Allen J. Kuharski

Jan Kott in Exile: Arden and Absolute Milan

In this essay, Allen J. Kuharski discusses Jan Kott as an exiled Polish writer best known for his essays on Shakespeare's plays, and compares and contrasts his writings with those of a variety of other Polish *émigré* writers, notably Witold Gombrowicz. He argues that Kott's most important contribution was ultimately as a performance theorist, in the traditions of Wyspiański and Brecht, rather than as a traditional critic or scholar, and in consequence he reached a wider readership in English and other languages than any other Polish writer. His choice of Shakespeare as a subject belied the full depth and complexity of the Polish sources (often experiential) for his readings of the plays – sources not always acknowledged in his work. Kuharski uses Kott's own syncretic, archetypal methods to interpret his life and work, explaining his position as an exiled writer *via* Shakespearean characters such as Duke Senior in *As You Like It* and Prospero in *The Tempest* – and, closest to the experience of the *émigré*, the cross-dressing Rosalind, compelled to belie herself in order to express herself. Tracing the evolution of Kott's complex existential self-definition in various phases of his life and writing, Kuharski concludes that the key to Kott's various authorial personae is the influence of the inter-war Polish writer and critic Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński. Allen J. Kuharski, Associate Editor for *Theatre Journal*, is the Director of the Theatre Studies Program at Swarthmore College in Philadelphia, and has published extensively on Gombrowicz, Kott, and other aspects of contemporary Polish and American theatre in the US, UK, Poland, France, and the Netherlands. His translation and stage adaptation of Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdydurke* has been performed in various countries, winning a Fringe First at the Edinburgh Festival in 2001.

> [Antonio] being thus lorded
> Not only with what my revenue yielded
> But what my power might else exact, like one
> Who having into truth – by telling of it –
> Made such a sinner of his memory
> To credit his own lie, he did believe
> He was indeed the Duke, out o' th' substitution
> And executing th' outward face of royalty
> With all prerogative. Hence his ambition growing
> . . . To have no screen between this part he played
> And him he played it for, he needs will be
> Absolute Milan.
>
> Prospero, *The Tempest* (I, ii, 97–109)

IN RETROSPECT, the life and work of Jan Kott is perhaps best understood in terms of a baroque theatrical allegory. Kott's career has evolved into an uncanny dance between life and the theatre he wrote about, particularly Shakespeare. If the political life of communist Poland resembled nothing so much as the world of Shakespeare's history plays (one of Kott's key arguments in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*), then Kott before he left the country performed the role of a minor but well-positioned courtier within the country's academic and cultural establishment. Within the academic and literary worlds of communist Poland, Kott initially played the role of both cultural king-maker and Grand Inquisitor. His function in part was to promote and to destroy careers and reputations, which he did with varying degrees of success.

Like many of the tragic protagonists he wrote about, Kott is a liminal and paradoxical figure – qualities heightened and complicated by his exile. He was one of the most widely read and influential cultural critics of the post-war Marxist humanist school both in Poland and abroad, initially identifying with and later disowning the post-war Polish Communist Party. As a dissident and an exile in the West, and ultimately in the United States, his chief claim to fame paradoxically remained *Shakespeare Our*

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Contemporary (originally published in Poland in 1961 as *Szkice o Szekspirze*, and first published in English in 1964) – a relatively early work in which his dialectical materialist approach was still emphatic. Though Poland's best known theatre critic both at home and abroad, after leaving the country in the mid-1960s he was for extended periods isolated from seeing Polish theatre in performance.

Kott's most important contribution as a writer has ultimately been as a performance theorist whose work more than that of any other writer shaped the staging of Shakespeare's plays in the second half of the twentieth century. As such, he initially followed in the tradition of Brecht's theoretical writings and adaptations of classical plays, though he later became more archetypal and Bakhtinian in approach. His intuitive understanding of directorial thinking in relation to a classical text made him a natural inspiration for (and at times active participant in) the work of such *auteur* stage directors as Strehler in Italy, Mnouchkine in France, Brook in England, and Swinarski in Poland. Within the theatre his contribution overall as a theorist has proven as significant and distinct as that of Antonin Artaud or his fellow theatrical *émigré*, Jerzy Grotowski.

Criticism that Made Theatre History

Shakespeare Our Contemporary remains one of the most widely read works by any Polish writer in English, and has been continuously in print for over three decades. Yet Kott's original Polish version was written before the author had any knowledge of English and was therefore based on Polish and possibly French translations of the play. The book was his first foray into English literature, his academic credentials having been earned in Romance languages, and his previous writings devoted to subjects such as the literature of the Polish Enlightenment, Victor Hugo, and the Polish nineteenth-century novelist Bolesław Prus.

