

“Tragic Destiny: The Dynamics of Hamlet’s  
Dis-ease and Redemption” (Part Two)

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Whoever aspires unweariedly,  
Is not beyond redeeming.

– Goethe, FAUST (Part Two)

### Introduction

In part one of this essay published last year I attempted to outline a major part of what I call the dynamics of Hamlet’s problems. Starting from the point of view of psychological realism, which is suggested by the great mass of critical responses to the play during the last four hundred years, a strong case can be made for viewing the character of Hamlet as a real person with real existential and psychological problems. Further, we can observe the problems operating within a network, what the psychologists call a ‘syndrome,’ the components of which cause and reinforce one another.

There is a good deal of both critical and textual evidence to conclude that Hamlet’s chief problem is his Oedipus complex. Hamlet’s social situation, which is the result of inter-personal relationships caused as a child of a distant father and over attentive mother, provides a classic environment for the development of his oedipal problems. In addition, a great deal of Hamlet’s thinking, feeling and behavior ---particularly his focusing of attention on his mother when he is emotionally stimulated, his lack of identity and his delay in seeking revenge for his father’s murder ---may be explained by reading him as a person who is in the grip of unconscious oedipal motives. Similarly, other problematic thinking, feeling and behavioral phenomena in

Hamlet's personality, not immediately explained by his oedipal cathexes, can be shown to be closely linked, either directly or indirectly, as effects of that problem. First among these secondary problems we can list and analyze Hamlet's introversion, his preoccupation with thinking and his substitution of language for more physical forms of action, all of which may be viewed as immediate outlets for psychological energies impeded by his oedipally repressed energies. Second, a behavioral divorce from the real world in the form of madness can likewise be understood as both the result and a concomitant of his tragic oedipal and introverted condition.

As I suggested at the conclusion of part one of this essay one may look beyond the complex web of Hamlet's problems and discover something at work that will lift his personality out of its neurotic state. However, before we can proceed to investigate the cause or causes of Hamlet's redemption, it is necessary to complete the analysis of Hamlet's problems. By so doing, not only can a more comprehensive picture be gained of the character, but also most of the major psychological criticism already noted can be brought into a more unified perspective.

### **The Causes of Hamlet's Dis-ease, continued**

Among those problems caused by both Hamlet's oedipal feelings and his intellectual introversion is his idealism. Many readers have pointed to Hamlet's idealism as a major cause in delaying the revenge of his father's murder, but in general they have not linked it to any problem other than his intellection.

Hamlet's idealism can be observed throughout the play. In answer to his mother's question early in the play about why he seems to be so particularly overwrought at his father's death, Hamlet replies: "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems' . . . I have that within which passes show" (I. ii. 76-85).<sup>1</sup> Hamlet's insistence that he is not involved with the world of appearances and that, instead, he has an inner essence of truth is indicative of a typical kind of youthful idealism that

refuses to allow the outer world of experience to compromise the inner world of ideas.<sup>2</sup> Coleridge believes the first soliloquy also reveals Hamlet's predominant idealism, because it exhibits a great deal of intolerance for a world that has fallen from its original, ideal garden-like state.<sup>3</sup> Also, in the Ghost scene Hamlet promises an ideal remembrance of what the ghost has enjoined him to do by wiping away all other memories until it is "Unmix'd with baser matter" from his consciousness (I. v. 99-104); while later, in the nunnery scene (III. i.), Hamlet's ambiguous language also suggests that he is unable to recognize or entertain or accept any compromised possibility between an ideal world of absolute chastity, i.e., "nunnery" as convent, and a world of absolute degradation, i.e., "nunnery" as brothel.

As with Hamlet's introversion we must inquire about how Hamlet's idealism fits into our larger emerging picture of him. Those readers who take an historical approach to the play find the source of Hamlet's idealism in the educative influences of the idealistically ordered Elizabethan world view. It is likely that Hamlet, who is a university student, is well versed in the philosophy of this view, but it might be more appropriate to see this objective, impersonal and therefore not forcefully meaningful knowledge as ancillary to the more immediate psychological fact that idealism is the natural consequence of excessive thinking. Hamlet's obsessive intellection causes him to live exclusively in a world of ideas; and that, in turn, causes him to see the world of fact as peripheral and, consequently, trifling. The American poet James Russell Lowell explains:

thinking a thing becomes better than doing it, and thought with its easy perfection, capable of everything because it can accomplish everything with ideal means, is vastly more attractive and satisfactory than deed, which must be wrought at best with imperfect instruments, and always falls short of the conception that went before it.<sup>4</sup>

We must hold Hamlet's Oedipus complex equally responsible for his idealism. In the Oedipus complex the child's desire for total and continuous possession of the mother is a desire for an ideal solution to all of his needs. In the healthy child that desire is abandoned and the ideal is compromised by the realization that his fantasy is doomed to failure by force of the real situation. In a child who is not forced to make that compromise, however, not only is the ideal wish retained in the unconscious to which it has been repressed and from which any conscious compromise with reality is impossible, but it is often the cause of another wish to be absolutely chaste as a preparation for the still unconsciously hoped for ideal encounter with the mother.

Charlton senses this second wish in Hamlet and indicates that "chastity is the main prop" of the ideal world in which Hamlet lives.<sup>5</sup> The text also suggests confirmation of this idea. Not only is there no evidence in the play that Hamlet has engaged in any sexual liaison, but there is sufficient evidence, in his first soliloquy and in the closet scene with his mother, that he despises the body because he associates it with what he considers to be the bestial appetite of sexuality. Often, as Freud and others have suggested, the negative view of the body and the material world in which it exists is a conscious attitude adopted by a person who is unable to come to terms in one way or another with his own sexuality.

Discussing the effect of Hamlet's idealism Nietzsche asserts that idealism kills the possibility of action. Taking an antinomial point of view but arriving at the same conclusion, Nietzsche observes that action needs to be sustained by the veils of illusion, but that these are rent apart by one who focuses on the essence of things.<sup>6</sup> While this is true the situation is both far more troubling and far more complicated than that. As has been already pointed out Hamlet's idealism combines with, supports and is supported by his other problems: his madness, his Oedipus complex and his compulsive thinking, to form a network of psychological difficulties whose combined strength

makes action all but impossible; and, to make matters even worse, this already powerful network is enlarged and further strengthened by two other principal difficulties.

One of these is doubt. Hamlet says "The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil" (II. ii. 594-5), yet nothing that took place to Hamlet's response to the identity of the Ghost in Act One, scene five could have prepared us to admit this possibility. On the other hand, Hamlet's closing lines in that scene that "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right" (I. v. 196-7) indicate a strong enough revulsion to the task given him by the Ghost that it might cause him to invent some reason to later doubt what he has seen. The reader can readily draw the same conclusion about the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Why should Hamlet be doubting the value of being at this particular time? He has only a few moments earlier in another soliloquy devised a plan "to catch the conscience of the king" (II. ii. 584-94). The execution of that plan will put him in complete control of the situation, unless, of course, he can find a way of resisting the demands of what he has already purposed to do by doubting the value of his existence.<sup>7</sup>

It would be a mistake to think, however, that Hamlet freely selects doubt as a way of resisting the demands of action. This kind of freedom would only be available to him if he were a mature personality, free from an unconsciously motivating oedipal desire and other consequent compulsions. In light of the developing picture of the character as I have been outlining it in this essay, it makes even less sense to impute Hamlet's psychological integrity by suggesting, as D. G. James does, that the doubt that Hamlet exhibits is a manifestation of the philosophical skepticism of Shakespeare's time.<sup>8</sup>

