12-1-2007

Acts of Being: Hamlet and the Philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard

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ACTS OF BEING: *HAMLET* AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of California, Davis, 2004

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota
December
2007

This thesis, submitted by Michael Lopez in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This thesis meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

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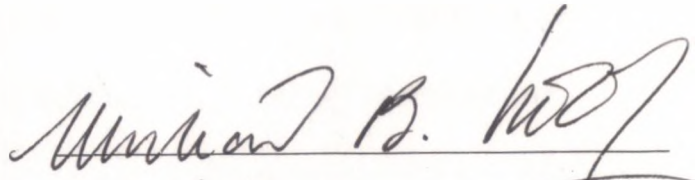
Signature 

Date 9/14/07

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No life is lived alone. And, no good (or great) work is the product of the individual of himself. All my work is the result of so many others who have allowed me to be a part of their *being*, and to them I hope this work is an adequate response to the great gifts they have given me.

To that end I thank Michael Beard, chair of my committee, teacher, advisor, and friend, who has always supported my academic and personal endeavors, wherever they might take me; his good wit, humor, and charitable person have sustained me through these several years of graduate school. Sharon Carson's kind and generous nature, knowledge of theology, philosophy, and literature, have helped me to see different and more profound insights for the figures I was discussing. And, Adam Kitzes' knowledge of Shakespeare, history, politics, and psychology was always useful and prescient – and I doubt I shall ever forget his remarkable lecture on *Othello* and the "stoning" of one's heart.

Tremendous gratitude is owed as well to the Kierkegaard Library, at St. Olaf College, in Northfield, Minnesota, under the direction of Gordon Marino, Boldt Distinguished Professor of the Humanities, and Cynthia Lund, Director of the Library, for their kindness and generosity in allowing me a blissful summer

of research at such a fine institution; the Folger Shakespeare Library, in Washington, D.C., for giving me the opportunity to *read* Shakespeare's life, and the lives of his contemporaries; and, the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre, at the University of Copenhagen, for providing me with the opportunity to *live* Kierkegaard, where Sarah Evald, Joakim Garff, Thomas Rasmussen, Bartholomew Ryan, and Brian Söderquist, all helped me to further my own connection to the *spirit* that is the work and life of Kierkegaard. These institutions, and the brilliant people who are a part of them, allowed me to discover fully the potential on the stages of my own life's way.

My mother, father, Lisa, Alfredo Jr., Matthew, and grandmother Judy, who have been supportive of me over these years cannot be thanked enough. It shall have to suffice that they know my gratitude exists where it matters most, in the work of memory as life. Their love has given me, when at times it seemed I could not continue, the will to do.

And to my friends, without whom I could never have had the will to be. In particular those friends who sent me off to North Dakota, from my native homeland in California, Eric Alborg, Peter Hays, Kevin Roddy, Elif Sonmez, Richard Speaker III, Raymond Waddington, and Bruce Winterhalder—together they have helped me to understand more about myself than even a hundred Hamlet's or Kierkegaard's could have revealed. And to my friends who received me in North Dakota—in particular, Cyle Cavett, Kristin Ellwanger, Mirko Hall,

Ursula Hovet, Justin Konickson, Mary Morley, Claudia Routon, Charles Turner, Jonathan Ulrich, Larry Woiwode, Alexander Wollan, Nicholas Zeman, and the crew at the Urban Stampede – thank you, for allowing me always to understand that I have a home in the North Country.

To the memory of my great-grandfather

Fritz Fredrickson

and for

Lisa, Matthew, and Alfredo, Jr.

Who have their own stages on life's ways to discover, and to be

ABSTRACT

This study is specifically concerned with analyzing the existential elements in William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, utilizing as methodology the works of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.

The aims of this study are chiefly to illuminate the usefulness of existentialism as an important, prescient, and timely methodology for criticism, as well as to reveal the applicability of Kierkegaard's works for literary analysis. There have, prior to this study, been other critical examinations of Shakespeare's work, utilizing the philosophy of Kierkegaard – however, unlike those other works of criticism, this project has undertaken comprehensive analysis of the play, making broad use of Kierkegaard's work (and other twentieth century thinkers), in order to come to as complete as is possible understanding of Hamlet as an individual psychology, and with that point of orientation to map his psychosocial, religious, and philosophic growth throughout the play. In that way, this study is useful to Kierkegaard and Shakespeare criticism, as it opens avenues of inquiry that have been lately neglected in the literary criticism's development, rejected by contemporary theory, and marginalized by the institutionalized methodologies of scholarship.

In doing this study, the final hope is that general principles of criticism are derived, which can then be applied to any work of literature with equal usefulness and benefit. Indeed, this project (and others like it) is particularly important in our cultural moment, where existentialism has been sidelined, in favor of methodological forms of inquiry that purport to be value-free, or which seek to undermine the idea and applicability of universals. This study rejects the contemporary norms of such studies, and argues for a fundamental critical shift towards criticism which (re)connects the individual reader to the universals of psychological development, experiential knowledge, and the search for individual meaning, endured by figures in literature, while retaining and embracing the particular nature of individual encounters through individual readership, and individual being.

This is a study that values the individual's encounter with himself, his particular moment of existence, suffering, and his coming to terms with a rejection of institutional, societal, and hierarchical valuation. Instead, this work argues for value, and essential centrality of ontology, that is the individual effort to discover meaning – a particular resurrection of *la condition humaine*, tempered by Kierkegaard's methodological structure, and the sobering tragedy of Shakespeare's Hamlet and *Hamlet* – that becomes, and ultimately is, truth for the individual.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

At first glance this project may seem to cover too much: too many theorists, critics, writers, and perhaps too many theories. Its consideration of time spans the late 1500's to early1600's (Shakespeare's time), to the nineteenth century (Kierkegaard), and frequently cites twentieth century thinkers. In addition to time, its scope crosses national boundaries – among them, Danish, English, German, ancient Greek – and disavows any particular categorization as being, for example, strictly philosophical or literary, in its approach to discussing *Hamlet*. Such an approach has its weakness: it opens itself up to assertions that the methodology in this study of Kierkegaard and Shakespeare lacks focus (or a particular emphasis), and as such renders itself useless as either a serious Kierkegaardian or Shakespearian work of criticism. I want, however, to avoid the terrain – historical, social, and political – of other critics, and engage in a theoretical study of *Hamlet* from a perspective better described as pastiche. My hope is that I produce a work of criticism that engages two very interesting figures of history and literature, and examine their struggles, conflicts, and psychologies, that have value for understanding the lives we lead.

On the one hand I'm dealing anachronistically in my comparison: a Danish prince, Hamlet (who exists only as a figure of literature), whose world is vastly different from that of the social critic and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. And in another sense I'm taking these two very different worlds – Shakespeare's literary production and the biographical and philosophical productions of Kierkegaard – and drawing parallels between them that suggest a much closer geographic, social, political, and cultural framework than actually is the case.

These are just some of the perils that I'm launching this project into, and moreover I think it also useful to say that I'm aware that just about every term, idea, figure (real or imagined), and issue that I bring up in this project is fraught with its own history and implications in the larger fields and discourses of which it is a part. A few examples of my use of language serves to illustrate this: when I use terms such as Being/being, time, ethical, or (and perhaps especially) existential – am I doing so in the way Heidegger, Sartre, Kierkegaard, or Nietzsche means them? The answer is, of course, to a certain extent both yes and no – but more importantly I am trying to elucidate the deeper threads of connection that exist between Hamlet and Kierkegaard's thoughts, without being drawn back by the world war that Sartre witnessed, or the debates that Kierkegaard found himself embroiled in. – I am, in short, appropriating this language in an – in a further borrowing to explain prior borrowing – uncanny way.

Clearly that does not excuse me from explaining myself, or in utilizing these highly complex, protean terms in a way that neglects their history – however, in that same vein I hope that when I use a term like "existential" it will mean to others what it means (in a very basic kind of way) to me: a method of thought which presumes that we have to proceed from our own individual existence in order to understand the world of which we are a part. That "ethical" will be understood as a set of coded values and morals which exist in all social communities, and that are ascribed as a methodological formulation of value judgments for actions. And that, similarly, in using terms like Being (a mixture of the uncanny/sublime [almost impossible to describe], spiritual connection in a world of others), and being (our individual motivations that allow us to become a fully fledged human-*being*) will be understood in a way that is directly similar to an understanding of Hamlet's evocation in Act III with 'To be or not to be.' – Which as anyone who thinks seriously about their individual being-in-Being in life knows, 'is the question.'

There are of course no definitive ways to understand that line in Hamlet – the diffusion of meaning that emanates from that single line concerning being has manifested itself into volumes of Shakespeare criticism, and countless other literary and personal responses. Rather, what I hope can be gained by the utilization of such terminology is that they can be utilized as basic tools, without all of the substantive theories they have ultimately grown into. Sartre is the

figure we associate most with existentialism (or perhaps it is Camus), and that is appropriate – Kierkegaard doesn't use that terminology to describe his philosophical works. But that term has meaning for us in the *zeitgeist* of our individual and collective mindsets – it has value for understanding our place in the world. And if this project is to be at least minimally successful, then the further meaning and placement of these terms throughout this work (and they are used often) is to be found within the context in which they are used. If I have failed to be specific enough – and that is a probable and distinct possibility – then it is because even my own critical powers are insufficient to draw from the wells of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the works of Kierkegaard, their full meaning and application.

This project is an individual study of the play *Hamlet*, and its ability to be usefully interpreted by several of Kierkegaard's works. The point is to delve with the tools of Kierkegaard and the rich depth of Shakespeare's creation, that so closely mirror our own individual encounters with life – with the hope that we emerge with a deeper understanding of the psychological conditions which motivate and hinder, liberate and enslave, our abilities to attain individual being in the lives we lead. In an effort to do this, the project's chief aim is to reveal principles of criticism and understanding to these issues: psychology, relations to others, emotions, and individual actions – so that others may see the usefulness in approaching other literary works in a way that seeks and values the

elucidation of the life forces and thrust, that literature has to uncannily connect us to the particular work, and to each other, in order to better understand our own conceptualizations of what it is to be.

Perhaps these aims are too uncertain (and too lofty) to be attained entirely – so that at the bare minimum, it is hoped, this project on Kierkegaard and *Hamlet* is an experiment in working through a dense work of literature through a useful and practical methodology (Kierkegaard), that orients itself around the constellations of individual psychology and its relation to the social community.

This next remark seems appropriate enough in elaborating the anatomy of this project on Kierkegaard and *Hamlet* – and was put to me nearly four years ago by a tough professor I admire. He said, "I can see the Shakespeare – but not the Kierkegaard." And indeed, what is the relation or point between the two that makes any worthwhile contribution to either fields of Shakespeare or Kierkegaard criticism? The answer I couldn't give then, but which I give now is – everything. I can not imagine finding a better theorist than Kierkegaard to use in approaching the figure of Hamlet (or any other of Shakespeare's characters) – because he is the single philosopher who sought to explore the elements of individual subjectivity in everything that we do to make meaningful lives, while still maintaining our fundamental spiritual connection to each other. And when I set out to study literature, it was to find those works that connected us as individual readers to the world of existence – irrespective of whether it was

George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* or William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Let me caution here: I am not suggesting in some draconian way that every individual reader comes to the same conclusions, feelings, or thoughts from each of these literary works (or any others) – in fact, it is the exact opposite. Hence the remarkable liberation of Kierkegaard's philosophy, which devotes itself to valuing those individual encounters with substantive issues, in a way that also promotes our connection to each other. We can each enter into an individual relationship with (and in fact, for Kierkegaard, we do) one another, literature, and God – but in the end, the point will have been to realize that to do so we come out of social communities, and ultimately reenter them.

Enter *Hamlet*. It is for me Shakespeare's most deeply probing tragedy; a work that goes on long after it has ended. The words of Hamlet strike a chord in our consciousness, and in many ways it is simply because he asks why he exists, and for what purpose his life is meant. But that's not quite it. It also has to do with his individual social life and the community of which he is a part: he leads an interesting and dynamic life; he is socially elite (he is, after all, a prince); has studied theology in the haunts of Martin Luther; he has family trauma, relationship issues (especially with Ophelia), is a dynamic and eloquent – albeit at times longwinded – speaker, and is put to a terrible task by a spectral phenomenon (which also happens to mirror some of his own deep seated, psychological desires). Taken together, Shakespeare created in Hamlet the (then)

most fully-fledged psychological literary figure ever to exist. (And if the ever-growing body of Shakespeare criticism or general literature related to Hamlet tells us anything, it is that this remains the case.)

So *Hamlet* was chosen because the main character is dense, and because the play is endlessly difficult to fully grasp and explain. But it was also chosen because, for me, he thinks and says some of the most penetrating and meaningful comments about individual existence, and our relations to others, that I've ever encountered in English literature. These issues fascinate me, and they are of course points of human existence that I am constantly on the road to further understanding – and this project is reflective of that. Ultimately any literary work, or set of works, could have been employed for the purposes of this project – and depending on my ability and desire to do the close analysis necessary for such a reading as the one undertaken here, come up with thoughts and ideas that were of equal use and value as the ones reached in this project. In *Hamlet*, however, I found the perfect combination of complexity and depth to match Kierkegaard's profound probing of individual existence. And so, in the end I chose works that I found to be personally challenging, and which I believe have the ability to contribute understanding to the challenging living that we as individuals endure.

