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### **The Religious Turn in Contemporary Literary Criticism as the political turn: Between Spirituality and Marxism**

**ABSTRACT:** The Western theory in the late XX and the early XXI century is marked by the so-called Religious Turn. This term includes the whole range of theoretical considerations by Derrida, Žižek, Badiou and others, which were mainly articulated after the fall of the Berlin wall and the proclamation of "the end of history". In an effort to overcome the potentially devastating consequences of the radical secularization in the so-called Western world, and with resistance to the ideas of the future beyond ideology and the growing monopolistic capitalism, these authors insist on the necessity of a simultaneous return to spirituality and Marx's legacy. Pointing to the numerous weaknesses of "materialist criticism" which was dominant in the last decades of the XX century and striving to overcome the dead end in which it was found by losing the Marxist tendency for the active transformation of the world, some contemporary literary critics (Ewan Fernie, Richard Kearney and others) offered some seemingly new and radical interpretations of literary classics. Starting from the assumptions of fore-mentioned philosophers, they have tried to point out to the activist, revolutionary or utopian potentials of literary texts, potentials which are hidden in the traces of spirituality that inhabit them and that one has to (re)discover. Taking into account the current developments and insights inside *The Religious Turn*, just as several representative interpretations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, this paper tries to portray the (im)possibilities of this kind of hermeneutics of hope and its context, which goes back to philosophers like Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch. It tries to answer the question of whether and to what extent we must revitalize the principle of religiosity as the only possible source of Blochian principle of hope and the subversive potential of literature. According to that, this paper examines the implications of this new approach to literature: changed perception of its position within the system through which it operates, as well as a stronger belief in the possibility of its overcoming of the same system.

**KEYWORDS:** *The Religious Turn, spirituality, marxism, Hamlet, hermeneutics of hope, political engagement, temporality*

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** *Religiozni obrat, duhovnost, marksizem, Hamlet, hermenevtika upanja, politični angažma, začasnost*

**POVZETEK:** Zahodno teorijo poznega 20. in zgodnjega 21. stoletja je zaznamoval t. i. duhovni obrat. Izraz vključuje širok spekter teoretičnih razmišljanj Derridaja, Žižka, Badiouja in drugih filozofov, ki so večinoma sledili padcu berlinskega zidu in razglasitvi »konca zgodovine«. Da bi prešli potencialno pogubne posledice radikalne sekularizacije v t. i. zahodnem svetu in se uprli idejam prihodnosti onkraj ideologije in rasti monopolističnega kapitalizma, omenjeni

avtorji vztrajajo, da je nujen simultani obrat k duhovnosti in Marxovi zapuščini. Nekateri sodobni literarni kritiki (Ewan Fernie, Richard Kearney in drugi) opozarjajo na številčne šibkosti »materialistične kritike«, ki je prevladovala v zadnjih desetletjih 20. stoletja, in si prizadevajo preseči prepreke, ob katere je trčil ta tip kritike, ko je izgubil marksistične tendence po aktivni transformaciji sveta. Ti kritiki predstavljajo na videz nove in radikalne interpretacije literarnih klasikov. Na podlagi razmišljanj prej omenjenih filozofov se osredotočajo na aktivistične, revolucionarne ali utopične potencialne literarnih besedil, potencialne, ki se skrivajo v sledih duševnosti v teh besedilih in ki jih moramo (ponovno) odkriti. Ob upoštevanju trenutnih vpogledov in dogajanja v duhovnem obratu ter s pomočjo različnih priznanih interpretacij Shakespeareovega *Hamleta* predstavimo (ne)zmožnosti tega tipa hermenevtike upanja in njen kontekst, ki sega do filozofov, kot sta Walter Benjamin in Ernst Bloch. Na koncu ponudimo odgovore na vprašanje, ali in v kakšni meri moramo revitalizirati princip religioznosti kot edini možni vir blochovskega principa upanja in subverzivnega potenciala literature. Ob upoštevanju teh odgovorov članek analizira implikacije novega pristopa k literaturi: tako spremenjen pogled na položaj literature znotraj sistema, v katerem deluje, kot tudi močnejše prepričanje v možnosti premagovanja istega sistema.

The aim of this essay is to point out the crucial aspects of the so-called religious turn in contemporary literary criticism, to enlighten the context in which it appears and to put into question its philosophical basis, its ranges and possibilities by focusing on interpretations of Hamlet.

