

## Hamlet: To Be Or Not To Be Who One Is

Eva Cybulkska

London, United Kingdom

[corsack@btinternet.com](mailto:corsack@btinternet.com)

**Abstract:** This essay examines the thoughts and actions of the eponymous hero Hamlet of Shakespeare's tragedy from the perspective of existential philosophy. The death of his father, the prompt remarriage of his mother and Ophelia's rejection of his love are interpreted as Jaspersian boundary situations. Burdened with the responsibility to avenge his father's murder, Hamlet faces an existential dilemma of either being a dutiful son or being true to himself. As he loses faith in the goodness of the world and confronts death, Hamlet enters a protracted phase of foundering, suffused with despair and self-loathing. The customary rational way of thinking fails him and his soul becomes shipwrecked. But this is also the beginning of Hamlet's journey toward authentic selfhood and becoming the *Existenz* that he potentially is. Affirming life with all of its absurdity in a moment of transcendence, he attains a kind of happiness that Camus addresses in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

**Keywords:** Hamlet; Jaspers, Karl; Kierkegaard, Søren; Nietzsche, Friedrich; Sartre, Jean-Paul; Camus, Albert; boundary situations; foundering; *Existenz*; despair; solitude; masks; authentic selfhood.

This above all: to thine own self be true.  
William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*<sup>1</sup>

*The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, written around 1601-1602 by William Shakespeare, is arguably the greatest tragedy since antiquity and has been drawing audiences for centuries. Perhaps the reason behind this is the perennial question: how do we deal with evil and become our authentic self. Evil can have a paralyzing effect on one's actions and it can also corrupt the soul. In his existential aloneness, Hamlet confronts evil and

opposes it "in the mind" (CWS III:i 58). By taking "arms against a sea of troubles" (CWS III:i 60), he embarks on an arduous, and at times seemingly interminable, journey towards truth and authentic selfhood. The title of this essay derives partly from Pindar's poem *Pythian Ode* with which Shakespeare may have been familiar.<sup>2</sup>

There are events in life that overwhelm us and irrevocably alter our relationship with reality and with ourselves. The customary, rational way of thinking cannot fathom the incomprehensible and we may have no emotional resources to cope with the experience

<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark" [henceforth abbreviated as *Hamlet*], in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David M. Bevington, London and Glasgow: HarperCollins 1992, pp. 1060-116, here I:iii, 78. All quotations are from this edition, henceforth cited as CWS.

<sup>2</sup> The passage reads, "Become such as you are, having learned what it is," Second Pythian Ode, line 72 in *Olympian Odes; Pythian Odes*, ed. & transl. William H. Race, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1997, pp. 209-382, here p. 239.

that shatters our consciousness. Karl Jaspers calls such situations *Grenzsituationen* (boundary situations, limit situations), which "are like a wall we run into, a wall on which we founder."<sup>13</sup> He argues that the best way to react within such situations is not by planning and calculating to overcome them, but by becoming the *Existenz* we potentially are. He also observed:

Death and suffering are boundary situations that exist for me without any action of mine. At a glance, I see them exhibit features of existence. Struggle and guilt, on the other hand, are boundary situations only as I help to bring them about; they are my own active doing. But they are boundary situations, because in fact I cannot be without bringing them upon myself. There is no way in which I might hold back, since by merely existing I take part in their constitution. [P2 204]

The tendency to think in terms of antinomies (for example, life versus death, good versus evil, object versus subject) poses a limit to our understanding and forms a part of boundary situations. This "antinomical structure of existence," as Jaspers called it, cannot be resolved by rational thinking. Logical thought can address only particular conflicts in existence, and unless one is able to transcend that limit, one remains trapped by the antinomies (P2 218).