Hamlet's psychology, his presentation, demeanor, and personality change often throughout the play – mirroring his own fractured psyche, his own

uncertainty about the situation he is in, and the choices he knows he must face. Kierkegaard's personal biography is right there with Hamlet – and so are many of the other people in this world that I've come to personally know. In this way Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors – those fictitious personas that Kierkegaard ascribes authorship to (in certain works) – is perfectly suited for discussing the stages of Hamlet's development in the play (or anyone else's for that matter). Kierkegaard himself sought to write from different perspectives in his pseudonymous works about individual experience, because that is part of subjective living (what we're all forced to deal with). When taken together however they form a powerful body of work, that is useful for analyzing subjective issues – in other words, just about everything – especially individual living and meaning. If you need a work that addresses the individual going against the grain of temporal moral codes, look to *Fear and Trembling*; if you want to hear arguments for being aesthetic or ethical, check out *Either/Or*; and, if you want to know why you shouldn't become preoccupied with material death, browse *The Sickness Unto Death*. These are of course simplifications of deeply meaningful and significant works – but the main point to be taken is that when you take these simplified singularities and combine them, then each of these particular works (or perspectives) contributes to understanding more deeply the totality of human being. We each go through periods of specific contemplation in our lives – and Shakespeare has Hamlet run through most of them in five acts; in

being able to have these multiple perspectives (Kierkegaard's works) to address our multiple points of being, we end up with an increased understanding of the larger picture that ultimately becomes Being.

Religion and philosophy should be nearing the surface of this introduction – and they are two areas that could easily become a multiple volume length study on Kierkegaard and *Hamlet*. Kierkegaard's work has substantive value not because it is specifically Christian, or that Kierkegaard himself is a Christian thinker; it has value for this analysis because of the issues and experiences he discusses in, among others, works such as *Fear and Trembling* and *Either/Or*. These subjective experiences with issues as diverse as God, seduction, death, and ethics, all come back to the central question of individual meaning – and that has value for discussing Hamlet, because he's dealing either directly or indirectly with these issues. That Kierkegaard provides points of reference for discussing these shared experiences makes him as useful as Aristotle, Freud, or Heidegger for understanding *Hamlet* (or our own lives). In this sense then I'm expropriating from Kierkegaard some of his major points in some of his major works, for the purpose of examining Hamlet's individual experiences, and his relations to others. In a way he's a representative metaphor for the everyman – that is to say, everyone who is trying to understand the existence into which they are thrown. So instead of religion meaning something very narrow and confined (granted, it is here ultimately Christian – simply by

nature of the texts and figures being discussed), I intend it to mean in the broadest possible way: the individual navigating a set of cultural values and thought, where the individual ultimately comes to have a deeper sense of spiritual presence within himself, and towards others. If that sounds vague, it isn't intentional: it's one of those things that is difficult to find words to describe – but that everybody has (to varying degrees) an understanding of, and I'll have to trust that *Hamlet* brings out in practice what Kierkegaard theoretically describes. (Hence those shared parallels of individual existence between Kierkegaard and Hamlet.)

Philosophy is a more appropriate way to go about delving into *Hamlet* anyway. That shared relationship between literature and philosophy is found in (among other places) ancient Greek philosophy. (Where would Aristotle or Plato have been without the works of Homer?) And my license, where taken, has been to take a mark out of their books by making use of figures that add greater complexity to this project – leaving me all the more to sort out. In using Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Aristotle, for example, I'm trying to draw on those specific points of reference in their overall works that help to further what Kierkegaard, Hamlet, and I are all individually (and collectively) trying to understand: life, and our place in it. This is not to say that this project is not systematic – it is; but you have to be willing to suspend the need for complete symmetry in order to see that life is anything but symmetric. (At least the middle

portion isn't symmetric.) So when I use Freud to discuss a particular point in Hamlet's psychological response to Gertrude, I do so knowing that there has been substantial work done on Freud, his shifting approach to Shakespeare (and *Hamlet*), and the larger debates concerning Freudian theory in general. I'm also aware that that might seem a bit shifty for a project that purports to be serious analysis – but I hope that in the end the pieces of the psychological image I'm trying to dissect and put together again bears out my specific use of these dynamic and contested intellectuals.

It is useful in moments like this to consider what the critic Walter Benjamin wrote in "On the Concept of History": "The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history" (390). In a similar sense I don't want to forget the contributions made by those major figures whose thoughts and voices have something to contribute to the chronicles of the individual experience. As well, in resurrecting the individual life that is Hamlet's, it is important to connect it with those theorists who might otherwise not play a role in discussing his attempts at being – but whose approaches to such issues meld with those of Kierkegaard's – in order to provide the fullest analysis of Hamlet's situatededness as possible. This is not an attempt to shirk responsibility for referencing the larger debates that this project alludes to, instead it is about returning to my original desire for an individual

character study, in order to illustrate those principles of criticism that can then be applied to other works with equal usefulness.

Despite this, however, there are still explicit connections for Shakespeare's works in Kierkegaard's thoughts. Indeed, Kierkegaard admired Shakespeare as a writer, and cites certain works by Shakespeare in his work. For our purposes, however, the beginning point of this study is Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way*, where we are given a brief analysis by one of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors, Father Taciturnus. In a brief passage he questions whether or not Hamlet is a religious drama, and writes:

> Börne says of "Hamlet," "It is a Christian drama." This to my thinking is a peculiarly good observation. I would alter it only by saying a "religious drama," and then would say that its fault is, not that it is a religious drama, but that it did not remain such to the end, or rather that it ought not to be drama at all. If Shakespeare will not give Hamlet religious postulates which conspire against him to produce religious doubt (wherewith the drama should properly end), then Hamlet is essentially a victim of morbid reserve, and the aesthetic demands a comic interpretation. (409)

For those critics looking for an explicit connection between Kierkegaard and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – there it is. Kierkegaard of course alludes briefly in other works to the play, but this is his longest analysis concerning this particular work.

It is included here because it serves as a useful starting point for understanding a very vague idea – one which, really, should be avoided all together: the idea of stages in Kierkegaard's philosophical corpus. It is altogether too simple to merely consider Kierkegaard's work as addressing the aesthetic, ethical, or religious, and that one simply moves amongst them in a dialectical fashion until they reach the most fulfilling point of existence (for Kierkegaard, the religious). And yet there is some value in utilizing those umbrella terms (and they are large) to understand basic points of reference in *Hamlet* – or anything else for that matter – but, only if greater analysis of its use in connection with an action or point of being is elucidated in greater detail. Then these large terms have a usefulness, not only for the particular issue being addressed, but also for utilizing the larger concepts in themselves (e.g. the "ethical" or "aesthetic") to discuss ways of being.

Stages on Life's Way then serves to illuminate the categories we'll be addressing, but beyond that it is of limited use. Gene Fendt in his work *Is Hamlet a Religious Drama?* has taken up the issue that Taciturnus addresses with respect to Hamlet, but this project is not concerned with that particular question – it is instead concerned with Hamlet's psychosocial development through the stages of aesthetic, ethical, and religious states of being. And it is important to remember that while the term religious can mean an infinite number of things, its use in this project is to expand upon Kierkegaard's use of it: as a way of being that realizes a connection with a vast otherness, that then allows us to go back

into the material world of existence and our social community, in order to act according to a truly just moral code (for Kierkegaard, the Bible). If we expand on Kierkegaard's notion of moral code, we can also see that such a framework for understanding our way of existing (in this case religiously) can be applied to a number of moral codes, that ultimately allow us to truly interact more justly towards one another.

One particular line of Tactiturnus' analysis deserves consideration here, where he says: "If Shakespeare will not give Hamlet religious postulates which conspire against him to produce religious doubt…then Hamlet is essentially a victim of morbid reserve" – it is, as previously stated, a point for beginning the work of this project, but even here we begin to see where the threads of unity begin to dissipate. Hamlet does have religious postulates, moral codes, social restrictions, and an individual conscience that perpetually conspire against him – and, which as I hope will be made clear in this project, create a fundamental religious doubt on the part of Hamlet, which he must ultimately overcome. That Hamlet's morbidity is so focused on death and on making meaningful choices should perhaps give us all something to consider doing, particularly in our own age of continuous consumption of glossy images and slick network programming. And so again it is important to see that while it is useful to consider *Stages on Life's Way* early in this analysis to show where I'm coming from, it is inadequate at best to analyze the play, or to reveal the fullness of

Kierkegaard's philosophy to understand Hamlet and its relevance to our own lives.

Something of that relevance – and the thrust of where I see shared similarities between Kierkegaard's thoughts (and life) – is better articulated through an excerpt of one of Kierkegaard's early journals, where Kierkegaard writes:

> No more than a person ever so well practiced in swimming can keep afloat in a storm unless he is deeply convinced of and has experienced the fact that he is indeed lighter than water, can one who lacks this inner point of orientation keep himself afloat in the storms of life. –Only when someone has understood himself in this way is he in a position to maintain an independent existence and thus avoid giving up his own I. How often we see (at a time when in our panegyrics we extol the Greek historian for knowing how to adopt a foreign style that is deceptively like the original author's, rather than censuring him, seeing that the first prize for an author is always for having his own style – that is with a form of expression and presentation which bears the mark of his own individuality – how often we see people who either from spiritual laziness live on the crumbs that fall from other people's tables, or for more egotistical reasons try to identify themselves with others until they

resemble the liar who, through frequent repetition of his stories, ends up believing himself. (*Journal AA* 19)

The structural parallels in this – what I would argue to be one of the great genuine quotations by an often witty, ironic, and evasive writer – and Hamlet's dilemmas, are unmistakable. And more importantly, what Kierkegaard says here is so much more useful for understanding *Hamlet*, Kierkegaard's own works, and their applications to analyzing other works, and our own lives. It is that "inner point of orientation…in the storms of life," that Hamlet must ultimately identify and attain, and what is more it must be a genuine and "independent existence" that is of his own choosing – the path, not the end, becomes the important element for an authentic individual existence. If all we do is wait to "live on the crumbs that fall from other people's tables," then we do no more than become "the liar, who through frequent repetition of his stories, ends up believing himself" – in other words, we become the most detestable hypocrite. We do not choose our own methodology for living life, rather we choose the spiritual laziness that late capitalism so eagerly seeks to provide, unless we too act like Hamlet and Kierkegaard in these respects: and ask ourselves seriously the questions of "Who am I?" "Why do I exist?" and "What is my purpose?" These are the beginnings of Kierkegaard's philosophy – they proceed from that idea of becoming an "original author" of our own individual I – and they navigate the incredibly complex web of relations that we share with others.

Raymond Waddington alludes to this act by Hamlet, of choosing a morality different than that expected by the ethical demands of his historical moment, when he writes in his article "Lutheran Hamlet" that, "Hamlet's resolved assurance, that not only is killing Claudius an action within "perfect conscience" but failing to oppose the king is itself an offense against religion, indicates his acceptance of a morality different from both the blind impulsiveness that resulted in Polonius' death and the agonized indecisiveness that inhibited earlier action" (38). Similarly this journal entry by Kierkegaard was written at a time (much like Hamlet's) where he was forced to reckon with his own existence as an individual 'I,' who through the strength of his own individual existence had to find meaningful truth for himself. Hamlet's effort is no less than this, and I hope too that our own individual pursuits to find our own 'I,' are done with no less intensity than that exhibited by Kierkegaard and Hamlet.

The immediate reaction to all of this should be – do we really need another study of *Hamlet*? It is the best known drama in Western literature, and is the one that has been endlessly theorized about, to the point of asking "Can another study really shed anything new?" And I am – to an extent – in line with Margreta de Grazia's criticism of all the psychological criticism that has been done on Hamlet, at the expense of the plot and themes in the play. She comments in *Hamlet without Hamlet* that:

> It was not sharper vision that brought Hamlet's complex interiority into focus. Rather it was a blind spot. In order for Hamlet to appear modern, the premise of the play had to drop out of sight. The premise is this: at his father's death, just at the point when an only son in a patrilineal system stands to inherit, Hamlet is dispossessed – and, as far as the court is concerned, legitimately. (1)

De Grazia's premise is of course a valid one, on both counts: that the play *Hamlet* is essentially about a dispossessed son – of both father and property – and that the emphasis in literary criticism over the past two hundred years has been to study the interiority of Hamlet's psychology, at the expense of the basic structure and plot of the play. I'm not necessarily in disagreement with de Grazia's overall assessment of *Hamlet* criticism – or even her contention that we should return our focus to certain historical elements of the play, like the transition of property and power from father to son, and the social elements of land, and power in general. De Grazia's further asserts that criticism antithetical to this, opens the door to ever greater distance from the plot of the play, where she remarks that:

> The focus of the play moved inward, and expressed itself not by the action primary to ancient drama, but by the withdrawl from action into the depths and interstices of character. With the tie to the past dissolved, Hamlet was newly opened to the future. Accompanying his subjectivity is what we might term a "futurity effect," a proleptic predisposition to times

to come. Freed from the determinants of plot, Hamlet is available to every advancing construal of what goes on inside. (18-19)

I especially like de Grazia's use of that phrase "futurity effect" with respect to *Hamlet* criticism – even though she means it derisively. It is true (especially after Freud) that the terms of engagement with the play radically altered, and became an endless introspection into the figure of Hamlet, his problems, the dilemma he faces in the demand from the Ghost, and the fact that he has been deprived of his rightful place on the throne of Denmark by his uncle, Claudius. But de Grazia's desire to return to the land, and its relation to Hamlet, is misleading to the overall structure of Hamlet's changes that he undergoes throughout the play. If Hamlet lacks that "subjectivity" that de Grazia contends has opened up the play – and especially its central figure – to endless theories about the nature of his being, then why read the play? Moreover, it strikes me that if we accept – and I'm quite willing to – de Grazia's central desire to resurrect those basic classical themes within the play (like the issue of land and its orderly transfer, or revenge tragedy as revenge tragedy), that that doesn't necessarily preclude or lessen the need for an increased understanding of Hamlet as a subjective individual, navigating a peculiar situation. In fact, it even helps to strengthen my overall approach to the play by showing how Hamlet grows beyond the basic structural plot elements, and becomes a radically different individual, unconcerned with such material interests by the end of the play. It also seems to me that that is

what literature is usually concerned with: individual growth, in spite of the basic plot elements. Hemingway's main character Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*, doesn't even have a plot to contend with – or is riding around in taxi's, drinking, chasing after an unattainable woman, and dealing with the effects of a World War a plot in itself?

