

Hamlet by Laforgue – the Source of Inspiration and Recycling

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After two guest performances of Shakespeare's plays by London theatre-makers in Paris in the 1920s, the French eventually became enthusiastic about the English genius, the source of inspiration for the Romantic Movement in Europe. The Symbolists continued to ride the Romantic wave of adoration, expressing their admiration for the tragic character of Prince Hamlet. In his work *Hamlet in France*, Michelle Willems writes about how the character became a myth and how "one of the derivations of this myth was 'Hamlet-ism', which affected a number of poets, like Baudelaire, whose image of Hamlet was essentially formed by the drawings of Delacroix, or like Mallarmé, who owned an illustration of Rouvière, like Hamlet by Manet whose vision of the play was shaped by the Dumas-Meurice Hamlet; as for Jules Laforgue, he was probably introduced to the word "Hamlet-ism" in France...". However, there was also an opposite movement within Symbolism. In contrast to adoration and enthronement of the genius onto Mount Olympus, there were examples of dethroning him. The spirit of persiflage cultivated in the environment of the Parisian cabarets was a gateway to avant-garde anarchy. There was a growing appetite for seeing Shakespeare being fragmented and immersed in anachronisms and various distracting effects.

Those who showed a strong inclination towards minority genres and alternative culture found a kindred spirit in Jules Laforgue. The most significant alliances included the exchange of inspirations between the father of Dada, Marcel Duchamp, and this young protagonist of Symbolism. Dissonance, the breaking of traditional mimesis, the combination of high and low, and the parody of stereotypes were common characteristics of their artistic methods. "Instead of a well-established, traditional style, Laforgue sought a new style of his own, an idiolect, a language offering space to the everyday, to the spoken word – a style that is not only related to the style of the authors who frequented the Parisian Cabaret Artistique and that of innovative authors such as Mallarmé, but can be regarded as a harbinger of the style of modern writers such as Céline and Queneau," as Pieter de Nijs put it in his comparative study *An Exit Marcel Duchamp and Jules Laforgue*. Duchamp shares this ambivalent attitude with Laforgue, as Nijs further continues: "Duchamp is not so much the Dadaist who only rejects. He is

much more like Laforgue, someone who is 'looking for a way out' – looking for new ways for the arts to go in a changing society." In 1967 Duchamp told Pierre Cabanne: "I liked Laforgue a lot, and I like him even more now".

These quotes suggest a lot about the essence of Laforgue's work, including his novella *Hamlet or the Consequences of Fatherly Obedience*, which is the subject of our analysis. In addition to his famous *Urinoir*, the artist Marcel Duchamp, creator of cartoons, is particularly remembered for the portrait of the Mona Lisa with a moustache. Laforgue proceeded similarly when writing the collection of novellas *Les Moralités Légendaires*, making the carnivalesque (in Bakhtin's terminology), and dethroning the great figures of world art like Salome, Lohengrin, Perseus, Andromeda and a few others, and bringing them closer to common people.

With respect to the perception of *Hamlet*, the most inspiring novella from his *Moralités* collection, several questions arise. We first look at the problem of the source material for the theme and its recurrent recycling.

Source material

It is a well-known fact that *Hamlet*, the famous play penned by William Shakespeare, is not the original source in this chain, and the play is not the original. It is like the demonstration of a postmodern situation in which everything we have at our disposal is just a kind of a copy. The theory on Shakespeare has listed a number of specific appropriations of the material. Professor Jana Wild published numerous papers on the subject in Slovak. Jules Laforgue wrote a loose version in which he preserved and varied certain constitutive motifs, used exact quotes of proverbial lines and their carnivalesque reversal as well as a host of anachronistic references to the facts, decentralising the narrative and the message of *Hamlet*.

However, the names of the main characters are different. He adopted them from the Danish chronicle of Saxo Grammaticus from 1200, the point of departure for Shakespeare. The king in power is not called Claudius but Fengo and his wife is not Gertrude but Gerutha. The old murdered king is called Horwendill, not Hamlet. It is

a clear sign of Laforgue's obsession with the Hamlet myth, as he visited Elsinore and breathed the Danish Nordic atmosphere before writing his persiflage.