The success of the book in Bolesław Taborski's English translation resulted in Kott's first chance to travel to England – in order to begin to study English. Shortly after his arrival, however, he was invited by a student theatre group to direct two of Sławomir Mrożek's one-act plays for the 1965 Edinburgh Festival. It was perhaps a sign of things to come that Kott's directorial debut took place abroad and in English – in Poland Kott's career had been limited to that of a theatre critic and professor. In the words of Kott's wife Lidia, 'I thought my husband was going to London to study English, but instead he ran away to join the theatre!'[1] Kott would later direct ground-breaking productions of Witkiewicz's *The Madman and the Nun* at San Francisco State University in 1967 and of Euripides' *Orestes* at Berkeley in 1968, among other productions.

The paradox of Kott's influence and stature as a writer on Shakespeare without a working knowledge of English – an influence that extended to England itself – leads back to the quintessential theatricality of his analyses and often visionary proposals for the plays in performance. The strength of Kott's interpretation was ultimately structural, contextual, and mythic rather than strictly textual in nature – and his emphasis on dramatic archetypes, significant metaphor, and social context was readily translatable into concrete theatrical images. Kott the dramaturg and collaborator with directors such as Strehler was thus born in the pages of *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. His work has thus transcended the role of criticism as secondary literature, and his writings have become, rather than merely reflected, a part of theatre history.

Since *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Kott has published numerous additional collections of essays published in both English and Polish – indeed, more than half of his published work has been produced during his emigration. These have included volumes devoted to classical Greek drama (*The Eating of the Gods*, 1970) and to Polish theatre (*Theatre Notebook: 1947–1967*, 1968; *Kaddish: Pages on Tadeusz Kantor*, 1997); two additional collections of essays on Elizabethan and Jacobean drama (*The Bottom Translation*, 1987; *The Gender of Rosalind*, 1992); and several *varia* editions of his writings (*The Theater of Essence*, 1984; *Stony Brook*, 1986; *The Memory of the Body*, 1992; *The New Jonas and*

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Other Sketches, 1994). He has also published a memoir, *Still Alive* (1990; English translation, 1994) and a sequel to *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (published in Polish in 1999), in addition to editing the anthology *Four Decades of Polish Essays* (1990) and the English translation of Witold Gombrowicz's three-volume *Diary* (1988–93). Since 1989, he has also regularly contributed short pieces to theatre journals in Poland. Both Kott's introduction and the roster of writers anthologized in *Four Decades of Polish Essays* emphasized the significance of *émigré* writing in contemporary Polish literature, with sixteen out of the twenty-six contributors eventually living and writing abroad.

From Marx to Bakhtin

Shakespeare Our Contemporary was a landmark volume of the Marxist humanist school of cultural criticism that emerged in reaction against Stalinism in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and elsewhere, with its emphasis on the dramatic play of historical forces and *realpolitik*. The book presented Shakespeare's history plays, for example, as a variety of Brechtian *Lehrstücke*, or 'learning plays', on the dialectics of political history. The essay entitled 'Hamlet of the Mid-Century' discussed the story of the Danish prince against the backdrop of the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party and the process of de-Stalinization that it signalled.

In other respects, however, the book went beyond Marxism and historical analogies, with one of Kott's most famous essays linking *King Lear* with Beckett's *Endgame*. His anti-sentimental reading of Shakespeare's comedies in the book emphasized their brutality and eroticism, particularly that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in a manner that owed little to Marx but proved immensely popular with young British and western European directors at the time. Ariane Mnouchkine's 1968 Paris staging of the play along with Peter Brook's in 1970 at the Royal Shakespeare Company were among several landmark productions that acknowledged the influence of Kott's essay 'Titania and the Ass's Head,' with both now regarded as turning points in the production history of the play in Britain and Western Europe.

In spite of Kott's exile and his extended periods as a 'non-person', as he was seen by Poland's communist authorities, his writings similarly inspired a number of key stagings of Shakespeare by leading Polish directors, including Konrad Swinarski's productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Cracow, 1970; Darmstadt, 1973) and Andrzej Wajda's *Hamlet* (Cracow, 1981).

Kott's writing changed markedly after his emigration from Poland. Marx receded as an influence; in his stead emerged a complex hybrid of archetypal mythology and the carnivalesque theories of Mikhail Bakhtin. Kott's interest in mythology was longstanding, and already apparent in his first book, *Mythology and Realism* (*Mitologia i realizm*, 1946). The essay 'Orestes, Electra, Hamlet', found in *The Eating of the Gods*, displays Kott's archetypal approach at its best, using the characters and scenarios of *The Oresteia* and *Hamlet* to highlight each other.