In Hamlet's case, there is a cluster of events that constitutes a boundary situation. One such event is the sudden death of his father, and thereafter the theme of death and the finitude of human existence dominate the play. It is the inevitability of death that propels the mind toward reflections upon life, truth, and reality. In his great soliloquy, Hamlet ponders thus:

Who would these fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscovered country from whose bourn<sup>4</sup>  
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of? [CWS III:i 78-84]

Jaspers believed that an awareness of death shatters all sense of security and gives rise to existential *Angst* and despair. But for Hamlet, this was not the only experience that destroyed his confidence in the world.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1970, p. 178. [Henceforth cited as P2]

<sup>4</sup> The Middle English word "bourn" means "limit"; it is one of many limits Hamlet encounters in the play.

The hasty marriage of his mother Gertrude to Claudius, now King, undermines his faith in the goodness and honesty of those closest to him:

Within a month,  
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears  
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,  
She married: O, most wicked speed, to post  
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! [CWS I:ii 153-6]

Hamlet was bound to have doubts about the sincerity and depth of her love for his father. But when the Ghost told him that Claudius had murdered his father, he must have suspected her infidelity and even her complicity in the crime. To make things worse, Hamlet's beloved Ophelia begins to reject his affections. Lacking the strength to oppose evil and even to see it, she yields to her father's machinations. For Hamlet, she is no longer an embodiment of love and innocence. The Ghost's imperative to take revenge for the murder plunges him into a conflict between filial obligation and personal freedom. Hamlet doubts the authenticity of the Ghost and its real intentions and embarks on finding out the truth by setting up experiments and immersing himself in thought.

In the process, Hamlet's soul peers into the abyss of nothingness that, as Sartre states, "lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm."<sup>15</sup> Faced with existential Angst and despair, his mind suffers a shipwreck and goes through a phase of foundering (*Scheitern*). Having overcome it, he reaches authentic selfhood, which can be attained only through much inner struggle. Jaspers called this true, inner self *Existenz* and asserted that "although all things founder...an *Existenz* cannot come to itself if it has not been in boundary situations" (P2 198). The limitations within the empirical world can be transcended with the aid of effort and courage, whereby one touches the eternity in a brief moment of an *Augenblick*. Hamlet reaches this point in the final act as is outlined anon.

### The Agony of Despair

... the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory.  
*Hamlet* (CWS II:ii 300-1)

Being alone with his deep pain and sense of loss, Hamlet faces a disintegration of his worldview (*Weltanschauung*). His solitary, mournful figure is silhouetted against the

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, transl. Hazel E. Barnes, London, GB: Methuen 1984, chapter V, p. 21.

decadent glitter of the court; alienated from the world and from himself, he descends into the nothingness of despair. The death of the father is painful, but the loss of faith in human goodness and honesty is devastating. The Ghost reveals to Hamlet that his uncle Claudius murdered his own brother and his mother, Queen Gertrude, emerges as a lustful woman, possibly an adulteress and an accomplice as well. Kierkegaard, who read Hamlet's story as a mirror of his own life, made an insightful comment: "Hamlet is deeply tragic because he suspects his mother's guilt."<sup>6</sup> If so, Hamlet expresses his turmoil indirectly through convoluted soliloquies, the masks and his so-called delay in taking revenge.

As love and innocence turn out to be an illusion, Hamlet becomes engulfed by despair and paralyzed in his actions. A question looms: is he to believe the illusion in the goodness of the world or his own perception that the world is corrupt? Leaden with grief and suspended between the living and the dead, Hamlet's soul draws near the abyss of nonbeing:

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!  
Fie on't, ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden,  
That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely. [CWS I:ii 133-7]

William James' description of a sick soul fits Hamlet's state of mind:

You see how the entire consciousness of the poor man is so chocked with the feeling of evil that the sense of there being any good in the world is lost for him altogether. His attention excludes it, cannot admit it: the sun has left his heaven.<sup>7</sup>

Despair is not about the loss of an external object, but about the loss of oneself, a loss of what was good in human beings. Unable to love oneself, one cannot love the world. Kierkegaard identifies despair as "sickness unto death," a deadening emotion that makes one want to escape from oneself:

The despair which is conscious of being despair, which is therefore conscious of having a self in which there is, however, something eternal, and which now either in despair does not want to be itself or in despair wants

<sup>6</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, A Fragment of Life*, transl. Alastair Hannay, London, GB: Penguin Books 1992, p. 153.