The names of characters in the piece that Hamlet plots to stage by a troupe of actors, called *The Mousetrap*, are also altered: In Laforgue's piece, the brother of Gonzago is murdered by King Claudius, while in Shakespeare's version the narrative set in Mantua is a prefiguration of the play by young Hamlet, and King Gonzago is murdered by his nephew Luciano. The author follows the strategy of avoiding authentic names. In Laforgue's piece, the king is called Fengo, as has been mentioned earlier, and therefore the use of the name Claudius for the fictitious king acts as a conspiratorial signal for the expert on Shakespeare's masterpiece, one of several self-referential references. Nevertheless, it has the same effect – the shot goose made a gaggle, and King Fengo faints before committing the murder in the performed piece.

The choice of the name William for an actor summoned to Elsinore by Hamlet is a nice reflection. Hamlet hands William his manuscript, asking him to keep it, for it is important to him, although he allows him to skip some of the passages at his own discretion. Yet he insists on the others. In terms of reality, the delivery of the manuscript is symbolic – we can see who is Hamlet, the author of the crucial story, and who is the preserver: the character of William naturally refers to Shakespeare.

Experts on Shakespeare's variation – and it must be emphasised that they have the greatest pleasure from Laforgue's novella – can be amused, for instance, by the reversed motif of the convent. In Laforgue's piece, actress Kate, the object of Hamlet's desire, attempts, or at least pretends, to enter a convent. However, the sweet prince repeatedly tries to prevent her from doing so. "Don't enter a convent, please," he pleads. Kate has the best intentions: she intends to care for the poor or the wounded in the Hundred Years' War – a mention of aforementioned anachronisms. According to a particular mention in Laforgue's text, the story takes place on 14 July 1601, long after the end of the Hundred Years' War.

As to anachronisms, Laforgue, as far as the facts are concerned, significantly extends the span of time. From the Hundred Years' War, through the opening night of Hamlet in

London, the French Revolution (14 July and a quote from the Marseillaise), to the 19th century Parisian bohemians, Louis Philippe's recommendation to the bourgeois "get rich" ("enrichissez-vous!"), the factory exploitation of the proletariat, and activism of progressively thinking people to alleviate poverty.

Decentralising the plot

Laforgue's story is slightly different from Shakespeare's. A series of tragic events had taken place before the story began to unfold. Apart from Hamlet's father, Polonius, the chief councillor of the king, and his daughter Ophelia are also dead, and the burial is expected. Hamlet is different as well. He lacks the fury to punish the culprit. As a true symbolist, he takes delight in the ritual jabbing of the wax figures – doubles of the royal couple. He is particularly thrilled by the beautiful story of his play and his way of transferring it to the iambic verse. He is content that the King's reaction to his play convicted him of murder. After this event, the royal parents completely disappear from the narrative.

The narrative begins with the melancholic prince finishing a play for three characters. He is primarily interested in his success as an author. In this respect Hamlet is Laforgue's alter ego, an autobiographical play. His ambition becomes more understandable a little later, after the funeral of Polonius that he missed, and learns the truth about his descent from a gravedigger. He is an illegitimate son of the old Horwendill (Hamlet) and the "most beautiful Gipsy woman" who had another son called Yorick. Hamlet is simply a born theatre-maker. His half-plebeian ancestry probably motivates his radical departure from his own social status. It is no longer something rotten in the state of Denmark, which embarrasses him after committing patricide. He voices criticism against the entire contemporary social system, making recommendations for the future: "Stage a rebellion on a beautiful day ... But then let it end for good! Burn and drown everything in blood!" In his closing argument, he pleads guilty, calling himself a sheer feudal parasite.

After a successful performance, Hamlet wants to flee Denmark with an actress. The convincing acting of Kate tested the theatrical qualities of his play on stage and

legitimated him as an author. He intends to settle in Paris with Kate. Laertes, a builder in Laforgue's Hamlet, who builds houses for factory workers, thwarts the plan. Laforgue comments on it thusly: "Indeed, Laertes should have been the hero of this story". Irritated by Hamlet's arrogant rebellion, the unsuccessful candidate for the main character takes the initiative and kills Hamlet in a duel at Ophelia's grave. Kate and William, her previous lover, seize the treasure bag that Fengo and Gerutha prepared for their escape from Denmark before Fortinbras and Hamlet had previously seized it as they were fleeing from Elsinore. William forgives Kate her betrayal, and points out that a full bag of money is a good compensation.