The essays in *The Bottom Translation* (1987) marked the height of Kott's work under Bakhtin's influence. The book's title essay, first published in *Theatre Quarterly*, is devoted to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: it is primarily a study in the aesthetic reconciliation of opposites – a different principle indeed from Marx's dialectical materialism. Kott the Marxist was clearly at work in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, with his vision of history as both mechanism and fate, combined with his acute understanding of the exceptional nature of the theatre as a magic circle where the normal rules of time and history are suspended. In *The Bottom Translation*, this magic circle becomes all, and history becomes the rational exception to the mystical rule.

In retrospect, however, both *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* and Kott's writings in emigration can be seen as variations on an essentially mythic or archetypal approach to Shakespeare's texts, ultimately building on the work of Carl Jung, Northrop Frye, Mircea Eliade, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, as well as of Bakhtin. Kott differed from these earlier writers, however, in his primary focus on drama.

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Kott's relationship to Shakespeare was significantly related to two other major figures of modern Polish theatre, one of whom shared Kott's fate as an exile – Witold Gombrowicz (1904–69) – and one who did not – Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1904). Wyspiański's work, still largely untranslated and unstaged in English, included a significant body of theoretical writings regarding the theatre, including a well-known essay proposing a production of *Hamlet* in the grounds of the royal castle on the Wawel in Cracow.

One of Wyspiański's most influential and far-sighted essays was on the staging of such classic dramatic texts, which he argued should be understood by directors and other theatre artists as scenarios open to interpretation and adaptation rather than as works requiring a scrupulous respect for the written 'letter' of the text in performance. On this score, Kott can be seen as no less in the theoretical tradition of Wyspiański than Brecht – and as the cultural mediator or stand-in for the still little-known theories of Wyspiański in the English-speaking world.

Kott's relationship to Gombrowicz is more complex. Gombrowicz (an *émigré* in Argentina and France between 1939 and his death in 1969) publicly acknowledged only three playwrights as influences on his work – Shakespeare, Goethe, and Jarry – none of them Polish (his unacknowledged influences are another story). Like Kott, Gombrowicz only knew Shakespeare's plays in translation (in his case in some combination of Polish, French, and Spanish versions). Gombrowicz's theatrical success outside Poland was due largely to his combination of theatrical stylization (which outwardly de-emphasized the 'Polishness' of the characters and action of his plays) with a Shakespearean substructure in works such as *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia* and *The Marriage*.

The director Jorge Lavelli, who successfully introduced Gombrowicz's plays to France, stated that 'for me, the work of Gombrowicz is an immense, Shakespearean universe, suddenly become ridiculous'.[2] Critics writing in Europe and America such as Konstanty Jeleński and Martin Esslin also recognized the Shakespearean inner logic of his plays – but significantly it was Jan Kott who was among the earliest to point out this aspect of Gombrowicz's work, in his essay 'A Genealogy of Polish Drama', first published in Poland in 1963.

Gombrowicz the playwright and Kott the critic/theorist both successfully 'arrived' in Western Europe in the mid-1960s – when Gombrowicz's works were still banned from performance in Poland and Kott's life as an *émigré* began. However, the Shakespearean substructure of Gombrowicz's work has been least grasped and appreciated by theatre artists in the English-speaking world. As a result the realm of Kott's greatest success as an *émigré* writer remains largely unfamiliar with Gombrowicz's theatre, in spite of their shared Shakespearean sensibilities.

Both Kott and Gombrowicz used Shakespeare in complementary ways to perform a kind of allegorical masque of their Polish experiences and subject matter – Kott explicitly in his essays, and Gombrowicz implicitly in his plays. The Shakespearean 'dress' of their writings had the advantage of belying the 'Polishness' of their concerns in the eyes of foreign readers while potentially revealing the universal dimensions of contemporary Polish experience to the Poles themselves.

Kott on the Blacklist

Kott became a political dissident in Poland before he formally became an exile and political refugee in the late 1960s, eventually settling with his wife and family in the United States. In exile, Kott's life began to resemble that of Duke Senior in *As You Like It* or Prospero in *The Tempest*. Shakespeare's plays about exiles always centre upon a version of the story of Cain and Abel, with a good brother and a bad brother separated by political differences and the physical distance created by the exile of the 'good' brother. On a collective as well as on an individual psychological level, these mythic stories also present allegorical *doppelgängers*, symbolic narratives of the reconciliation (or mutual destruction) of the contradictory and conflicting elements of a single soul.

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On the individual level these stories tell of familial conflicts between the brothers Duke Senior and Duke Frederick or of Prospero and Antonio. On the collective and political level they symbolically contrast the dangerous political courts of Duke Frederick or 'Absolute Milan' with the pastoral anti-courts of the Forest of Arden or Prospero's island. In a final baroque twist in Shakespeare's symbolic logic, while Arden and Prospero's island are ostensibly 'natural' settings in contrast to the world of 'culture' or 'civilization' in the courts, in fact they are constructed pastoral worlds where 'nature' is inseparable from 'theatre' (as well as from magic and the confusion of gender).

