

Vygotsky's Tragedy: *Hamlet* and the Psychology of Art

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Abstract

Lev S. Vygotsky is one of the major figures of psychology; however, his deep engagement with the arts is less known. This is surprising, given the fact that the arts, and especially Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, are present throughout his career. In this article, we argue, first, that *Hamlet* was a major symbolic resource for Vygotsky in times of liminal transitions, and second, that it is this very deep experience of having been transformed by means of *Hamlet* that grounds his psychology of art, which aims precisely to show how *Hamlet* works as a “technique of emotions.” Our demonstration is organized into three main movements. In Part 1, we retrace the historical and cultural context in which Vygotsky grew up as a young man. We emphasize his experiences of liminality and transitions, due to transformations of the social world and his own life. In Part 2, we examine Vygotsky's proposition itself through a close analysis of his *Psychology of art*. Finally, in Part 3, we further explicate the relation between art and life at play in Vygotsky's approach and relate this to Vygotsky's broader psychology.

Keywords

Vygotsky, aesthetics, liminality, transition, cultural psychology, psychology of art, *Hamlet*

This is the last thing I have done in psychology, and I will die at the summit like Moses, having glimpsed the promised land but without setting foot in it. Forgive me, dear creatures.

“*The rest is silence.*”

Vygotsky, around 1934, last entry of Notebooks, (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 497, emphasis original)

Introduction: *Hamlet* as *Fil Rouge*

Lev S. Vygotsky has become one of the major figures of psychology, a world recognition achieved long after his death. He is mainly known as one of the fathers of developmental psychology (together with Piaget) or as an inspiration for instructional techniques and activity theories. However, Vygotsky's deep engagement with the arts is less known; this is surprising, given the fact that the arts, and especially Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, are present throughout his short career.

Vygotsky's (1971) first known full essay, his masters dissertation, was dedicated to *Hamlet*; also, the play took center stage in the PhD thesis that would form the basis of his *Psychology of art*. *Hamlet* is frequently quoted in his work, and especially, in his recently translated *Notebooks* (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018). There, the quotation above—Shakespeare's *The rest is silence*—is the very last

entry—this choice reveals how much *Hamlet* seems to have accompanied him, until this final appearance just before he “shuffled off his mortal coil.”

Recently, René van der Veer and Anton Yasnitsky made a complex analysis of the aspects of Vygotsky's work that were of greatest importance to him personally. Based on an extensive study of self-quotations, diary entries, correspondence, and so on, they conclude that his *Psychology of art* (Vygotsky, 1971), and his papers on the development of imagination in children (Vygotsky, 1994, 2004) come top of his own theoretical hit-parade (while on the applied side, his pedagogical textbooks come top [van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2016b, p. 92]). However, remarkably, little noise has been made about the profound inspiration that Vygotsky found in the arts, and especially, *Hamlet* (but see Bayanova, 2013; Chesnokova, 2018; Shchedrovitskii, 2014; Smagorinsky, 2011; Yaroshevskii, 1996).

In this article, we build upon the recognition of the centrality of art, and especially *Hamlet*, to Vygotsky's life and his psychology. The innovation of Vygotsky's *Psychology*

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of art is to move away from viewing art as simply “arousing” individual emotions, toward observing its transformative effects as a “technique of emotions,” which is both socially guided, historically situated, and unique to every member of an audience. Vygotsky’s core proposition is that each work of art can be seen as a technique *of* and *for* personal and social transformation. This conception is clearly in evidence when Vygotsky writes that as a “technique of feelings” (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 244); art provides “a psychological means for striking a balance with the environment at critical points of our behaviour” (p. 247), and hence, we “resort to art only at critical moments in our life” (p. 248).

This provocative proposition forms the central focus of this article: It invites us to consider the artwork that Vygotsky has most invested, *Hamlet*, as a transformative “liminal affective technology” that supported him in his life, and particularly “at critical points.” We argue, first, that Vygotsky used *Hamlet* as a major symbolic resource in times of liminal transitions, and second, that it is this very deep *experience* of having used *Hamlet* to make sense of personal and social transformations that grounds his psychology of art. Our demonstration is organized into three main movements. In Part 1, we retrace the historical and cultural context in which Vygotsky grew up as a young man. We emphasize his experiences of liminality and transitions, due to transformations of the social world and his own life, and highlight the trajectory of his engagement with the arts, and especially with *Hamlet*. In Part 2, we examine Vygotsky’s proposition itself through a close analysis of his *Psychology of art*; in this volume, Vygotsky (1971) identifies devices and techniques common to diverse literary forms, eventually culminating in his reading of *Hamlet*, demonstrating his understanding of “the true psychological meaning of our own aesthetic reaction” as governed by “the astonishing psychological rules” of aesthetics (p. 160). Finally, in Part 3, we further explicate the relation between art and life at play in Vygotsky’s approach and relate this to Vygotsky’s broader psychology, before concluding with a summary statement.

Social and Political Transformations and the Course of a Life

To understand the evolution of Vygotsky’s writing, we need to retrace transitions in his own developmental trajectory, and this we can do only if we sketch the radical transformations of the historico-cultural conditions in which he was living, as a Vygotskian reading would invite us to do (Perret-Clermont, 2008; see also Szakolczai, 2013).

Societal Crises, Liminality, and Life Transitions

Informed by psychology of the lifecourse, we are aware of the fact that societal crises may translate into personal

experiences of ruptures of the taken-for-granted structure of life, leading to dynamics of transition, and liminal experiences, or liminal transitions. We also know that other types of events—personal or relational crises, illnesses—can equally be experienced as ruptures and thus trigger liminal transitions. In addition, people living in the margins of a given structure can also be considered as likely to experience a form of liminality. Transitions and liminal experiences are all occasions for change and development, involving a variety of processes (Stenner, 2017b; Stenner & Zittoun, 2020; Zittoun, 2006, 2012; Zittoun et al., 2008). On one hand, dynamics of developmental transitions can be described as including processes of identity transformation, learning, and sense making, and are triggered by events that a person perceives as a rupture (Zittoun, 2006, 2008). On the other hand, the term “liminal” was introduced in Van Gennep’s (1909) *Rites de passage* to designate the middle phase of a rite of passage, which is preceded by separation rites and followed by reaggregation rites. In more recent developments, liminality is associated with an experiential phase of *passage* during which familiar social norms and structures are suspended and new possibilities are sometimes opened (Stenner, 2017b; Thomassen, 2014; Turner, 1969). Taken together, the notion of liminal transition invites us to examine the relationship between collective events likely to be perceived as ruptures, and psychological transformation (Stenner, 2017b). However, liminal transitions do not always resolve well: The “liminal” phase may at times be lasting, and people can become “stuck” in transition, which has been identified as “liminal hotspots” (Greco & Stenner, 2017). Vygotsky, we will argue, lived through times of intense social transformations, leading to multiple cumulative and overlapping transitions and liminal experiences, some of which were experienced as liminal hotspots; we will examine how his engagement with *Hamlet* and his theorization of art reflect his experience of using literature and the arts to support transitions and move out of liminal hotspots.

Lev Vygotsky was born in 1896 as the second child of a Jewish wealthy family—the father had a private insurance company—soon joined by four other brothers and sisters. The family had to move to Gomel in 1897; Gomel was at the border of the “Jewish Pale of Settlement” (Yasnitsky, 2018, p. 1) where Jews could escape some of the restrictions imposed in the rest of the Empire. In these years, the Russian Empire was a monarchy, deeply connected to the Orthodox Church. The wide diversity of nations gathered into the Empire had gone through rapid industrialization, but still the territory remained mainly agricultural. The political situation was unstable, and various agitations also found expression in pogroms aimed at Gomel in 1903 and 1906. It is in this context that we can understand the initial formative years of Vygotsky and the constraints imposed upon his education in liminal Gomel. Later, when the Empire entered into World War I in 1914, Vygotsky was

already studying at university in Moscow and not directly affected by the events; it is the beginning of the Bolshevik revolution, and the extreme agitation in 1917–1918, that transformed Vygotsky's life conditions as an enthusiastic, intellectual, and artistic young man. The Revolution, a massive societal rupture, transformed society, caused massive population movements, and occasioned the reinvention of core institutions; this is the context in which Vygotsky started his professional life, which we will now explain.