In fairness, de Grazia is being historical in her analysis – and there is tremendous value in that. She is doing important work in trying to establish and delineate where the critical trends have shifted, and how they may have consequentially shifted our understanding of some very important (and fundamental) aspects of the play *Hamlet*, in our rush to understand the multiple-perspectives of Hamlet the character. Our understanding of the individual should not come at the expense of forgetting the circumstances in which we find him, or of the cultural institutions that dominate and contaminate his being. And de Grazia's assessment on the overall structure of the play is useful to consider, where she remarks that:

> *Hamlet* begins with the command to revenge…and ends with the satisfaction of the command…Once the command (or vow) has been uttered, the deed is as good as done: the dictates of the convention demand it. From the start, the end is both imminent and immanent. The extremes are set, and the middle – the meantime – is all that remains. That meantime takes the form not of a telic advance from start to finish, but

> rather a filling up between those two endpoints. The play's multiple acts of revenge all conform to this structure. A pause invariably intervenes between the resolution to act and its execution. (197)

This study is concerned with that "pause" that de Grazia maintains "invariably intervenes between the resolution to act and its execution." As with so many things in life – including the very act of biological existence (it consists of a beginning and ending) – the middle is what tends to be most interesting, and is usually the location where we place our fullest critical analyses. This doesn't negate the beginning of the play *Hamlet* – de Grazia is right that it "begins with the command to revenge," and that irrespective of anything else "the deed is as good as done." Of course she's speaking of Shakespeare's artistry, and the convention of literary writing and plot devices generally, but nevertheless her basic contentions are valid. Again, however, her assertion that "that meantime takes the form not of a telic advance from start to finish, but rather a filling up between those two endpoints" – strikes me as being a disregard for the depth that Hamlet possesses as a figure, whose psychology is interesting and ahead of his social climate. That Hamlet can rise above (or that Shakespeare could write him above) his particular historical moment, does not invalidate the work that has been done – or that will be done – to understand Hamlet's struggle in (and with) his moment, the psychological issues he confronts, or our relationship to him as readers with similar psychological confrontations.

Indeed, de Grazia's remark that "A hamlet is a diminutive ham, the Saxon word for a settlement, often marked off by a ditch, with too few dwellings to warrant a church" – as being a useful point of origin for seeing the connections she's making with the issues of land and power (and of Hamlet's lack thereof), seems to me to warrant all the more psychological study of Hamlet. That such a "diminutive" holder of properties stolen, should exist and recognize his existence as he does, marks a trajectory that closely resembles the dilemmas of the twentieth century, and those which shall increasingly confront us in the twenty first. Again, however, de Grazia's work is complementing this effort, rather than diminishing it – and in fact should make us more acutely aware of our own critical history, and force us to become increasingly self-critical towards the ways in which we approach *Hamlet*; and we should rightfully assess whether our removal of Hamlet from his situation and historical moment, are damaging to a fuller understanding of the play.

In replying to de Grazia's useful work, I hope to alert the reader to the vast amount of psychological criticism that has already been done on Hamlet. And it is enormous. This study did not spontaneously come into being with the original thought of: "No one has done a psychological study of *Hamlet*" – rather, the hope is that it will take a different approach towards understanding Hamlet's situation as being rather like our own, and that existentialism – and particularly the use of Kierkegaard's work – will help to make more explicit those shared

connections. In this way Eleanor Prosser's *Hamlet and Revenge* is useful for situating this project. Like de Grazia, Prosser is concerned with historical issues regarding Hamlet's relationship to the concept (and reality) of revenge. More importantly, however, while she dissects historical Elizabethan conceptualizations of revenge, the meaning of the Ghost, and the concept of private revenge with respect to Hamlet, she does so while acknowledging and formulating her claims with an awareness to Hamlet's psychological being. Prosser notes in her work *Hamlet and Revenge* that:

> There is no implication [for Hamlet] that good and evil do not exist. Hamlet is tortured precisely because he is not a moral relativist. Lust, hypocrisy, dishonesty – these are absolute evils. He suffers not because there is no such thing as virtue but because reality fails to meet the exacting standards that he believes apply to all men. (150)

Hamlet and *Hamlet* are about those issues of good and evil – and that Hamlet "is not a moral relativist." If anything, as Prosser notes, his intellectual standards demand more from others – though, not initially, himself. In other words, we can learn from Hamlet as a literary figure, and can draw upon his interactions with the hypocritical social community of which he finds himself a part, and draw parallels to our own social existence. Indeed, Prosser continues, "Even as he [Hamlet] voices his own jaundiced view of the reality around him, he affirms his faith in the wonder of creation and the miracle of man" (160). This is high prose

to describe phenomena that we all confront: the reality and possibility that exist in human life; the sacred and the profane; the divide between what is good and evil - however you care to characterize it. Moreover, Hamlet's uniqueness is furthered by the depth of his thought: he takes the time to consider the hypocrisy of life, and is not simply a figure deprived of the trappings of his position. In many respects Prosser grasps these conceptual issues, particularly as they relate to Hamlet as a figure who is trying to come into his own individual sense of being, where further on in her study she remarks:

> He [Hamlet] states his dilemma as "to be or not to be" - not as, "to live or not to live." The issue, as he sees it, is not between mere temporal existence and non-existence, but between "being" and "non-being." In other words, he is struggling with a metaphysical issue: not the narrow personal question of whether he, an individual man, should kill himself, but the wider philosophical questions of man's essence. (160)

Prosser is to the point, and what is more she is adept at delineating the particular issue for which this study will expand upon, where she says that Hamlet "is struggling with a metaphysical issue"; Hamlet as a character rises above his own situation of having lost a father, being under the political rule of a murderer, and having been deprived of his rights as the heir apparent. Instead, Hamlet is prodding himself about issues of being; he is asking questions about the point to and for his existence. It is exactly because Hamlet is questioning the essence of

his own (and humanity's existence), that he resonates so acutely with our own time – when we are in particular need of those literary figures who are both dissatisfied and unhappy with the content of their particular historical moment, and who ask *why*.

That said, Prosser's tremendous study is still concerned with different issues – as she says, "Hamlet is facing the moral question has been too long thought irrelevant to the play: whether or not he should effect private revenge" (160). That is not the question that will be addressed here. Though it is acknowledged that the Ghost's request does mirror some of Hamlet's conscious (and unconscious) desires, this study is nevertheless concerned with larger issues of being, and takes a different analytical approach than the idea of "private revenge." Instead, the focus in this work is the consideration of Hamlet's individual psychological growth; his – what I will explore to be – stages of development, and their relation to aestheticism, ethics, and being. In that way then this study is also less historical than either de Grazia's or Prosser's, though as I remarked earlier, such endeavors have tremendous value; in order to understand a message you must grasp the historical moment – especially as the audience would have understood it – of the messenger.

And yet, what of our own time and Hamlet's relevance to it? This analysis operates on the assumption that while Elizabethans had their own reaction to *Hamlet* – so too do we. Every generation must (re)create for itself the particular

(and often peculiar) meaning of a work, with often uncanny results. Of Hamlet's own struggle within his particular historical moment, Prosser argues:

> Hamlet is trapped between two worlds. The moral code from which he cannot escape is basically medieval, but his instincts are with the Renaissance. Shocked from his unthinking acceptance of the commandments of Church and State, he is forced to find a new orientation. Can God have created man a thinking creature and yet have ordered him not to use the very faculty that raises him above the animals? What is it, to "be"? (164)

Even Hamlet's own frame of reference is shattered by being positioned within two wholly distinct historical epochs, – and that makes the connection to our time all the easier. Our current cultural moment is a pastiche of multiple perspectives, historical and conceptual frameworks, and not unlike Hamlet we often find ourselves locked between the laws of society, and our own instinctual drives which say those laws are either unjust, or simply wrong. And much like Hamlet we're also trying to understand what it means to "be," to make meaningful choices that define ourselves as both an individual, and as being able to undertake meaningful actions. That dilemma, as Prosser notes it, is found in that collision between contradictory premises – are we simply to endure the situation we find ourselves cast into? – Or is there something more to the idea of being?

Without belaboring the merits of such an approach, and while placing this study within both the fields of Kierkegaard criticism (a slightly easier task, considering work has already been done regarding Kierkegaard and Shakespeare), and Shakespeare criticism, a further comment from Prosser's *Hamlet and Revenge* is useful for situating both the origin and need for the analysis undertaken here.

> In Hamlet's dilemma, we find the dilemma of civilized man, a dilemma that becomes more profound as civilization becomes progressively restrictive. In our own day, the dilemma looms large. Caught in an age of increasing frustration, hemmed in by civil law and social codes, lost in the mass, many have raised Hamlet's questions. What is man if his chief good be but passive resignation to a will other than his own? When is obedience merely a euphemism for cowardice? In the modern world, many have argued that man can find his "being" only by obeying his own instincts and the dictates of his own private will – only by defying or at least ignoring, the dictates of civil and social law. (250)

Prosser's remark of "in our own day," must be relativized: the work *Hamlet and Revenge* was published in 1967, and so is a product of that explosive moment in our cultural history. And yet I think that "Hamlet's dilemma," which Prosser saw as being relevant to the particular historical era she was writing in, is even more pronounced in our own moment. Those questions that she sees Hamlet

asking: questions of freedom and the will to be, its conflicts with the requirements of modernity, society, and law, are all issues that are becoming more omnipresent, and thus necessitate ever greater studies and questions on issues of freedom, being, and how to understand the defiance of social order. In a certain respect then this project is an extension of those questions that Prosser was asking in the 1960's, and finds its bearings in those questions that she sees Hamlet asking.

When Prosser concludes, however, that: "Hamlet does, indeed, retreat from rebellion, a fact that a modern reader may regret…He defiantly asserts his own being against all limitation, but he ultimately accepts limitation as the only means of freeing him to find that being" (250), I can not entirely agree. What Prosser interprets as Hamlet's ethical "retreat from rebellion" is, for me, a movement towards a deeper and more spiritual understanding of his position. He has come to realize that in resigning himself to the material finitude of his existence, he is able to truly free himself to act meaningfully as an individual. Prosser hints at this realization by Hamlet when she notes that, "he [Hamlet] rises to affirmative reconciliation. He has not abandoned his search for being. His search has ended in the serene knowledge that "the readiness is all'" (250). That is the point of departure for this study – and where it will continue that project that was begun in a historical moment quite like our own: to analyze and

understand that "search for being," and what, exactly, Prosser is alluding to when she says that Hamlet has risen to "affirmative reconciliation."

While this study is by nature imperfect, and its analysis incomplete – the hope is, nevertheless, that its vision will contribute to a deeper understanding of Hamlet's sense of being, particularly at the end of the play, where "the readiness is all." And that in doing so, it will transcend its flaws and incompleteness.

CHAPTER II

THE LAWS OF LIFE: SUFFERING, THE AESTHETIC-ETHICAL, AND THE (NON)DIALECTICAL 'I'

in the blue night
frost haze, the sky glows
with the moon
pine tree tops
bend snow-blue, fade
into sky, frost, starlight.
the creak of boots.
rabbit tracks, deer tracks,
what do we know.

– Gary Snyder
"Pine Tree Tops"

Literature is, in some ways, a poor reflection of life. The world you encounter in a work of literature operates by necessity, rather than by chance or accident, as is so often the case in real life. And yet, at certain times in fiction, you encounter those literary figures whose individual personality and particular world so closely mirror our own, that you begin to wonder how an author has such an uncanny ability to replicate individuals (us) he never knew. *Hamlet* is such a work; despite having been written over four hundred years ago, the main themes that it addresses – individual choice, uncertainty, questions of morality, and action – are those that we can readily appreciate. And its main figure, Hamlet, is

someone we can especially sympathize with and understand, particularly after two World Wars, major philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, and writers like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Camus, Hemingway, Stoppard, and Beckett. Hamlet is struggling with what it means to be an individual who has obligations in a world that is, for him, governed by a murderer – but more importantly, is one in which hypocrisy and injustice rule, and which he must navigate. But it's not as easy as that. Hamlet is not an ideal hero, because his intellect overrides immediate moral judgment and action; his delays are anything but advantageous to the cause – all the major characters die, either directly or indirectly as a result of his intellectual thought, plots, and delays; and because he has self-doubt.

Hamlet is not certain about his world, and he is especially uncertain about what happens after he leaves it. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare succeeds in pausing the turmoil of life to focus his creative energies on one figure, that of Hamlet, who until an encounter with a ghost (and at times, even after), strikes us as an inward, self thinking, and self referencing, dandy. He doesn't seem to be really concerned about others or their welfare, rather he's mostly interested in how he feels, and what he thinks – all of which help us to see the benefit of utilizing Kierkegaard's philosophy for understand Hamlet's individual development as a human being. For much like our own world, and the issues that we confront on a daily basis, the most important ones for Hamlet will be confrontations with his self, with

what it means to live for the benefit of others, and to act according to a higher moral dictate than the one provided by his social community. He has to mediate through the uncertainty of human life, to which only his actions can have any concrete meaning for his personal existence. More importantly, however, Hamlet has to discover and choose for himself a way of being that is more than that of a self-interested aesthete, and is even ethics – that is, by simply following the rules. Understanding that this complex web of self-chosen interactions and choices are what define the self, and in using those choices to negotiate the uncertainty of life in order to find meaning which is true for the individual (existentialism), where tracing the spiritual psychology (and development) of Hamlet allows us to further examine this philosophy and character study, in practice.