It makes a good deal more sense to concur with Schlegel, Coleridge, Victor Hugo, Lowell, Bradley, and more recently Harold Bloom, all of whom relate Hamlet's skepticism to his compulsive thinking. For Bloom Hamlet is the most pervasive

representative we have of intellectual skepticism; and the cause of his skepticism is that he thinks too much.<sup>9</sup> Hugo and Lowell elucidate. For Hugo, Hamlet's thinking leads to "an endless chain of the undecided"<sup>10</sup> because he is, in the words of Lowell, "always, as it were, standing at the crossroads, and sees too well the disadvantages of every one of them."<sup>11</sup>

Ivan Turgenev offers another view which has a certain resemblance to the psychological explanation adopted here. According to Turgenev Hamlet is an egotist who lives entirely for himself and like all skeptics he cannot be both the subject and object of his belief.<sup>12</sup> Turgenev's assertion that we cannot believe in anything save that which is outside and above the self is consonant with the psychoanalytic notion that our ability to believe in anything finds its principal source in the child's belief in the father, who is the first principal reality that commands his attention and submission as an unbeatable rival for the affections of the mother. With the admission of that belief the child's basic egotism is surrendered because the child has learned that it is necessary to control his desires and conform to reality. The child who retains his desire because for a variety of reasons the father has not commanded his attention, on the other hand, has no cause to believe in anything other than his own desire. In which case, the child may be termed, as Turgenev names Hamlet, an egotist.

Finally, in order to have a comprehensive picture of Hamlet's disease one last problem needs to be identified and explained. Hamlet is a coward. Hamlet himself more than once offers cowardice as an explanation for his inaction. In the Act Two, scene two soliloquy he questions himself about why he has delayed enacting the Ghost's command. "Am I a coward?" (566) he asks; and he answers in the affirmative:

it cannot be  
But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall  
To Make oppression bitter, or ere this

I should ha’fatted all the region kites  
With this slave’s offal. (ll. ii. 572-6)

Later, in Act Four, when trying to discover why he has been delaying the revenge he again entertains cowardice as the reason and this time perceives it as an effect of thinking:

Now whether it be  
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple  
Of thinking too precisely on th’ event—  
A thought which, quarter’d, hath but one part wisdom  
And ever three parts coward. (IV. i. 39-43)

It is not only Hamlet’s own testimony which forces our agreement that he is correct. Cowardice is not only the logical effect of skepticism and thinking, as Hamlet himself points out, but it is also the axiological effect of the identity crisis caused by and part of the Oedipus complex. Unsure of who he is, he is unsure that he is able to do what the Ghost asks. What he does know about himself is that he is unlike “Hercules:” he is an intellectual, a student inexperienced and unversed in political and military matters. His foe, Claudius, on the other hand, is an older person with considerable political experience supported by the power of his current office. Under such conditions Hamlet naturally cowers rather than faces the issue.

To sum up, in examining the vast body of critical ideas about why Hamlet delays taking action against his father’s murderer, one finds explanations which offer bits and pieces of Hamlet’s problems. What I have tried to show here, on the other hand, is that these bits and pieces might be organized into a pattern that yields a more comprehensive understanding of not only why Hamlet delays revenging his father’s death but also why he is more generally divorced from the real world. Because of his Oedipus complex he is cut off from the world emotionally; because of his compulsive thinking and the idealism

and skepticism that follow from it, he is cut off from the world intellectually; and because of his cowardice and madness he is isolated from the field of action.

In all these ills what we observe in Hamlet is a man brought to his present condition not by free choices or ethical decisions, but instead by a set of circumstances that produces within him an insidious disease that grips him in its hold and takes its evil effect on him and on others around him. In her close reading of the imagery of the play Caroline Spurgeon supports this view by concluding that the central problem of the play is:

a condition for which the individual is apparently not responsible, any more than a sick man is to blame for the cancer that strikes and devours him, but which nevertheless, in its course and development, impartially and relentlessly, annihilates him and others, innocent and guilty alike.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Rise of Death-Consciousness**

In tragedy, Myers observes, "It is impossible... for one to find only good or only evil in life." According to the tragic attitude, the existence of evil and good is not a matter of chance. Instead, these exist in "an inevitable relation to one another"<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the relationship between the two is not general but specific. Each tragedy deals with a specific evil and its relation to its concomitant good.<sup>15</sup> In *Hamlet* we have seen that the evil that invades the main character is the evil of the Oedipus complex with all its consequent problems; and we have noted that at the source of the complex lies an unrealistic desire for the mother that, together with its consequent compulsions and prohibitions, arrests all development of the self in relation to the world of experience. What then is needed to bring the tragic relation between good and evil into focus is some factor, some reality that will spur the development of consciousness



and of the personality and thereby create a contiguity between the self and the world. But what can this good be?

There is no question that the concomitant good of which Myers speaks is present in this tragedy. First, there is the outward sign that the good has appeared. The central socio-political evil presented in the play, the injustice of a murderous king sitting on the throne of Denmark, married to his victim's wife, is rectified by the end of the drama. Second, there is the appearance of the psychological good that allowed the socio-political good to occur. The Hamlet that we see in the last act is not at all like the neurosis ridden character that we have observed earlier in the play. The change is dramatic, apparent and to the good. Harold Bloom, for one, agrees that:

He is at last himself, no longer afflicted by mourning and melancholia, by murderous jealousy and incessant rage. Certainly he is no longer haunted by his father's ghost.<sup>16</sup>

What accounts for the dramatic change and what does the drama focus on besides the already noted psychological problems of Hamlet? The one answer to both these questions comes from unlikely quarters.

Throughout the play from the first scene in Act One where the Ghost makes its brief appearance to the funeral dirge that we hear at the close of Act Five the pervasiveness of death makes itself felt. Indeed, the play is so rife with death that some readers have chosen to disregard the already observed and equally apparent psychological problems of the main character in order to conclude that death is the only theme of the play. L. C. Knight bluntly states that:

The theme of Hamlet is death. Life that is bound for the disintegration of the grave, love that does not survive the loved one's life...Death is over the whole play. Polonius and Ophelia die during the action, and Ophelia is buried

before our eyes. Hamlet arranges the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The plot is set in motion by the murder of Hamlet's father, and the play opens with the apparition of the Ghost.<sup>17</sup>

Others concur: the subject of *Hamlet* is death. Not only does the Ghost appear at the start of the play, but as we move from that first scene to the next we observe Hamlet in his first soliloquy, wishing for the melting of flesh into dew and lamenting the divine prohibition against self-slaughter. Before the end of Act One we have another Ghost scene, followed, in the next act by another soliloquy on the theme of 'to die... to sleep.' Following that we observe a performance of the play "The Murder of Gonzago," hear another soliloquy on 'the witching time of night when churchyard yawn,' and follow Hamlet into Gertrude's closet where he not only kills Polonius but also attempts to kill Gertrude and is interrupted by the Ghost. After Ophelia goes mad and is drowned comes the comic relief, yet even this, beside an open grave, consists of verbal parrying on the subject of death. Finally, the catastrophe comes,<sup>18</sup> so rife with death that it prompts the arriving young Fortinbras to remark:

O proud death,  
 What feast is toward in thine eternal cell,  
 That thou so many princes at a shot  
 So bloodily hast struck?      (V. ii. 369-72)

What I want to suggest, then, and what I hope to be able to demonstrate by a closer reading of these and other events of the play, is that the reciprocal good presented by this tragedy is the evolution of Hamlet's consciousness, his maturation if you will, brought about by his encounters with death. The perception of death as a psychological good has been noted by others. The philosopher Karl Jaspers has pointed out that

reality is not lost by elements that contribute to the cessation of life. Instead, it is precisely these things that reveal the true nature of things to us and make themselves wholly and decisively felt.<sup>19</sup> Claudius' comment on death is most strikingly accurate: nothing is more natural (I. ii. 3); and nothing, as Freud points out, is more powerful in driving us to transcend our desires for pleasure and attachments to those persons and things which yield that pleasure than the driving force of death.<sup>20</sup>

If the death experiences Hamlet has as he moves through the play are plotted, and the meaning and effects that those experiences have upon are discovered, we will be able to see how Hamlet becomes, as we find him in Act Five, the hero of this tragedy. Finally, something may be added that suggests what the play seems to indicate about the implications of the Hamlet's redemption for us, the audience, for this is a play that not only contains a story within its story, which is a device Shakespeare used more than once, but it also prompts us at the end of the drama to hear a reenactment of the story of the play outside the confines of the play itself.