*It is well-known that an automaton once existed, which was so constructed that it could counter any move of a chess-player with a counter-move, and thereby assure itself of victory in the match. A puppet in Turkish attire, water-pipe in mouth, sat before the chessboard, which rested on a broad table. Through a system of mirrors, the illusion was created that this table was transparent from all sides. In truth, a hunchbacked dwarf who was a master chess-player sat inside, controlling the hands of the puppet with strings. One can envision a corresponding object to this apparatus in philosophy. The puppet called "historical materialism" is always supposed to win. It can do this with no further ado against any opponent, so long as it employs the services of theology, which as everyone knows is small and ugly and must be kept out of sight.*

*Walter Benjamin, Theses on the Philosophy of History*

Adhering to the principle of hope, insisting on its revolutionary and activist potentials; focusing on the future, the insight that messianity, just like history, is a category of future; and in the end the appropriation of Marx's and (directly or indirectly) Hegel's legacy – all of these theoretical and philosophical preferences, proclaimed by such great syntheticists of

Marxism and (mostly Judeo-Christian) religion as Ernst Bloch, Jürgen Moltmann and Gustavo Gutiérrez,<sup>1</sup> are also inherent to those interpreters of Shakespeare's works who insist on the necessity of the so-called religious turn in theory from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

That hermeneutical impulse was born out of the exhaustion caused by dominant approaches of the last decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century which generally can be defined as "materialist criticism"<sup>2</sup> and, even more generally, as different currents of the "hermeneutics of suspicion."<sup>3</sup> In his preface to the collection *Spiritual Shakespeares*, which consists of numerous interpretations of spirituality within Shakespeare's oeuvre, Ewan Fernie insists on "inherently optimistic" character of this project and in the same time he hopes that „fresh consideration of spirituality might reinvigorate and strengthen politically progressive materialist critics“ (Fernie, „Introduction“ 3). One could notice that editor's and authors' hope is Blochian one – *docta spes* – not merely an affection but the urge of which we are conscious and which sparks us to be directly engaged. This kind of theoretical engagement – whose aim is to spiritualize materialist criticism from the past in order to make better future – undoubtedly involves the thought about Shakespeare as a „living thinker“ (Fernie, „Introduction“ 2). Thus it becomes close to presentism, the approach that insists on critical reflection between Shakespeare's works and the contemporary issues all around the world.

What is, however, that spirituality like? In their turn to religion contemporary interpreters of Shakespeare actually turn to "spirituality as such": in the center of their attention are not particular aspects of different confessions and their traces all over the Shakespeare's work but spirituality in general. More precisely, that is "the possibility of spirituality", because „Shakespearean pluralism involves competition between possible absolutes, and resistance to the absolute as well“ (Fernie, „Introduction“ 7). In defining spirituality Fernie is very (in some cases even too much) reserved so that he defines it as „the experience or knowledge of what is other and is ultimate, and the sense of identity and 'mission' that may arise from or be vested in that experience“ (8). That which attests indefiniteness of „spirituality as such“ and the difficulties Fernie has in defining it is exactly the way in which he does it. Namely, he insists on its negative defining: spirituality is not the same as essentialism, ideology or religion. It is, nevertheless, the very heart of religion, that which precedes it, „an experience of truth, and of living in accordance with truth“, while that truth is the truth „not of this world but of a world that has not yet and perhaps never will come to be“ („Introduction“ 9). That experience is precious, as Fernie emphasizes now and then, because „the conviction that an alternative world is more desirable as well as somehow more profoundly real than this one can motivate a hermit-like withdrawal from the world as it is, but it can also inspire positive revolutionary change“ („Introduction“ 4). Even though, while saying this, Fernie refers to Gerrard Winstanley, the English protestant reformer from 17<sup>th</sup> century, it is undoubtedly true that thinkers such as Bloch, Moltmann or Gutiérrez would agree with it.