From the earliest moments in *Hamlet*, we find that we have entered into a world wracked by uncertainty, and tainted by the sense that something is wrong. As one of the guards, Barnardo, remarks in the opening of the play, "'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco," to which Francisco responds, "For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold / And I am sick at heart" (1.1.5-7). These remarks are significant to an existential discussion of *Hamlet*, for as Horatio remarks upon entering this scene at the beginning of the play to Barnardo:

> BARNARDO. Say, what, is Horatio there?
> HORATIO. A piece of him. (1.1.17-18)

'A piece' of Horatio is present[1], that is to say he is not fully present either to himself, or in the larger fractured environment of the play. What Shakespeare succeeds in constructing here is an understanding that the moral and ethical structures are in disarray – emphasized in that opening where only a piece of an individual is present. As the play unfolds we come to discover that that fracture extends to the political, social, and religious spheres in Denmark, because of a subversion to the natural social order.

It is Horatio who proves himself to be a pivotal figure, navigating the ambiguous currents that form the psychosocial elements of the play, because it is Horatio who must deal – from an intellectual and scholarly mindset – with the presence of the Ghost.

> MARCELLUS. Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy
> And will not let belief take hold of him
> Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us…
> HORATIO. Tush, tush, 'twill not appear. (1.1.22-24; 28).

Horatio is fractured – only 'a piece' of him is present – and yet it is he who is called upon to ascertain the validity of the existence of a supernatural presence. Within the very earliest parts of the play Shakespeare has managed to create a world that is not only absurd, but one which exists within an almost primordial

[1] I am grateful to Richard Purkarthofer of the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre at the University of Copenhagen for drawing my attention to this line as an issue of fragmented consciousness, and for an extended discussion of that particular concept in Kierkegaard's philosophy.

and spiritual mythology, governed and navigated only by the individual, on the strength of individuality and choice alone. There are no institutional forces for the guards to fall upon – indeed they seem unable to comprehend fully the situation in which they find themselves. Of course, it is at the moment when Horatio is at his most doubtful –"Tush, tush, 'twill not appear" – that the Ghost makes its appearance.

> BARNARDO. In the same figure like the King that's dead.
> MARCELLUS. Thou art a scholar – speak to it, Horatio.
> BARNARDO. Looks 'a not like the King? Mark it, Horatio.
> HORATIO. Most like. It harrows me with fear and wonder.
> BARNARDO. It would be spoke to.
> MARCELLUS. Speak to it, Horatio.
> HORATIO. What are thou that usurp'st this time of night
> Together with that fair and warlike form
> In which the majesty of buried Denmark
> Did sometimes march? By heaven, I charge thee speak. (1.1.40-48)

It falls to Horatio who is a "scholar" to "speak to it," leaving us with little doubt as to the validity of the spectral figure's existence. Horatio is struck with "fear and wonder" at such a sight, and recognizes the Ghost's desire to communicate; even Barnardo comprehends this when he remarks that "it would be spoke to" – though, one might ask, to what end. This ghost, if it is "like the King that's dead," clearly has business on his mind as he clamors around his old castle "in which the majesty of buried Denmark / Did sometimes march," suggesting an underlying note of violence in the Ghost's purpose.

This is not a ghost of peace: rather there is a clear metaphoric allusion to the unnatural end that old King Hamlet met. Nevertheless, all of these figurative references: Horatio as a scholar, "buried Denmark," and the Ghost being in "warlike form," serve to reveal that Denmark and its old King are anything but buried, and that the message he wishes to communicate is ultimately not meant for any scholar, or former guard that served him. When Horatio declares, "By heaven, I charge thee / speak" the Ghost leaves, but not because Horatio has utilized the term "heaven" as a way to mark it either as a good ghost or one that intends evil, rather it is because the idea of heaven represents wholeness, a oneness with God (in Kierkegaard's terms, "absolute"), and this ghost is anything but in heaven. There is an inability to communicate over the chasm – this is why the image of Purgatory's a potent one – between the Ghost, Horatio, and the Guards, it is because they lack the moral vision and common ground to understand one another, such that their ranks as scholar and soldier are useful only for establishing that this ghost is not the product of mere superstition.

MARCELLUS. It is offended.
BARNARDO. See, it stalks away.
HORATIO. Stay, speak, speak, I charge thee speak.
MARCELLUS. 'Tis gone and will not answer.
BARNARDO. How now, Horatio, you tremble and look pale.
Is this not something more than fantasy?
What think you on't?
HORATIO. Before my God, I might not this believe
Without the sensible and true avouch

Of mine own eyes.
MARCELLUS. Is it not like the King?
HORATIO. As thou art to thyself.
Such was the very armour he had on
When he the ambitious Norway combated. (1.1.48-60)

While it is useful to think of the Ghost as being offended, particularly if one wishes to make the case for it being a spirit of Hell, it is less useful when one thinks of the one-directional communication that occurs here. The Ghost made no indication as to whom he wished to speak, indeed the Ghost makes no remark at all. The significance of this one-directional exchange is to reveal that direct communication between Horatio and the Ghost is not possible. What Horatio does succeed in doing, however, despite not being able to enter into a verbal exchange with the Ghost, is to provide (to the audience) verification of the ghost's existence in reality, but more importantly that this ghost is more than a ghost who simply haunts.

MARCELLUS. Thus twice before, and jump at this dead hour,
With martial stalk hath he gone by our watch.
HORATIO. In what particular thought to work, I know not,
But in the gross and scope of mine opinion
This bodes some strange eruption to our state. (1.1.64-68)

"With martial stalk" the Ghost sallies throughout the castle, and as Horatio notes "In what particular thought to work, I know not." Nevertheless, the Ghost's representative value in the play increases, especially because his presence "bodes some strange eruption to our state." Of course this "eruption" is

not merely to the sociopolitical structure of the state, it is also an affront and eruption to the state of mind for the characters involved. Much of the play revolves around this central motion of unsettledness: the Ghost's presence (omens of eruption) parallels deep anxiety that has the ability to destroy the political structure of the state, and ultimately the social hierarchy of the community. Indeed, we further come to understand, after Horatio's remarks on the "eruption to our state" that the Ghost portends, is that old King Hamlet defeated the King of Norway, but that now young Fortinbras of Norway sits encamped at the seat of the Danish empire. Horatio goes further, noting that Fortinbras intends "to recover of us by strong hand / And terms compulsatory those foresaid lands / So by his father lost" (1.1.101-102). Aside from the bad omen of Fortinbras camping with his army outside the Danish castle (the center of political authority), it is also worth noting the functional importance of fathers, the hierarchical authority that they represent, and the pattern of absent fathers in the play. Both Hamlet and Fortinbras have lost fathers (and of course Laertes will eventually come to lose his), and both are seeking to act as powers of restoration within their own particular moral and ethical universes. At the conclusion of the play this issue will make itself apparent, through an important comparison between Hamlet and Fortinbras' political ability to govern the state – and to act as a restorative for the authority of the father.

BARNARDO. Well may it sort that this portentous figure

Comes armed through our watch so like the King
That was and is the question of these wars.
HORATIO. A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye
In the most high and palmy state of Rome
A little ere the mightiest Julius fell
The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets…
As harbingers preceding still the fates
And the prologue to the omen coming on,
Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
Unto our climatures and countrymen. (1.1.107-115; 121-124)

Prophetic words to be sure, especially the idea that the Ghost is a harbinger who precedes the fates, and worse (though poetically articulated) is that it is only "the prologue to the omen coming on." Rich in biblical references[2] ("a mote to trouble the mind's eye"), literary references, and prophecy, Horatio's unusual understanding of the events which Denmark (and perhaps even Hamlet) are about to endure roll forth from him. In an echo of the omens given to Caeser: "the graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead / Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets," Horatio's remarks are a bloody premonition of things to come. Again, the emphasis upon symbolic harbingers, metaphoric references to a collision within the will of something beyond material existence: "heaven and earth together demonstrated / Unto our climatures and countrymen," suggest that the events that will take place are beyond comprehension by the individuals involved (with the exception of Hamlet), and that the requirement demanded by

[2] See for example Matthew 7.3

the natural order for the restoration of things is a request to which there must be a reply.

> HORATIO. But soft, behold, lo where it comes again…
> If thou hast any sound or use of voice,
> Speak to me.
> 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…
> MARCELLUS. Shall I strike it with my partisan?
> HORATIO. Do, if it will not stand.
> BARNARDO. 'Tis here.
> HORATIO. 'Tis here.
> MARCELLUS. 'Tis gone. (1.1.125; 127-134; 138-141)

Even as Horatio attempts unsuccessfully to directly communicate with this other being, the Ghost, an understanding is revealed of the relationship between speaker and hearer. Direct communication is possible only if the method by which the communication takes place occurs within a common framework, not only of language, but also (and arguably more importantly) the concept of mind with which the two find the means and method to express statements of coherence. Horatio's limitations are not purposefully self-imposed: it is because his conceptual framework does not allow for the Ghost's desire for his death to be revenged to be understood; it conflicts with Horatio's scholarly and political sensitivities.

It is a secret that can be fully understood and acted upon only by Hamlet. The relationship between the Ghost and Horatio can only be one of indirect communication, because Horatio is not prepared to listen to the message of the Ghost, asking it "if there be any good thing to be done / That may to thee do ease and grace to me," where the focus is on establishing a relationship between Horatio and the Ghost; Hamlet's connection with the Ghost seems preexisting, and immediately understood between them. Understandably, since the Ghost's message could not reasonably offer any comfort to Horatio, who is sufficiently politic and socially adept to not wish to murder Claudius. Following this, Horatio rightly focuses on attempting to situate the Ghost's presence within a political framework, asking it, "if thou art privy to thy country's fate / Which happily foreknowing may avoid / O, speak." Again, the Ghost will not answer this question, for while the country's fate will be the fall of Claudius, and the restoration of order by young Fortrinbras, it again is not directly the fate of the country for which the Ghost is present. It is a personal message, and Horatio's purpose is to serve as messenger (as he does, when he relates this news to Hamlet), and he must do so without understanding the content or meaning of either the origin of the message or the message itself.

MARCELLUS. It faded on the crowing of the cock.
Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated
This bird of dawning singeth all night long,

And then, they say, no spirit dare sit abroad…
HORATIO. So I have heard and do in part believe it…
Let us impart what we have seen tonight
Unto young Hamlet, for upon my life
This spirit dumb to us will speak to him.
Do you consent we shall acquaint him with it?
As needful in our loves, fitting our duty?
MARCELLUS. Let's do't, I pray, and I this morning know
Where we shall find him most convenient. (1.1.156-160; 164; 168-174)

The importance of the Ghost fading "on the crowing of the cock" is significant because it speaks to spiritual confinement, and to the horrendous act endured by the Ghost in life. When Horatio comments, "so I have heard and do in part believe," he is expressing skepticism towards the folklore to which the night guards seem subject. More functionally, the Ghost's confinement allows for Hamlet to be notified by Horatio – the messenger – and underpins the idea of specificity in communication: the Ghost's message can be interpreted and fulfilled only by Hamlet. Horatio recognizes this when he comments that, "this spirit dumb to us will speak to him [Hamlet]." In rendering the Ghost mute to the other characters of the play, the stage is set specifically for an individual – Hamlet – to take upon himself an incredibly arduous task: the murder of a king. More significantly, it forces a single individual to enact this effort without the assistance of others – indeed who could help him directly fulfill such an act – and so will require of him an absolute ownership of himself, in order that he can

possess the absolute spirit to act. The philosopher Martin Heidegger articulated an understanding of ownership as being a necessary foreground for being (similar to that of Kierkegaard), when he asserted in his essay "What Are Poets For" that:

> If Being is what is unique to beings, by what can Being still be surpassed? Only by itself, only by its own, and indeed by expressly entering into its own. Then Being would be the unique which wholly surpasses itself (the *transcendens* pure and simple). But this surpassing, this transcending does not go up and over into something else; it comes up to its own self and back into the nature of its truth. Being itself traverses this going over and is itself its dimension. (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 129)

That notion of "only by itself, only by its own, and indeed by expressly entering into its own," is the concern that Hamlet will occupy himself with for much of the play, until he reaches that moment of ownership of the self whereupon he can act. It is not enough to merely accept or acquiesce to a fate, or a particular situation (such as the one Hamlet is thrust into by the Ghost's imperative). To take ownership of something is to question it, its meaning for one's life, and then to truly accept it as something which is ours, inseparable from our essential being. That is what Heidegger (and Kierkegaard) is expressing in the line, "it comes up to its own self and back into the nature of its truth," – that is it becomes

a truth within itself, and it is the application of this in practice which Hamlet does, and which begins his existential development.