To begin with the earliest encounter of death that we can assume Hamlet has takes place even before the play opens. Hamlet, a student in Wittenburg, is informed of his father's sudden demise. We, the audience, do not witness either the death of King Hamlet, nor do we attend his funeral and I think it is not improbable to assume that neither does Hamlet. Never does he or anyone else mention anything to the contrary and it is logical to assume that by the time young Hamlet is informed of the death of his father and returns home to Denmark his father's burial rites have already taken place.

What is important to note both here and in all of Hamlet's subsequent encounters with death is the type of experience that he has and the apparent effect of the experience upon him. In this first experience with death Hamlet's senses, the vehicles of experience, the five senses, are not engaged directly with the death of his father. We can assume that he either hears news

of the death from a messenger or sees it written in a message sent by the court. In either case the experience remains an abstract, intellectual event, both by reason of the fact that it is not a direct experience of death and, second, because the two senses seeing and hearing, by nature, result in the most abstract forms of experience we can have. In the experience of seeing, the object is removed some distance away from us and our contact is limited to reflections of light touching upon our eyes. The much touted adage that 'Seeing is believing,' i.e., that somehow seeing has a force that produces an emotional commitment, is simple not true, especially in one like Hamlet whose psychological energies have already been committed to another object. Being one of the two most pervasive forms of experience, we are accustomed to regularly discount what we see as unimportant and require further evidence of a more forceful kind before we give our assent. Thus, according to the story told by the gospel writer John, even after seeing him resurrected from the dead, Thomas needed to be invited to add to the visual experience of the resurrected Jesus by touching the wounds made at the time of his crucifixion; and we, in our daily rounds of watching the most terrifying and thought provoking images on television news, remain emotionally free to go about our business without any significant alteration in our attitudes or in our behavior.

With the sensation of hearing the situation is much the same. As with seeing, the object that we sense is removed, sometimes greatly so, at a distance from our body. In addition, hearing is the most ephemeral of the senses. While seeing may often permit us a continued look at the object we are experiencing, albeit in a constantly changing state, in hearing the object of our experience is there, then gone.

Another point to take into consideration here is that the abstract nature of this first death experience for Hamlet is enhanced by the fact that what is experienced takes the form of language which is in and by itself a symbolic form that is once removed from the world of concrete reality.

Taking all this into consideration, then, it is not surprising to find that the prince's initial encounter with death apparently has little or no emotional force to alter or disrupt the already existing psychological fixations present in his personality. The evidence of Hamlet's first soliloquy, "O that this too, too sullied flesh would melt" (I. ii. 129-58), as has already been indicated, shows that despite 'hearing' of his father's death within the past month he remains firmly fixated on his mother and can think of nothing else.

In this, his first soliloquy, Hamlet has his second death experience. He begins the soliloquy with a death wish (129-32), a wish that his body dissolve or that suicide were not against the law of God. Thus from the very start of the play death surrounds Hamlet on two fronts. It is both an external event to be perceived and an internal drive to be expressed. The source of Hamlet's internal preoccupation with death and the thoughts of death, often occur in young people

as a reaction to aggressive and murderous impulses. That is, when an adolescent's desires are frustrated, aggressive impulses emerge against the authority figures... that are doing the frustrating. The young person, however, is likely to feel quite guilty about these impulses with the result that he turns these impulses against himself, so that finally they take the form of an intense preoccupation with ... death.<sup>21</sup>

However, despite the unhealthy psychological source of the death wish, it should be stressed that the soliloquy represents an additional encounter with death for Hamlet; and, as such, although it is only an auditory and linguistic experience for him, which by nature is relatively ineffective and which seems to have no immediate effect upon his behavior, except perhaps preparing him to be eager to accept his next death encounter with the Ghost, it does contribute to a psychological maturation

which has already begun and which will become more perceptible as his experiences with death multiply and add.

Next Hamlet hears of and encounters the Ghost of his father, the late king (I .iv-v). The Ghost has drawn considerable interest from readers for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that contemporary man has difficulty adopting a point of view that will lend comprehension of or significance to ghosts. How are we to understand the ghost? What is the significance of its appearance in Shakespeare's play? ---A question that peaks our interest especially in light of the fact there was no ghost in the non-dramatic sources from which Shakespeare drew his plot.

Since throughout this essay I have been adopting a psychological point of view in reading the play it will be consistent to view the Ghost as a psychological rather than a theological problem. Not only does this make more sense within the general reading pursued here, but viewing the Ghost from this point of view is also a more acceptable interpretation of the Ghost to contemporary audiences.

The function of the Ghost is suggested by Horatio in Act One, scene one. In charging the Ghost to hold discourse with him he offers three possibilities for its presence:

If there be any good thing to be done  
That may to thee do ease, and grace to me,  
Speak to me;  
If thou art privy to thy country's fate,  
Which, happily, foreknowing may avoid,  
O speak;  
Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life  
Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,  
For which they say your spirits oft walk in death,  
Speak of it, stay and speak. (I. i. 133-42)

Later, when Hamlet is informed by Horatio of the Ghost's

appearance, he recognizes it as a sign that all is not well and that some foul play is afoot (I. i. 255-6).

What is clear is that both Horatio and Hamlet view the Ghost as an informant, a stimulant to consciousness that urges a correction of some wrong condition. As such, Shakespeare's Ghost follows the traditional function of ghosts, i.e., of stimulating guilt in order to cause repentance (literally, a re-thinking) and the correction of a troubling situation via some ethical action. From a psychological point of view the Ghost is a bringer of information whose occurrence indicates that what it has to say has been repressed, kept out of consciousness, because it is inimical to whatever it is that dominates consciousness. Furthermore, the Ghost's appearance indicates that what it represents has been kept under control to such an extent, i.e., either for a long period of time or with so much force, that an eruptive reactive appearance of the repressed material has taken place when the repression could no longer be maintained. Hence, as with every ghost what this Ghost has to say is both good and against the grain of the person who must listen. It is a monster from the unconscious that shows the individual to whom it appears the material that has been repressed in order that a psychological wholeness or integration of personality can be reached. Such is the case in any number of other stories, as for example in Dickens' "Christmas Carol" where the ghost of Marley is working towards a regeneration of Scrooge but is hardly an appearance whose ideas Scrooge would like to entertain. Yet entertain he must. And so it is with Hamlet.