In one moment Fernie claims that spirituality is „a necessary supplement for radical materialism“ („Introduction“ 10). Following Jacques Derrida's deconstructive interpretative strategies one could conclude that *The Religious Turn* tries to revitalize completely marginalized element of that binary opposition, to reread Shakespeare's work by focusing on those aspects which have been neglected by the dominant approaches and „to brush history against the grain“ as Walter Benjamin would say (257). Beside that, Derrida has influenced this approach in many other ways. Directly inspired by *The Spectres of Marx*, proponents of *The Religious Turn* emphasize their debt to the legacy of Derrida who, for his part, insists on recognition and tribute to the legacy of Marx. However, the way he himself does it, in the end of 20th century, in some aspects is different than traditional marxist thought and apparently close to the rare and exceptional syntheses of marxism and religion such as Bloch's and Benjamin's ones, although only in principle: „If analysis of the Marxist type remains, then, indispensable, it appears to be radically insufficient there where the Marxist ontology grounding the project of Marxist science or critique *also itself carries with it and must carry with it, necessarily*, despite so many modern or post-modern denials, a messianic eschatology (Derrida, 73). For Derrida the messianic is „the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the arrivant as justice“ (33). He is sure that „this messianic remains an ineffaceable mark – a mark one neither can nor should efface – of Marx's legacy (Derrida 33). In contrast with Bloch's, Derrida's understanding of messianic (which he himself differs from messianity) and of historical course is not so imbued with optimism and faith in progress and modernity, although both thinkers insist on principle of hope and responsibility towards future. Anyway, that understanding was convincing and inspiring enough to make literary critics try to find the traces of spirituality within Shakespeare's work.

Beside late Derrida and late Stephen Greenblatt<sup>4</sup> a crucial impact was made by thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou who also turn to religion, although that religion is essentially different from Derrida's „spirituality of deferral“ and „undetermined spirituality of otherness“ (Fernie, „Introduction“ 15-16). Fernie himself insists on the militancy and apparently „sharper political edge“ of their convictions: in their opinion „the impossible happens“, the existence of transcendence is possible *here and now* („Introduction“ 15-18). The indication of Žižek's justification of religious terrorism is maybe the greatest evidence of how much this philosopher puts his hopes in return to religion as a means of renewal of „political commitment within the post-ideological world of a capitalist monoculture“ (Fernie, „Introduction“ 12-13). This Žižek's radicalism gets close to the uncompromising faith in the promises of socialism that Bloch had had one century before but it is at the same time very doubtful – now it is more than clear that all of the hopes Bloch had put in revolution were painfully betrayed in the end.

„The post-ideological capitalist world“ is exactly the biggest common enemy of all before mentioned thinkers from the end of 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century, just as it is one of the crucial causes of rethinking the religiosity. After Francis Fukuyama proclaimed „the end

of history" and the final triumph of Western liberalism, the heirs of Marx' legacy had begun to look for some new hope which they in the end found in spirituality. Although that spirituality, just as we had already mentioned, is always defined very generally and abstractly, one could not say that that spirituality itself, just as the process of finding it, is totally decontextualised. It is indicative that the very centers of Western civilization are the places in which the emancipatory potentials of religion are reconsidered by the thinkers who belong to the marxist tradition in various ways and who at the same time live and work in the cultural space dominantly marked by Judeo-Christianity, on which they usually refer in their theory, although they are nominally open towards any possible kind of religiosity. *The Religious Turn* is, considered in wider sense, basically the political turn and the attempt to get rid of postmodern particularism<sup>5</sup> and invading capitalism. It is the foreboding of the Western civilization that it is already necessary and that it will only become more and more necessary to pose the crucial question of Liberation theology in a whole – „how to tell a poor man *God loves you*“ (Gutiérrez 6) – and that it will be impossible to give an answer if God had died a long time ago. The urge to reanimate God (although most of the mentioned thinkers do not name it this way) is followed by hesitation in front of the spectre of future and the will to offer a new hermeneutics of hope. This urge didn't bypass the field of literary criticism.

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In one offhand remark in his preface to the collection *Spiritual Shakespeares* Ewan Fernie suggests that essay „Where hope is coldest“, dedicated to the play *All is Well that Ends Well* and written by Kiernan Ryan, „bears comparison with Derrida's conception of 'the messianic' as well as with the work of Ernst Bloch“ (27). Reading this essay proves that Fernie's right: showing once again that Shakespeare's work resists any dogmatic interpretation, Ryan insists on emancipatory potential of hope and revolutionary utopistic potential of spirituality within that play. It is about Christian hope that transcends the frames of Christian religion by, paradoxically, getting close to materialism: „*All's Well* understands that the miraculous is meaningless unless it is made flesh through the transmutation of human lives in the material world of history (Ryan 43). The author's call for an „as-yet-unrealised spirituality of hope“ really „resonates with a larger critical project that significantly anticipated *Spectres of Marx*“ (Fernie, „Introduction“ 19) – Bloch's philosophy of hope and its later echoes through history. Nevertheless, it seems that the proponents of *The Religious Turn* are somewhat more inclined towards Hamlet. What makes this choice more interesting is the fact that Bloch had dedicated one of the chapters of his capital work *The Principle of Hope* to comparative reading of *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*.