In tsarist Russia, specific laws limited free movement, and quotas restrained the access Jewish inhabitants could get to education—putting them de facto in a liminal position. This context shaped Vygotsky's learning and developmental trajectory. As a very alert young man, friends with artists and intellectuals, he suffered from this forced limitation imposed on Jews in his region. Interested in literature and Jewish texts, he found relief in a prophetic form of philosophy, and later, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. xiii). Vygotsky had won a gold medal for his secondary education, and so was able to benefit from a blind ballot process designed to enable selected Jews to enter university; he was thus admitted at the *Imperial Moscow University* in 1913. However, the only disciplines open to Jewish students were Medicine and Law; Vygotsky tried the first before moving to the second. Being satisfied with neither, he took classes on literature in a parallel *Moscow City People's University*, which could not deliver degree titles (Yasnitsky, 2018, p. 4).

According to Yasnitsky (2018), it is during this phase that Vygotsky became seriously interested in the influence of literature on the subjectivity of the reader (pp. 5–6). A first version of the essay that would become *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, is dated August 5–September 12, 1915, written in Gomel, and a revised version dated February 14–March 28, 1916, was written in Moscow (Ivanov, 1971, p. 270). While attending the two universities, Vygotsky also became “an activist of Jewish journalism, a theatregoer and an eager participant of the cultural life of the second largest city of the Russian Empire” (Yasnitsky, 2018, p. 14). In parallel to his studies, he was indeed much involved in writing literary essays and theater criticism (Sobkin, 2017). In 1916–1917, Vygotsky was writing for a weekly journal of the Jewish intelligentsia *Novyi Put' (The new path)*, for which he was also secretary (12 of these papers can still be traced), and he wrote five papers for a monthly magazine edited by Maxim Gorky devoted to “literary, political and artistic studies,” *Letopis' (Chronicles)* (van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2016a, p. 244). Vygotsky also wrote an essay on Yulii Aikhenvald, a literary scholar and critic, for another journal edited by Gorky. Aikhenvald probably inspired his serious engagement with *Hamlet*, as we will see below. Then as a result of the double turmoil of Russia's entry into World War I followed swiftly by the revolution, Vygotsky returned to Gomel at the end of

1917 or early 1918 after completing his studies; whether he obtained a university degree or not is unclear (Yasnitsky, 2018, p. 14).

Second, the Gomel to which Vygotsky returned was first taken by the Bolsheviks in 1917, followed by the Germans in 1918, and back to the Bolsheviks in 1919; it then became the capital of the Gomel region within Soviet Russia (Yasnitsky, 2018, p. 17). In this period of transformation, new positions were created for the management of the region, and many people in Vygotsky's circle took positions in the new regime. It seems that Vygotsky, who was initially not interested in politics, became a defender of bolshevism after the short German occupation. In any case, the new social order gave him new opportunities. It is at this time that Vygotskii changed his name to Vygotsky (Yasnitsky, 2018, pp. 27–29). In 1919–1920, he worked as the head of the statistics department of Gomel's regional worker cooperative, and next to it, as it was poorly paid and he now needed to support his parents who had lost their status, he was giving occasional lectures and courses at schools, colleges, and worker's education events (Yasnitsky, 2018, p. 23). There, he taught on Russian, aesthetics, theory of art, and introductions to philosophy, logic, and psychology. He also gave lectures on psychoanalysis, reflexology, pedagogy, and evaluation. After a silence in publication in 1918 (van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2016a, p. 245), Vygotsky published in 1919 an essay on *Revolution and theatre* in a volume on poems and essays by leftist artists suggesting that he now was also convinced by the new state of things (Yasnitsky, 2018, p. 24). He also shortly wrote an essay on Leo Tolstoy's criticism of Shakespeare in 1920 (van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2016a, p. 244). In 1922, Vygotsky took a role “in a middle-level position of a governmental employee in charge of theatrical entrepreneurship in the Gomel region” (van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2016a, p. 244; Yasnitsky, 2018, p. 27), and started another wave of intense publications—77 papers were published between 1922 and 1923 in weekly political and literary newspapers in Gomel (van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2016a, pp. 244–247), mainly reviews of theater plays, ballets, and operas, in Russian and Yiddish.

Still in Gomel, in late 1922, Vygotsky was hired at the newly created Gomel *Pedagogical Tekhnikum*, where he taught a variety of psychological topics, and became the head of the Cabinet of psychology—a psychology laboratory. In 1923, Vygotsky presented an ambitious program for this Cabinet, coordinating research in experimental psychology and pedagogy, and activities in various educational institutions and social work. He also presented some results of first experiments in 1923, including in children's abnormal development. Very soon, he prepared three papers to be presented at a congress in 1924 on education and memory building on the current reflexology theories (Yasnitsky, 2018, pp. 32–33). These papers were well received—most notably by Aleksander Luria.

Third, the rapidly developing psychologist moved back to Moscow in 1924 at the invitation of Luria, to work at the *Moscow Institute for Experimental Psychology*. There, he was very committed to the education of children with various difficulties, often connected to the massive population movements in the Revolution's aftermath. Vygotsky and Luria were committed to developing a new psychology that would participate in the building of a new society (Yasnitsky, 2018, pp. 43–50). Vygotsky married, and engaged fully in this very intense activity.

During these years, no publications about the arts are to be found, and it would take time for Vygotsky's first psychological publication to appear (there is one in 1924, none in 1925, one in 1926 . . .). This does not mean that his interest for the arts diminished. In 1925, Luria met film maker Sergei Eisenstein after the release of the *Battleship Potemkin*. They became friends, and Vygotsky was also introduced, leading to various collaborations in the late 20s, combining psychology and cinema, on hypnotism and on memory (Yasnitsky, 2016, p. 36), including the famous mnemonist (Luria & Bruner, 1987). That relationship, and its further development, suggests that cinema was also part of Vygotsky's thinking. In 1925, Vygotsky was sent to represent the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) at an international psychology congress in London, in a well-documented trip (Yasnitsky, 2018, p. 52; Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, pp. 57–70).

However, Vygotsky was also in bad health. A first tuberculosis crisis in 1922 was followed by a second massive tuberculosis fit after his trip, which forced him to spend the year (1926) in hospital. Through this difficult liminal phase—close to death as discussed below—he worked on three books including reworking his PhD (which his illness prevented him from defending in 1925) into the *Psychology of art* (Yasnitsky, 2018, pp. 53–57; Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, pp. 71–90). *Psychology of art* was ready in 1926 but—despite traces of an agreement with an editor about its publication (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 71)—it remained unpublished during Vygotsky's life time. According to Yasnitsky (2016), the sole manuscript survived only because it was kept by Sergei Eisenstein (p. 37). The first publication of *Psychology of art* in Russian had to wait until 1965 in a version from which all references to supposedly anti-revolution authors like Trotsky were expunged (Fraser & Yasnitsky, 2016, p. 60). It took six more years—and the work of a young dissident linguist and semiotician Vyacheslav V. Ivanov—before a restored version appeared in English in 1971 (Fraser & Yasnitsky, 2016, p. 68).

In sum, *Psychology of art* is a book born from the liminal experience of social marginality and deep sociohistorical and personal transformations. First, the marginal position imposed upon Jews in prerevolutionary Russia fed Vygotsky's interest and engagement in literature, the

interdiction against studying humanities at university bringing him to invest that field in the margins. Then the Revolution totally transformed the social field and Vygotsky's position within it, creating ruptures in his life, and a major transition in his life and in society, opening new possibilities for himself and millions of others. Returning to Gomel, Vygotsky was now free to draw on his former interests, expand them, and nourish them with the new hope of changing society for the best. Emerging from this liminal transition, his project for a transformative theater expresses a sociopolitically nourished imagination. The sociopolitical events, that enabled Vygotsky to become a psychologist and to travel abroad (both important biographic ruptures and turning points), were followed by a third massive rupture, the hospital stay in a critical state. Finally, the sociopolitical environment also imposed a silence of 50 years on these writings.