Kott's exile earned him a place on the list of blacklisted authors in Poland – his name appearing alongside those of Henryk Grynberg, Nina Karsov, Szymon Schechter, Leopold Tyrmand, and Andrzej Wirth (among many others) in the so-called 'Black Book of Polish Censorship' issued for internal use by the Polish Communist Party in the 1970s, which was subsequently smuggled out and published in the West in both Polish and English.[3] After the declaration of martial law by the Jaruzelski regime in 1981, Kott again earned the animus of Poland's communist authorities as a result of a radio interview in which he compared the ubiquitous groups of Polish army soldiers to be found at the major intersections of Poland's cities at that time to 'the whores of ancient Rome standing around their fires waiting for clients'.[4] As a result, Kott did not succeed in obtaining permission to return to Poland until after the political changes of 1989.

If communist Poland played the role of Absolute Milan in Kott's career, then in what Arden did he arrive as an exile? One apparent answer would be that he joined the Polish diaspora in the United States. Another might be that like Leopold Tyrmand, Jerzy Kosiński, or Ewa Hoffmann, he would become part of New York's literary elite. However, in baroque allegories such apparent answers are not always the most meaningful ones. The successes of Tyrmand, Kosiński, and Hoffmann – like Joseph Conrad before them – were in part based on their abilities as literary polyglots to write in English as fluently as in their native Polish, a feat never attempted by Kott. The linguistic mask assumed by an *émigré* writer living and working in a second language was eloquently addressed by Hoffmann in her 1989 memoir *Lost in Translation*. Kott's Arden in the end was found in American academia rather than New York's literary scene, his role as a writer alternating between the world of the theatre and that of the Polish intellectual diaspora. It was these two 'virtual communities' that he inhabited and which provided the focus of his writing in the United States.

The Polish Diaspora

The Polish diaspora in the United States is a vast and diverse community – the largest concentration of Polish emigrants/immigrants in the world, as well as just a part of the far-flung global community of the so-called 'Polonia'. Worldwide, Polish emigration is estimated to account for one-quarter to one-third of all Polish-identified people (between twelve and sixteen million individuals),[5] and so is as widespread as any diaspora in world history – comparable in quantity, duration, and breadth of dispersion to the Jewish or Chinese diasporas.

By the end of the twentieth century, significant Polish *émigré* communities, in some places sustained through five generations or more, could be found throughout Western Europe, Great Britain, and Scandinavia, as well as in Latin America, Israel, South Africa, Australia, and the countries of the former Soviet Union – with large concentrations in Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania, as well as in many of the central Asian republics (the descendants of Polish deportees arriving since the nineteenth century). The Polish diaspora in the United States and Canada, as in many other parts of the world, contains both the most provincial and the most cosmopolitan milieux of the culture.

The culture and demographics of the Polonia are in significant contrast to those of the Polish state *per se*, particularly in regard to the significantly larger Jewish presence, the result of Jewish emigration before and

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after the Second World War, as well as of the Polish Communist Party's anti-Semitic campaign in 1968. Waves of emigration by successive generations of dissident political leaders and intellectuals have resulted in the transplantation of many Polish social and cultural milieux into foreign soil – milieux whose role in the life of the Polish state has often been through a 'virtual' rather than an 'actual' presence over time. The intellectual culture of this 'virtual Poland' was perhaps best exemplified by the work of the dissident *émigré* publishing house Instytut Literacki/ Institut Littéraire in Paris, which maintained an independent and highly influential forum for both political and literary writers banned in communist Poland through the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Designing a Mask of One's Own

Theatre artists, much like the members of a diasporic group, also inhabit an archipelago of cultural centres and peripheries. They lead dual lives, at once sharing in the life of the larger communities they inhabit and participating in a subculture with an intense and insular collective life of its own, deeply marked by an arcane and complex common history and sharing shibbolethic rituals and codes of behaviour. Kott's primary point of entry into American culture and society was *via* the theatre – particularly drama schools and university theatre departments.

His academic hosts in his first years included a distinguished roster of American theatre critics and scholars: Robert Brustein at Yale; Daniel Gerould at San Francisco State University; and Travis Bogard at Berkeley. As a result, he reached a diverse and still growing readership in English, distinct from that of any other Polish *émigré* writer, with *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* soon becoming required reading in many universities and drama schools in Great Britain, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere.

When Kott moved beyond the specific domain of the theatre it was usually as a critical guide and promoter of Polish writers, such as Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Tadeusz Borowski, or Witold Gombrowicz. As a member of the American Polonia, Kott has for decades proven an indefatigable independent ambassador for Polish culture in the United States through his teaching, speaking, writing, editing, and personal support of a wide variety of translations and theatrical productions by both *émigré* Poles and Americans.