<sup>7</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, New York, NY: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1903, p. 149.

to be itself.<sup>8</sup>

For Kierkegaard, despair is a state of inwardness related to the rising level of consciousness; the more consciousness, the more intense the despair (*SD* 72). Cioran, that other expert in the realm of despair, looked upon life as "one long, drawn-out agony" and considered consciousness to be "an open wound in its heart."<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, who felt a strong affinity with Hamlet, took this thought further by stating, "the growth of consciousness becomes a danger; and anyone who lives among the most conscious Europeans even knows that it is a disease."<sup>10</sup> Hamlet suffers as intensely as he does because he is conscious of the wretchedness of the world, of the futility of any action, and of the absurdity of existence. He has lost all illusion that his action (avenging the murder of his father by killing Claudius) can change reality. Certainly, it cannot reverse events and it cannot restore his faith in the innocence of the world. The paralyzing effect of evil drives Hamlet into a state of utter dejection. He descends into self-loathing: "What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven" (CWS III:i 128-30). Ensnared by various hypotheses, doubts, and thought experiments, he becomes weary of life and of himself.

A few years prior to writing the play, Shakespeare suffered a double loss: the deaths of his only son, Hamnet, and of his father. Thus, grief must have been a very real experience for the bard. Deep grief and anguish are often beyond any means of direct expression and cannot be relieved by tears. Michel de Montaigne, whose essays Shakespeare almost certainly read, was mourning his beloved father when he wrote:

The force of extreme sadness inevitably stuns the whole of our soul, impeding her freedom of action. It happens to us when we are suddenly struck by some piece of really bad news: we are enraptured, seized, paralyzed in all our movements in such a way that, afterwards, when the soul lets herself with tears and lamentations, she seems to have struggled loose, disentangled herself and become free to range about as

<sup>8</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, transl. Alastair Hannay, London, GB: Penguin Books 1989, p. 77. [Henceforth cited as *SD*]

<sup>9</sup> Emil Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, transl. Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnson, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1992, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, transl. Walter Kaufmann, New York, NY: Vintage Books 1974, p. 300.

she wishes.<sup>11</sup>

Hamlet, who never sheds a tear, laments correspondingly:

I have of late—but  
wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all  
custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with  
my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth,  
seems to me a sterile promontory [...]  
Man delights not me— [CWS II:ii 296-300, 310]

Fathers and sons need one another. As Kierkegaard observed:

There was once a father and a son. A son is like a mirror in which the father beholds himself, and for the son the father too is like a mirror, in which he beholds himself in the time to come.<sup>12</sup>

If one of them dies, especially when his death is untimely or tragic, this mirror is shattered irrevocably.

### Mirroring, Individuality, and the Masks

The origin and commencement of his grief  
Sprung from neglected love.—  
*Hamlet* (CWS III:i 180-1)

Human beings develop a sense of self with clear personal boundaries through the meaningful mirroring by significant others, usually one's parents. In order to become who one is, the assistance of others is needed to synthesize one's personality out of contradictory thoughts and emotions. After Jacques Lacan, Donald Winnicott called it "the mirror stage" and wrote,

in individual emotional development, the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face....What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself.<sup>13</sup>

The need for mirroring continues far beyond infancy and is particularly important at the time of adolescence; failure at this phase may lead to a fragile ego-formation with lifelong consequences. However,

only the meaningful mirroring by the Other can facilitate the emergence and growth of one's self. By contrast, Narcissus withered gazing into his own reflection in the pond, while the nymph Echo was meaninglessly repeating his words. For the self to become authentic, one needs to be engaged in a loving struggle with others. "Man comes to himself only together with the other man, never by mere knowledge alone," stressed Jaspers.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in a place of some undifferentiated psychic mass, separate selves can emerge. Paradoxically, one needs that loving challenge by the other to feel confident as a separate and unique self, and this implies solitude (skillfully portrayed by Laurence Olivier in his 1948 film rendition of *Hamlet*), self-consciousness, and inevitable suffering. To be a part of the undifferentiated herd—as Nietzsche would have said—is more comfortable.