Art, Hamlet, and Liminality in Vygotsky's Lifecourse

Our past work has made us very attentive to resources people may use to support life transitions, or to facilitate the process of learning from liminal experiences, and bringing them to closure (Stenner, 2017b; Zittoun, 2006, 2018). In theorizing this issue, we have distinguished two (always interwoven) kinds of liminal experience: “spontaneous liminal experiences” that happen to people when the normative order patterning their world is abruptly transformed, and “devised liminal experiences,” which are actively sought and involve the mediation of symbolic resources serving as “liminal affective technologies” (Stenner, 2017a, 2017b). In human history, cultural experiences such as these provided by ritual, dance, music, theater, and literature have thus often been devised for nourishing and amplifying affective and imaginative processes, and bringing them to play in real-life transitions (Kuhn, 2013; Winnicott, 2001). A liminal affective technology thus concerns the manner in which “art and life reciprocally interpenetrate one another” (Stenner & Zittoun, 2020) to facilitate the resolution of liminal experiences that might otherwise be damaging or difficult to manage and get through (Stenner, 2020; Stenner & Greco, 2018; Szakolczai, 2016). We have shown how works of art (literature, music, visual arts and installation, and cinema) can create an enabling microenvironment for a cultivation, externalization, and sharing of people's cultural experiences which can support identity transformation and learning associated with new forms of sense making, sometimes with deep life consequences (Zittoun, 2006, 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2014). Art can thus guide and support a person to make sense of and manage their transformation (see also Valsiner, 2020). Thanks to this work, we have learned to treat repeated allusion to a certain artwork as an indication that it has become a symbolic resource for that

person. Hence, in the case of Vygotsky, *Shakespeare's Hamlet* appears recurrently, and especially in times of transitions. This suggests it was for him a symbolic resource; we will show how it became a liminal affective technology operating precisely at the heart of his liminal experiences (Stenner, 2017b; Zittoun, 2006), and how his experiences with Hamlet may have invited him to theorize that symbolic efficacy.

From what precedes, it seems reasonable to suggest that Vygotsky's investment in the *Psychology of arts* reflects his personal transformations. Here, we show the crucial role played by Hamlet during these liminal experiences.

First, we note that Zavereshneva and van der Veer (2018) see an anticipation of his dissertation on Hamlet in a talk about the book of Ecclesiastes that Vygotsky prepared while still in the Gymnasium:

Vygotsky was well acquainted with this Hamletian situation: striving for integrity—in both his personal life and in theory—he was more than once forced to fight duplicity, deceit and despise caused by the fact that he was a Russian citizen of Jewish decent and an unorthodox follower of Spinoza and Marx in the land of victorious socialism. (p. xiii)

Vygotsky was poised to apply the literary method of Yulii Aikhenvald and Arkadii Gorn'feld that he learned at *Moscow City People's University*. Both were “strong advocates of a highly subjectivist approach to art and literature. (. . .) Depending on the genre (theatre, music, or literature) the individual observer, the member of the audience, and the reader are co-creators of the piece of art” (Yasnitsky, 2018, p. 5). The literary text occasions and provokes associations and other feelings for the reader, guided by the narrative. Analysis thus includes a close analysis both of the formal features of the text and of these subjective feelings and responses. Young Vygotsky analyzed Shakespeare's “Hamlet” using this method that he referred to as “the reader's critique” (Yasnitsky, 2018, p. 6). As we will see, Vygotsky would finesse this subjectivist approach to art, developing it into his more complex socially situated transformative reading.

Second, Hamlet appears in the notes written during Lev Vygotsky's dramatic and remarkably productive stay at the Zakharino hospital during 1926 (see above). The intensity of this scholarly production during a serious tuberculosis crisis suggests a significant liminal experience. Through his diary, we witness how Vygotsky's dialogue with Hamlet appears as a counterpoint to his daily proximity to suffering and death, in 1926:

In the half year spent in this home, where death was as ordinary and common as the morning breakfast and the doctor's round, I absorbed so many impressions of death that I am inclined to death just like a tired person is inclined to sleep. (Zavereshneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 85)

The passage immediately prior to this extract shows Vygotsky using Hamlet like a mirror to symbolize his profound near-death experience. The following quotation shows Vygotsky's “reader's critique” in action as he observes his own feelings:

Hamlet's death is a psychological necessity for the spectator. It is not the endpoint of two lines of the story (that is a detail of the plot and the denouement), but of the line that joins them in the emotional experience of the spectator. In the outburst, our identification with the hero was burnt, destroyed (feeling—expenditure)—emptiness, devastation, Hamlet died in our heart before he died on the scene, because we could no longer attribute our feelings to him, the physiological devastation (like after the coitus). Death is the sign of this psychophysiological devastation. The experience of art is affective conflict. That is exactly why it attracts (accumulates) former conflicts. (Zavereshneva & van der Veer, 2018, pp. 84–85)

However, and third, it is important to note two points. First, Vygotsky moved from his particular case to a more generalized understanding of how art works (as indicated above in his reference to the “emotional experience of *the spectator*”). Second, in the *Psychology of art*, Vygotsky proposes an analysis of art as a means, not just of provoking, but of *transforming* emotions: a social technique of emotion. Although he moves beyond Aikhenvald's method, he retains the notion that the affective tensions developed in the artwork “attract” and “accumulate” those of the spectator, opening the way to possible transformation. As shown in section “Vygotsky's Psychology of Art—Approaching Hamlet,” he theorizes art as a dynamic process at the boundary of the social and the personal, and he ascribes a “psychology” to the artistically mediated experience itself beyond questions of the individual psychology of the author or the spectator/reader. As shown in section “Vygotsky's Hamlet,” Hamlet plays a key role in his demonstration of this development.

After his hospital stay and the completion of the *psychology of art*, Vygotsky seems to have fully concentrated on his work as psychologist. Although his work on imagination refers indirectly to art (Vygotsky, 1994, 2004), there are no more publications which are overtly about art and literature until the very last phase of his life, when he returned to consider the relations between spontaneous and artistically devised emotions, including an article on the problem of the psychology of the actor (Smagorinsky, 2011; Vygotsky, 1932/1999). There are also traces of Vygotsky's internal dialogue with Hamlet and Shakespeare in his *Notebooks* well after 1925, until his death. In his notes about Spinoza and a theory of emotions, for instance, he writes in the year 1931–1933 the following:

Spinoza succeeded in creating an idea of a man, etc. (. . .) It is a true idea because it corresponds with its object, because it

shows man—in Shakespeare’s words—in the full meaning of the word, Thereby it shows the psychology of man, its genuine subject matter. Ecce homo. (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 213)

Hamlet is also present when discussing clinical cases at the in 1931 and 1932.¹ For instance, after describing a case of a man who displays buffoonery and self-praise, he writes, “There is system (method) in this madness—Polonius. There is meaning in this meaninglessness” (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 196 and note 69). Later, reflecting on schizophrenia, he writes, “The pathological change of word meanings. The disintegration of concepts, Concepts are not images but exit in time,” and above this, he simply adds the word “Hamlet” (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 333). Finally, Hamlet returns in the preparation of his last conference presentation in 1934, in his very last notes (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 497).

In sum, the *Psychology of art*—with the analysis of Hamlet at its core—accompanied him during the long years of his youth and development, passing through the most transformative experience of a liminal stay at hospital. Vygotsky found comfort and inspiration in the arts as a young man, and this was mediated by what seems to be an intense identification of his own fate with the figure of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Through such use of *Hamlet* as a symbolic resource during the intense period of transitions sketched above, he developed a novel and complex psychological theory of art as a technique of feeling with transformative personal and social potential. On one hand, his work on Hamlet in the *Psychology of art* provided the basis for the formulation of a new psychology in which the social forms the mind via the mediation of art and other cultural artifacts which function as techniques of emotions. On the other hand, Vygotsky maintained a much more personal and inner dialogue with Hamlet, who remained an “inner alter” (Marková, 2006) until his death. Although it was never written, Vygotsky (1971, p. 3) promised “at least one other book” on Hamlet. We now turn to the book he did write.

Vygotsky’s *Psychology of Art*—Approaching Hamlet

Vygotsky used Hamlet as a symbolic resource during the many transitions of his life, and especially in the most vital liminal experiences. As noted, his *Psychology of Art* precisely aims at analyzing the role of arts as transformative techniques; we propose that it is because Vygotsky had experienced the transformative power of a symbolic resource such as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, that he devoted himself to understanding this process in this important part of his work. To do so, Vygotsky had to address the intellectual debates of his time, related to a “crisis of objectivism”

which found particular expression both in psychology and in aesthetics.