> CLAUDIUS. Now follows that you know: young Fortinbras,
> Holding a weak supposal of our worth
> Or thinking by our late dear brother's death
> Our state to be disjoint and out of frame –
> Co-leagued with this dream of his advantage –
> He hath not failed to pester us with message
> Importing the surrender of those lands
> Lost by his father with all bands of law
> To our most valiant brother…
> How is it that the clouds still hang on you?
> HAMLET. Not so much, my lord, I am too much in the 'son.'
> GERTRUDE. Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off
> And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
> Do not for ever with thy vailed lids
> Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
> Thou knowst 'tis common all that lives must die,
> Passing through nature to eternity. (1.2.17-25; 66-73)

The message of the Ghost will not, however, find an ethical Hamlet capable of acting on behalf of others, nor will it find a Hamlet who has entered into the stage of religious being, that is that individual who has resigned himself away from material finitude, and who instead possesses the strength to make choices that go against the ethos of a particular social community; instead we encounter an aesthetic Hamlet, overtly analytical, self-concerned, and depressed. "Good Hamlet" Gertrude declares, "cast thy nighted colour off / And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark." In a deceptively simple phrase, Gertrude has helped

to illuminate the absurdity into which Hamlet is thrown: his mother has hastily remarried Hamlet's uncle Claudius, who has murdered Hamlet's father, and who signifies, figuratively, Denmark – hence, the political necessity of looking upon the entirety of Denmark as a friend. Hamlet's own mother is advising him not to feel sorrow over the loss of his father, because it is the common thing that all living creatures must die – including (and especially) kings – "passing through nature to eternity."

Were Hamlet a politically savvy figure, he might see fit to think of the situation as one in which it were in his (and the country's) interests to accept the situation as he finds it, and to disavow his depression. But as Hamlet indicates in his aside, "a little more than kin, and less than kind" (1.2.65) and "not so much, my lord, I am too much in the 'son'" that possibility is limited. Playing on the idea of *sun* and *son*, Hamlet establishes himself as an aesthetic intellectual and a capable wordsmith, and that will play a significant role later in the play. Moreover, the interchange of sun and son is also a commentary on the his being unnaturally (still) saddened by the death of his father. It is but too much "sun" that has caused his depression, and one of course can't help but see the contrast between light (sun/son) and the darkness of his demeanor.

> HAMLET. Ay, madam, it is common.
> GERTRUDE. If it be
> Why seems it so particular with thee?
> HAMLET. 'Seems,' madam – nay it is, I know not 'seems'.

'Tis not alone my inky cloak, cold mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black…
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed 'seem',
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and suits of woe. (1.2.73-78; 82-86)

It is not my mere appearance of sorrow, Hamlet informs his "cold mother," rather the depth of my individual psychology is steeped in that which "can denote me truly," through those "forms, moods, shapes of grief," that other men (like Claudius) "might play," and these mere outward forms of depression are but "the trappings and suits of woe." Hamlet's aesthetic sensibilities are present: he is concerned with his sensuous emotions, and with the impact the situation has on him – his reference is to externalities, the "forms" and "shapes of grief," not the reality of the emotion in itself. Despite the selfish I-centered response Hamlet gives, we can sympathize with Hamlet's circumstances – few, if any of us, could not feel sorrow and anger at losing a father, to say nothing of a mother's quick remarriage to his uncle, and can subsequently appreciate Hamlet's hostility towards his situation.

"These [are] but the trappings and suits of woe," declares Hamlet in response to his mother's request to dispense with his outward melancholic demeanor. And Gertrude could have political motivations for doing this: after all the natural order of the social hierarchy has been radically altered, and it would

serve the structure and order of Claudius' rule to have Hamlet at least feign happiness. Yet again, however, we see that Hamlet is positioned as a figure who is both unwilling (perhaps, also unable) to serve the unjust situation in which he has found himself, and more functionally it is because he is unwilling to cast off his depressed outlook that he becomes the character who must restore the fractured environment of wrong that Claudius has created. Hamlet as a character cannot exist as Hamlet without the morally absurd universe that is his habitat, and he could not serve as one of the most fully developed psychological figures in Shakespeare's creative works were it not for the spiritual engagement for a higher sense of morality that he – and only he within the play – possesses. The fullest rendering of obligation, restoration, internal conflict, and unknowing are found in Hamlet; the other characters possess minor emulations of these important emotions, but they serve only to reveal the deeply felt trauma that Hamlet endures. Shakespeare focuses the plight of human being in Hamlet, and then proceeds to complicate it with Hamlet's intellectual sensitivity, impulsiveness, and delay, which serve to heighten Hamlet as a dramatic figure who embodies the self-questioning inherent in existential thinking, and which makes him the figure who cannot obey the laws of his time – those that would compel him to shed his cloak of woe in favor of hypocrisy – and so he must obey a higher calling found only within himself.

As we move into the central thematic concerns of the play, a useful parallel for understanding this vaguely drawn idea a higher morality within the self, can be found in Kierkegaard's use of Abraham and Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*. We find in *Fear and Trembling* a brief recapitulation of the Biblical story, where Abraham and his wife Sarah, who are both very old, are told by God that they will have a child. Eventually Sarah gives birth to a son, Isaac, and of course as Kierkegaard notes, this in itself was a great gift, and is one for which there was no appropriate measure for the joy felt by the father, Abraham. Eventually, however, God says to Abraham that he must sacrifice Isaac to prove his faith in Him, and Kierkegaard says this is unthinkable: who could violate the laws of society, morality, nature, and the love a father has for a son – for a son that God that gave to him in the first place? Yet that is the situation Abraham finds himself in, and Kierkegaard says that it is his faith in God (the "absolute"), despite being within a morally absurd universe where such a thing could happen.

It is Abraham's task, Kierkegaard tells us, to move beyond the ethical, in order to be able to come into a direct relation with faith in God; that even though God has demanded that he sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham must nevertheless have faith that Isaac will be restored, through God, to him. The demand is for a spiritual transcendence that requires a renunciation of the ethical, of any conceptual moral framework, because it is only through Abraham having faith in

the absolute that he is able to succeed. Indeed, as Kierkegaard argues, it is only because Abraham has absolute faith in his self, through God, the absurdity of his condition, and his choice, that he can sacrifice his son. There is no denying that there's a paradox here, and Kierkegaard notes this when he writes in *Fear and Trembling* that, "The ethical expression for his [Abraham's] relation to Isaac is that the father must love the son" (70-71) – and yet what happens when that love conflicts with duty to God? That's where Kierkegaard's important idea of the leap of faith makes its appearance. Abraham has to make a purely existential choice within himself, to either follow God's command or not. Both choices have consequences; one (not following the command), and thereby not murdering his son, seems much more grounded in an ethical framework than the former; nevertheless, the only way to decide is to choose. Abraham chooses God's command, and takes a leap of faith to believe that God will restore Isaac, to him, which ultimately proves to be the case. Clare Carlisle remarks on this in *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming*:

> Just as rational criteria are unable to help Abraham decide between two absolutes, so this faith in God's love cannot be grounded by reason. According to rationality, a command that Abraham inflict such tremendous suffering on himself and on Isaac, *and* destroy the future society that Isaac represents, without any gain to anyone, cannot be an

expression of love. For Kierkegaard, it is precisely this lack of rational justification that testifies to the greatness of Abraham's faith. (99)

This is useful because Kierkegaard emphasizes the role of the individual in decision making, irrespective of ethical claims on individual moral agency. As Carlisle notes it is, in fact, the "lack of rational justification that testifies to the greatness of Abraham's faith." Much like Abraham, Hamlet must make a choice – but to what ethical framework can he turn? Claudius is, after all, a murderer; and so too will Hamlet become a murderer if he commits the action demanded by the Ghost. Hamlet must make a choice that is not necessarily right by any given standard, but which he must trust will ultimately be the right one – with nothing to go on, except to act on the strength of the absurd, and to make an individual decision as to what is right.

Much as Kierkegaard illuminates in his most expansive covering of the tension between aesthetic and ethical impulses, *Either/Or*, Hamlet must advance from his egoistic aesthetical framework that operates around an ontological 'I,' into the more sympathetic (with others) understanding of his obligation to restore the state, though not the family. If Hamlet were to remain solely ethical, then he might be rightfully considered an ethical figure (though he can't be, because of the tremendous destruction his actions cause), rather, in order for us to understand Hamlet's successes we have to comprehend the spiritual evolution

that occurs as he embarks upon his efforts to understand and dispel his egoistic impulses through existential inwardness, in order to act meaningfully.

Ironically, it is the murderer Claudius who continues this theme of ethical requirements – especially those inherent in Hamlet's position as prince –and the necessity of circumstances to appear normal. He reminds Hamlet that

> CLAUDIUS. 'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
> To give these mourning duties to your father,
> But you must know your father lost a father,
> That father lost his, and the survivor bound
> In filial obligation for some term
> To do obsequious sorrow; but to persever
> In obstinate condolement is a course
> Of impious stubbornness, 'tis unmanly grief,
> It shows a will most incorrect to heaven…
> For what we know must be, and is as common
> As any the most vulgar thing to sense – …
> A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
> To reason most absurd, whose common theme
> Is the death of fathers. (1.2.87-95; 98-99; 102-104)

Claudius has summed up the structural issues at play within the play: Hamlet's inconsolable grief, his suffering at the loss of his father, and more importantly that this grief comes at the dangerous possibility of looking bad for Claudius and his rule – not a good thing as the Norwegians are encamped upon the doorstep of the Danish kingdom. Ironically (again), it is Claudius who lectures Hamlet on propriety in death, mourning, and the incorrectness of too-long mourning as being "a fault to nature," despite the fact that Claudius himself is guilty of the

most egregious fault to the religious, ethical, political and social nature of the community, that being the murder of his brother.

As if anticipating the many hypocritical court-room scenes of our present age, where a lawyer often wins a case by barraging the victim with the qualities that made their victimization unavoidable, here we have the great absurdity and hypocrisy of the murderer lecturing about appropriate (and natural) behavior. Claudius furthers the absurdity of the situation by citing Hamlet's acts as being against Heaven, invoking the powerful remark that it is "a fault to nature, / To reason most absurd, whose common theme / Is the death of fathers" (1.2.101-104). Depending on your maneuvering you can think of God as a father, the redeemer of mankind through father-like teaching and love; Hamlet as a student of theology would not have missed this centrality of father in Claudius' claim: heaven, death, fathers and sons, where the ultimate demand is that Hamlet submit to the natural social order, where Claudius has assumed (by divine, political, social, and sexual right) the role of the father. Death may be common for Claudius, but for Hamlet the situation is far beyond the realm of the political: the loss of his father, for Hamlet as son, is an unbearable wound that is exacerbated within this morally absurd schematic of a Denmark haunted by unspoken guilt, sealed by the Ghost's demand (a former father) to avenge his murder.

Hamlet does not have the opportunity to reply to Claudius' long explanation of his rightful place as the new political (but not spiritual) father, as Gertrude interludes "Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet. / I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg" (1.2.118-119). Hamlet relents and remains, and at this point in the play we are witness to one of Hamlet's great aesthetic monologues.

> HAMLET. O that this too too sallied flesh would melt,
> Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
> Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,
> How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world! (1.2.129-134)

One need merely look to Kierkegaard's character "A" of *Either/Or* to find the aesthetic psychology that we see here. The bemoaning of a weary existence, where "how weary, stale, flat and unprofitable / Seem to me all uses of this world!" The aesthetic individual is permanently locked within himself, where he considers everything to exist for the purposes of entertainment, without any recognition of the other, and never seeks to engage in relationships which value the other as a distinctly individual person. The aesthetic individual views the universe as an existence to be tolerated, enjoyed, but in a purely, 'I' motivated way, which perceives each negative action as evidence of a miserable world, whereby everything inherits negative meaning. Why should "I" have to be held

to any kind of *ethical* or *moral* obligation – the aesthetic individual asks? Why can't this "too too sallied flesh…melt," without acknowledging the fact that this "sallied flesh" is all that we possess in the material world. Yet that is the aesthete's great ability, to neglect the material as an ethical relationship within himself, instead choosing to view the material being as something to exploit, and to enjoy without obligation, at the expense of others. In the speech there is also the recognition that canon law forbids suicide, and further reveals Hamlet's indecision as he struggles with the tremendous weight of his father's death. The aesthetic offers no solution other than the immediate, however, which is without either reflection or ethical relation to the self. Thus, Hamlet resorts to, at the end of the speech, engaging in the work of memory as mourning, dredging his father's image to the surface with: "So excellent a king…so loving to my mother" (1.2.139-140), and Hamlet questions this work of memory, asking "Heaven and earth, / Must I remember?" (1.2.142-143). This self examination is key to Hamlet's consciousness shifting away from the immediate and aesthetic, which demand only itself and the consumption of others; remembrance is an ethical act, and has no place in an aesthetic conceptual framework.

Memory is one of the first instances of an ethical relationship to others, because it requires reflection, and an understanding of that other which is outside of our self, and as such the work of memory proves too much for the struggling Hamlet to bear, and in the end he returns to the theme of immediate

moment (far easier to endure): his mother has quickly remarried – to his uncle no less – and again to the sexual dynamics of the new wedding room that so disturbs him.

> HAMLET. O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
> Would have mourned longer – married with my uncle,
> My father's brother (but no more like my father
> Than I to Hercules). Within a month…
> She married. O most wicked speed! To post
> With such dexterity to incestuous sheets,
> It is not, nor it cannot come to good;
> But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue. (1.2.150-153; 156-159)

The return of Hamlet to those "incestuous sheets," which are moved with such "dexterity," torments him to no end. However, a diegetic reading would also offer the structural understanding that while Hamlet condemns these "incestuous sheets," he is also condemning the social community of Denmark. (While Shakespeare was writing this play the situation of Henry VIII's marriage to Katherine of Aragon [the widow of Arthur, his brother], was certainly fresh in the audience's consciousness; it is thus especially notable that the only two who seem to remember these moral proprieties and injunctions are Hamlet and the Ghost.) Hamlet condemns the marriage that others pass off as possibly hasty but otherwise passable, and so it is again Hamlet who acts as a repository for the written moral code of what is conventionally right, but which in practice is never followed. At this point in the play, however, Hamlet finds himself unable to do anything except experience a broken heart, because "I must hold my tongue."