In Hamlet's case, it is not difficult to imagine that what he saw in Gertrude's eyes was herself; filled with vanity, she had no time for his young soul. With a subtle yet irresistible seductiveness, she bound her son to herself. And as to the murdered King Hamlet, who was preoccupied with all things kingly, particularly a war, it was unlikely he was able to nurture his son's uniqueness. Hamlet was born on the day of his father's victory over the aging King Fortinbras. Being given the King's name, he must have been expected to become a living monument to his father's achievement and glory. Not only did his parents fail to mirror Hamlet's soul, they were turning him into their own mirror. Lost in a solipsistic labyrinth of self-reflections, Hamlet attempts to mirror himself. In the highly acclaimed production of the play at London's Barbican in 1998, Yukio Ninagawa directed the actor to declaim the "to be or not to be" soliloquy in front of a mirror. By forcing the audience to follow his every word and movement, Hamlet turns the viewer into his belated mirroring. Unmirrored, Hamlet is desperately lacking that Jaspersian loving struggle with the other. "Now I am alone" (CWS II:ii 549), he concedes.

Nietzsche made a sharp distinction between solitude and loneliness.<sup>15</sup> While he viewed solitude as

<sup>11</sup> Michel de Montaigne, "On Sadness," in *The Complete Essays*, transl. Michael A. Screech, London, GB: Penguin Books 2003, pp. 7-10, here p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, transl. Walter Lowrie, London, GB: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press 1945, p. 13

<sup>13</sup> Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, New York, NY: Routledge 1996, p. 112.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Jaspers, "Philosophical Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp, Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing Company 1974, pp. 1-94, here p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Zarathustra's speech "The Home-Coming." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, transl. Reginald J.

a lofty, heroic state of not needing the other, he saw loneliness as abandonment and yearning for company. Solitude plays an important role in becoming who we are. Jaspers highlighted the tension and reciprocity between individuality and solitude: "only where there are individuals can there be solitude."<sup>16</sup> The reverse, however, is equally true: only where there is solitude can there be individuality. There are two contrasting drives: one towards solitude and one away from it, with love being "the only suspension [*Aufhebung*] of solitude among integral individualities" (IS 198). Solitude is needed to establish the boundary of the individual, as is the company of others.

There is a close relationship between the capacity to be alone and the capacity to form a friendship. The etymology of the word "alone" can be traced to "all-one"; being able to be alone means to be whole and self-contained. Only when two people do not need one another can they become friends in the deep meaning of the word. In true friendship, the aloneness and separateness are mutually observed and valued, as Rainer Maria Rilke poignantly advocated: "I hold this to be the highest task for a bond between two people: that each protects the solitude of the other."<sup>17</sup> Hamlet's world is shattered by the collapse of boundaries of those around him. The Ghost crosses the boundary between the dead and the living and forces his imperative of revenge upon Hamlet; his mother and uncle cross the boundary of decency by eloping in an incestuous relationship;<sup>18</sup> and Polonius and other courtiers continually spy on him, crossing the boundary of privacy. The only person who does not cross Hamlet's personal boundaries and respects his sovereign solitude is his loyal friend Horatio. A fellow scholar from Wittenberg, much below the princely status, he comes to Elsinore to be with Hamlet at the time of need. The basis of their friendship is best worded in Montaigne: "If you press me to say why I loved him, I feel that it cannot be expressed except by replying: 'Because it was him: because it was me.'"<sup>19</sup>

---

Hollingdale, London, GB: Penguin Books 1969, pp. 202-5.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Jaspers, "The Individual and Solitude," *PhaenEx* 6/2 (Fall/Winter 2011), 189-214, transl. Mario Wenning, p.189. [Henceforth cited as IS]

<sup>17</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, transl. Charlie Louth, London, GB: Penguin Books 2013, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> In Elizabethan England, a sexual relationship with the husband's brother was considered incest.