In his short preface to the *Psychology of art*, Vygotsky presents his work, not as a system, but as a program for articulating the central problem of an adequate psychology of art, rejecting the “old popular psychology” which had served as a premise for aesthetic theory. He thus hoped to plant a “small seed” from which a future psychology might sprout (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 5). Vygotsky’s problem, including its central idea and method of approach, lies at the intersection of psychology (concerned with the conditions of experience) and aesthetics (concerned with artistic forms), and his approach demands attention to the thresholds between the form and material of an artwork, and between art and life.

Vygotsky presents the central idea of his program in terms of the relation between *material* and artistic *form* (both defined below). He then adds, importantly, “or, what amounts to the same thing, the acknowledgement in art of the social techniques of emotions” (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 5). Building on Hennequin (1892), this acknowledgement begins with a view of a work of art as a carefully crafted compound of aesthetic symbols designed to arouse emotions. Methodologically, this entails *both* a detailed analysis of the composition of an artwork *and* attentiveness to the emotions it stimulates when encountered. Vygotsky, however, differentiates his methodology from the then standard aesthetic-psychological approach in two main ways.

First, his aim is not to make inferences about the psychology of the artist/author or the spectator/reader (as typical of what Vygotsky presents as a now redundant “old” psychology of art), but to directly experience and observe the emotions engendered *through the encounter* with the work of art. He refers to these feelings and responses to the form and material of the artwork as an “impersonal psychology of art” (p. 5). His claim, in short, is that it is only by actually analyzing the living process of reading fables, short stories, and tragedies, alongside a detailed analysis of their composition, that one can discover the mechanisms—the “psychological laws”—through which such works of art act upon and with us (a psychology that is not centered on the “person” of the author or reader). This requires careful observation of how formed artistic material creates discernible “impersonal” psychological effects. Again, this impersonal psychology is *relational* and so not limited to psychological assertions about the personal psychology of the author or of the reader.²

Second, although Vygotsky regularly writes of analysis, he is nevertheless well aware that the chief problem of the psychology of art is synthesis, and specifically the *psychological synthesis of art* (p. 6). It is in this respect that Vygotsky moves from viewing art as simply “arousing” or transmitting emotions, toward observing its transformative

effects. Art is for him indeed based on a synthesis that he calls “the union of feeling and imagination” (p. 215). This union is what allows art to transfigure emotions rather than simply to express them. This applies *both* to the relation between artist and artwork, *and* to the relation between audience and artwork. With respect to the former, the process of fashioning an artwork involves “the creative act of *overcoming* the feeling, resolving it, conquering it. Only when this act has been performed—then and *only then* is art born” (p. 248). Through their imaginative objectification into the form of a “work,” feelings are transfigured onto a social plane, making art nothing less than “the social within us” (p. 249). With respect to the latter, once objectified, the completed work of art is then in turn available as a resource for its audience. It is in this double sense that we can understand Vygotsky’s core idea of art as a “technique of feelings” (p. 244), *of*, and *for* personal and social transformation.

The *psychology of art* is a first attempt to demonstrate the necessity of such a problematization and method, first by showing the limits of alternative approaches, and second, by applying it. To this end, the 11 chapters of the volume are structured into four sections. Following a first section which frames the problem of a psychology of art, the second section is a critique of the “old psychology” (which concentrates on three of its aspects: art as perception, as technique, and as expression of unconscious processes). The third section gathers the four chapters analyzing the aesthetic reaction with respect to fables, *Gentle Breath* by Bunin and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and the fourth section presents Vygotsky’s new psychology of art through an elaboration of his new concept of *catharsis*; a summary and expansion of his thesis beyond literary arts to visual arts, sculpture, and architecture; and a conclusion which outlines some relations between art and life, including the relevance of the book to general psychology and a discussion of play and of the educational value of art. In essence, then, the book promotes a passage from “old psychology” to “new” which hangs on the transitional analyses of actual artworks presented in the third section. As suggested in our introduction, our core focus is the idea that art is an affective technique of psychological and social transformation, especially efficacious in liminal transitions.

Demonstrating the Technique: A Method

The core of Vygotsky’s demonstration resides in the third section, and even more, culminates in the *Hamlet* analysis, which synthesizes devices that are first identified in the analyses of fables and *Gentle Breath*. In effect, Vygotsky presents the fable as the most basic—even ‘atomic’—literary form. He suggests that the way in which a fable is analyzed provides a clue as to the entire aesthetic theory

adhered to by the analyst. He then deliberately takes the reader through what he understands to be a progression through “three literary forms which show a progression in complexity and literary eminence” (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 90). The aim is to show the increasing elaboration of techniques and devices common to each; this makes *Hamlet* the centerpiece.³ This is why we will concentrate on this third section.

Methodologically, Vygotsky’s analysis in section “On Art and Life” hinges on the identification of various techniques and devices, including dynamics between various “planes” that he finds at work in the compositions. These serve to channel or carry the audience’s affectivity, perception, and other feelings in different directions to set up, sustain, and resolve emotional tensions of various kinds.

Vygotsky sets up two important conceptual distinctions. The first contrasts the *anatomy* and the *physiology* of the work. Anatomy concerns the structure of the composition and the possibility of its decomposition into parts (*Hamlet* contains five acts, each of which involves various events; there are 35 or so characters, various stylistic elements, etc.). Physiology concerns the dynamic scheme of the artwork as it functions in the experience of the audience, in which each structural feature or stylistic element serves a purpose within the wider artistic whole (i.e., it is about synthesis). Physiology is unthinkable without the reader/audience. It is about the conjuring and shaping of the perceptions and affections of the audience, and hence, anatomical structures are ultimately physiological techniques and devices.

The second distinction contrasts *material* and *form*: *material* includes all the events and characters and relationships that are readily available for use by the artist for their work; *form* indicates the way this material is artistically arranged to form the work. Form is treated material. Vygotsky (1971) opts to use the word *plot* to designate the untreated *material*, reserving the word *subject* for the particular form or treatment of that plot material. The basic plot of a prince who discovers that his father has been killed by his uncle who has taken over the crown and married his mother, for example, is material that could be given artistic form in numerous ways (p. 145). This material might challenge a fable writer, but could be nicely suited to a short story, a saga, a song, or—of course—a tragedy, and it would be “formed” very differently in each of these. Likewise, two different short stories might form the same material differently, one starting at the beginning and unfolding the plot events chronologically, and another starting at the end in a who-done-it fashion.

Before showing how Vygotsky analyses *Hamlet*, we now follow Vygotsky’s progressive demonstration: he first discovers the “seeds” of tragedy in Krylov’s fables before watching them grow in Bunin’s short story; only then will they finally come to full flower in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Vygotsky's Analysis of Krylov's Fables

Vygotsky shows how the fables he analyses operate with a device involving contrasting “planes” which evoke, steer, and tease the readers’ feelings. This insight then forms the basis of his identification of comparable devices in his analysis of the short story form and the tragedy form.

Vygotsky (p. 137) concentrates on the lyrical fables of Krylov, the chief device of which he sums up by citing a line from Krylov himself: *He poured a subtle poison on his works*. This “subtle poison” is the poetic introduction of a second level of meaning into the fable, a level which sets up a dynamic contrast which adds emotional tension and depth to the reading experience. Vygotsky successfully demonstrates how each of Krylov’s fables functions by developing the story simultaneously in two contrasting directions, the second subtly “poisoning,” as it were, the first. We will give two examples.

“The Wolf and the Lamb” is a tale in which a lamb is accused by a wolf of infringing his property by drinking from his river. A contrast is set up between two planes: first, a juridical chain of events in which the lamb successfully and politely answers each of a succession of the wolf’s accusations (the lamb becomes more dignified with each successful justification), and second, a plane on which, despite the first, the increasingly furious wolf builds steadily toward the final outcome of devouring the lamb. This sets up a poignant tension between reason and fate, right and might, through which feelings about the expectation of reason and right are subtly poisoned, as it were, by the “counterfeelings” that are generated on the other plane directed toward grim fate and might. As Vygotsky (p. 121) puts it,

In this carefully devised system, feelings are evoked on one level which are diametrically opposed to those evoked on the other. The fable seems to tease our emotions.