The ambiguity surrounding the Ghost's appearance, the ambivalence of the perceiver towards the Ghost, and the Ghost's ultimate function as a stimulant to integration has been suggested by what others have indicated:

In his [Shakespeare's] play the appearance of the spectre means a breaking down of the world and a germination of thoughts that cannot really be thought.<sup>22</sup>

Generally agreeing with this kind of reading Hattaway calls the Ghost a “rendering of inner experience”<sup>23</sup> and Goddard, borrowing what I take to be originally an idea of Carl Jung, calls the Ghost an expression of “the autonomous character of the unconscious”<sup>24</sup>

In order to maintain the view that Shakespeare’s play is psychologically realistic the further question of whose unconscious the Ghost emerges from should be taken up briefly. Certainly we are talking in the main about Hamlet’s unconscious. The Ghost is foremost Hamlet’s repressed material. But second, since the Ghost appears to both Bernardo, Marcellus and Horatio in Act One, scene one, we can say that, as a kind of mass hysteria phenomenon, the Ghost also represents to a lesser extent the repressed material of these other characters. We might I think legitimately hypothesize that they have been repressing awareness of the possibility that the late king was murdered for fear that reprisals might be taken against them if they make their suspicions known. Hamlet, I believe, is not the only one to perceive that “all is not well” because “something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”

Fear also helps to explain the appearance of the Ghost to Hamlet. As has already been pointed out one of Hamlet’s secondary problems is that he is a coward and his fear of reprisals from the murdering king would naturally cause him to repress his suspicions. However, an even more forceful motive for repressing what the Ghost has to say is that it conflicts with Hamlet’s Oedipus complex. To enact the ethical demands that consciousness of the Ghost’s information implies means taking revenge on Claudius. Yet this is difficult to do since Hamlet in part identifies with Claudius for fulfilling his own fantasy of killing his father and marrying his mother.

Hamlet’s experience of the Ghost is both visual and auditory of a sort, but because the Ghost is a projection of Hamlet’s own repressed suspicions and ethical sensibilities, its



appearance has more impact upon him than an external auditory or visual experience might have. Its appearance, as it were, is both within him and outside of him, a powerful enough psychological phenomenon that has been objectified into a 'somatic experience.' The powerful emotional hold that the Ghost has over Hamlet while he is viewing it, as well as the fact that he is able to forget the Ghost once he has projected it, that is, gotten it out of his system, is in large part explained by this fact.

Hamlet's Act One encounter with the Ghost clearly indicates both the ambivalent nature of his psychological position and his awareness, although unclear, of that ambivalence.

The encounter begins in scene four when the Ghost motions to Hamlet to call him aside. This gesture has two significances. First, the others present are not as repressed: they suspect less because they are less kin to the matter and have less responsibility to make right any wrong that has occurred. For that reason the Ghost remains only a somewhat vague omen of a troubling situation for them. Second, by calling him aside the Ghost makes clear the great importance for Hamlet of what he is about to say, as well as the absolute power he has to be seen and heard at this time. Hamlet is consciously aware of this power when his friends try to stop him from following the apparition. In answer to Horatio's command not to follow the Ghost any further Hamlet replies "My fate cries out" and then adds to the Ghost, "Go on, I'll follow thee" (I. iv. 82-86).

Now alone with the Ghost, the degree to which the Ghost controls Hamlet's mind is indicated by his urging Hamlet to mark him; and by Hamlet's reply "I will." "Speak, I am bound to hear." Yet, in the next few moments, when he does hear what the Ghost has to say, indeed, what the Ghost might have been expected to say, Hamlet can only respond with a feigned incredulity which signals an ambivalence that will pervade the remainder of his conscious encounter with the repressed material that the Ghost represents (I. v. 2-8).

Like Hamlet in his first soliloquy, the Ghost couches his explanation of how he was murdered in metaphor. Using the same myth of the Eden-like garden gone bad that Hamlet used in his first soliloquy, the Ghost further proves itself as a projection of Hamlet's unconscious. Furthermore, this use of myth allows a kind of abstraction from the event that signals the desire on the part of Hamlet's consciousness to keep the material at least partially repressed. The psychological realism here, as it will be throughout the play when Hamlet is approaching cathartic awareness, is stunningly accurate. In all our attempts to remember (an injunction the Ghost will later urge upon Hamlet in this scene) what we have repressed, we use large amounts of energy to resist, in one way or another, that remembrance and that results in 'ambiguous givings-out,' messages in the form of symbolic or partially true images, or simply messages that are later easily forgotten, that is, messages that are repressed once again. Ambivalent feelings and ambiguous undertakings are, therefore, the norm for such an encounter.

After the Ghost tells his tale and asks Hamlet to remember him (91), Hamlet responds ambiguously. He will remember but only "whiles memory holds a seat / In this [his] distracted globe" (96-7). He will remember what the Ghost has said "Within the book and volume of" his "brain, / Unmix'd with baser matter" (103-4); but what is immediately remembered is his anger towards his mother ---the thing that the Ghost specifically told him to forget!

After the Ghost exits, the scene concludes with Hamlet and the voice of the Ghost urging Hamlet's friends to swear silence about what they have seen. Why? Is this so that Hamlet might take his revenge more easily; or is this done to make it easier to forget what will not be made public? The basic ambiguity of the scene remains intact. Finally, there is Hamlet's last words, that clearly indicate a conscious recognition of his own ambivalence: "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right." (196-7)

In light of the ambivalence Hamlet shows from the very beginning to this death-encounter with the Ghost it is not surprising that the experience, in and of itself, has little lasting impact upon him. Time passes. We are not informed about how much, but what is sure is that Hamlet has largely forgotten what the Ghost enjoined him to do. Yet once again, coming this time in another form, Hamlet's repressed unconscious desire to be a real and ethical person stimulates his conscious. When a band of traveling players appear (II. ii. 417 ff.) Hamlet urges them to give him a sample of their quality by retelling Aeneas' tale to Dido about Priam's slaughter.

The selection he requests is significant for several reasons. First, even though it is again only auditory and linguistic, it is another internally caused death experience for him, one suggested by his own imagination. Second, the story bears some similarity -- a noble king killed by a villain -- to the death of Hamlet's father. As such it repeats the thought provoking experience Hamlet had with the Ghost and will result in a reaffirmation to revenge his father's murder in the next soliloquy. Finally, because this particular selection takes the form of rhymed couplets, rather than the more realistic form of language generally used in the play, there is some indication that the awareness that it might deliver to Hamlet's consciousness is being distanced by the artificially controlled form of the language. In other words, the player's speech, like the Ghost scene before it, and the first soliloquy before that is indicative of Hamlet's psychologically realistic ambivalence. It is a composite of material that both stimulates cathartic awareness to his ethical responsibilities and resistance to that awareness.

While resistance is present, the primary effect of the selection once objectified by the recitation of the player is cathartic and results in Hamlet's second soliloquy (II. ii. 543-601) in which he accuses himself of having needlessly delayed the revenge and once again commits himself to the task. In the soliloquy the subtext and stimulant to the commitment

is once again thoughts of death. Hamlet makes it clear that his cathartic self accusation is caused by comparing his repressed reaction to his own father's death with the player's reaction to the speech about the death of Priam.

The key point here, I believe, is that for the first time we are given direct evidence of the causal relationship that exists between the contemplation of death and feelings of guilt that stimulate ethical commitment. This death experience, his fourth, although once again only auditory and linguistic, has moved Hamlet to a level of self awareness in which his oedipal attention to his mother is at least for the moment completely repressed and his commitment to his ethical task reaffirmed. Moreover, the reaffirmation takes a new turn in so far as it includes an attempt to go beyond mere solipsistic ruminations that have only a linguistic outcome. The soliloquy ends with practical steps for trapping the king, which is an attempted translation of language into action.

However, the plan to trap Claudius by having the players perform "The Mouse Trap," into which Hamlet will insert some lines to trap the king, continues the binary pattern of catharsis and resistance. In so far as the plan is nothing more than a call for more and perhaps unnecessary evidence of Claudius' guilt it represents Hamlet's resistance in the form of continued procrastination to performing the ethical injunction placed upon him by his conscience projected in the form of the Ghost. On the other hand, in so far as the play within the play will be for Hamlet another death experience and one that is acted out three dimensionally in the real world it represents an advance over the purely linguistic of hearing about his father's death and of his first two soliloquies. In other words, the play within a play becomes the artistic re-enactment of the message and experience of the Ghost and, as such, suggests the relationship that exists between both the causes for and purposes of art and fantasy. As an objectification of fantasy art is a step in the direction of bringing the personality in contact with reality.