The analogy between diasporic communities and the world of theatre-making operates on another level, as well. As perhaps best exemplified by the life and writings of Gombrowicz, a life in emigration is necessarily the assuming of a mask, which at its most profound potentially becomes an act of creative self-definition. At its worst, it is the experience of having a mask – usually defined by stereotype – thrust upon one's actual identity. The process of cultural assimilation is learning to wear a mask as naturally as if it were one's actual face – the existential analogue of being the understudy for a classical role. Spontaneous self-expression is deferred in favour of successfully assuming the assimilated role – what actors refer to as 'inhabiting the mask'.

At the highest level, as in the case of Gombrowicz or Kott, there is also the opportunity to create a mask of one's own design – but the mask is still a mask and not one's face as it is known in the home country. In other words, a life in emigration is a form of performance, akin to theatre. In the parlance of contemporary cultural theory, the life of an exile is innately 'performative', a prime example of identity as a process of social construction.

The successful performance by the dissident *émigré* has a deeply paradoxical character. To return to the Shakespearean analogy, the *émigrés*' authenticity and authority in 'Absolute Milan' is often heightened precisely by their absence from the court – the dissidents' 'absence' therefore can create a greater sense of their virtual 'presence' within an authoritarian culture. It is precisely this process that draws the court ultimately to seek out the exile – whether to destroy, co-opt, or reconcile them to the idea of returning. The very survival, much less success, of the *émigré*'s life in 'Arden', however, requires the wearing of a mask, and therefore the

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apparent 'inauthenticity' associated with theatrical artifice.

The Diasporic Player

The diasporic player is therefore by definition conflicted and paradoxical, occupying the liminal threshold between two cultures – endlessly performing an *agon* with aspects of themselves as well as with those around them. In short, the exile is an intrinsically histrionic personality, like the cross-dressing Rosalind in *As You Like It*, expressing herself through belying herself. And, significantly, the character of Rosalind has increasingly interested Kott since his own emigration, providing the title essay for his collection *The Gender of Rosalind*.

The collective life of diasporic communities can potentially take on a heightened sense of ritual and performance, as well – their displacement requiring an emphatic performance of collective 'presence' in spite of their circumstances. Gombrowicz sketched a bitter satirical portrait of this phenomenon in his novel *Trans-Atlantyk*, where a secret society of Polish *émigrés* in Argentina during the Second World War conducts private rituals of grotesque mutual domination and submission. The novel ends with a Dionysian counter-ritual of healing and ecstatic release by the same characters in the seemingly absurd setting of an Argentinean *estanzia*.

Only in Kott's memoir *Still Alive* (originally published in Polish as *Przyczynek do biografii* in 1990) does his work significantly overlap with that of other Polish *émigré* writers. It does so on at least three scores: first as a memoir of life in inter-war Poland; second as a Holocaust 'survivor narrative' in its chapters on Kott and Lidia's experiences as assimilated Polish Jews in hiding during the Nazi occupation of Poland; and third as a memoir of the increasingly poisoned atmosphere of post-war communist Poland. As a memoir of inter-war Poland, the book echoes Gombrowicz's *Wspomnienia polskie* (*Polish Memoirs*, originally written for broadcast on Radio Free Europe starting in 1955; first published in 1978) and Czesław Miłosz's *Native Realm* (*Rodzinna Europa*, 1968).

The Holocaust survivor narrative is by now a large and diverse genre to which numerous Polish authors of widely varying literary ambitions have contributed. The special interest of Kott's contribution on this score is precisely the high level of his literary capacities and his contact with and observations of other key writers and intellectuals during the Nazi and Russian occupations. Kott's chapters on the Stalinist period in Poland link the book to the less visible but no less diverse genre of the Cold War 'dissident's memoir', earlier significant Polish contributions to which included Czesław Miłosz's *The Captive Mind* (1954), Leopold Tyrmand's *The Rosa Luxemburg Contraceptives Cooperative: a Primer on Communist Civilization* (1971), Nina Karsov and Szymon Szechter's *In The Name of Tomorrow* (1971), and Aleksander Wat's *My Century* (1981).

The scope and perspective of the book as a theatrical autobiography also recall Ida Kamińska's *My Life, My Theatre* (1973). Kamińska, the artistic director and leading actress of Warsaw's post-war Jewish Theatre, also left Poland for the United States in the late 1960s – in Kamińska's case as a direct result of the communist government's anti-Semitic campaign in 1968. Unlike Kott, Kamińska was unable to transplant herself professionally in the United States.