Without the impetus of the Ghost, locked within his self-concerned aesthetic framework, Hamlet is unable to make the leap of faith necessary to confront Claudius, and restore right and order to Denmark. Indeed, it is this broken hearted sentiment that underwrites his pedagogy as a theologian – an individual who makes his life by studying texts, the Laws of religious faith – and provides an even more sympathetic rendering of the struggle we see him endure, between his will to believe in the absurd and his obedience to the law, as he contemplates how to act.

If criticism is to be directed at Hamlet for his failure to act, it is that Hamlet never fully seems to utilize his passion to make the leap of faith for his cause, and ultimately to commit the act on the strength of the absurd. This criticism is flawed because it considers only the topography of Hamlet's motivations, rather than the deep spiritual wounds he experiences, and because it also ignores the communication that takes place between Hamlet and Horatio. No other character in *Hamlet* has the ability to communicate so forcefully, directly, and thoroughly to Hamlet as Horatio – his advice is grounded in the political. It is Horatio who is always present when Hamlet must confront difficult choices, and it is Horatio who serves one of the most functionally important roles in the play: he is the character who instantaneously knows that the Ghost is to be understood by Hamlet, and it is he who becomes the messenger for the Ghost, delivering a message he cannot understand.

HORATIO. My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.
HAMLET. I prithee do not mock me, fellow student,
I think it was to see my mother's wedding.
HORATIO. Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon.
HAMLET. Thrift, thrift, Horatio, the funeral baked meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.
Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
Or ever I had seen that day, Horatio.
My father, me thinks I see my father.
HORATIO. Where, my lord?
HAMLET. In my mind's eye, Horatio. (1.2.175-184)

"In my mind's eye," Hamlet envisions his dead father, and it speaks to a trauma that affects Hamlet in ways that the other characters of the play brush off in the hurried world of political decorum and social affairs. Immediately in this exchange Hamlet and Horatio establish that Horatio is present in Denmark for Claudius' and Gertrude marriage – not, his father's funeral – which Horatio acknowledges with "Indeed, my lord, it [the marriage] followed hard upon." It is an exchange which assures Hamlet, and which reveals a deeper (arguably homosocial) bond between the two students. It also serves to illustrate Horatio's political understanding of the situation – he is ignorant neither of Hamlet's sufferings nor the political realities of power transfer, and family dynamics. It is to Horatio that Hamlet reveals the visions of his father, those dreamlike webs where the work of love in mourning resurrect. In his conversation with Horatio we gather a sense of the deep loss that Hamlet feels for his father, a figure who looms throughout the play as a metaphor for the more extensive psychological

and spiritual dramas that Hamlet must confront. Rather than reading it as a literal rendering of father-son relations, it seems more appropriate – given Hamlet's theological training, his aesthetic and ethical struggle, and his long monologues devoted to questions of metaphysics – to interpret the absent father as an emotional absence felt within Hamlet's construction of faith. This does not seem to be a difficult inference to understand, given that the vast majority of the twentieth century[3] was spent wrestling with trying to make coherent sense out of destruction, loss, and divisive hate that placed us in an absurd condition not so very far from Hamlet's. So while we can – and to an extent should – read the father dilemma as an issue of physical presence, we should not limit the fuller force of understanding Hamlet's search for his absent father as a search for the logocentric father of *meaning*.

It is not surprising to find Hamlet retreating into his self, his 'mind's eye,' because as Kierkegaard argues, it is the ability to understand that that which occurs outside our ontological 'I' must begin by a journey of inwardness, in order to free ourselves from distractions, despair, and anxiety. Kierkegaard writes in *The Concept of Anxiety*, "Whenever inwardness is lacking, the spirit is finitized. Inwardness is therefore eternity or the constituent of the eternal in man" (151) – and he's talking about how inwardness becomes the basic beginning for

[3] One work which stands out as both a triumph and tragedy for its rendering of this question of meaning and loss – and which in large part could be read corollary to *Hamlet* – is T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

understanding what constitutes our individual self, and for making individual choices of meaning. It is about retreating into the self, in order to realize that the spirit which is the self is in fact infinite, and connected to God, and so should result in a feeling of liberation from the bonds of material problems, and the finitude of physical life.

The relationship between Horatio and Hamlet is the most important in the play, because it is with Horatio that Hamlet has a wounded listener. Horatio is wounded by his scholarship: it represents and prevents his belief with absolute faith (as Hamlet must eventually achieve) in the message for which he is the messenger (namely that Hamlet is sought by a spiritual apparition). Moreover, there is also a balance between the two, where Horatio's temperament is able to give sound advice (arguably the soundest advice given by anyone in the play) on the situations that Hamlet will encounter. Yet Horatio is nevertheless still a messenger, who understands neither the message nor its intended consequences. Make no mistake however: Horatio is not a foil to Hamlet, rather he is an equal intellect who has learned to constrain his emotions – something that Hamlet, with respect to continence, has inequitably mastered – and so heightens our comprehension of Hamlet as being deeply uncertain of his social, political, and personal position.

In his treatment in *Either/Or*, of aesthetic and ethical living, Kierkegaard does not make explicit which life is to be chosen (be it the aesthetic or ethical) –

he leaves that to the reader. Part of what Kierkegaard is doing is also to reveal both sides of the either/or dichotomy, and the need to choose one's life, be it either aesthetic or ethical. And Kierkegaard makes pretty clear that the life of meaning lies in being able to have genuine relations with others, which eventually leads to the religious. In the religious we, as individuals, discover that we are a part of this infinite spirit – for Kierkegaard, God – and that our material moments of existence are just the beginning of understanding the confluence of soul, body, and spirit within our individual self, or 'I.' As Kierkegaard notes in *Either/Or*, "The aesthetic factor in a person is that by which he is immediately what he is; the ethical factor is that by which he becomes what he becomes" (492); to be aesthetic is to exist solely in the moment for the sake of oneself, whereas the ethical is about the process of growth, a way of being which welcomes the developmental stages of being an individual with ethical relations to others. Beyond that is the substantial existential question that Hamlet eventually has to ask: what lies outside my mere perception? For Kierkegaard it was the infinite, that eternality that exists far beyond the protean physical existence of day-to-day human life.

Hamlet in conversation here with Horatio reveals, however, that he remains within his aesthetic self, where his father is in his "mind's eye." The work of love, as Kierkegaard argues in his hefty tome *Works of Love* becomes something much more than an image or remembrance; rather the one dead

ceases to be dead (as memory), and so assumes a greater reality than when he had been alive. It is an empathetic philosophy from an individual, Kierkegaard, who lost most of his family as a young man, and who lived in the shadow of a father who (even in death) tormented him for much of his life. And yet, it is a striking philosophy that appeals to anyone who has lost someone they loved (and which underpins much of Christianity)[4], because it seems to suggest that the fear and trembling we feel at the thought of death is misplaced, unimportant – indeed, doesn't exist, where love is concerned.

> HORATIO. Two nights together had these gentleman,
> Marcellus and Barnardo, on their watch
> In the death waste and middle of the night
> Been thus encountered: a figure like your father
> Armed at point, exactly cap-á-pie,
> Appears before them and with solemn march
> Goes slowly and stately by them…
> This to me
> In dreadful secrecy impart they did,
> And I with them the third night kept the watch
> Where, as they had delivered, both in time,
> Form of the thing, each word made true and good,
> The apparition comes. I knew your father,
> These hands are not more like. (1.2.195-201; 205-211)

Hamlet carries deep emotional wounds within him, and it is because he suffers from these wounds that he is able to communicate with the Ghost. It is the

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[4] Kierkegaard discusses this more fully in *The Sickness unto Death*, where his conceptualization of Christianity and religious faith for the Christian is to be found in the promise of resurrection. Thus, for Kierkegaard, the Christian is without anxiety – something that he likens to sin.

suffering individual who loses something, and who must reconcile that loss within himself, that is the most adequate listener of a message – especially a message from a figure outside the realm of the corporeal real. Of course this isn't new, the idea that through suffering we are able to see. Blindness often accompanies insight, because we're forced literally into a kind of inwardness. We're cut off from the immediacy of sight, from the phenomena which our eyes perceive all around us, and so in a very real way have to contend with our other senses, and our intellect's ability to analyze and question our memories of things, and connect them with a deeper appreciation for what they appear to be in our blindness.

Shakespeare does something of this in *King Lear*, where Lear is able to see the true ramifications of his destructive and foolish actions only when he has lost everything, and goes physically blind. Of course we could go even earlier than that to the most famous depiction of blindness and insight with the Greek tragedy of Oedipus, who only through blindness understands his fate. And, one might do well to consider the suffering epileptic boy in the Bible (Matthew 17:14-23), whose father asks Jesus to heal him.[5] Raphael does a remarkable rendering

[5] In particular the verses (*New International Version*) from Matthew (17:19-20) that read, "Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replies, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you," have particular relevance understanding the idea of faith and spirit in Kierkegaard's

of this scene in his *The Transfiguration* which hangs in the Pinacoteca Vaticana, in the Vatican City. In the painting[6] we see the trauma rendered clearly, where Jesus and the suffering boy are in direct communication - spiritually and physically - and only the suffering individuals can understand one another. No one, not the father or the bystanders (arguably even the angels, if we trust Raphael's depiction) can fully fathom the connection shared between the sufferer and the messenger-healer.

The Ghost of *Hamlet* is not the real Hamlet senior: he is an image, a spectral figure whose purpose is to deliver a demand to Hamlet, which also happens to mirror some of Hamlet's own unspoken desires (e.g. revenge). In the end, however, the message will provide redemption because it enables Hamlet to be able to act. For Horatio, however, the figure of the Ghost remains a political apparition: "In the death waste and middle of the night / Been thus encountered: a figure like your father / Armed at point, exactly cap-á-pie, / Appears before them and with solemn march," where the keywords that Horatio uses to describe Hamlet's father are "armed" and in "solemn march." This is a ghost who means

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work. In an especial way, the line "Nothing will be impossible for you," if you have faith, has relevance for what Kierkegaard is trying to get at when he speaks of the 'leap of faith,' and the movement from the ethical to the religious.

[6] In a paper I delivered to the Hemingway Conference in Andalusia, Spain (2006), "Eternal Recurrence in Hemingway's *Across the River and Into the Trees*," I similarly used the theme of suffering and insight to discuss the Raphael painting and its connection to the suffering Colonel Cantwell of the novel. This is a large thematic issue that underpins both Western culture and Christianity.

political business – he's also clearly seeking some kind of satisfaction – and yet Horatio cannot communicate with the Ghost, because he is a scholar who hasn't suffered in the ways that Hamlet has. If we draw a parallel to *Fear and Trembling*'s Abraham, we find a remarkable similarity to the demand the Ghost makes of Hamlet: the message of God comes with a tragic cost – the life of Abraham's son, Isaac. In both cases the messenger makes a demand that could ultimately have tragic consequences if followed – indeed, in the case of Abraham it would come with the ultimate loss, that of his son, and the reality being that the message can only be understood by the intended recipient; had Abraham talked of God's demand to others, they would have tried to stop him – and so he must remain silent. No one would have been able to understand him.

This individual truth doesn't necessarily mean much to those of us outside the direct communication between Abraham and the absolute – and it isn't meant to. The paradoxical interaction between an individual and an absurd situation is something that can be universally understood (we can all, to some extent, relate to the position [in varying degrees] that Abraham finds himself in) – and yet conventional ethics says we have a moral imperative to stop Abraham, and Hamlet, from committing the demands given to them. Kierkegaard doesn't care for ethical systems that don't acknowledge individual need for individual action (both his philosophy's anti-Hegelianism and personal life attest to that);

for Kierkegaard the truth of any life is to be found in the genuine suffering gained by the individual through real-life encounters and experience.

As Nietzsche reminds us in *Twilight of the Idols*, "The most spiritual human beings, assuming they are the most courageous, also experience by far the most painful tragedies: but it is precisely for this reason that they honour life" (88). There is to my mind no greater spiritual psychology in Shakespeare's tragedies than Hamlet. In him we see the fullest realization of individual human suffering – something we view from both his situation, and the content of his speech. In both cases they work symbiotically to produce an individual torn by personal pain, public duty, fealty to false peers, and the general malignancy that confronts any individual who wishes to counter the hypocrisy of the social order, where the frustrated sufferer ultimately asks: can any just and discernible meaning be drawn from one's own meager – and largely immeasurable – life? Spiritual individuals always suffer more than their political counterparts, because the tragedies of others and the bondage of the past hangs upon them, haunts them, and forces them to act with the best interest of what is right. For the spiritual individual there is no immediate ethical solution to the problems at hand, no useful ethical schematic from which to decipher right or wrong, because the spiritual individual sympathizes with the suffering other, incorporates their suffering within himself, and so suffers in the most courageous way possible.