In anticipation of the Hamlet analysis, presented later in the volume, Vygotsky describes this fable as a “drama” which “either rushes toward its inevitable end or seems to pause with hope, thus playing with these contradictory feelings” (p. 121). He shows how the contrasting planes are then brought together to yield the “catastrophe” (*pointe* or climax) of the fable, a resolution that Vygotsky associates with his rather original reconceptualization of catharsis. This concept involves precisely a transformation or even transfiguration of the emotions evoked and involved, rather than a simple “release.” Vygotsky proposes the metaphor of *short-circuiting* to dramatize what occurs at catastrophe (for a critique, see Valsiner, 2015, p. 99). Driven to an extreme, “the emotions that built up in the course of the fable are discharged. There occurs a short-circuiting of the two opposing currents. The contrast explodes, burns, and dissolves” (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 142). Although the terms of “discharge” and “explosion” may suggest a destructive phenomenon,

which could miss the constructive sense of the emergence of novel insight that Vygotsky aims for, the metaphor of short-circuit could also be read in a more creative way. It vividly represents the brutal current that unites two separate planes, as when a flash of lightning unites the clouds to the ground in the midst of thunder—which may be the origin of light and fire, both potentially dangerous and creative.

Vygotsky analyses several fables following the same principle. Here, we have space briefly to note that he finds “the true seed of tragedy” (p. 132) in his analysis of “The wolf in the kennel.” In this case, the two planes involve a contrast between the chaotic alarm of dogs and huntsman when they discover a wolf in their kennel, and the calm cunning of the wolf as he appraises the situation. The emotional tension is maximized when the wolf majestically proposes a new allegiance, claiming to have come in peace (while he has been surprised and forced into a corner), pledges henceforth not to attack (while his eyes want to devour all present), speaks of friendship (when he is the enemy), and pledges to protect them (while the dogs prepare to tear him apart). The catastrophe is reached when the huntsman announces that “peace with wolves is made in one way only”—before releasing the hounds to attack. Vygotsky concludes the following:

In a tragedy the two levels or themes finally meet in the general catastrophe which represents simultaneously the death or destruction of the hero and his sublime triumph. Scholars of psychology and aesthetics say that an impression or emotion is tragic when the moments of sublime triumph coincide with those of unavoidable destruction or death. (p. 136)

Vygotsky's Analysis of Bunin's "Gentle Breath"

Fables are usually linear, with a beginning, a drama, and a resolution, where two planes can collide; Vygotsky then analyses a more complex form, the short story, as exemplified by Bunin’s tale “*Gentle Breath*”. In this more complex form, the two planes correspond to Vygotsky’s distinction between plot (material) and subject (form). The plot concerns the life and eventual murder of a young woman, Olia Meshcherskaia, but the story itself (the subject) begins, not at the chronological beginning, but at its very end. It begins with descriptions of Olia’s grave, and of the gray days, the barren trees, the cold wind ringing through a porcelain wreath, and a photo of Olia—a joyful high-school girl with uncommonly lively eyes. From the “present/now” thus established in the graveyard in April, the narrative curve loops back in time to describe Olia as a well-to-do, happy, gifted, and mischievous young girl, before taking the reader through her blossoming into a graceful 15 years old, famously admired by boys. We are then told about “the last winter of her life” where Olia is described as elegant and carefree, and as throwing herself into the pursuit of pleasure.

While gleefully dashing around with happy screams as she is chased by first-graders during the school break, Olia is summoned by the school principle, a small, gray-haired lady. Olia is reproached for her behavior, and especially for her nice hairdo, expensive combs, and glamorous slippers, which invite treatment as a woman, when she must not forget “you’re only a schoolgirl.” Olia’s reply is shocking. She *is* a woman, and in fact the principle’s brother Maliutin “is to blame”: “It happened last summer, in the country . . .” The story then skips forward 1 month to the scene of Olia’s death, shot by a jealous Cossack officer on the railway platform after she had refused to marry him, despite promising, and had let him read the passage in her diary, from July 10, where she recounts how she had been seduced by Maliutin, an encounter that had disgusted her. We thus learn that her initial unhappy seduction (rape?) happened in July, her reprimand from the principle happened some months later during winter, and she was murdered 1 month after that, while still a 16-year-old school girl. It is at this point that Bunin’s story returns from its foray into the past and loops back to April, to the present of the graveyard, where we are introduced to a little woman dressed in black. It is she—a maiden lady of 30 and former teacher of Olia—who sits at a bench in front of the grave and hence the reader learns that it was through her eyes that we saw Olia’s photo on the oak cross, and through her ears that we heard the wind ringing through the porcelain wreath.

Vygotsky shows how Bunin’s compositional form (subject) rearranges the time order of the real-time—irreversible—sequence of events that constitute the material (plot) of the story. He lays out a diagram of material plot (a *dispositional scheme* showing all the events in real-time chronological order) and contrasts it with the *compositional scheme* (the sequence in which these events are ordered in the novella qua subject).

Vygotsky suggests placing the linear plot line next to the treated subject and drawing curves to show where transitions to earlier and later events occur. He calls this the *interpretational curve* and likens it to the “melody” of the story. Having thus described an important aspect of the anatomy of the story, the next “physiological” step is to find out “*why* the author treated the material as he did” (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 152), that is, what psychological effects it enables him to produce with and for the reader. The first of the two planes is generated by the thoroughly bleak nature of the plot material about the life troubles and senseless murder of a Russian schoolgirl in a provincial town. The plot material is selected to relentlessly and mercilessly expose the gloom of life, such that he “allows us to put our hand right into life’s festering sores” (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 153); it thus inevitably sends the reader’s emotions along a horrific and turbid vector. The second, contrasting plane is set up by the “melody” of its treatment as the poetic subject; on this second plane, the emotional effects of the first are systematically

intercepted and unraveled, such that Vygotsky (p. 156) can write of the “destruction of content by form.”

When we read the composition itself, starting serenely at the graveyard, and moving on to describe the death and the diary entry in an undramatized matter of fact way, as if viewed from afar, we read “with completely different feelings than if the events had been developed rectilinearly, in chronological sequence” (p. 155). It is not that the horror of the plot material is avoided in the formed subject; on the contrary, the horror follows us undiminished until the end, but on the second plane “the horror is transposed to another level where we experience it differently” (p. 157). This other level is encapsulated in the story’s title “Gentle Breath” which, for Vygotsky, is the main character of the work, along with its variant: the wind. In effect, toward the end of the story, the reader realizes that all they have been told has been mediated through the perspective of Olia’s teacher. The story starts in the cemetery by the oak cross with the cold wind ringing through Olia’s wreath, and it ends just moments later in the same place with the same cold spring wind. Now, however, the wind is identified with the breath which—to quote from Bunin’s final sentence—is “dissipated again in the world.” When, toward the end, the teacher walks through the cemetery and takes her seat in front of the grave, she arrives at exactly the point where the story begins. Hence, as the story comes full circle, so too does the gentle breath as it is shown to dissipate into the spring wind.

Taking this into account, we can grasp how the two planes correspond (a) to the view that the reader gets through the teacher’s eyes and (b) to the view that (Bunin ensures that) the reader gets *of* the teacher and all that we have seen of her world. In this way, the reader is poised on a threshold at which they can both imaginatively *become* the teacher and yet *observe* her as if from a distance.

In addition, Vygotsky is clearly aware that the teacher is pivotal to the “duality of the story” and “serves as a frame for the entire narrative” (p. 154). He does not miss the important fact that Bunin (p. 165) describes her as someone “who for a long time has been living under delusions which to her are a substitute for life’s reality.” First, she had lived vicariously through her brother. Then, when he was killed in action, she became a “martyr to the world of ideas,” and next, it was Olia’s death which “provided her with a new delusion,” and Olia who “is the object of her ceaseless thoughts, admiration and delight.” The story, in this respect, is about the teacher’s psychological processes in the midst of a liminal experience as she comes to terms with the meaning of grimly tragic realities, and in particular, how she makes sense of death and of what death makes of her. The story, in a nutshell, is told through the turbid lens of a troubled soul, and yet we—who are placed in her position by Bunin, who can precisely serve as a guide—are also shown a way out.