As clearly reflected in the dates of the writing of *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Kott's intuitive grasp of the baroque logic of Shakespeare's plays was somehow based on his life in Poland before emigrating. The Polish political inspiration for Kott's famous essays on the history plays and tragedies was apparent from the start. In director Peter Brook's words, Kott was 'a man writing about Shakespeare's attitude to life from direct experience' and as 'undoubtedly the only writer on Elizabethan matters who assumes without question that every one of his readers will at some point or other have been woken by the police in the middle of the night'.[6]

Martin Esslin's introduction to *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* sketches Kott's wartime and post-war political biography as part of Poland's communist underground and even-

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tual government, explaining his significance in relation to other Marxist humanist writers such as philosopher Leszek Kołakowski.[7] Esslin concurs with Brook's opinion that 'It is Poland that in our time has come closest to the tumult, the danger, the intensity, the imaginativeness, and the daily involvement with the social process that made life so horrible, subtle, and ecstatic to an Elizabethan.'[8]

'Rising to the Mask'

The mask of Kott the *émigré* was indeed a late version of a series of masks he had earlier assumed in Poland. It was arguably his own existential mask-play that initially drew him to the theatrics of Shakespeare's Rosalind, Viola, or Edgar, no less than to the intrigues of Coriolanus, Henry IV, or Richard III. The Polish sources for Kott's interpretations of the disguised, cross-dressed, and exiled characters in Shakespeare are less obvious than the political and historical ones often explicitly referred to in his essays. As revealed only in *Still Alive*, Kott's life in Poland can be divided into three periods of such mask-play before his assuming the role of *émigré* and dissident: the pre-war years; the Second World War; and Poland under communism. Each of these periods demanded that Kott rehearse and perform a series of existential dramas of self-definition as well as of self-denial – both the forging of a potential new identity and 'rising to the mask' of an externally defined role.

The young Kott was the product of the complex cultural and ideological crucible that was pre-1939 Poland. The child of the increasingly secularized urban Jewish bourgeoisie and largely assimilated into Polish culture, he published poetry as a young man, and came in turn under the influences of both Catholicism and Marxism. Kott's family included several converts to Catholicism, and at his father's behest he was baptized as a child, and never circumcised – choices that later proved vital to Kott's survival of the Nazi occupation.

Kott's wife Lidia Steinhaus, the daughter of the distinguished mathematician Hugo Steinhaus, also grew up in a secularized Jewish family prominent in Polish artistic and intellectual circles. Kott's early biography reveals him to be both an example of and an articulate voice for the dynamism and fluidity that at times emerged in Jewish–Catholic relations in inter-war Poland. In his memoirs, Kott is clearly fascinated by the examples of two Franciscan nuns, both converts from Judaism, who assumed roles of leadership at the Institute for Blind Children at Laski, a centre of progressive Catholic social work and intellectual activity before and after the war.

In the midst of a personal and spiritual malaise in the spring of 1939, Kott stayed for a time in the Massif Central at a French Dominican monastery with ties to both the Institute at Laski and the French worker-priest movement. Kott was struggling with the same questions that concerned Simone Weil. His experiences with the Dominicans, however, produced no conversion. The subsequent outbreak of the war and his experience of the Russian and German occupations of Poland instead resulted in his joining the tiny and embattled Polish communist underground in 1943. Decades later – as an *émigré* – he again spent time in a monastery, this time among Buddhist monks in Burma.

The fitful process of self-definition experienced by Kott in the context of the Polish Second Republic has its counterpart in the literature of the period. Again the connection to Gombrowicz emerges. One of Gombrowicz's earliest short stories, *The Memoir of Stefan Czarniecki* (*Pamiętnik Stefana Czarnieckiego*, 1926), concerns the tragicomic journey of the son of a mixed Jewish–Catholic marriage who is unable to achieve a stable sense of personal, cultural, and political identity against the backdrop of the new Poland. Disillusioned by his experiences in the Polish–Russian war of 1920, Gombrowicz's title character at the end of the story proclaims himself first a communist and then a militant pacifist (and by implication an anarchist as well).

A more flamboyant embodiment of the process is found in Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's novel *Farewell to Autumn* (*Pożegnanie jesieni*, 1927) in the character of Hela Bertz. Hela is the brilliant bohemian daughter of a

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Jewish banker and, like Kott and Gombrowicz's Stefan Czarniecki, experiences acute anxieties of identity. Hela comes under the influence of (or perhaps brings under *her* influence) an unconventional Catholic priest and theologian, through whom she eventually converts to Catholicism. When this fails to quell her anxieties, she turns to bisexuality and – again, like Kott – eventually to Eastern mysticism.