<sup>19</sup> Michel de Montaigne, "On Affectionate Relationships,"

Hamlet is in awe of his friend's stoic qualities:

Give me that man

That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,  
As I do thee. [CWS III:ii 70-3]

Horatio rarely engages in a loving struggle with Hamlet. He simply is. However, by just being there, he brings much needed grounding and containment to Hamlet's passionate and conflicted soul.

While hardly anyone pays attention to Hamlet's anguish, the agents of envious and suspicious Claudius often unscrupulously spy upon him regarding his behaviors and deeds. The court of Elsinore has almost turned into an Orwellian nightmare that denies individual freedom and privacy. Excessive surveillance indicates failed mirroring and violation of personal boundaries. In the recent London Almeida production of *Hamlet*, the director Robert Icke highlighted the devastating effects of such surveillance on the individual. As in so many of Shakespeare's plays, the inner state of the protagonist mirrors the state of society. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (CWS I:iv 90), observes Marcellus at the outset of the play, and we soon learn that something is rotten in the state of Hamlet's soul. Hamlet takes arms not only against the outer rot, but also against his impending inner decay—and this proves to be much more difficult.

Masks, or personae, provide a temporary solution for reconciling the disparate parts of self. The Italian word *persona* derives from Latin *per sonare* (to sound through), and relates to the observation that masks worn by actors (particularly in ancient Greece) improved the resonating quality of the actor's voice. We want others to feel and think about us in a certain way and the mask is an ideal tool for achieving that, hence our personae vary according to the social environment. A mask reveals as much as it conceals and it can also grow into the wearer's face, imperceptibly merging with the true, silent self. It can become defensive armor for a fragile self and it can also be a weapon of attack. The mask of a madman serves these functions for Hamlet:

[Hamlet] Fell into a sadness, then into a fast  
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,  
Thence to a lightness, and by this declension  
Into the madness wherein now he raves, [CWS II:ii

---

in *The Complete Essays*, transl. Michael A. Screech, London, GB: Penguin Books 2003, pp. 205-19, here p. 212.

147-50]

Madness can be a mask for profound sorrow and a hiding place for a wounded soul. Hamlet's madness could also be regarded as a form of revolt against the presumed sanity of corruption and deceit. Sometimes, insanity can be the only authentic reaction to evil. Although madness can offer a temporary refuge from the unbearable pain of existence, ultimately it deepens the gulf between the individual and the world.

Another of Hamlet's masks is that of a misogynist. Queen Gertrude shows no grief following the death of her husband and she promptly jumps into bed with a younger man. For Hamlet, it meant the brutal destruction of a mother and wife ideal, and from that moment, his view of women was altered. Filled with disgust, he reproaches his mother:

Ha! have you eyes?  
You cannot call it love, [...]  
Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight [...]  
Nay, but to live,  
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,  
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love  
Over the nasty sty! [CWS III:i 68-9, 79, 93-6]

To make things worse for Hamlet, Ophelia, that dutiful daughter of Polonius, rejects his tender affections and yields to the manipulative influence of her father. As Claudius killed King Hamlet by pouring poison into his ear, so does Polonius kill Ophelia's love for Hamlet by pouring poisonous words into her ear. Their previously pure love becomes sour, and Hamlet sends her to a nunnery so that she would not become a "breeder of sinners" (CWS III:i 123). Sarcasm can be a mask that hides an injured, deeply disappointed love. Whilst Hamlet becomes swamped by the evil around him, he ceases to be capable of loving and of being loved. His soul turns into an "unweeded garden." Hamlet's tragedy lies in the fact that he cannot stop wanting to love his mother and Ophelia, but his anger and deep sense of betrayal puts a barrier to it. Only later does his capacity for love and forgiveness win over bitterness.