Laforgue's Hamlet ends with his ironic comment, one of many in which he indulged: "One Hamlet less, let's tell the truth, is not a reason for the human race to perish." Peter Brook tersely described the profile of Laforgue's Hamlet by saying that he was a decadent dandy. He is frustrated by society, but chooses the path of a lonely gesture of intellectual disgust and escapes first to the tower of Elsinore Castle (the phrase "ivory tower" is appropriate) and then abroad, but Laertes prevents him from escaping. He has no allies, and even the character of Horatio is missing.

Theatrical Fates of Laforgue's Hamlet

Before we focus on the reception of Laforgue and his Hamlet in Czechoslovakia, we must remember to mention its premiere in France. Interestingly, there was a two-year shift from the Czech adaptation. In the spring of 1939, a young actor and mime Jean-Louis Barrault performed the role of Hamlet by Laforgue in the theatre of Théâtre de l'Atelier, dramatized and directed by Charles Granval. The future key figure of post-war French theatre history had a passion for minority genres, and brought to fame, for instance, the pantomime considered a subgenre. After the war, he performed the role of this character as an unbalanced existentialist in Shakespeare's play in 1947.

Nevertheless, we are interested in the Czech dramatization penned by the representative of the avant-garde E. F. Burian and the production he directed. When Hamlet III was produced in 1937, Jules Laforgue was already well known to the Czech cultural community from several translations. There was a strong affinity of Czech

modern poetry with French literature. The connection of the Czech and French avant-garde scene was not weaker, either. The Dada Theatre as well as other small stages in Prague and Brno produced avant-garde and proto-avant-garde plays. Prague, however, was a crossroads of art movements coming from both the West and the East. The representatives of Czech leftist culture carefully watched the events in the Soviet Union. From 1932, Stalin's totalitarian power was on the rise and it was also reflected in culture, firmly advocating the model of socialist realism. This provoked dissent between the artists, members of the Communist Party, and they left the party. Burian was a big propagator of communism and Soviet art in his alternative D Theatre. He was a personal friend of V. E. Meyerhold and admired him greatly. There is evidence of mutual inspiration. In 1937, however, one could sense a dense atmosphere in the Russian theatre. Burian had first-hand information as he met V. E. Meyerhold in Prague a year before.

The choice of producing Laforgue's Hamlet on stage was – as reconstructed by contemporary Czech theatre research – a homage to the Russian artist with an uncertain future. Burian expressed it like this: "Let's not be mistaken. Hamlet III is a manifesto of the freedom of artistic expression. It is a manifesto of art for the unconditional rights in society." (Burian, Prague Dramaturgy, p. 86). Burian openly opposed socialist realism, which provoked heated debates in Czechoslovakia. The free stylisation of his production was an artistic contribution to the debate and reference to Meyerhold's poetic.

By staging Hamlet III, Burian instilled a new spirit in his already obsolete propaganda institution, and infuriated the left-wing critics and comrades for the rest of the season. It caused so much uproar that the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia temporarily suspended his party membership.

From the perspective of the contemporary political context, Burian's adaptation is an exceptional link in the chain of inter-textual continuations of Hamlet.

The key to reading the dramatization was provided by the author himself on the first pages of the text. He chose a quote from Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*: "Invest me in my motley; give me leave / To speak my mind". In a two-act comedy he proceeded in the

opposite direction as Laforgue who abridged the story. Burian expanded it towards Shakespeare's canonical text. More than half of his play follows the story of Hamlet I (let's name Shakespeare's text like this), and a smaller part is the dramatization of Laforgue's Hamlet. Burian integrated both sources by transferring them to his own language, which implied in the eyes of the criticism of the time a return to the Dada mode of staging from his early period. Burian had already staged another text by Laforgue, the play *Joker Pierrot*, in Brno in 1929, in the spirit of his anarchic youth humour.

In this sense, the way the old king was murdered in Hamlet III was the icing on the cake: his rightful wife, Gerutha, stabbed him in the back with a silver fork. To make the gag perfect, young Hamlet portrayed the incriminating incident in *The Mousetrap* in the spirit of the canonical text by Shakespeare – the killer poured poison into the old king's ear. Despite a lack of consistency with reality, the culprits responded accordingly, admitted guilt and fainted. A playful distance from the narrative was enacted in numerous funny ways; Burian gained valuable experience from cabaret and Bertolt Brecht. Hamlet, for instance, interrupted a stream of Ophelia's laments, exclaiming: "shut up, everyone is waiting for my soliloquy".