Hela's lover and male counterpart in the novel is Athanasius Bazakbal, a failed poet who swings between her influence and that of Sajetan Tempe, another failed poet who eventually finds success as the leader of a quasi-Bolshevik revolution. Kott's early life story can be seen as a curious synthesis of the fates of Hela Bertz and Athanasius Bazakbal. Critics of Kott's participation in the cultural establishment of Stalinist Poland might also draw less flattering comparisons with the dogmatic Tempe.

The Conversion to Communism

Elements of the tragicomic narratives of *The Memoir of Stefan Czarniecki* and *Farewell to Autumn* are curiously blended in Kott's own experience of the crucible of the German and Russian occupations during the Second World War. Kott's ability to pass as a Polish gentile guaranteed both his own survival and that of his wife Lidia. His success in the external performance of both 'Pole' and 'Catholic' was combined with an inevitably heightened awareness of his own Jewishness under the circumstances, as well as a more acute examination of his political options and ultimate allegiances. Kott's 'conversion' during the years of Poland's occupation was to the Polish Communist Party and its underground resistance rather than to the Roman Catholic Church or the Home Army. Privately, Kott's wife Lidia immediately confronted him with the potential moral cost of such a decision and temporarily separated from him in the wake of his joining forces with the Party. Significantly, Kott's only published writing during the war years consisted of poems printed clandestinely in 1944 as part of an anthology entitled *Out of the Abyss* (*Z otchłani*), dedicated to the suffering of the Jews during the war.

Kott's 'performance' of the Party loyalist and ideologue, begun during the war, lasted over a decade, ending with his formal resignation from the Party in 1957. Kott's postwar literary persona was initially defined through his work as a co-founder of *The Forge* (*Kuźnica*), a literary weekly established in Łodz. According to Czesław Miłosz:

> Applying Marxist criteria, but not in a constricted, dogmatic sense, [the editors of *The Forge*] opposed the 'narrow realism' of photographic verisimilitude and advocated a 'broad realism' such as Balzac or the English novelists and French encyclopedists of the eighteenth century had practised. Although inspired mainly by Georg Lukacs, they avoided his exaggerations. For them, an interdependence between the fate of the individual and the history of a given society was all-important. As to literary models, they more or less scorned the second half of the nineteenth century, preferring to admire Defoe, Fielding, and Marcel Proust. They held Soviet Socialist Realist literature in low esteem and published, instead, translations of unorthodox Russian poets like Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova. It was *The Forge* that gave much space to a debate on a literature of self-criticism, known as the 'intelligentsia's settling of accounts'. The term designated a critical approach to certain mental habits and conventions proper to the intelligentsia and referred to the spiritual surgery that authors who resented the code of behaviour prescribed by the pre-war Establishment performed on themselves.[9]

About Kott's particular contribution in this period, Miłosz writes:

> [Kott's] fascination with Enlightenment rationalism, distinguishable in all those connected with *The Forge*, is reflected in his very style. He learned much from the ironic, down-to-earth brilliancy of the French encyclopedists, but even more from the most eminent translator of French literature, the French-oriented essayist [and theatre critic] Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, who distrusted the lofty constructions of intellectuals and searched for determinants of ideas in primitive desire and impulses: sex and money. What Boy-Żeleński found in a liberal anti-clerical ideology, Kott found in Marxism, with its stress upon the material factors of human existence.[10]

Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* was written in the transitional period between his resignation from the Party in 1957 and

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his co-signing of the so-called 'Letter of the Thirty-Four' in 1964, protesting against the communist authorities' censorship policies. Originally designed as a materialist reading of the plays both informed by Marx and liberated from Stalinist cultural dogma, the book proved equally effective as Kott's professional passport to the liberal materialist West. Kott's popularity with young directors such as Mnouchkine and Brook at the time may have been indebted as much to the influence of the pre-war writings of Boy-Żeleński as that of Marx or Lukacs. Kott, the child of the pre-war Polish bourgeoisie and former communist zealot, was now courted by the liberal West.

The question again arises of Kott's role and projected image as an *émigré* writer. Kott gives a nod to Boy-Żeleński in his introduction to *Four Decades of Polish Essays*, and simultaneously identifies the 'philosophical fool' Touchstone in *As You Like It* as the theatrical/literary patron saint of both exiles and essayists. The implications of this passage are telling in regard to Kott himself as an *émigré* writer – with the witty but melancholy Touchstone as his chosen 'mask'.

The public persona of Kott the *émigré* is nevertheless still best understood as that of a latter-day Boy-Żeleński – a writer still recognized in Polish literature for his wit, cosmopolitanism, and brisk theatricality. Through the masks of Kott the spiritual seeker, radical ideologue, dissident intellectual, and *émigré* always gaze the eyes of the urbane fellow traveller of Gombrowicz and Boy-Żeleński in the Vanity Fair of pre-war Warsaw's literary cafés and cabarets – though those eyes ultimately lived to see things that Gombrowicz and Boy-Żeleński did not. Like Gombrowicz, Kott understood the power of wit as both a weapon and a means to cope with suffering – a necessary survival skill cultivated by both the courtier and the exile.