Having noted that Hamlet has made significant psychological progress by the end of his second Act soliloquy, it becomes relatively easy to understand why his next soliloquy (III. i. 56-89) is full of resistance in the form of self pity communicated in the most abstract way possible, and why it follows so closely on the heels of the second soliloquy. Indeed, the self demeaning "To be or not to be" meditation is the first words we hear from Hamlet since he boldly announced that "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

That his third soliloquy, his most famous utterance, is a form of resistance to the progress he has just made is indicated by its proximity to the second Act soliloquy and by the abstract form of the language it entails. Progress towards catharsis takes time. That was indicated by the length of time between Hamlet's promise to the Ghost and his second soliloquy; but resistance usually follows close on the heels of catharsis, since its purpose is to maintain the integral unity of the ego being disrupted by the new material entering into consciousness. One can hardly take seriously, and must therefore look for some other way of understanding, a death meditation that is constituted by a stream of infinitives ---"To be, to die, to sleep, to dream"--- devoid of time, space and subject; in short, devoid of any feel of real persons acting in the real world. As such, although it is one more death experience for Hamlet, it is, at the same time, a retreat into the world of the purely linguistic on the most abstract level and a movement away from the action oriented second soliloquy that included a plan to trap the king.

Fortunately, despite the resistance offered here the plan to produce "The Mouse Trap" is already in the hands of the itinerant players and its enactment provides Hamlet with his next and more effective death experience. Just before the production of that play, now relaxed by the backsliding of his "To be or not to be" soliloquy, Hamlet is able to move forward and prepare himself for more awareness by urging the players to be realistic in their dramatic portrayal (II. ii. 1-45).

Before the play begins Hamlet's witty parrying with the other courtiers about mother, marriage and death (92-133) indicates his internal struggle between awareness of the problem that he must act to make right and his own desires for his mother's sexual favors. Here, as he does elsewhere in the play, most notably in the famous graveyard scene, when confronted by awareness to matters pertaining to sex and death, the cause of his dis-ease and the reality that will eventually destroy that cause, Hamlet will use humor as a form of resistance to distance himself from the matter.

Once enacted the performance of "The Mouse Trap" has its intended effect in revealing the guilt of Claudius, but now having the additional evidence that he needs to take his revenge, instead of perusing that goal Hamlet is eager to allow himself to be diverted by an invitation to see his mother. Hearing that he is sent for by his mother he replies "You are welcome;" and follows this by compulsively repeating "my mother," "My mother, you say." Then he joyfully announces his neurotic cathexis to his mother, proclaiming "O wonderful son, that can so astonish a mother!" Finally, he replies with what is perhaps language of a classic oedipal gesture: "We shall obey, were she ten times our mother." (303-24).

What seems to have happened here is that in viewing the play Hamlet's repressed emotions to enact revenge have been called up from his unconscious, but since he is so strongly cathected to his mother, what results is not the free fixing of that emotional energy upon the task of revenging his father's death, but rather the desire to act aggressively to his mother as the primary cause of his oedipal frustrations. Further evidence to this reading of the situation is given by that fact that on his way to his mother's closet his anger against her has risen to so high a pitch that he must caution himself against using daggers against her (III. iii. 387).

Even before that in his brief encounter with Polonius near the end of the Mouse Trap scene, we find Hamlet resisting

awareness to reality by attempting to name external objects according to his own fantasies (365–78). The point of this interlude is not, as some readers have suggested, to make Polonius out a fool. Hamlet has no significant reason for doing that. That Polonius is such a fool, however, provides Hamlet with the occasion he needs to explore his fantasies as a way of escaping confrontation with his ethical duty. Polonius, the obsequious servant to the king, here serves Hamlet's psychological purpose just as he will once again serve in a most deadly way in the next scene.

This scene, full of the same ambiguity we have noted throughout Hamlet's psychological journey, seems to end, however, by moving Hamlet forward via a meditation on death that is once again somewhat analogous to the appearance of the Ghost (379–90). Itself only an auditory experience this soliloquy contains images of more tactile forms of experience. In an image of satanic-like communion Hamlet asserts his desire for a more concrete gustatory and tactile experience: "Now could I drink hot blood, / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on." Yet a moment later, with typical counterpoint, he quiets his commitment and diverts that energy by spending his anger on his mother. Finally, he undercuts the entire cathartic effect implied by the opening of the soliloquy by affirming that he must never translate abstract words into more concrete forms of experience:

My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites;  
How in my words somever she be shent,  
To give them seals never my soul consent. (387–90)

The following scene (III. iii) in which Hamlet goes to his mother's closet is most important. On the way there Hamlet comes upon Claudius praying and defenseless. Everything seems right for taking his revenge; and in his fourth soliloquy, a meditation upon the death of Claudius, he begins with that

perception "Now might I do it pat" (72); yet he soon degenerates into an attitude of resistance supported this time by abstract thinking on the event. I believe Shakespeare impresses the audience with the fact of Hamlet's resistance here by letting us know that Hamlet's thinking is simply mistaken. In point of fact the unrepentant Claudius would not go to heaven, as Hamlet conveniently concludes, if he were to be killed now.

Continuing resistance to any awareness of his ethical obligations Hamlet goes to his mother's closet with the intentions of spending his anger on her only with words. Yet so great is the anger that rests upon years of repressed oedipal frustration, that in a moment of rage, he is overcome by the compulsion to do her physical harm. Unfortunately for Polonius, who has hidden himself behind the arras, he becomes the transferred object of Hamlet's aggression, the nearest convenient object which Hamlet may strike at to vent his anger at his mother without actually venting it upon her.

Some readers have suggested that Hamlet thinks he has killed the king when he stabs through the arras. This is simply not so. His cry, "A rat!" may be ambiguous but what follows is certainly not. His first remarks after doing the murder reveal that he doesn't know who he has killed and simply questions, logically so considering the locale of the incident, if it is the king. What seems certain is that there is no indication that he has any intentions of taking his revenge upon Claudius at this time. That point has already been made clear in the soliloquy he voiced while passing the king on the way to his mother's chamber; and that idea would make no sense in light of our understanding of the oedipal intentions that make him agree so readily to see his mother.

Still focused on those intentions he continues to speak to his mother about his wish to prevent her from going to bed again with his uncle; and so strong is the oedipal fixation that he does this as if nothing, let alone his first time at murder, has just happened. Only after he fully vents the oedipal desire



that his mother save herself from having sex with another and only after he obtains repeated promises from his mother to that effect is he able to turn his attention to Polonius and then only with the intention of trying to undo the experience by hiding the body.

Nevertheless, on the plus side, the second appearance of the Ghost which occurs in this scene indicates that, as has been true since the beginning of the drama, Hamlet is unable to give himself completely to venting his oedipal frustrations. His repressed ethical conscience can still make itself felt and exert some control over him at least now that he has relieved himself of a large quantity of those frustrations by striking out at Polonius. Even more important to note, however, when considering its long term effect upon him, is the fact that this scene includes a new type of death experience for Hamlet. Words become action and action becomes murder. The concrete, tactile nature of the death experience, which because of the more impressive nature of the experience is bound to have a more powerful effect upon him, is stressed by Hamlet himself as he remarks that he will "lug the guts into the neighbor room" (214).