Burian preserved the names of characters and many situations, motivations and puns from Laforgue's Hamlet. He described his free access as follows: "Like Shakespeare, who 'violated' the authors of old Spain, and Laforgue, who 'remade' Shakespeare in his own way – allow me to dramatize the world as it appears to me, according to my motto.

If you are looking for Laforgue in my book, you find him just like I discovered the spirit of Elizabethan England in Laforgue. Nothing is sacred enough to last forever. Or do you think that the Greek grammar school was merely conceived to serve some Greeks and then disappear?" In this introductory note E. F. Burian justifies his own practice characterised by free access to texts of other authors, their rewriting, and adaptations.

What is new in his Hamlet III? Burian increased the intensity and content of power brutality. In the conversation between King Fengo and his chief councillor Polonius, he allows us to perceive the sadistic methods of rule in a series of naturalistic details. The

king not only gives primitive orders to murder people, but also humiliates his subordinates (Polonius, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz) with malicious delight. The perversity of acts combined with black humour does not lag behind a similar picture of power practice from another Shakespearean travesty, *Ubu Roi (King Ubu)*, a play by Alfred Jarry. It seems that Burian was reading Laforgue with Jarry's eyes. He balanced the contrast between the fierce criminal passion of the king and his chief councillor with the heightened activity of the gravediggers. In addition to the mandatory scene in the cemetery, they appear two more times. In both additional scenes they apparently revolt against the court, in one of them a gravedigger starts chopping the royal stool. It is significant for Burian's language of metaphor. After all, he used this motif of destruction as a subtitle of the play: *Thrones Good for Wood*. In the end, Prince Hamlet recommends to destroy everything in the country: "Burn it all. May blood flow. Crush the nobility, ideas, all the idols and languages like bedbugs." It is very much like Laforgue. Burian's production indicates in the characters of gravediggers that the future protagonists who "cleanse the Augean stables" are in the offing.

The communist critic Július Fučík expressed his view on the scene of gravediggers and Burian's explicit text in his ideological report, trying to defend his favourite but also blame him for a number of things: "Changing the world is the task of the others and the scene of Burian's gravediggers (Marx: "What the Bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own gravediggers") suggests that E. F. Burian probably wanted to create a new play from Shakespeare's character in which he would bring his concept of Hamlet to completion." However, Burian placed the weapon against the existing world into the hands of Hamlet, the author of the play, pointing to incriminating evidence. Let's remember his lines about the power of art, like: "Art has been absorbed in weapons and great spirits have awakened the world".

As far as the artistic level of the production is concerned, the critics appreciated actors' performances and were particularly enchanted by the lyrical scene of dying Ophelia. Thanks to the invention of the celebrated cinematograph, the stage designer M. Kouřil conjured up amazing visual effects: the image of water with reflections of light and floating long hair. A Danish critic went into raptures about the performance, finding no parallel in contemporary European theatre.

By deconstructing the narrative and characters, Burian's play with its free unmatched humour spreading in all directions has heirs in Czechoslovakia. The text of Vladimír Fux *Hamlet IV or Elsinore Circus* was produced in the satirical theatre Večerní Brno in 1962. Number IV refers to Laforgue, Burian and also to the most famous variant of Hamlet by Shakespeare. The parody sketch of Hamlet by Lasica and Satinský from 1968 is not number V, because it is a personal persiflage by the young comedians. However, it preserves the spirit of the principle of deconstruction described above. The intellectual clowns L + S have contradicted the clichés and stereotypes layered on the iconic play over the years, and inconspicuously tested the knowledge of the young audience about the classic.

It is understandable that the theatre-makers in the regional theatre for young audiences in Trnava easily accepted Shakespeare. They had just put on a successful production of *Romeo and Juliet* in which a number of title roles were multiplied and several canonical scenes (for example the balcony scene) were repeated in various genre registers. A year later, they produced Burian's text of *Hamlet III*. It was staged in a similar spirit of Dada ridicule with major and minor modifications (leaving out the hints referring to inter-war Czechoslovakia).