Kott consistently presents himself in *Still Alive* as experiencing a crisis of self, a spiritual hollowness, a hunger to create a self through action and relationship. As a good Marxist, he provides us with a strong sense of the class and environmental influences upon his life. His class origins and artistic interests, however, ultimately made him ideologically 'unreliable' from the Stalinist point of view. He acknowledges the possibility of a spiritual dimension in his explorations of Catholicism and Buddhism, but neither comes to anything.

Kott is acutely sensitive to sensory impressions and possesses the verbal gifts to express them. His prose captures people and situations like a highly responsive photographic plate. We come to know Kott in his memoirs primarily through how he reacts to other people and interacts with them in various well-defined situations. In this, he shows his affinities to the existentialists he admired and to Shakespearean dramaturgy, in which characters have little identity or exposition other than what is revealed in their actions within the circumstances of a scene.

Kott began life in a state of existential nausea, identifying with the characters of Flaubert and Gide, and in the midst of the Second World War became a Shakespearean political actor in real life, improvising a self after being thrust into the action of a history play in the making. *Still Alive* is the record of this improvised self, where *what* has been played ultimately possesses less interest than *how* and *with whom* it was played. In this regard, *Still Alive* is very much the account of a life performed.

In *Still Alive*, Kott provides the specifics of the spiritual and political evolution that later made his theatrical writings so compelling, with only the briefest references to the theatre along the way. But as such the book provides an essential complement to *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, raising by implication complex questions of the relationship of Marxist theory to political and theatrical praxis – the same questions that are raised by the lives and careers of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Brecht, or Grotowski, which often lack the first-hand accounting Kott provides.

Shakespeare Our Contemporary proposed a syncretic relationship between Elizabethan/Jacobean drama and the politics of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, with Shakespeare's plays becoming complex analogues or allegories of twentieth-century *realpolitik*. *Still Alive* takes the reader backstage, show-

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ing the concrete materials and workings of this theatrical demiurge's political casting calls and interpretive rehearsal halls, prop rooms, and costume shops.

Kott at Colonus

Significantly, *Still Alive* does not address Kott's life in emigration after 1966, precisely the period of his greatest theatrical fame and activity. Kott's neglect of this period suggests two possibilities. One is the 'American' interpretation: Kott had a sequel in mind. The other is the 'Polish' reading: nothing he encountered after leaving Poland marked him as deeply as what he had already experienced there. While there is certainly an audience among theatre people around the world for the former, there is a tacit challenge to that same audience in the latter.

Unexpectedly, near the end the book Kott included two theatrical homages: the first is to Joseph Chaikin performing in Los Angeles after his stroke in *Struck Dumb* (which Chaikin co-wrote with Jean-Claude van Itallie); the other is to the experimental Polish theatre director Tadeusz Kantor, who died in 1990 during dress rehearsals for his acclaimed last performance piece, *Today Is My Birthday*. In the midst of a series of meditations on his own mortality, Kott unexpectedly turns his gaze back to the theatre.

In Baroque allegory, characters and events are often embodied in a mixture of contemporary, biblical, and classical iconography – sometimes operating explicitly in one register and implicitly in another. Such is also the case with the late life of Jan Kott in exile. The parallels between his life in Poland and as an *émigré* with the action of *As You Like It* or *The Tempest* break down after the fall of communism in 1989. Unlike Duke Senior or Prospero, or his Polish contemporaries Czesław Miłosz or Sławomir Mrożek, Kott never permanently left his American Arden in order to return to his native Polish Milan. Kott's own age and weak health, his children and grandchildren in the United States, as well as the protracted illness and death of his wife Lidia (who passed away in 2000), all made a permanent return to Poland impractical.

The mythic exile that emerges in this last phase of Kott's life is not found in Shakespeare, but rather in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. Like Sophocles' hero, Kott was destined to finish his life in exile, in spite of his increased recognition at home and a steady flow of visitors from Poland seeking him out in his modest Santa Monica home. Kott's writing continued to inspire new theatrical productions, with his essay 'On Gombrowicz' providing the spark for a landmark stage adaptation of Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdydurke* by Teatr Provisorium and Kompania Teatr of Lublin in 1998. Like Antigone and Ismene journeying to Athens to visit their blinded father, the company first began planning an American tour in 2000 in order to perform in Kott's presence – the first Polish company to perform Gombrowicz on tour in the US.

Though, like Oedipus, the elderly Kott was destined to remain in exile, like Prospero he had made peace with his Antonio and Absolute Milan.

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