Bunin does not resort to a crude materialism and does not lack sympathy for the teacher who, after all, is a proxy for all who struggle to come to terms with life's troubles. On the contrary, as Vygotsky makes clear, the catastrophe resolves with the dominant "tonic chord" of the "Gentle breath." The form removes the turbid confusion from the material and transforms it into lucid breath, as cold winter transforms into life-bringing spring. This will not bring the dead back to life, but it releases to the future, a better story that will preserve Olia's memory in a manner that sheds progressive light on the complex of factors that lead to her death. Insight delivered and stupor dispelled, we can look with fresh eyes and "compel the horror to speak the language of gentle breath" (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 160). Hence we see how, proper to Vygotsky's definition of tragedy, the death of the hero gives rise to a sublime triumph. We are finally ready for Hamlet.

Vygotsky's Hamlet

We have shown how Vygotsky discovered a mechanism in Krylov's fables whereby the emotional tensions that are generated by the construction of two divergent "planes" are brought to an extreme before being resolved in a moment of affective transformation. Vygotsky then finds a more complex version of this same device in Bunin's novella, exploiting, in this case, tensions between material and form. Hamlet takes this still further. First, much like Bunin, Shakespeare stimulates, complicates, and polarizes emotions by setting up a tension between planes of plot (material) and of story/subject (form). Second, there is a second-level use of additional devices of fiction and insanity to keep the first-level functioning (by rescuing its "plausibility" at points of maximal absurdity). Third, there is a tension between the nature of the dramatis personae and the play's action. Although they are much more complicated in the tragedy, all three mutually superimposed techniques were encountered in "seed" form in Vygotsky's analysis of fables. We will concentrate on the first.

Affirming the enigma of the play as a core device. The Hamlet chapter begins by affirming the common view that Shakespeare's greatest tragedy is an enigmatic riddle. Why does not Hamlet get on with it and kill the king, as surely he must? Why does he hesitate so? Hamlet is a paradox. He is a hero whose driving force is to delay in a play whose main action is inaction. Vygotsky quickly dismisses the many critics who try to "explain away" the riddle of Hamlet's inertia by attributions about his character (he stalls because he is weak-willed, a procrastinator, a philosopher, and yet . . .), or about the obstacles in his environment (he stalls because the king is too powerful, and yet . . .). He also criticizes Volkenshtein's influence on the staging by the Second Moscow Art Theatre for the "radical surgery" done to the

script to simplify Hamlet as an Enlightened Hero struggling passionately against the overwhelming negative power of a medieval king. Such interpretations take the enigma for an accidental error (or, like Tolstoy, condemn Shakespeare's ineptitude). Anticipating Greenblatt (2004, p. 324), Vygotsky insists that the enigma is a principle device of tragedy. We must not naively ask "why does Hamlet delay?" Instead, "Why does Shakespeare make Hamlet delay?": that is the question (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 181).

Setting the material plane in tension with the plane of the subject form. The clue to the "why," Vygotsky suggests, is in the "how." Like Bunin, Shakespeare constructs two planes by exploiting a contrast between material/plot and form/subject. But with Hamlet, things are more complex still because, like all tragedies, it reuses material from old sagas, legends, and epics. Shakespeare's Hamlet reworks a Scandinavian saga that was in turn written up as a legend around 1200 AD by Saxo Grammaticus (the *Vita Amlethi*). The *Vita Amlethi* is evidently *plot material* for Shakespeare because it tells the tale of Prince Amleth who takes revenge on his Uncle the King for killing his father and marrying his mother (Sorelius, 2002). Further parallels include that, before finally killing his Uncle, Amleth feigns madness, is tested by a woman, has a difficult talk with his mother, and accidentally kills the king's council who was spying in her bedroom. The genius of Shakespeare's play is thus not its plot because the plot material is largely secondhand. The play-writer thus reforms preformed plot material in a manner distinctive to tragedy. The original Greek tragedies like *The Oresteia* or *Oedipus Tyrannus* were also dramatic treatments of material that had already been poetically formed by Homer, but Hamlet borrows from these also.

Vygotsky (1971) was well aware of the Amleth legend and points out that to understand why Shakespeare makes Hamlet delay, we must compare the play with the old legend (p. 181). Vygotsky shows how Shakespeare exploited the vengeance narrative already well-established in the legend precisely to generate and heighten the expectation that Hamlet will kill the king (charged by the ghost with his regicidal duty, he will sweep to revenge "on wings as swift . . . as thoughts of love"). It is in this way that he constructs the first of the two "planes" of his tragedy (the plane of the material). He then sets it in tension with a second plane, the subject plane of his own compositional form, including his own original contributions to the action, in which Hamlet delays by constructing the "Mousetrap" of a play within a play (to "catch the conscience of the King"), and then, he creeps up behind the king, raises his sword poised to strike, and—just then as the audience are tensely holding their breath—Hamlet hesitates, and withdraws because Claudius is praying (" . . . and so he goes to heaven . . ."), and then kills Polonius by mistake ("a rat" . . . "I took thee for thy

better”), and so on. As Vygotsky puts it at a crucial point in his analysis:

While the content, the material of the tragedy tells about how Hamlet kills the king to avenge his father’s death, the subject of the tragedy shows how he does not kill the king, and when he does it is not out of revenge.⁴

As with the Bunin analysis, Vygotsky (1971, p. 185) is thus able to draw an “interpretational curve” of the formed subject set off against the straight line of the plot material: “Because at all times [Shakespeare] lets us see, feel, and be aware of the straight line which the action should follow, we are even more keenly conscious of the digressions and loops it describes in actual fact” (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 186). Shakespeare constructed the planes of his drama by “pushing the plot from its straight path onto a devious and twisted one,” and in this way, “the duality of the story and the plot accounts for the action taking its course on two different planes” (p. 189). Echoing and extending his two observations about the fable of “The Wolf and Lamb,” Vygotsky (1971, p. 189) once again identifies here (a) Petrazhetskii’s “method of teasing the emotions” and (b) a specific tragic duality which “splits” a set of emotions which rush definitely toward a climax from another set which pause, hesitate, and deviate from that inevitable end. Vygotsky thus shows how the play is carefully designed to rouse and capture the viewer’s feelings and expectations, teasing and straining their emotions “to the utmost . . . making us quite painfully feel every step that leads away from the main path” (p. 189). Thus situated at the liminal threshold between two contrasting planes, Hamlet’s pause or delay is the very fulcrum, not just of any literary device, but of the very device that lends tragedy its distinctive character. The introduction of the enigma of hesitation is therefore precisely the means by which Shakespeare transforms the material of the old legend of Amleth into the tragedy of Hamlet. It is the device that incepts and veils a brooding enigma at the heart of the play, only to unravel and thus unveil it at the cathartic moment of catastrophic pattern shift which is the culmination of the play.

The catastrophe of Hamlet. In describing the play’s catastrophe, Vygotsky gives significant attention to the odd fact that the King is, in a sense, killed twice (he is poisoned by a drink and by Laertes’ sword) and both murder attempts were in fact intended by the king for Hamlet before back-firing and killing Claudius himself (“Fall’n on the inventors’ heads”). The denouement, however, generates astonished bewilderment on the part of the audience because, even at the end, it remains far from clear that Hamlet fulfills the plot and kills the king out of vengeance, and indeed, little attention is given to the king’s death, and no mention of its relation to old king Hamlet. Instead, Claudius’

death recedes into near invisibility as it is overshadowed by the other deaths (Hamlet, Laertes, The Queen), while at the same time, being singled out from those other deaths by virtue of (a) its double nature and (b) the fact that Claudius is alone among those killed in not being reconciled with Hamlet. The king thus dies twice by his own poisoning, and he alone dies alone: unveiled as a hated “incestuous, murderous, Damned Dane.”