A manifest avowal to the inter-war avant-garde was characteristic of the expanding area of alternative theatre in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s. It was also the case with this production. Sharing similar opinions with Nvota, the critic Martin Porubjak understood it and called his review "Hamlet for E. F. Burian". In this case, however, it was only a formal gesture. The critical response was embarrassing. Nvota's production appeared in an ideological vacuum – in contrast to the passionate controversy surrounding Burian's staging – and did not receive any response.

According to Porubjak's description, "Nvota conceived the production as Hamlet's testimony before an investigator. At the beginning of the performance Hamlet appears in front of the audience, his facial and profile photographs are taken and he defiantly makes his confession. His words are accentuated by the constant clacking of the typewriter – the minutes of the 'Hamlet case' are taken." The theatre-makers count on

the audience being familiar with the case and emphasis is therefore transferred from the content to the way it happened. In the critic's view this poses a problem. The performance was nothing more than a "polemical glove defiantly thrown in the face of academic theatre," he noted. Nvota, according to him, had a great respect for the leading representative of the Czech theatre avant-garde. "And thus he fills the production with the wealth of theatrical ideas, the versatility of stylised actors' creations, and a mixture of expressive devices (from karate to the elements of Japanese theatre)", yet the performance drew a lukewarm response. "A little out of time and space." (Práca, 11 January 1983). Another critic of the same generation pointed out that there was too much emphasis on the form. According to the above-mentioned comments, the production suffered from self-reference, and was a travesty for travesty's sake without references to the reality. Hamlet's destruction of Elsinore was quite amusing.

Like E. F. Burian, the Italian "enfant terrible" Carmelo Bene recycled Laforgue's *Hamlet or the Consequences of Fatherly Obedience* as it attacked the social order and dominant culture.

The Italian theatre rebel, known in Europe from the late 1950s, worked with Shakespeare for a long time. He staged several of his plays, and raised his artistic profile through Shakespeare. The list of his Hamlet productions is long, and several of them are variations of his stage adaptations of Laforgue's novella. After the first performance in 1967, translator Ennio Flaiano said that it was a very free version of French poetic prose. Bene borrowed the "spirit of transcription" (David Sanson) from Laforgue. E. F. Burian similarly justified his approach to recycling. One of the series of Bene's variations had a humorous title *Omelette for Hamlet* (the concept of Omelette also concealed the meaning of homage: Hommage - Hommelette). The Hamlet series was finalised only in 1994.

His film from this series has a significant title – *One Hamlet Less*. It was premiered at the Cannes festival in 1973. The title is a quote from one of the last sentences of Laforgue's text, which is part of the author's strategy for dethroning the English genius. The prominent French poststructuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze used this memorable expression with a small change in the title of his *One Manifesto Less*.

In this theoretical text Deleuze explains Carmelo Bene's approach to text, direction, acting, in short, to his understanding of art. According to Deleuze, Bene's strategy is based on a revolt against dominant culture based on power representation, on normalised and standardised formulas. He deconstructs the structures he devised at all levels: from speech, through conflict, up to composition in order to discharge original intensity and develop it into smoothly continuing variations.

In his understanding, however, intensity is in the middle, and therefore he is not interested in the beginnings or ends of the narrative. Laforgue chose a similar approach in his Hamlet, which begins with the arrival of actors at Elsinore and ends with their escape, leaving behind dead Prince Hamlet.

The basis of Bene's creative work is reduction, the "amputation" of everything that used to be the pride of dominant art, which was placed on the pedestal as a monument to the majority. It was a process of reduction, of adaptation to the minority.

Bene recognised in Laforgue an admirer of minority genres (short prose, small forms of poetry, parody genres), and treated Shakespeare in this spirit. According to Gilles Deleuze, the relatives of Laforgue in literature would be Heinrich von Kleist in proportion to papal Goethe, or Franz Kafka in proportion to dominant German literature. While the representatives of great art are both temporal and eternal, minority authors are timeless. In relation to Shakespeare, it would ultimately be the liberation from clichés and stereotypes and the reducing of the original intensity of his works in relation to the contemporary audience. Peter Brook was looking for something like that when he searched in the great classic for the tiny sparks that could rekindle the flames.

Finally, both Peter Brook and Carmelo Bene had their instructor when examining Shakespeare. It was the French rebel against mainstream culture, Antonin Artaud.

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