At the start of Act Four we find Hamlet continuing to resist the realization of death and the maturing psychological effect that death experiences may have. Although he alludes to the smell of death, Polonius' rotting body, when he is questioned about its whereabouts, he does so behind a comic mask which has become more and more the method he uses to resist confrontation with brute reality (IV. iii. 33-39). He also assumes an unnatural jovial disposition when he is offered the chance and readily agrees to go to England and, thereby, to escape the entire troubling situation (IV. iii. 40-56).<sup>25</sup> Yet underlying the use of these masks the realization of death festers within his consciousness and, when he is confronted with more such experiences, his defenses, eroded by the numerous experiences he has already had, begin to crumble in the face of that one undeniable

reality.

The first of these additional death experiences comes just as Hamlet is leaving Denmark. There he comes upon Fortinbras' army en route to their deaths in Poland. Like Oedipus whose fate of killing his father is sealed just when he thinks he is escaping that fate, Hamlet, just as he thinks he is escaping the reality of his father's death, the Ghost, thoughts of suicide, the fictive recitation and enactment of the deaths of Priam and Gonzago, contemplation of killing his mother, speculations about when to kill Claudius and the rotting body of Polonius ---just as he thinks he is escaping all these, he encounters multitudes more who are soon to die.

In his last lengthy soliloquy (IV. iv. 32-66) a new consciousness is born. Here Hamlet realizes the pervasiveness of death: that all die, that none escape. More than that, he understands that so many who have far less cause than he has are willing to risk death. With an image that signals his movement from the subjectivism of unfulfilled oedipal desires, convoluted thinking and a desire to remain in the abstract world of language, to entrance into the world of concrete reality and ethical determination, he gives a kind of sacramental substance to his thinking. "O, from this time forth," he says, "My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth" (65-66).

The ambiguity and ambivalence previously observed, caused by his desire for mother with its incumbent problems, now begins to be dissolved and transformed into a new more integrated fabric, substantially free of adulteration and ambivalence. As we have already seen earlier in the play it is all too easy, after the impetus of the present experience fades, to revert back to the old self and perhaps that would have happened once again, except that following this experience, like the three unrelenting hammer blows of fate at the conclusion of Mahler's "Tragic Symphony," Hamlet is engaged in rapid succession by another, then still other death experiences, until the cumulative effect of these closely followed experiences, like a tidal wave,

unhinges all cathexes, quiets all resistance, frees and redeems him to fulfill his tragic destiny.

The first and second of these additional experiences involves his own possible death. Hamlet has discovered the note that Claudius has written to the King of England requesting that he put Hamlet to death. With a divine indifference that denotes a new more stable personality Hamlet rewrites the note, sending its bearers, the king's spies, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to their deaths in his stead. Second, before reaching England Hamlet alone accidentally boards a pirate ship giving chase and his life is put at great and real risk.

Freeing himself from this life-threatening situation he returns to Denmark, sending ahead of himself a letter to Claudius that announces a rebirth under the sign of Jonas: "I am set naked on your kingdom" (IV . vii . 42-3). Like Jesus, whose resurrection follows his acceptance of death "the prince who returns from sea is [already] a changed man, resigned, detached, . . . tragically illuminated."<sup>26</sup>

Unknown to him, however, Hamlet returns just as preparations are being made for the burial of Ophelia who has gone mad and committed suicide in his absence. Making for the castle he crosses the graveyard where, in the climactic scene of the drama, he encounters two rustics preparing Ophelia's grave and the death experiences that will completely cut off any possible retreat to his dis-eased self.

From the start the gravediggers scene (V. i.) continues to show us a Hamlet who is substantially changed. There is no tortured emotional resisting to the completion of death-consciousness he gains in this scene. Instead, in the first part of the scene, we witness a quiet climax and resolution to any traces of Hamlet's ambivalence. While his emotional quietism makes it clear that he has already withdrawn from the neurotic oedipal fixation that made him passion's slave and which haunted him throughout the play, there still remains an intellectual residue, a kind of curiosity about possibilities, in his soul. At the start

of the scene he is at once intrigued and repulsed by death. Thereafter, each subsequent encounter with the remnants of man's fate allows him to review and calmly work his way through the former obstacles and defenses that prevented him from being, in the words of the existential philosopher Heidegger, "in the world."

Like the risen Christ returned from the dead Hamlet goes unrecognized by the gravediggers and will remain so until he proclaims himself later in the scene. However, he himself is full of recognition. He recognizes in the gravedigger's song the defenses used in his own art, the art of playacting, the art of using words to distance himself from feeling; and when the gravedigger throws up the first skull Hamlet recognizes the fact that "That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once" (74). Moreover, Hamlet recognizes that the skull is that of every man: 'a politician' or 'a courtier,' his father or himself, who could once use words to ease away the problems of life. Yet now these words, once so skillfully used, have fallen silent in the face of death. Continuing the same theme, of the next skull he says "may not that be the skull of a lawyer?," a user of word tricks, but now he is also silent. With a kind of intellectual gymnastic divorced from any emotional impetus Hamlet continues calmly searches for some other way to stave off what he perceives more and more to be the inevitable fate of all men, the one reality to which all must come. He inquires about the durability of parchment and again, this time by inference and in written form, the use of language. Yet the inquiry answers itself: parchment is obtained from the parched dead skins of sheep and calves.

After the gravedigger dodges Hamlet's questions about whose grave it is, Hamlet, looking for something that will outlast death, tries another ploy. "How long will a man lie i' th' earth ere he rot?" (158) The answer comes back: even that is only a matter of time.

The closeness of death persists and intensifies. The

gravedigger throws up the skull of Yorick. This was the man whom Hamlet as a boy had many and close experiences with. This was the jester from whom Hamlet learned his jests and verbal wit. This was the man who was like a father to him and, had he been the consort of Gertrude and powerful rival for her affections, this is the man who could have averted Hamlet's oedipal desires. Grasping the skull, the surest remains of death, Hamlet confronts death both symbolically and in his most tactile experience yet. At this moment, when grasping Yorick's skull replaces listening to the untouchable Ghost of his father, that father whose ghostly power never impressed the young boy, the mature Hamlet puts to rest the now self-indulging, now self-pitying, now self-chastising revenger. The sense of the power of death over all life forces of whatever strength indelibly forces itself upon his consciousness.<sup>27</sup> As the moment of revelation ebbs away, echos of it recapitulate the thought. Even the mighty Alexander and Caesar fell and were transformed into the mundane by death.

As Hamlet reaches a kind of stasis, what Frank Kermode calls a "sense of an ending," the final hammer blow strikes. Ophelia's funeral procession draws near and Hamlet, witness to one more death and overcome by the irrefutable fact of death, leaps into her grave in a symbolic gesture of his acceptance of what he now recognizes must be for all men including himself.

At this point perhaps it is a good time to pause from the drama incited by comments that have been following the narrative order of the tragedy to put Hamlet's many death experiences into a more logically organized perspective. In the course of the play Hamlet has three different types of death experiences; and each of these types has, by nature of both the form it takes and the subject matter it deals with, a lesser or greater effect upon ridding him of his psychological problems.

The first and least effective type of death experience is what I call 'abstract,' first because it employs the senses of

seeing and/or hearing, which constitutes a less impressive form of contact with the world than the more concrete experiences of smelling, tasting and touching. Second, these are abstract because the subjects of these experiences are also relatively unreal since the deaths are not concomitant with the time of the experience.