### To Be Or Not To Be Who One Is?

This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.  
*Hamlet* (CWS I:iii 78-80)

The opening line of the play is, "Who's there?" This could almost be taken as a theme: "Who am I?" Faced with the corruption of values around him, Hamlet can no longer

sustain his position as an idealistic philosophy student. Neither can he become an avenger of his father, on par with the base murderer, his uncle King Claudius. The idea of revenge did not originate in Hamlet's mind, but he was infested with it by the Ghost's parting imperative, "remember me!" Throughout the play, the longest of all of Shakespeare's plays, the hero struggles with the dilemma of doing what is expected of him and of being who truly he is. He struggles to be his authentic self.

There has been a multitude of academic deliberations as to the so-called delay in Hamlet's action of revenge. Among them was Ernest Jones, a Freudian psychoanalyst, who argued that Hamlet had murderous Oedipal feelings for his father and a desire to sleep with his mother. Following this logic, Claudius would have acted out Hamlet's secret wish.<sup>20</sup> This is a highly speculative conjecture without any textual evidence to support it. Calling Hamlet's non-action a delay implies that it would have been normal and desirable for him to kill Claudius at the first opportunity. In a manner reminiscent of John Keats' "negative capability," Nietzsche emphasized, "the first preliminary schooling for spirituality: not to react at once to a stimulus, but to gain control of all the inhibiting, excluding instincts". For him, the essential feature of a strong will "is precisely *not* to 'will' – to be able to suspend decision."<sup>21</sup> And this is exactly what Hamlet does; he suspends decision. As Holbrook has perceptively observed, the main reason why we love Hamlet is precisely because of his dragging of the feet, his infinitising, and his refusal to conform to the normal world.<sup>22</sup>

But there is another underlying reason for Hamlet's suspension of action – his foundering. Torn by contradictory thoughts and emotions, Hamlet's mind cracks. Ophelia laments with poignancy that his "noble mind is here o'erthrown" with that "most sovereign reason/Like sweet bells jangled [is] out of tune and harsh" (CWS III:i 153, 160-1). There is no normal reaction to a highly abnormal situation, so the only genuine response is foundering. Foundering occurs when one

<sup>20</sup> Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company 1976, pp. 90-1.

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, transl. Walter Kaufmann, New York, NY: Penguin Books 1976, pp. 463-563, here p. 511.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2010, p. 49.

confronts the antinomies of existence, and while it indicates the presence of nothingness, it also opens the door to freedom, transcendence and *Existenz*. It offers a possibility for a breakdown to become a breakthrough.

Hamlet was reading philosophy in Wittenberg when his studies were interrupted by turbulent events beyond his control. Another young man in his situation might have decided to turn his gaze away from the corrupt court of Elsinore and escape into philosophy. Hamlet did not. Confronting truth, and doing so in all his existential aloneness, he faces the greatest challenge that a human being can face – that of becoming oneself.

To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
 And by opposing end them. [CWS III:i 57-61]

This soliloquy, perhaps the most famous in all of literature, has often been interpreted as Hamlet's deliberation on suicide. But is this its only reading? After all, Shakespeare does not say "to live or not to live," but uses the word "be." Wilson Knight emphasizes the difference between being and living in that "to be is not merely to live, to act, to exist, but really *to be*; to be as an integrated and whole person." He argues that in this state of being, one is beyond the antinomies of action and passivity and beyond fear of death, since life and death have ceased to exist as antinomies.<sup>23</sup>

Hamlet is burdened with the task to avenge his father's murder, and yet he is not a murderer but a thinker. Thus, throughout the play, he does what comes naturally to him: he deliberates and introspects as if anticipating the Cartesian formula "I think so I exist." And thinking is his way of remaining true to himself. Like an existentialist, he thinks not of abstract ideas such as "what is knowable," of "how many categories we can discern," but about questions of life and death. He ponders upon what it is to be human:

What is a man,  
 If his chief good and market of his time  
 Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more,  
 Sure he that made us with such large discourse,  
 Looking before and after, gave us not  
 That capability and godlike reason  
 To fust in us unused. [CWS IV:iv 34-40]

It is ultimately a choice between being true to his own

meditative nature or to be someone he is not – a cold-blooded killer. When Hamlet kills Claudius in the final act, he acts spontaneously and without deliberation. That action belongs to him alone. At last, to act and to be becomes one and the same. Throughout the play, Hamlet struggles with his own violent feelings toward those who betrayed his faith (Mel Gibson portrays this very well in Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 film adaptation of *Hamlet*). Hamlet confesses to Horatio:

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting  
 That would not let me sleep. [CWS V:ii 4-5]

The fiercest battles are those fought within, at the boundary of selfhood. In the above-mentioned Almeida production, the actor Andrew Scott expressed Hamlet's besieged state of mind in a dramatic gesture of punching his chest and face with clenched fists.

To be whole and authentic means to own one's thoughts and feelings. The parting command of the Ghost, "remember me!" undermined the validity of these and aimed at turning Hamlet into a copy of his father. Charles Taylor has stressed that:

each of us has an original way of being human. Each person has his or her own "measure"....There is a certain way of being human that is *my way*. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this gives me a new importance of being true to myself. If I'm not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for *me*.<sup>24</sup>

This play is about the independence and integrity of the soul of its chief protagonist, even though he does not express this directly. Perhaps, the deepest feelings and thoughts cannot be expressed directly? For Hamlet, to articulate the notion that his father wanted him to be a ruthless instrument of revenge is impossible. He opposes usurped power of the Ghost and also of King Claudius. Alone, he resists the seductive pull towards conformity. Like Camus' *l'homme révolté*, he "attacks the unlimited power which authorizes a superior to violate the forbidden frontier." As Camus observed, "far from demanding general independence, the rebel wants it to be recognized that freedom has its limits everywhere that human being is to be found."<sup>25</sup> It is the breakdown of boundaries that shatters Hamlet's world and lies at the

<sup>23</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1991, pp. 28-9.

<sup>25</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, transl. Anthony Bower, Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books 1962, p. 248.

core of his boundary situation. This motif is introduced early in the play when Claudius addresses Gertrude as "sometime sister, now our queen," and then he refers to Hamlet as his cousin and son (CWS I:ii 8, 64). Hamlet echoes this mockingly: "a little more than keen, and less than kind" (CWS I:ii 65) and later "my uncle-father and aunt-mother" (CWS II:ii 375-6). Not only Ophelia's father, but even his childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, turn into spies and traitors. And it is that nightmarish defilement of limits that Hamlet so vehemently opposes.

The vital step towards authenticity is to be honest with oneself. To paraphrase Nietzsche,<sup>26</sup> Hamlet courageously sees what he sees and as he sees it, and therein lies his great appeal. But looking evil into the eye carries the danger of being paralyzed by the malevolent gaze of Medusa. Nietzsche proposed that having an insight into the terrible truth and seeing the essence of things killed Hamlet's ability to act because "action depends on a veil of illusion—this is what Hamlet teaches us...all man can now see is the horror and absurdity of existence."<sup>27</sup> Hamlet is someone who has the courage to look into the abyss of nonbeing and remain true to himself. It is not what he does but what he does not that defines him as a hero of authenticity. In Sartrean terms, one might say that the play is about the freedom of choice between being an authentic self and living in bad faith (self-deceit). And perhaps this choice is the heaviest existential burden we face; it is our Sisyphean curse.