A useful analogy might be to consider the intended effects of catharsis in tragedy, whereby through viewing the suffering of an unusually great person, the audience member is made to feel a purgation - a release of their own guilt, suffering, etc. - and so can set forth anew in life (one hopes), a better person. I would argue that in large part Catholic confession serves much the same purpose, in that it allows for an individual to feel as though he can move on with his life without the lingering of guilt from sin, in their psyche. For the truly spiritual individual however no such purgation is possible, because he goes beyond - in Kierkegaard's terms - tragedy. This movement beyond tragedy into a different sphere of meaning is what Kierkegaard is interested in with respect to Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*. Because Abraham's dilemma is one that is so monstrous - the murder of his son - no ethical deliberation could save him (or Isaac). There is no right or wrong to God's request: there is only spirituality - faith or no faith, and only faith in the absolute could save Isaac. At such a moment it seems that language often fails us, and Kierkegaard seems to come to that same conclusion with respect to the absolute (Abraham, after all, remains silent). Where absurdity prevails, what good are bureaucratic rules and institutions? They serve only to keep the wheels of capital exchange in motion, and are of little to no use for the individual becoming more individual, and in fact prevent the individual from being able to act upon his subjective truth for what he knows to be right. The subjective truth for Abraham was to follow the

demand of God, because he knew in faith that it was the right thing to do; similarly, Hamlet doesn't possess any document - like that from a court, or a political power - that authorizes him to do what his conscience will ultimately demand, and so he has to act out of subjectivity (his own), in order to act on what he believes is right. That's a major emphasis for Kierkegaard,[7] and was something he practiced in his own life - but what is more important is that emphasis upon the individual who has to act *out of himself*, without recourse to external hierarchies, or ethical notions of right and wrong. Much of twentieth century literature is about this struggle between the individual and social orders, and the overriding message seems to be that to find real meaning you have to bring it forth from yourself, through individual experience - because no church, or state, or (to a certain extent) social community is going to be able to do that for you.

Nietzsche, like Kierkegaard, seems to recognize this interesting separation of language's ability to communicate when dealing with different spheres of existence (tragic, eternal, absolute, etc.), when he asserts that "Language, it seems, was invented only for what is average, medium, communicable" (*The Portable Nietzsche* 530). While Horatio (indeed, the same applies to Barnardo and Marcellus) can communicate that he has been witness to the apparition of the

[7] An example in Kierkegaard's own life would be his public feuds with the Danish State Church. See Joakim Garff's *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Princeton UP, 2005.

Ghost, he cannot fathom or communicate the absurdity, and deep spiritual meaning that the Ghost portends. And how often we all find ourselves in this very condition that Nietzsche and Kierkegaard allude to, when we find that in absurd situations that demand our deepest existential inwardness, language can not convey adequately to another the belief and acts that we must commit. That subjective truth that Kierkegaard speaks of in all of his work – be it religious, pseudonymous, personal, or vitriolic – requires that an individual spiritual awareness be coupled with the courage to believe and to act – though, not necessarily, to be able to communicate it to others.

> HAMLET. I will watch tonight
> Perchance 'twill walk again.
> HORATIO. I warrant it will.
> HAMLET. If it assume my noble father's person
> I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape
> And bid me hold my peace. I pray you all,
> If you have hitherto concealed this sight
> Let it be tenable in your silence still
> And whatsomever else shall hap tonight
> Give it an understanding but no tongue…
> HORATIO, MARCELLUS, BARNARDO. Our duty to your honour.
> *Exeunt* [*all but Hamlet*]…
> HAMLET. My father's spirit – in arms! All is not well;
> I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come.
> Till then sit still my soul – foul deeds will rise
> Though all the earth's o'erwhelm them to men's eyes. (1.2.240-248; 252; 253-256)

"Give it an understanding, but no tongue" beseeches Hamlet, with respect to the tenuous communications that must be entered into with the Ghost, and the situation in which they find themselves. It is because Hamlet's mentality is

capable of – and designed for – that which is unknown, uncertain, and spiritually questioning (he is after all a theology student), and that he requests *understanding* and *not* speech. This overarching desire to reconnect with his father is tempered, however, by the concreteness that Hamlet requires of the Ghost, declaring that he'll engage in discourse with the Ghost "if it assume my noble father's person." That remark by Hamlet crystallizes the appropriate setting for the action of the play to come, where Hamlet declares "All is not well." It is Hamlet who has decided at this moment – and without even needing to meet the Ghost – that he will right that which is wrong.

As Nietzsche perceptively notes in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (his probing of moral values and ressentiment):

> While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is "outside," what is "different," what is "not itself"; and *this* No is its creative deed. This inversion of the value-positing eye – this *need* to direct one's view outward instead of back to oneself – is of the essence of *ressentiment*...it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all – its action is fundamentally reaction. (36-37)

Nietzsche delivers philosophy so much more dramatically than Kierkegaard, and one appreciates that flare, particularly with his remark that "every noble

morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of oneself." Kierkegaard isn't quite so derisive towards those who shirk his demand for the (existential) inwardness that his philosophy demands. And yet, what Nietzsche is saying commingles well with Kierkegaard's thoughts, as when Nietzsche criticizes "This inversion of the value-positing eye – this *need* to direct one's view outward instead of back to oneself – is of the essence of *ressentiment*," because for both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard to come into being requires a self, rather than an outside world for which one requires "external stimuli in order to react at all." No new understanding can come into being by the individual who merely reacts, because there is no creative impulse required of that individual, by (and for) himself. If Hamlet had merely *reacted* to an individual direct communication with the Ghost, then there would have been a false premise for avenging the crimes committed. It is important, both for us to understand the play *Hamlet* and to see the inner-workings of the existential aspects, that in order for us to act in any meaningful way we cannot wait to see the outcome, or for an external prompting; the act itself must be spontaneously taken up – utilizing only the criteria that the subjective individual possesses – by the individual alone. That Nietzsche criticizes those who "*need* to direct one's view outward," is a criticism implicit in Kierkegaard's critique of the Aesthete, in *Either/Or*. For one to have an ownership of their being, one must go inward and look deep within their self, in order to understand who they are; the thrust of their morality; their reasons for

the actions they commit – none of which is possible without deep reflection. There must be a continuous return to the self by the self; instead of working to disperse our own moral agency through outside institutions, distractions, or others, we must, both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard assert, return to our self in order to act.

Kierkegaard writes of this individual dialectical relation with, "...what is the self? The self is a relation which relates to itself, or that in the relation which is its relating to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation's relating to itself" (*The Sickness unto Death* 43). It's about bringing it all back home to the self and making a choice, or as Bob Dylan says in his song "Workingman's Blues #2": "You can hang back or fight your best on the front line," – and that is a manifesto for *choosing* a way of being; for *choosing* a self. You cannot diffuse your being through the use of external stimuli – unless you want to face the critical wrath of Nietzsche who terms it "slave morality"; nor, for Kierkegaard, can you truly possess a self until you understand that your entire essence of being is derived from yourself in relation to itself. It also means that instead of trying to understand oneself and one's life, by looking outside to the exteriority of immediate surroundings, that what they should do is realize that they have the ability to create their lives out of their self; to create the action that defines their being. As Kierkegaard reminds us, there can be no mediations beyond our self,

and to attempt to do so makes devalues the meaning of our actions, and become, instead, mere play-acting.

In Robert Champigny's Kierkegaardian-influenced study *Portrait of a Symbolist Hero*, on Alan Fournier's remarkable novel *Le Grand Meaulnes*, Champigny writes that:

> The ethical man assumes his freedom by trying to shape the future in such a way that certain events, certain situations may come to pass. The aesthetic man, on the contrary, does not try to shape the future as something that will become present (events, situations), but as something that will become past, that is, an experience to interpret. (8)

Hamlet's movement away from the aesthetic individual - that person who is guided by displacement, who seeks others for entertainment and exploitation, and who agrees to act in situations not out of deep ethical regard for the conditions he finds, but rather for the sake of a kind of pure aesthetic moment ("an experience to interpret") - to the ethical individual who works towards shaping a moment that shall come to pass, is the bulk of the psychological development in the play. In rejecting aesthetic criteria, the purpose is not to dismiss the artistic, creative, or spiritual workings of Hamlet, rather it is to talk about our ways of entering into relationships with others - and in the case of Hamlet and Kierkegaard with our own self. If we observe ourselves in a mirror

in a purely aesthetic way, we enter into the dangerous terrain of interiorizing a narcissistic view of ourselves, and our relationship with our self becomes what Sartre referred to as the *gaze*.[8] We no longer *look* at ourselves, instead we only seek the momentary enjoyment of *gazing* upon our outward presentation. One does not have to look very hard, I would suggest, in *Hamlet* to find such a situation apparent in Hamlet's demeanor in the earliest part of the play, where the loss of the King is felt by him in a narcissistic fashion; Hamlet insists upon mourning the loss of his father as a loss for himself. There is a significant difference in memory and mourning that I am alluding to here – one which we have all had to encounter at one point or another: that temptation to mourn the loss of an individual possessed within our self, instead of mourning the loss of an individual within their particular self.

As Champigny further notes in his study, "The individuality of the social man, his 'personality,' is built for him by others. But only 'I' can build my aesthetic individuality…The aesthetic, like the religious, and unlike the ethical, sets the individual above the universal" (99). Speaking through Kierkegaardian terms Champigny attempts to delineate the three major psychological tropes that Kierkegaard discusses, but he also marks one of the major focal points of

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[8] There have been others who have taken up this concept of the *gaze*, but Sartre's corresponds the closest to what Kierkegaard's (and my) interpretation constitutes, in relation to ontological appearance and presentation. For further reading see Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, and his later lecture "The Humanism of Existentialism."

existential philosophy: that "only "I'" can build my aesthetic individuality." It is important here, however, to note that the aesthetic individual who builds his "I" does so without considering his relations to others, rather he wishes to utilize his individual "I" as being only himself, and does so without the welfare of others in his conceptual framework. In that sense the aesthetic discounts what Champigny and Kierkegaard refer to as the "universal" (or ethical), because it places the individual above the universal (others), *without* concern for them. This is an important distinction, because the religious also requires that "only "I'" can build my own individuality – without recourse to the universal – but that in doing so it also places the shared connection between all other beings as its major foundation; in other words, we exist to serve others without selfish regard. The Aesthete, both in *Either/Or*, and life, doesn't do that. Kierkegaard argues (and we see Hamlet struggling with this), that one must move away from immediacy and irony, to an ethical understanding of others, where the ultimate realization is that we come to understand, and deeply feel, that shared spiritual connection between all beings, which dissolves our selfish conceptualization of an ontological "I," into one of express otherness. These terms, and their use, are part of the framework for understanding Hamlet's psychosocial development, as he moves away from being only self-concerned with his feelings and problems, and realizes that there is an outside world of which he is a part, and to which his actions should be beneficial.

In his perceptive article (which invokes Kierkegaard), in *Shakespeare Survey,* Philip Edwards writes that "The tragic hero longs for clear directives to govern his action; he longs for absolutes, for an existence which he can value as authentic and uncompromising" (45-46).[9] And Hamlet to an extent certainly does desire some kind of 'directive' to decide his next moves. He is not for Kierkegaard, however, an entirely tragic or heroic figure because the tragic hero does not debate or contemplate to the extent that Hamlet does, or have the kinds of inward doubts that Hamlet must continuously address.

> *Enter* Ghost
> HORATIO. Look, my lord, it comes.
> HAMLET. Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
> Be thou a spirit of health or a goblin damned,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
> Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
> That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet,
> King, father, royal Dane…
> What may this mean
> That thou, dead corpse, again in complete steel,
> Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon…
> So horridly to shake our disposition
> With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls? (1.4.38-45; 51-53; 55-56)

[9] It should be noted that Philip Edwards' introduction to the New Cambridge edition of *Hamlet* also discusses Kierkegaard's philosophy and its usefulness in talking about Hamlet, such as when he remarks on the ethical and spiritual divide with: "A terrible weight is thrown on the human judgement and will. Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*, spoke of Abraham hearing a voice from heaven and trusting it to the extent of being willing to kill his own son…These distinctions between acts of faith and the demoniacal, between holy works and works of man's imagination, seem fundamental to *Hamlet*" (60).

It is with moral uncertainty, as to the nature of the Ghost and his intentions, that Hamlet declares "Be thou a spirit of health or a goblin damned / Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell / Be thy intents wicked or charitable." There is no simplistic either/or comprehension of the figurative (or literal) phenomena with which they are confronted, and this speaks indirectly to the vacuity of convention: if the answers were easy then Hamlet would simply act (or not) – and the play would be over. It is because we do not know the Ghost's intentions – are they good or are they evil? – that Hamlet must impute into the nothingness of unknowing his own moral structures and imperatives from which to act. He asks rhetorically "What may this mean" that a corpse has risen in such a "questionable shape," because he is unable to categorize or interpret the Ghost in an aesthetic way. The Ghost's presence "so horridly shake our disposition / With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls," that we recognize Hamlet's inability to cast placement of the ghost within a moral framework.

This ghost is no mere metaphoric phantasm – he is very real, and he means potentially (especially considering that he comes "in complete steel") war-like business. The structure of the play seems to prohibit *a priori* Hamlet's being a tragic hero – there is no *easy* directive, no easy absolute; nobody fully understands the spiritual presence of the Ghost, nor can anyone (save Hamlet) share any direct communication with him. Perhaps it is as Edwards says, that "the twentieth century has completely upset the equilibrium of Apollo and

Dionysus by putting all the weight on the Apollonian side" (51). In other words, when our intellect is incapable of understanding what we encounter, it is undoubtedly only our emotional morality that can respond to something such as a ghost. It is Hamlet specifically who is fully capable of receiving the Ghost's spiritual message, because he embodies uncertainty, *and* the desire to question the world (and his being) of which he is a part.

