full time for many months, but I am able to supply an outline. Those who discussed the book in print divided into three groups. First and quite small in number were those who dismissed it as worthless. Their number would perhaps be augmented if we could add those who refused to review it, plaintively hoping that their silence would be construed as stony. Of this remnant I shall say no more, but leave them with my respectful salute.

In a second and larger group, made up mainly of academics, judgement was hedged with qualifications. The professional Shakespearians are aware that Shakespeare's scenarios (as distinct from his texts) are often sensational, farcical, fanciful, or a combination of the three which may properly be called grotesque. They are also aware, at least some of them, that in certain Elizabethan plays one finds complete or almost complete congruence of scenario and text. In the case of *The Revenger's Tragedy* as distinct from *Hamlet*, and in the case of most of the plays of Marston, performance in pantomime would convey virtually the same impression as performance with words. The language is distinguished but in a sense redundant, since it fails to modify the impression of the grotesque conveyed by the sensational, farcical, and fanciful action. The Elizabethans truly had their theatre of the absurd, a small one, but its plays lack the prestige to be viable in its modern counterpart. No one seems to care whether Marston is 'our contemporary'. Now the scholarly reviewers, conscious of those features which Shakespearian drama shares with the lesser kind of its day, felt impelled to follow a judicious line; the key phrase in their appraisal was that Kott had gone 'too far'. I must confess that judiciousness of this kind strikes me as a conditioned reflex rather than a working principle; if someone is headed in the wrong direction, his first step is 'too far'. However, I am an academic man myself and can understand the leaning toward yes-and-no judgements. There is always the fear that blunt disapproval, a downright no, will be construed as attack upon the right of free speech; perhaps this is a new infirmity of noble minds.

The third and by far most numerous group of responders were those who greeted the book with enthusiastic approval.

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For the most part these were theatrical and literary journalists, those who preside over one branch of the arts by directing plays, conducting book columns, and writing reviews for periodicals. In their occupation an espousal of the 'contemporary' is a condition of employment, and one can sympathize with their elation over the discovery of such a reputable modern author as Shakespeare; why look this gift horse in the mouth? The most significant feature of their response was their common assumption that some authors are more contemporary than others, with such playwrights as Beckett, Genet, Ionesco, and the like the most contemporary of all. Also highly significant was the fact that the welcome given by the intelligentsia to the idea of a dark destructive Shakespeare stopped short at the border of the Soviet Union. Although Kott's book met with a mixed or favourable response everywhere from Sweden to Israel, and from Czechoslovakia to Japan, it was viewed as ratsbane by the Russians. A rival book by a Russian critic, Grigori Kozintzev, reinvoked the more familiar Shakespeare, bright apostle of moral decency and the dignity of Man. It is called in English translation *Shakespeare: Time and Conscience*, but was published in Russia as *Our Contemporary: Shakespeare*.[1] One is bound to ask whether the kind of contemporary which Shakespeare proves to be depends less on when one lives than on where one lives. Or, putting it another way, is there now a Shakespeare West and a Shakespeare East?

Here I must say a word about recent Shakespearian criticism in the Soviet Union. Until 1940 this criticism was dogmatically Marxist, with Shakespeare accepted as a genius, but one who spoke for the dying aristocracy or else for the rising bourgeoisie. Then the emphasis shifted, and Shakespeare was viewed as a spokesman for the common humanity which had been victimized by feudalism and was about to be victimized by capitalism. The emphasis has now shifted so far that the Marxist element is scarcely visible. Shakespeare preached nothing, but his frame of reference—this may come as a surprise—was Christian humanism. The Russians do not call it Christian humanism, they call it 'popular' humanism, but it amounts to the same thing. They prefer to cite folk tales, ballads, fables, and proverbs in illustrating Shakespeare's humanism, instead of the texts of the clerical reformers favoured by Renaissance scholars, but they are aware of these texts and no longer refrain from

[1] Grigori Kozintzev, *Shakespeare: Time and Conscience*, translated by Joyce Vining, New York, 1966.