Although Vygotsky (in our translation at least) does not put it quite this plainly, one might just as plausibly say that the king unwittingly *kills himself*. The killing of the king is hence precisely *not* the cathartic catastrophe of the play because it entails no new insight and affective clarification, no transformation to a new level of organization. Instead of being eclipsed, the enigmatic obscurity characteristic of the play only *deepens* with Claudius’ death. We sink still deeper into paradox because we still cannot grasp why Hamlet pauses and recurrently strays from the straight path of revenge that was so clearly laid out before him as his duty by the ghost. So, what is the actual point of tragic catharsis? Where in fact do the two diverging and conflicting planes “suddenly converge at one point during the final scene” (p. 190), if not with Hamlet avenging his father? Vygotsky’s analysis shows that the true catastrophe comes as a result of Hamlet’s death and not that of the king. The affective transformation thus comes when we least expect it and from a “completely different direction” (p. 190). On one level, when we see that Hamlet is dying, we lose any hope that he will properly fulfill the vengeance plot. But it is precisely then, when we have reached the point of giving up, that we suddenly realize that we have arrived at the point, the *pointe*, “to which the tragedy has been carrying us all along.” (p. 187). Hamlet dies and his story—like that of *Olia Meshcherskaia* which, thanks to Bunin, is kept alive by her teacher—is left by Hamlet in the mouth of Horatio. Hamlet, dying, looks out and addresses the audience: “You that look pale and tremble at this chance, that are but mutes or audience to this act . . . Had I but time . . . O, I could tell you — But let it be.”

And then he addresses his friend: “Horatio I am dead; Thou livest; report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied.” The dying Hamlet thus charges Horatio “To tell my story.” And he does this just as Osric announces that the conquering Fortinbras has arrived at the castle, just in time for Hamlet to achieve another reconciliation with a man whose father he had killed. Hamlet gives Fortinbras his dying voice, thus supporting his election as ruler of the new Kingdom to come. It is Hamlet who must die to usher in the sublime triumph of a new order of justice. Recalling Vygotsky’s final diary entry, the moment of catharsis is reached with Hamlet’s famous four final utterances: *the rest is silence*. But now the audience knows that what is silence for Hamlet, “whose voice will draw no more” (4060), is simultaneously the song to be sung by Horatio. And the

other deaths too, writes Vygotsky (1971), “form a melody” in Shakespeare’s great composition, carrying forward to the future this brave new song of a people to come (p. 188). And, for those among the audience whose hearts have been softened, the tears flow as Horatio closes the eyes of his friend and utters: “Good night sweet prince: And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!” It is only at this point that the turbid, enigmatic darkness that had characterized the play gives way to cathartic, tragic, light. It is here that the tragedy fulfills the “task of art” and performs its “extraordinary operation with our emotions” (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 190). It is as if the elaborately woven thread of the veil—that enigmatic riddle Vygotsky’s shows to be the core feature of the artwork itself—is suddenly unraveled as if pulling on a loose thread. It is Hamlet’s death that constitutes that thread, and by means of his death, the dark mood of the play suddenly lifts, and a new dawn arises.

Through this analysis, Vygotsky thus demonstrated the power of his approach: the identification of contrasting planes within a work of art, in this case corresponding to a distinction of form and material, that create and operate with affective tensions in the reader or the viewer, as part of a craft that, as it were, bends bows to a maximal tension, builds expectations before transforming them in a new synthesis. Hence, the creative synthesis presented here goes further than the simple “shortcircuit” described in his analysis of the fable; it is not only as if we could witness lightning in a thunderstorm, but in addition, the transformation of the whole sky—as when the storm clears the clouds and purifies the sky. Vygotsky shows us how to analyze a work of art—through a psychological approach on the threshold with aesthetics—as a powerful social technique of emotions, transforming viewers. Thus, we hope to have shown the pivotal significance of Shakespeare’s Hamlet in the decisive third section of the *Psychology of art*.

In his project of demonstrating that art can be a social and cultural technique of emotions, Vygotsky put his reading of Hamlet, a very personally invested symbolic resource, at the heart of his demonstration. It nevertheless reaches “objectivity” (in Vygotsky’s specific sense of the artwork’s “impersonal” psychology) because it focuses on the devices through which the viewer’s emotions are channeled, teased, and offered resolutions—the psychology of art shall therefore be a “science” that examines a *dispositive* designed to transform the psyche according to specific socially constructed forms. His coup de force was thus to unpack the very process by which the formed material of the artwork, invested temporarily by the audience, becomes a machine that decomposes, expands, transposes, tenses, and transforms their emotions. And this, we propose, comes from Vygotsky’s personally heightened awareness of how such an affective technology operates with special vitality when the cultural experience corresponds with a spontaneous liminal experience.

On Art and Life

At the end of this exploration, we now have to synthesize the main steps of our demonstration and reflect on their implications, before concluding.

Discussion: Paradoxes and Transformations

We have built our reading of Vygotsky’s life along an identification of three (interconnected) types of transitions and liminal experiences: those of the historical context in which he lived; those of his own lifecourse; and those more specifically related to his hospital stay. Using a distinction between devised and spontaneous liminal experiences, we suggest that these spontaneous liminal experiences are related to a specific “devised” liminal experience in Vygotsky’s cultural life: his “reading experience” (Szakolczai, 2013) with Hamlet. This juxtaposition enabled us to examine how *Hamlet* worked for Vygotsky as a symbolic resource—an artwork personally invested, to which one can return again and again. This resource, we suggest, functioned as a liminal affective technology through which he made sense of the maelstrom of his own liminal circumstances, a device that participates in the transformation of affect and the associated creation of new sense making (Stenner & Zittoun, 2020).

We have also developed work on “liminal hotspots” (Greco & Stenner, 2017) that may complement our reading of Vygotsky’s uses of Hamlet. “Liminal hotspot” designates people’s experience of becoming “stuck” in a liminal phase of transition because of the paradoxes generated by the collapse of a taken-for-granted form of order or organization. Hamlet, we are suggesting, helped Vygotsky to see his way through his own liminal hotspots. Indeed, it is precisely during liminal circumstances, when existing symbolic resources and supports (proper to a world now gone) necessarily fail, therefore, that it becomes necessary to *create* new ways of making sense and of acting. It is here that art comes into its own because it operates and expresses beyond the ordinary level of rational discourse (Stenner, 2017). For this reason, a work of art that has itself been formed under liminal conditions, as Hamlet clearly was (Szakolczai, 2013, Chapter 8), can serve as a powerful symbolic resource for those going through something similar. This allows us to see how Hamlet the character can resonate with, say, Vygotsky the young man, and provide a sounding board for *feeling through* a passage ridden with paradox. Yet being “between worlds” enhances paradox because those in liminal circumstances lack a clear future and feel themselves *both* one thing *and* another while simultaneously being *neither* one thing *nor* the other. Hamlet, grappling with the collapse of his world, is an archetypical example. Shakespeare shows to Vygotsky a Hamlet trapped in the paradoxical labyrinth of a liminal hotspot, and in so doing, he throws

him, as it were, a thread like that Ariadne gave to Theseus, to guide Vygotsky out of his own real liminal hotspot.

Vygotsky's analysis, from this perspective, is essentially a description of how Shakespeare, Bunin, and Krylov *build liminal hotspots* into the architecture of their works of arts, only to resolve them in a transformative catharsis. We have seen, for example, how Bunin tells the story of gentle breath through the blurred eyes of the teacher in the cemetery who is stuck in the "in between" of her own liminal hotspot, which Bunin allows his reader both to experience and to transcend. This in turn makes sense of the fundamental paradoxes of Hamlet as part of a liminal affective technology in which the viewer finds release from an artfully constructed hotspot: Hamlet both must and cannot kill his Uncle the king, so he kills him without killing him. Hamlet both loves and cannot love Ophelia, so he loves her by abandoning her. Hamlet both must and cannot kill himself, so he gets killed by another. Hamlet both must and cannot know how his father died, so he learns it from a ghost. Hamlet both must and cannot lead the way to a new future for his people, so he nominates his former enemy Fortinbras as his heir. In each case, the emotions of the spectator are made to flow in unexpected directions.

The transformation of emotions we have been discussing is thus, on one level, a *deparadoxification* of feelings that have become stuck in a liminal hotspot. To grasp this, we need to understand the threshold through which "art" intersects with "life" and aids its transformation. This intersection is the topic of the final chapter of *Psychology of Art*, but it is also the topic dealt with in the final few papers of Vygotsky's life, especially his article on the problem of the psychology of the actor. In this article, Vygotsky revisits his earlier discussion of Diderot's famous *Paradox of the actor* (in Chapter 11 on art and life, for example, Vygotsky, 1971, p. 235). Once again, he emphasizes the transformation of feelings made possible by art at the threshold between the "idealized passions" of art and "natural, live feelings" (Vygotsky, 1932/1999, p. 4).