As a first sub-type of these, there are the experiences that are abstract because they relate to the past, such as Hamlet hearing news of his father's death, or hearing and seeing the apparition of the Ghost of his dead father. A second sub-type are those experiences that are abstract because they combine a consideration of the future with the past by including wishes or plans about possibilities that do not presently exist. A good number of Hamlet's soliloquies are of this kind. The first soliloquy, "O that this too, too sullied flesh would melt," in which Hamlet wishes for death, and the second soliloquy, "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I," which ends with his plan to trap the king and implies the murderous revenge that will follow, are of this type. So too is the soliloquy "Now might I do it, pat," in which Hamlet contemplates the possibility of killing the then defenseless Claudius but concludes that he will wait for some more appropriate future time. The third soliloquy, "To be or not to be," is a third sub-type of abstract death experience. As we have already seen, it is so abstract in its language that it is entirely devoid of any time zone and, therefore, can not even be understood as a realistic death wish. As a result of it being outside of time it constitutes a sub-type specific to itself. Next are those death experiences that are abstract by reason of their artificial subject matter. The player's speech about the death of Priam and the drama "The Mouse Trap," which follows it are examples of this type. Last, is Hamlet's Act Four, scene four soliloquy "How all occasions do inform against me." Its abstraction rests not only on its oral-auditory nature, but also because it is, at least in part, a generalization. However, its impact upon Hamlet is strengthened by Hamlet's

willingness at the conclusion of the soliloquy (Line 66) to translate the pure abstractions of thought into a more concrete, 'bloody' entity, a kind of sacramental encounter with the world.

A second general type of death experiences is what might be called 'concrete but emotionally unrelated.' This type is more effective because it is more concrete. It entails one or more of the more impressive forms of experience, smelling, tasting or touching and its subject matter occupies time present, an event that is concomitant with consciousness. Yet the effect of these experiences is diminished to a somewhat low level by the fact that they are experiences with the deaths of those with whom Hamlet has no emotional relationship. Among these experiences we can place the death of Polonius and later the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. These deaths are emotionally unrelated to Hamlet because he neither cares for these persons nor does he see in them any analogy to his own person. As such, he can view them and his experiences of them with complete detachment. We have seen how immediately after stabbing Polonius through the arras Hamlet is able to continue his discourse to his mother unabated; and he seems to be positively unmoved when telling how he wrote and substituted the death warrant that would send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths when they reached England.

Finally, there is a third type of death experience that is concrete by virtue of the type of sensation it employs as well as by the fact that the experience of it is concomitant with the occurrence of the death. In addition, unlike the second type of death experience the effectiveness of this third type is enormously strengthened by the fact that it is also an emotionally related experience, that is, it is an experience relating to the death of someone Hamlet cares for and/or identifies with. For these reasons this third type of death experience, which I call 'concrete and emotionally related,' has the greatest impact upon resolving Hamlet's problems. Hamlet's experience with viewing and

handling his own death warrant and his tactile brush with the pirates while en route to England are of this type, as are his encounter with the skull of Yorick and the grave of Ophelia when he returns to Denmark.

The reader will note that there is a certain time correspondence between Hamlet's death experiences when considered as a narrative series and those same experiences when considered as a logically organized series. Although there is a good deal of overlapping of types as the drama unfolds, in the early part of the play, Acts One and Two, Hamlet has abstract experiences of death. By the middle of the drama, Act Three, he begins to encounter concrete and emotionally unrelated experiences. Finally, in the last two acts, he is confronted by concrete and emotionally related experiences. This correspondence between the narrative and logical series is not only due to the fact that Shakespeare is writing a drama in which he hopes to portray a rising conflict moving toward some climactic moment, but also because it is psychologically realistic to portray having experiences of death in this order. For most of us our early years are limited only to hearing about death or seeing it as an art form. Later, as the poet Wordsworth says, "Shades of the prison house begin to close on the growing boy." We begin to have more concrete experiences with death, perhaps by attending the death or funeral or others; and, then, finally, as we go on further, we begin to be confronted by the death of loved ones and by the certainty of the oncoming reality of our own demise.

### **Hamlet Redeemed**

Having concluded a survey and analysis of the death experiences Hamlet has, we are now ready to observe the effects of these experiences on the personality. In the aftermath of the events, now shorn of all poetic pretensions by Shakespeare, Hamlet philosophizes upon the net weight of his experiences:



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....  
Let be. (V. i. 216–20)

Kirsch finds that

The theological import of these lines have, with their luminous reference to Matthew, has long been recognized, but the particular emphasis on death suggests a psychological coordinate.... [Hamlet] speaks to Horatio calmly, almost serenely, with the exultant calm that characterizes the end of the long inner struggle.... He has looked at the face of death... and now accepts [it] as an inevitable part of his condition. He recognizes and accepts his own death.<sup>28</sup>

And so, with the psychological conflict having been resolved, within a brief space of time Hamlet physically succumbs to death, but not before he fulfills his ethical destiny by ridding the body politic of its murdering king. Countering some readers who have wrongly taken Hamlet’s death to be an accident of mere circumstance, Hegel observes that

From a purely external point of view, the death of Hamlet appears as an accident occasioned by his duel with Laertes, and the interchange of the daggers. But in the background of Hamlet’s soul, death is already present from the first.<sup>29</sup>

According to Hegel, then, Hamlet’s death is the natural physical outcome his psychological condition; it is not an accident, nor, we might add, is it an unpremeditated end to the drama by Shakespeare. In Shakespeare’s source, Saxo, *Ambales*, the hero does not die but succeeds to the kingdom. Shakespeare’s innovation, that the hero dies, shifts the reader’s attention in two different directions. First, as presented in this drama, there

is no possibility of focusing on a physical prize as a legitimate outcome in life's struggle. Instead, we are forced to look for something less tangible, something psychological or spiritual; yet, because it is not physical, something that might, unlike parchment, outlast death. Second, our attention is drawn to ponder the meaning of Hamlet's dying request to Horatio, to

Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story,           (V. ii. 352-4)

and, consequently, to probe the meaning that Hamlet's psychological gains might have for a third party, the intended listeners to Horatio's tale.

However, before addressing these last things, let us begin with an examination of the psychological gains that Hamlet himself makes as a result of attaining an intense consciousness of death. As with Hamlet's disease the gains may not be immediately apparent. Touching this point Harley Granville-Barker noted that

All great drama tends to concentrate upon character;  
and, even so, not upon picturing men as they show  
themselves to the world like figures on a stage – though  
it is how it must ostensibly show them – but on the  
hidden man.<sup>30</sup>

Yet if we observe him carefully after his return from England a composite picture of the new Hamlet can be constructed.

First, there is considerable evidence to indicate that as a result of his death experiences Hamlet is no longer oedipal. Hamlet's realization of death includes a realization of the death of his mother as well as that of himself. That much, I believe, is clear from his remarks about his mother when he addresses the skull of Yorick (V. i. 186-9). In spite of any artificial

means at her disposal, he indicates that it is not possible for his mother, the object of his desire, to stave off the inevitable; and, by implication, it is not possible for Hamlet to entertain the thought of absolute, that is, complete and eternal, possession of her. Being convinced that the both the desiring subject, himself, and the desired object, his mother, pass away, Hamlet is forced by this realization of reality to surrender the long standing cathexis to his mother.

The effects of the break becomes almost immediately visible. All the frustrated psychological energy that has been pent up by his oedipal cathexis and all of the energy that was used in a deviated manner as a result of that cathexis is now freed to be used in new ways. Without recognizing the specific psychological cause for the change Joseph Summers notes the effect. "The result of the shift," Summers observes, "seems to be release, . . . so that he is free to respond spontaneously."<sup>31</sup> His energy can now be directed to mourning the loss of its more proper object, Ophelia, the woman he would have loved had it not been for his mother; and when her body is brought to the graveside, leaping into her grave, he is able for the first time to proclaim his love for her. Whether or not Hamlet actually did love Ophelia before this moment is beside the point. What is important is that his sexual energies have become free and he is able to fantasize about love for another. This is a clear indication that he is no longer fixated on his mother.