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mentioning God. This body of current Russian criticism is far from offering a Shakespeare without words. It is well informed about Elizabethan drama in general, and about the theatrical and critical history of Shakespeare's plays. Kozintzev's book is fairly representative of it, and it has two representative defects. The first I shall mention now, the second in a moment. The first is less a defect than a handicap under which all unsensational criticism of Shakespeare must now labour. It tells us nothing new. What it says about Shakespeare has been said in so many times and places, in so many ways, that it can no longer excite. This is scarcely the fault of the author. It takes a genius equal to Shakespeare's to excite us with what we already know.

The fact stands that the Shakespeare who is Kozintzev's contemporary proves to be pretty much the one who was the contemporary of Jonson, Dryden, Doctor Johnson, Coleridge, and similar spokesmen of old. The one who is Kott's contemporary is not. Nevertheless, Kott's book, though produced in Poland, is indubitably a Western document, wholly inspired by art and ideas prevalent in our part of the world. The thought gives one pause. In 1966 an anthology of Shakespearian criticism, in English though published in Russia, was prefaced by R. M. Samarin, who described the Soviet Union as 'a country in which Shakespeare has truly found a second home—a vast country, generous in love and gratitude. . .'[1] Is there a chance that this 'second home' will become the only home, indeed the refuge of the pre-Kottian Shakespeare? Before succumbing to panic, I must continue to examine the evidence. My next piece is not comforting. At the Tenth International Shakespeare Conference held at Stratford-on-Avon in 1963, Samarin was the Soviet delegate. He read a paper called 'Our Closeness to Shakespeare'. Its conclusion, addressed of course to East and West, was 'Our closeness to Shakespeare brings us closer to each other. For this feeling of unity in the name of the great values of universal culture we have Shakespeare to thank'.[2] At this same conference a Western delegate read a paper called 'Shakespeare and the Fashion of These Times'. In it Samarin's 'great values of universal culture' figured under the different and dampening label of 'decorous moral and intellectual conformities'.[3] After mentioning the possible value of 'romantic

[1] *Shakespeare in the Soviet Union, A Collection of Articles*, compiled by R. Samarin and A. Nikolyukin, 1966, p. 14.

[2] *Shakespeare Survey*, No. 16, ed. Allardyce Nicoll, Cambridge, 1963, p. 17.

[3] J. P. Brockbank, ibid., p. 34.

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nihilism' and its triumph in the theatre of the absurd, the delegate said 'perhaps the time is ripe for a study of Shakespeare's pessimism'. Actually the study had just been written, Kott's, and was about to be launched on its great career.

This delegate was not, of course, directly rebuking Samarin and his cheerful affirmations, or giving an anticipatory endorsement *in toto* to a pessimistic Shakespeare. He belongs to the school of thought which sees value in Modernism in its nihilistic aspect because of the 'value of extreme commitments'. The idea is that sacrilege implies the sacred, that only the damned apprehend the glory of salvation, that assertion of human indignity may be a route to recovered dignity. There is, I am told, a more radical element discoverable in the nihilistic aspects of Modernism.[1] If we could shuffle off entirely the restraints and obligations imposed by 'cultural values', we might return to that golden age of instinctual living when every day was a Dionysiac holiday. Both positions leave me sceptical, but it is not my business to attack them. My present objection is solely to the statement that the time may be ripe 'for a study of Shakespeare's pessimism'; that is, for a doctrinal counter-attack upon a doctrinal position hitherto assumed by commentators. What this spokesman seemed to be saying is that Shakespeare has had too many Pelagian critics; we should loose upon him a few Manicheans.