Finally, if it is accepted that the *Psychology of art* is a work pertaining to a transition in Vygotsky's life and work, then one may wonder what became of it and what effects it had on his further development. Leontiev (1971) and others have considered the reflexion on art as a "transition" in Vygotsky's psychology, meaning a turning point. An implication is that he moved from such subjective concerns to a mature objective psychology. However, our reading proposes an alternative understanding of this role of "transition." In effect, the fact that Vygotsky returned to these very problems in his last few publications on emotion and the psychology of the actor (Smagorinsky, 2011) makes it more plausible that his reflexion on art as a technique for affective transformation was fundamental to his mature psychology, although this remains speculative. Indeed, to the very end, he was still trying to define his "new approach" and

considering himself "close to its correct formulation as a genuine scientific problem" (Vygotsky, 1932/1999, p. 9). And it is of fundamental importance that in this late essay on the actor, he diagnoses that "the essence of the problem, which seemed paradoxical to all who wrote about it, consists in the relation of the artificially produced emotion of a role to the real, live natural emotion . . ."

So, although his later psychological work became focused on education, Vygotsky retained a core inspiration from art. And he kept writing striking essays on the power of imagination, in which the arts play a substantial role (Vygotsky, 1994, 2004). His complex reflexion on the relation between language and speech is well known (Vygotski, 1934), and it could also be informed by his close reading of literature. This claim is consistent with Van der Veer's (1997) observation that Vygotsky's work on art set the stage for his later psychological program investigating the pivotal role of language in human development. When Van der Veer (p. 7) states that this linguistic psychology was founded on the three themes of "Words, words, words," he (and Vygotsky) is, of course, quoting directly from Hamlet. Yet beyond that, Vygotsky kept coming back to one core question: How can we think the threshold between practical action and imaginative thought? How, like rain falling on dry land, can the airy cloud of imagination nourish and revitalize the earthly field of actual, factual practice? It is on these core questions, on the relation between "the dynamic of thinking" and "the dynamic of the real field" (Zavershneva and van der Veer, 2018, p. 497), that his *Notebooks* close. Of course, our argument is limited to the facts we have worked with, and further scholarship is required to fully substantiate it. There is a whole rereading of his emerging new psychology that is still to be done; our hypothesis is that it was inspired by his work on literature, a work never truly completed and perhaps ever in process.

Conclusion—A Tragic Work

To conclude this essay, we need now to come back to our initial propositions.

Hamlet, as we showed, accompanies Vygotsky during his teens, through his painful near-death experiences at hospital, to his further doubts and hesitations all through his working life, as visible in the *Notebooks*, and just before his early death. The only other work comparable as an influence on Vygotsky's thinking is Spinoza's *Ethics*. In addition, we have pointed out that Vygotsky's experience as part of his lifecourse was in turn situated in a very specific historical and cultural time, a time of massive transformation that exposed his life and that of millions of others to many ruptures and transitions.

Vygotsky, we suggested, had *an experience* with Hamlet,⁵ and without this experience, he could not have understood the profound meditation on liminal experience

undertaken in the play. The *Psychology of art*, written during an acutely liminal phase, can be seen as an attempt to objectify, theorize, and share a very intimate transformative experience, leading to the creation of a new psychology (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 338).

This core experience brings us to emphasize another line of argument: Vygotsky's deep sense of the tragic. We have argued that the tragic figure of Shakespeare's Hamlet is the inspirational heart of Vygotsky's psychology of art (as was arguably also the case with Freud Bloom, 1994). When he traces the continuities (at the level of devices) between Krylov's fables, Bunin's short story, and Shakespeare's play, we have shown how at every point Vygotsky draws attention specifically to the affectivity proper to tragedy. Finally, Vygotsky saw his work as a continuation of the genealogical project of the "remolding of man [sic]" inaugurated by Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 259)—in that sense, the *Psychology of art* can be seen primarily as a psychoaesthetics of *the tragic*.

Let us thus conclude on the tragedy of Vygotsky. In tragedy, the destruction of the protagonist is simultaneously the threshold at which the spectator comes to view the frightful events for a second time and from a second perspective "only without its sting and venom" (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 232). It is through this second seeing that the spectator—whose own secret passions have been awakened by the story—can compare her own relationship with the tragedy. The artwork, as we have seen, is carefully arranged so that these awakened "spontaneous" feelings are made to "flow within banks of granite, made of completely opposite feelings" (p. 232). The artwork is a granite monument of impersonal affect, and yet it is this very feature that calls out, channels, and ultimately reconfigures the emotions of the spectator. It is at this threshold that the psychology of art is revealed as *the supreme center of biological and social individual processes in society* (p. 259): "In order to perceive art, we must contemplate simultaneously the true situation of things and their deviation from this situation" (p. 258).

As the *Psychology of art* was not published during his lifetime, Vygotsky could not see the seed he planted develop further. And so the tragic sense evoked by the play Hamlet strangely resonates with his life. Vygotsky compared his own fate with that of Moses (Zavershneva and van der Veer, 2018, p. 497), who must die with only a glimpse at the Promised Land he worked so hard to make actual for his people—and yet whose accomplishment and fate are precisely located at the threshold. And it is in Hamlet's words that Vygotsky's formulates the very last entry in his notebook: *The rest is silence*.

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Notes

1. At that time Vygotsky worked at the EDI clinic - the Experimental Defectological Institute of Narkompros, created in 1929 and directed by Vygotsky from its creation to his death (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 167, note 3).
2. Naturally, any artwork will mean different things to different people, but Vygotsky proposes that amid that necessary variety, impersonal mechanisms can nevertheless be discerned. The difference between the psychologist and the ordinary appreciator of art is the distance the former takes toward their experiences with art. Here, the influence of Spinoza on Vygotsky is strikingly apparent: "Like him, I have strived neither to be astonished, nor to laugh, nor to weep—but to understand" (p. 6).
3. Hence, Vygotsky chooses an order of presentation of these literary pieces that does not correspond to the chronology of his interest.
4. Unfortunately, the MIT Press translation of *The Psychology of Art* makes an important error translating this sentence, which in the original reads, "Если содержание трагедии, ее материал рассказывает о том, как Гамлет убивает короля, чтобы отомстить за смерть отца, то сюжет трагедии показывает нам, как он не убивает короля, а когда убивает, то это выходит вовсе не из мести." On p. 189, the MIT translation reads "If the *material* of the tragedy tells . . . then, the *plot* [our emphasis] of the tragedy shows us how he fails to kill him . . ." Hence, the English translation reverses and hence obscures, here and elsewhere, the material(plot)/form(subject) distinction whose importance to Vygotsky's analysis we have emphasized. Another striking example is the translation on p. 5 of a crucial proposition in the Preface where Vygotsky states the "Central idea of the psychology of art" to be "recognition of the dominance of material over artistic form, or, what amounts to the same thing, the acknowledgement in art of the social techniques of emotion." The original Russian, however, reads "Центральной идеей психологии искусства мы считаем признание преодоления материала художественной формой или, что то же, признание искусства общественной техникой чувства." Vygotsky does not in fact assert the "dominance of material over form" but instead, consistent with his approach as we have outlined it, describes art as "the overcoming of the material by the art form," which is a completely different proposition. We thank Polina Vrublevskaia for these correct translations. This problem of translation is thus systematic

and points to more than typological errors. The 2005 French translation by Françoise Sève aims to correct the interference with Vygotsky's meaning and translates correctly the Russian as "A nos yeux l'idée centrale de la psychologie de l'art consiste à reconnaître que la forme artistique l'emporte sur le matériau, ou, ce qui revient au même, que l'art est une technique sociale du sentiment" (Vygotski, 2005, p. 18)—the overcoming of the material by the artistic form . . .

5. The English expression "an experience"—as distinct from just "experience" (see Dewey, 1934/2005, Chapter 3) is equivalent to Vygotsky's preferred Russian term *perezzhivanie*, which is also close to the German *Erlebnis* (as used by Dilthey, 1906/2010 in a way that influenced Dewey). Notable here is Smagorinsky (2011, p. 336) theory that Vygotsky was inspired to use *perezzhivanie* by Stanislavsky's (1938/2007) treatise on acting.

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