### Toward Transcendence

When Hamlet returns from his exile in England, he seems calmer and more composed; he is now alone rather than lonely. Soon, he encounters gravediggers who are preparing the ground for Ophelia's burial, of whose death he does not yet know. Before he learns this, he is shown the skull of Yorick, the former court jester. In one of the most moving scenes of the play, while holding the skull, Hamlet reminisces:

<sup>26</sup> The passage reads: "By lie I mean: wishing *not* to see something that one does *see*; wishing not to see something *as* one sees it." Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Antichrist," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, transl. Walter Kaufmann, New York, NY: Penguin Books 1976, pp. 565-656, here p. 640.

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, transl. Shaun Whiteside, London, GB: Penguin Books 1993, pp. 39-40.

Alas, poor

Yorick. I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips, that I have kissed I know not how oft.

[CWS V:i 183-8]

In this moment of *peripeteia*, as Hamlet is looking death into the eye, his faith in the goodness of the world is instantly restored by the power of that precious memory of being once sincerely loved. When he learns of Ophelia's death, he is ready to drop his mask of cynicism and admit that he loved her. Crucially, this is the first of two moments in the play when Hamlet encounters the transcendent. In a momentary existential experience, which Jaspers called *Augenblick*,<sup>28</sup> empirical time ceases to exist and *Existenz* touches eternity. As the term the "blink of an eye" suggests, it is an intimate, ineffable experience of subjective time; it is a moment when the antinomical structure of existence is no more and the noumenal self asserts itself. The poet T. S. Eliot called it the "still point of the turning world...there the dance is."<sup>29</sup>

Against the advice of Horatio, Hamlet decides to enter a duel with Laertes, Ophelia's brother. In a moment known as the fall of the sparrow, he expresses his readiness to die:

Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now; yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be. [CWS V:ii 217-22]

Throughout the play, Hamlet's mind has been torn between the antinomies of existence: love and contempt, obligation and freedom, reason and madness, life and death. Now, in a moment of transcendence, he recovers the stillness within and becomes the *Existenz* he potentially is. As Hamlet dies in the arms of Horatio, momentarily suspending his solitude, he transcends the boundary between life and death, leaving his faithful

<sup>28</sup> The metaphysical concept of *Augenblick* can be traced to the writings of Kierkegaard (as *Oieblik* in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) and also to the ones of Nietzsche (as the gateway called *Augenblick* in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).

<sup>29</sup> Thomas S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton-1935," in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, London: Faber and Faber 1963, pp. 175-81, here p. 191.

friend to mourn the "sweet Prince" and tell his story to the world. The rest can only be silence.

Hamlet is a fictional character whose appeal lies in that his story is also our story. It is a story about the fragility of existence, about the courage to oppose evil, to endure foundering and to descend into despair. As William Hazlitt perceptively observed, Hamlet's sayings are meaningful to us as far as they mirror our own thoughts; "their reality is in the reader's mind. It is we who are Hamlet."<sup>30</sup> Hamlet could have quietly retreated to Wittenberg and written a treatise on the treachery and corruption of the Danish Court. Instead, he chose to confront the truth and to reclaim his authentic selfhood from the shipwreck of being. And we, the readers and the audience, also have such a choice when faced with evil. We can turn our heads

and pretend that we just do not see, or we can embrace the truth and engage in the affairs of the world. While sentenced to freedom in our existential aloneness and conscious of our own inescapable finitude, we can affirm life and existence in all its absurdity. What is important is "the struggle towards the heights which is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy,"<sup>31</sup> said Camus. Perhaps this is the kind of happiness that Hamlet reached. Ultimately, what defines humanity is not a victory over temporary adversity, but the courage to see evil and oppose it with all one's being. And the sweet Prince, that timeless hero of authenticity, continues to fascinate us doing just that.

---

<sup>30</sup> William Hazlitt, "Hamlet," in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, London, GB: J. M. Dent & Sons 1906, pp. 79-87, here p. 79.

---

<sup>31</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, transl. Justin O'Brien, London, GB: Penguin Books 1975, p. 111.