The plays cannot seem living things to us if we are willing to throw them into the hopper to be shredded in idealogical warfare, no matter on what side we stand. A moment ago I mentioned a second defect in Kozintzev's rival book. I cannot speak of it without first saying that it, and the kind of current Soviet Shakespearian criticism it represents, strikes me as less formalistic and more humane than much of our own. I can say this without danger of having my passport lifted and therein lies my point. The second weakness resides in the mere fact that it comes from a state where public utterance must be officially sanctioned and therefore comes under suspicion of conforming with official doctrine. Its author is sincere, but we cannot accept comfortably what anyone says about anything unless he is free to say the opposite. The faults in Kozintzev's book are contingent faults. Kott's book has a contingent virtue: it asserts the right to be wrong. There can be little doubt that its vogue in Czechoslovakia derived partly from the fact that it

[1] Lionel Trilling, 'On the Modern Element in Modern Literature', in *Varieties of Literary Experience*, ed. Stanley Burnshaw, New York, 1962.

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suggested a means in the theatre of thumbing the nose at Big Brother. We can sympathize with the Czechs in their longing for freedom without accepting *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a study in bestiality. As advocates of freedom we need not love all our clients.

I return now to my starting point. Amidst the various Shakespeares obtruded upon our view, a Shakespeare West and a Shakespeare East, a pessimist and an optimist, a contemporary and a non-contemporary, just where may Shakespeare be found? Is the idea of a Shakespeare who can still be spontaneously enjoyed, without reference to his value as a doctrinal ally, simply a nostalgic dream? Must we simply admit regretfully that nothing gold can stay? The evidence that Shakespeare is still alive in the sense that his plays can be enjoyed as wholes, and emotionally as well as intellectually, is not supplied by our theatres. Men of the theatre maintain that it is impossible to stage a Shakespearian play objectively except as a museum piece. It must be interpreted if it is to seem relevant to our times. Perhaps they are right, but if so, the production is not the play, but the producer's commentary upon it, and we cannot tell whether audiences are enjoying the play or the commentary. Some of the most successful recent productions have been the most militantly modern, in the sense of being accommodated to fashionable philosophical postures. The evidence for an uninvaded Shakespeare is not to be found either in literary criticism. Much of this is worth while, and certainly that which takes account of the words is better than that which does not, but it is possible that with the first word of commentary a trace of doctrine filters in. I speak in a free society, but I am well aware that my sympathy with traditional moral and religious modes of thinking and feeling renders my commentary suspect. It is my belief that the best evidence of the survival of Shakespeare in our day is provided by those who rarely go to the theatre and who rarely read criticism but who do read the plays. These readers are getting a Shakespeare with words, and with words wholly his own.

Having said so much about Shakespeare without words, let me conclude with a few remarks about Shakespearian criticism without words. It exists and may it long endure. If there were not a page of Soviet commentary, there would still be Soviet criticism. The presses in Russia cannot supply the demand for Shakespeare's works, in English and in translation. I do not mention the host of theatrical productions because I do not

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know what they are like, and to a greater or lesser degree they may be projecting a Shakespeare East. But the millions of readers are silently telling us that they are finding enjoyment, and are thus rendering the judgement we most want to hear. And of course what they are enjoying is not a Shakespeare in exile. There are countless readers in the West for whom a Shakespeare West exists only in books which they have not heard about and would only consider peculiar. Mr. Samarin could have made his point without mentioning 'the great values of universal culture'. If people East and West are enjoying in common something worth enjoying they are indeed brought 'closer together'. I wish we could leave that something alone.

Oddly enough, criticism without words is what Shakespeare himself wanted and received. His plays evoked practically no written commentary in their own time, but there was criticism. I began with mention of the epilogue to *The Tempest*. Its prologue, if one existed, is lost, but we know what it would have said. Like the other prologues of the period, it would have been a plea for courteous attention, a plea for silence. And as the play wove its spell, as the others had woven theirs, a judgement was passed in the Globe. It was expressed by silence, except for a few wordless sound effects—the indrawn breath, the sigh of relief, the sound of lament and laughter, and finally the sound of applauding hands.

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