According to Bloch, Hamlet is “completely a dreamer of a grand utopistic kind, but the subject of this dream is not inspired by the anticipation of the end, and it is not the anticipation of the end (substitution of an act) which paralyzes him. His undecidability comes rather from a specific exaggeration of consciousness detachment, the exaggeration here named as paleness of mind“ (1207). Bloch sees in Hamlet closed will, residue of a maniristic melancholy, impossibility

of "coming out of shadow" of non-presence, anxiety and undecidability, considering at the same time Hamlet's stance as that of the late medieval manirism, namely not the liberation through materialism germinating from the bourgeois ratio, but instead the religious dismay in face of one's own irreligiosity (1208). Thus Hamlet's faith, "having become only (the) negative (one), altogether paralyzes the emergence of Da-Sein (being)"; Hamlet stays "encaptivated in potentation", just as the time which is "out of joint". Contrary to Prospero, Hamlet eludes "here and now", his "dagger speaks but is not drawn out", he is "the inhibited Orest, even more the inhibited reformer" (1208). Hamlet, concludes Bloch, becomes this way "the paradox of a great dreamer, the one who does not believe in his hopes and aims; the paradox of the one who transgresses, who beyond the existing borders believes in nothing, which in the end is disparate to all plans and actions" (1209).<sup>6</sup>

The complexity of Hamlet's character becomes clear once again if we move from Bloch's to Fernie's reading of the play. According to Fernie it is a sort of apotheosis of *here and now*, while Hamlet's god is „God of rashness“ and exactly the „metaphysics of rashness“ is what sets Hamlet free from spiritual paralyses and makes him directly engaged („The last act“ 199-200). Both Bloch and Fernie recognize the enormous importance of the scene at the graveyard, but while the former finds in it the place that devalues everything, the latter, on the contrary, claims that it is a moment which makes everything meaningful: Hamlet's „sudden faith that 'divinity' is absorbed in the mess and chance of history enables him to live and die confidently and unanxiously („The last act“ 206). Thus Fernie tells us that he is obviously more inclined towards Žižek's experience of spritual as the existence of transcendence *here and now* than towards Derrida's concept of messianic or Bloch's imperative of the future: opposing the idea of messianic expectation that displaces life towards future, Fernie thinks that *Hamlet* proves us that „'divinity' irradiates and operates through the very imperfections of existence“ („The last act“ 203). Contrary to Bloch's claim that *Hamlet* in no way manages to free himself through materialism, the contemporary interpreter insists on specific version of „spiritual materialism“ that we can find if we at the same time return to Shakespeare and to religion.

Not so long ago, only several decades before *The Religious Turn*, Ernst Bloch, philosopher who used to find and locate the places of utopian aspirations in all aspects of human existence and world history, saw in Hamlet the impossibility of their realization and no sign of concrete action.<sup>7</sup> Although starting from other assumptions, poststructuralist interpretations, articulated in the meantime, also didn't find any reasons for optimism in reading *Hamlet*. Fernie, however, managed to find those reasons. Maybe that's because he is rather „rashing“ when he claims that the ultimate value of *Hamlet* could be in some way reduced to here and now.

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We could conclude that *The Religious Turn* in interpretation of Shakespeare really split up with the past embodied in postmodernity as long as it focused on potential sources of

spirituality in literature. However, the proponents of this approach could also be considered the heirs of

their precursors – thanks to keeping the distance from the tradition of close reading and a sort of instrumentalization of literature with a view of direct acting in a contemporary world. This method of reading could be criticized or defended in various ways but it is undoubtedly easy to understand it: the pass from 20<sup>th</sup> do 21<sup>st</sup> century is the time „out of joint“, the time of proclaiming the end of history and the time in which we begin to deal with the legacy of the previous century. Those beginnings may still be uncertain, but they can also be precious as long as they attempt to strengthen the principle of hope and to insist on the principle of responsibility towards the spirits of the ones still not born and the ones who died.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless it seems that the most problematic aspect is exactly that here and now that lean enough nor on the past neither on the future. Either here and now is considered to be something which is „never contemporary to itself“ in a Derridian manner or as the possibility of the intervention of transcendence in the history, as Žižek and Badiou believe it should be considered, in each case we cannot find any firm foothold within *The Religious Turn*, which is maybe a logical consequence of understanding spirituality as „a structure of experience and possibility, rather than a revelation of one true dogma“ (Ferne, „Introduction 16).