Even more important than his new found sexual capacity is the fact that having been freed of his desire for his mother he no longer has any need to see his father as a rival and is thus free to identify with the late king. Now beyond incestuous jealousy, in a gesture of unrivaled self-confidence, in plain sight of the entire body politic, he proclaims his identity for the first time: "This is I, Hamlet the Dane." (250-1) Gone is all the insecurity which urged him to treat himself in the third person as he did when called upon by Rosencrantz after he hid

the body of Polonius (IV. ii. 1). It is worth noting that with one stroke here Hamlet not only announces himself to be Hamlet, the son of his father Hamlet, but also “the Dane,” the person to whom the responsibility for the order of the kingdom has passed. Thus, Hamlet acquires a broader ethical insight than was apparent earlier. His ethics is no longer limited to an introverted and safe focusing on his own guilt about not revenging his father’s death, but has become, instead, concerned with his social responsibility to others in his role as his father’s son, the king, and as messiah of the nation.

Previously grappling only with artificial forms, with ghostly projections of his own suspicions and guilt, with introverted ruminations of his own self-pitying feelings, with the artistic fabrications of his own literary imagination ---mentally isolated by all these ---Hamlet was unable to give assent to any reality outside himself. Now, however, all the doubt he formerly felt and expressed has been replaced by a consciousness of death, the one irrefutable and necessary reality outside the mind. And that, in turn, has generated a new attitude of faith in the authority of the objective world and, by implication, with the plan and planner upon which that authority rests. Now shorn of all doubt Hamlet asserts his faith that “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will.” (V. ii. 10-11) and shapes his own response to his oncoming fate with an English Language understanding of the “Amen” that is present in all prayer endings: “Let be.”

Suspecting the imminent trap set for him by Claudius and Laertes, the once cowardly Hamlet is now able to accept his fate with a quiet courage. Moreover, the decision to “Let be” to “neither refuse nor to postpone the fencing match... stems from his new perspective on death and his life and also from his acceptance of purposes beyond his will or control.”<sup>32</sup> In speaking to Horatio the once procrastinating Hamlet now recognizes the brevity of life, for “A man’s life is no more than to say ‘one;’” (V. ii. 74) and the once doubting Hamlet now with a

ghostly authority asserts that there are no accidents, that instead "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow." (V. ii. 215-6).

Moreover, when it occurs to Hamlet that the oncoming contest which might bring his death is giving him pause to think, the once introverted intellectual, always willing to elaborate on his self-pity, now in touch with the world outside those 'nutshell' demensions, dismisses the perception as "such a kind of gainsgiving / as would perhaps trouble a woman."

Last, the former Hamlet, at times calling himself mad, at other times called mad by others and at times acting mad, now recognizes his madness and renounces it as his former self. Before the deadly fencing contest begins, he asks pardon from Laertes upon whom his madness has taken its greatest toll (V. ii. 223-39).

In sum, then, having attained death-consciousness the new Hamlet has been freed from all the psychological problems that constituted his diseased former self. Where there was an oedipal fixation there is now the freedom to love; where there was introverted thinking that resulted in closing off the world there is now quiet abandonment to what the world has to offer; where there was cowardice there is now the willingness to engage in a life-threatening situation; where there was madness there is now a person who is both sure of his own identity and who renounces that madness and wishes to realign himself to the world through apology; where there was doubt there is now belief in the plan of God and, finally; where there was procrastination of his ethical responsibility as revenger of his father's murder there is now 'kyrios,' the lord and redeemer of the kingdom.

### **The Readiness is All**

Having 're-membered' his life by integrating his thinking, feeling and acting with the world outside himself, Hamlet is

now ready to complete life by confronting the reality of his final exit head on. Although excommunicated from reality early in his life by his fixated fantasies for his mother, consciousness of the inevitability of death has convinced him that "The readiness is all" (V. ii. 218). Commenting on the change of character implied by this phrase Joseph Summers notes that

While it seems clearly to refer to death, the 'readiness' surely implies full alertness to life itself --whatever may come, including death. Human life loses its claim to heroism... if its chief energies are devoted to avoiding or delaying the coming of death or, even more unnaturally, to pursuit of that death which will surely come.<sup>33</sup>

And for Susan Langer the readiness is the final part of what she calls "the tragic rhythm," "a pattern of life" that is

exemplified in mental and emotional growth, maturation, and final relinquishment of power.... In that relinquishment lies the hero's true 'heroism' ---the vision of life as accomplished, that is, life in its entirety, the sense of fulfillment that lifts him above defeat.<sup>34</sup>

In Shakespeare's tragedy the sense of fulfillment for Hamlet is completed by one final gesture. In his last moments of life he attempts to address the audience with the meaning of what they have been witnessing. But being unable to speak, since "Death, / Is strict in his arrest," he relinquishes that task and confers an apostolic mission upon Horatio urging him to relate "Things standing thus unknown." "Absent thyself from felicity awhile," he urges Horatio, "And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story" (V. ii. 339-54).

Hamlet's words are at once a plea to Horatio and to us, for we "That are but mutes or audience to this act" (Line 340), even more than Horatio have been witness to the story of his

transformation. At the end of the tragedy, then, we the audience are invited not to look forward to a happy future, but in memory of Hamlet to look back over what we have witnessed and to put together the good complimentary to the evil that it represented, "to find in it the suggestion of an order that will not allow good or evil to stand alone."<sup>35</sup> In Hamlet's story, which weaves the work of psychological wounds and healing encounters, in Horatio's remembrance of that story, in Shakespeare's remembrance of the Saxo story and in the millionth remembrance and reenactment of Shakespeare's tragedy in performance ---in all these which mirror one another, we the audience are inspired to inch our way to a consciousness of the value of life and the psychological freedom provoked by the fact of death.

## NOTES:

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7. Charlton, pp.89-90.
8. D. G. James, from *The Dream of Learning* (1951), cited in Michael Hattaway, *Hamlet*, (London: Macmillan, 1987), p.59.
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10. Victor Hugo (1864), in *Major Literary Characters*, p.27.
11. Lowell, p.34.
12. Ivan Turgenev (1860), in *Major Literary Characters*, p.24.
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15. Myers, p.48.
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17. G. Wilson Knight, from *The Wheel of Fire* (1930), in *Norton Critical Edition*, p.185.
18. C. S. Lewis, from *Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem* (1942), in *Norton Critical Edition*, p.215.
19. Karl Jaspers, "The Tragic: Awareness, Characteristics, Interpretations," *Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism*, p.15.
20. See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1920) for an interesting, albeit more biological interpretation of the "death instinct" as the ultimate controlling force in life.
21. Cited in Holland, p.170.
22. Lewis, p.215.
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- York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, 1966), p.167.
24. Harold Goddard, from *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (1951), in *Modern Critical Interpretations*, p.24.
  25. Lowell, p.38.
  26. Mark Rose, "Reforming the Role," *Modern Critical Interpretations*, p.126.
  27. Bloom, p.3.
  28. Arthur Kirsch, "Hamlet's Grief," *Major Literary Characters*, p.135.
  29. G. W. F. Hegel (1835), *Hegel on Tragedy*, Ann and Henry Paolucci, eds., (New York: Scribners, 1975), p.90.
  30. Henry Granville-Barker, *Preface to Hamlet* (1946), (New York: Hill & Wang, 1957), p.7.
  31. Joseph Summer, "The Dream of a Hero," *Major Literary Characters*, p.150.
  32. Ibid, p.150.
  33. Ibid, p.150.
  34. Susan Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, (New York: Scribners, 1953), p.356.
  35. Myers, p.46.