The general non-dogmatism inherent to all above mentioned thinkers is hard to criticize but the understanding of time which lies in the base of their theory is more than questionable. As opposed to Derrida, who properly claims that respecting Marx's legacy has to involve the idea of history as „eventness that includes all temporal dimensions“, whereby we have to lean on the future thanks to the idea of revolution that functions as „footfold for the analysis of historical events“ (Solar 245) (and in this way he becomes partly close to Blochian tradition), and who also realizes that in non-dogmatic marxism „there are tinges of utopism but there are no deffinitive utopias“ (Solar 247) (which is one of the crucial differences between Bloch and him), literary critics such as Ewan Fernie are in danger of failing to observe temporal totality or to stultify it with their radical presentist engagement. On the first look it might seem that Fernie's position is much more close to the one of Walter Benjamin, especially the one from *The Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Namely, although both Benjamin and Derrida had always associated the problem of temporality with the questions of ethics, and regardless of illusory identity of Benjamin's „weak messianity“ and Derrida's „messianic without messianity“, there is a huge difference between those two thinkers, primarily evident in emphasizing the past on one and the future on the other side: „The common ground for Benjamin and Derrida is a refusal to give content to the messianic promise, or to determine the shape of the messianic event. Benjamin, however, compensates for this lack of content in the messianic future by resorting to the messianic past as our responsibility to liberate history. By transposing messianic into uncertain and indefinable future that is yet to come Derrida makes a distance from Benjamin“ (Ware 105). However, Fernie's position is not close to any of those two philosophers – „spiritualized“ here and now he sees in Hamlet does not lean on the past. „Divinity“ that

irradiates and operates through the very imperfections of existence" is not temporal enough not simply because Fernie focuses on the present but because it is questionable whether it includes the other temporal dimensions at all. This insight in great measure brings into question the legitimacy of *The Religious Turn* in context of literary criticism and interpretation, due to the fact that understanding of time in its basis is not explained and justified enough regardless of general attempts of its advocates to do so. Nevertheless, the legitimacy and influences of this new kind of hermeneutics of hope will be clear only in the future, although some of its proponents don't respect the category of the future as they should.

1 Bloch's philosophy of hope, Moltmann's theology of hope and Gutiérrez's hermeneutics of hope which resulted in his contribution and leading position within the Liberation theology movement are deeply connected. See for instance: Robert T. Cornelison, "The Development and Influence Of Moltmann's Theology", *The Asbury Theological Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 1, Wilmore 2000; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming God: Christian Eschatology*, Trans. Margaret Kohl, SCM Press Ltd, London 1996; Gustavo Gutiérrez, "A Hermeneutic of Hope", Occasional Paper No.13, The Center for Latin American Studies, Vanderbilt University, Nashville 2012.

2 Those are approaches such as cultural materialism in England and new historicism in USA, which were popular in the eighties of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pessimistic intonation of new historicism can be clearly understood from the essay "Invisible Bullets" by Stephen Greenblatt.

3 In this occasion it is necessary to go back to Paul Ricoeur's idea of the conflict of interpretations, which lies in the foundation of our essay in a whole. Ricoeur differs the hermeneutics of faith, which believes in the meaning and tends to find it, from the hermeneutics of suspicion, which functions as demystification and reduction of the illusions.

4 Mostly thanks to the Greenblatt's study *Hamlet in Purgatory*.

5 From today's perspective it is clear that exactly marxist-inspired literary criticism contributed to particularism in postmodernity to a great measure. See: Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Wiley-Blackwell 1996. That is why Badiou, for instance, insists on the return to the universal which was neglected thanks to dominant principle of difference and that is the cause of Kerney's exclamation: "New concepts of the 'religious' and the 'political' urgently need to be opened up and thought through in our postmodern age of growing indifference and indifferation" (Kearney 180).

6 Trans. from German to English: Jovan Bukumira.

7 Which, certainly, does not mean that Bloch didn't see the existence itself of the utopian

tendency in Hamlet. Moreover, according to Bloch anguish is one of the strongest forms of utopian yearning, while Hamlet is a representative possessor of that anguish. That means that Bloch and Fernie actually share their initial premises but they locate their manifestations in a totally opposite way.

8 "It is necessary to speak of *the ghost*, indeed to *the ghost* and *with it*, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and just that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born" (Derrida XVIII).

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