Sidney Hook in *The Quest for Being* saw this stark contrast in discrete philosophical terms when he noted that "In the strongest contrast between the ethical and the religious mode of feeling and conduct which has ever been drawn, Kierkegaard says that Abraham must be regarded either as a "murderer" (the term is his) from the ethical standpoint, or a "true believer" from the standpoint of absolute religion" (132).[10] Like Abraham Hamlet must find the ability to act, without concern for how others will categorize his actions. What Hook considers to be a "true believer," is for Kierkegaard one who possesses

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[10] Sidney Hook, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Kaufmann all have very good – if somewhat critical – responses to Kierkegaard. Each of these critics seems to take particular issue with Kierkegaard's (lack of) methodology, and his frequent airiness in addressing issues of being. As well, Hook and Kaufmann are particularly critical of Kierkegaard's reference to the notion of the "Absolute," – they feel that he never adequately defines it, and also that it opens up dangerous possibilities for justifying any action (including heinous acts) on the basis of the individual claiming they were acting according to their relation with this (airy) notion of an "absolute." Hook's commentary here is, however, particularly useful, because he is concerned specifically with issues of Being and acting, and is critically interested by Kierkegaard's idea of the absolute, and its role in moral agency.

absolute faith in his purpose – and so transcends the ethical valuations that conspire to prevent him from achieving that purpose.

HORATIO. It beckons you to go away with it
As if some impartment did desire
To you alone.
MARCELLUS. Look with what courteous action
It waves you to a more removed ground,
But do not go with it.
HORATIO. No, by no means.
HAMLET. It will not speak: then I will follow it.
HORATIO. Do not, my lord.
HAMLET. Why, what should be the fear?
I do not set my life at a pin's fee,
And for my soul – what can it do to that,
Being a thing immortal as itself?
It waves me forth again. I'll follow it.
HORATIO. What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff…
And there assume some other horrible form
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
And draw you into madness…
HAMLET. It waves me still. Go on, I'll follow thee. (1.4.57-70; 73-74; 78)

It is Horatio (again) who recognizes the ethical implications of the Ghost's motioning for 'impartment' – or, communication – and even Marcellus notes that the Ghost does this with "courteous action." Yet both Marcellus and Horatio are united in their belief that Hamlet should not go with the Ghost, which motions to him to take leave of the others. As Hamlet says "It will not speak: then I will follow it," and here we see the structural differences present in the character of the individuals present; Horatio's ethics preclude him from taking part (or carrying out) the act that Hamlet ultimately does, and further underscores the

necessity of the individuality acting completely alone and within himself to understand his situation, and to make a leap of faith into the absurd. Because neither Horatio or Marcellus are equipped to deal with the absurd, neither of them would serve any useful purpose to the Ghost – or to repairing the psychological and social ruptures in the state of Denmark. Hamlet responds in an interesting way when he replies to the others concerns with "Why, what should be the fear" of going with and interacting with the Ghost; more significantly, Hamlet shows himself to be in control of his individual self when he suggests that his soul would remain intact, because the Ghost is "a thing immortal" and also because Hamlet is sufficiently self-aware not to allow the Ghost to do him conscious harm. Horatio's rejoinder of what the Ghost might *tempt* Hamlet to do such as draw him into the ocean or have him walk off a cliff, or worse "assume some other horrible form / Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason / And draw you into madness" – is of particular interest because it is very much grounded in the practical and rational effects that this unknown quantity (the Ghost) could wreak on Hamlet's psyche.

We're in uncertain terrain – at least in Horatio's mind – of what to do with the Ghost, and yet as Denis de Rougemont writes in "Kierkegaard and Hamlet," "The prime characteristic of a genuine vocation lies in its ambiguity" (121). For Horatio (a scholar) nothing worse can happen than to lose the "sovereignty of reason," our mental faculties for understanding the world around us, ourselves,

and our relation to the world. Therein lies one of the most powerful formulations of archetypes that Shakespeare and Kierkegaard provides: the rendering of so many different approaches to the same "immortal" thing, and yet with so many different reactions. Be it the soldier, Marcellus, the scholar Horatio, or the poetical Hamlet we're given several approaches with which to see and understand where Hamlet's coming from, and to understand how the absolute, universal, and ethical can manifest themselves. Perhaps irrationally Hamlet replies simply to all of these theoretical concerns and possibilities for his own death with, "It waves me still. Go on, I'll follow thee." Hamlet in the moment has spontaneously acted – and from what criteria we can't definitively say, and that's the point, it was done entirely within himself. Shakespeare has managed brilliantly to construct a scene with a soldier and a scholar, both of whom see the terrible possibilities that the Ghost represents – and so we cannot, with absolute credibility, say why Hamlet does what he does.

In attempting to illuminate Hamlet's course of action after his encounter with the Ghost, de Rougement utilizes the idea of vocation – or what might be better termed a "calling" – to see the development of Hamlet's ethical and spiritual psychology. As de Rougement notes in "Kierkegaard and Hamlet":

> ...Kierkegaard's tragedy was the typical tragedy of a *vocation*. Its entire plot lies in the progressive revelation of the meaning and purpose of that vocation, which, from the very beginning, had been

> secretly directed toward a single, stupendous action for which the hero had long been preparing, over which he hesitated and drew back, until a seemingly minor incident provoked the final leap, the consummation that cost the hero his life. (110)

But Hamlet's call is and isn't a vocation as such; it's life. The questions over meaning, and the endless struggle over how to be or act are the bulk of the play, and while de Rougement offers an interesting insight into a type of dramatic genre (and more specifically his argument that "a seemingly minor incident provoked the final leap" will be useful later in this work to discuss Hamlet's ultimate ability to act), de Rougement's focus is on something different. In trying to reveal parallels between Kierkegaard's biographical life, and the allegorical idea that is *Hamlet*, he's working too hard to explain Kierkegaard's own failings at pursuing his desired vocation to be a member of the Danish clergy. Still, what de Rougement says is helpful, particularly where he suggests that the "entire plot lies in the progressive revelation of the meaning and purpose of that vocation," because we look and see a "progressive revelation" in Hamlet's development and course of action, away from the aesthetic and into the ethical.

> HORATIO. Be ruled, you shall not go.
> HAMLET. My fate cries out
> And makes each petty artery in this body
> As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve.
> Still am I called – unhand me, gentleman –
> By heaven I'll make a ghost of him that let's me!

I say away! - Go on! I'll follow thee.
Exeunt Ghost and Hamlet
HORATIO. He waxes desperate with imagination.
MARCELLUS. Let's follow. 'Tis not fit thus to obey him.
HORATIO. Have after. To what issue will this come?
MARCELLUS. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.
HORATIO. Heaven will direct it.
MARCELLUS. Nay, let's follow him. (1.4.81-92)

The continual pull over how to react to the Ghost continues, despite Hamlet's emphatic finality in his decision to go and speak with the Ghost. As Hamlet recognizes however, "My fate cries out / And makes each petty artery in this body / As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve. / Still I am called," and if we were to find a vocational call then it would be with Hamlet charging against Horatio and Marcellus' restraints with "Still I am called." (For Hamlet the task of finding that path that forms the way to meaning is the crux of the play, and his life.) Not only is Hamlet being literally called, but more importantly his "fate" has been called. Juxtaposing fate with "each petty artery" Hamlet makes a direct comparison between himself and his comrades, that they and their philosophies become those "petty arteries," despite being quite real joints that form the human body and are necessary for life.

Hamlet's intention, however, is dramatize what the Ghost calls him to do, and what he feels within himself, and is by far the more important and meaningful purpose, such that it outweighs consideration of his mere physical

being. It is a pivotal moment that pits the representatives of the ethical and rational - Horatio and Marcellus - against the unyielding Hamlet. This scene is critical for understanding the movement towards faith, which manifests itself direct conflict between rational ethicality and the moment of faith. De Rougement argues in "Kierkegaard and Hamlet":

> Kierkegaard's mind had long been fascinated by the two concepts of the instant and the leap. To him, the instant was the time of faith, the contact of time and eternity, or as he put it, "the plentitude of time, when the eternal decision is realized in the shifting occasion." The leap was the characteristic movement of faith, irrational, instantaneous, and concrete. (119)

Horatio remarks that Hamlet "waxes desperate with imagination," and he's right - to a certain degree. Hamlet is more fully able to empathize with the Ghost as a suffering being (which he clearly does wish to identify as his father), but more so as a catalyst for an impulse towards action which isn't entirely understood in the practical here and now. Almost prophetically Horatio recognizes in a vague way the large impact that this meeting between Hamlet and the Ghost will have, and he crystallizes it in the form of his question: "To what issue will this come?" He isn't simply talking about the particular issue of Hamlet going off of a cliff, or being lured into the sea, or even of going mad; Horatio sees that this meeting will have universal application to the entirety of Denmark, and to all of the characters

in the play. His politically endowed sensitivity marks him as someone who can clearly discern the ethical implications of Hamlet's actions, and propitiously Marcellus remarks that "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90). Horatio seems to understand this and remarks in a seeming resignation to the situation at hand that "Heaven will direct it," to which the practical Marcellus who is still inclined towards the present possibility of danger refuses, and so they do the only thing that their psychologies in this instant allow – they follow.

C.S. Lewis remarks in *Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem* that "This ghost is different from any other ghost in Elizabethan drama – for, to tell the truth, the Elizabethans in general do their ghosts very vilely. It is permanently ambiguous" (7). As Hamlet embarks upon his fateful meeting with the Ghost, it is important to recognize again that there is no certainty as to the Ghost's moral position – that is to say, whether he portends good or evil in his appearance – and so he remains, as he should, ambiguous. Eleanor Prosser in her study *Hamlet and Revenge* also notes this important uncertainty, commenting that, "Because man is justified by faith alone, the Protestants argued, either he is in a state of grace at the moment of his death and goes immediately to Heaven or he is damned and goes immediately to Hell" (102) – in short, who is this Ghost, where has he come from, and is he good or evil? It is this ambiguity that allows Hamlet to become and ultimately *be*, and it is also in this way that the play so closely resembles our own fragile human condition: we are all subject to ambiguity, and so within

ambiguity Kierkegaard argues we must be guided by an overriding force of subjective will that merges with the spirit that is larger and more present than ourselves. We do this with the recognition that an end exists, though we're not able either to visualize it or walk to directly towards it.

As the noted Kierkegaard critic Alastair Hannay remarks in *Kierkegaard and Philosophy*, "Spirit, again for Kierkegaard as well as for Hegel, has a positive content; it involves the realization that human existence is grounded in an eternal *telos*" (67). What Hannay is alluding to in a distinctly philosophical way, is that idea that occupies much of Kierkegaard's writing: what becomes of our particular being? Our individual I? As Hannay notes, "spirit" - that essence which encompasses (and is) everything - is a content for actualizing; in other words, it is through spirit that we are able to become and be. That notion "that human existence is grounded in an eternal *telos*," is an elegant phrase to ascribe to Kierkegaard's sense of our individual presence, which is part of an eternal coming-to-be. What Horatio says in an ethical way about Heaven directing the action of things, is something that Hamlet must actualize in a deeply spiritual way, where the Ghost acts as something beyond social construction or convention, and so forces Hamlet to search his subjective will in order to act.

> HAMLET. Whither wilt thou lead me? Speak! I'll go no further.
> GHOST. Mark me.
> HAMLET. I will.
> GHOST. My hour is almost come.

When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames
Must render up myself.
HAMLET. Alas, poor ghost.
GHOST. Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing
To what I shall unfold.
HAMLET. Speak, I am bound to hear.
GHOST. So art thou to revenge when thou shalt hear.
HAMLET. What?
GHOST. I am thy father's spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night
And for the day confined to fast in fires
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away…
HAMLET. O God!
GHOST. – Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder!
HAMLET. Murder!
GHOST. Murder most foul – as in the best it is –
But this most foul, strange, and unnatural. (1.5.1-13; 24-28)

Speech: in so many ways it dominates the essence of the play; the ways in which we are able to communicate with each other, and the destructive forces that secrets and miscommunication have to alter outcomes with catastrophic consequences. It is appropriate then that at this juncture of the play Hamlet is unwilling to follow the Ghost any further – he demands communication. And the Ghost responds with "Mark me," that is to say 'listen to me,' to which the young Hamlet is eager to comply. Clearly we see the difference in the way that Hamlet and the Ghost interact – indeed, the Ghost will *only* make direct communication with Hamlet. This is due to the structural figurings of Hamlet's character: he is the individual who embodies – as is closely possible – the representative values

of the single individual striving against the universal and into the absolute. As Peter Hays remarks in his study of archetypal figures in *The Limping Hero*, "We know that those left to rule at the end of Shakespeare's plays are not grand figures, for good or bad, that their predecessors were. Malcolm is a lesser man than Macbeth, Albany than Lear, Fortinbras than Hamlet, Aufidius than Coriolanus, Ferinand than Prospero, and Cassio than Othello. Shakespeare seems to be saying that greatness frequently leads to disorder, resulting in the orderly but mediocre inheriting the earth" (190). Hamlet certainly has a dramatic flair that the other characters in the play do not possess (just as Macbeth is certainly a more fascinating character than Malcolm) - but more importantly he has the sensitivity and spiritual openness to feel and act. Shakespeare immediately establishes this spiritual necessity as the ruling ideology of the play, and when Marcellus says to Horatio "Thou art a scholar - speak to it, Horatio" (1.1.41), we discover (not surprisingly) that Horatio *cannot* communicate, because he is the character in whom Shakespeare instills political awareness and sensibilities necessary for the stable order of society.

The Ghost becomes then a figure who demands spiritual justice - he is after all forced to endure the hell of purgatory: "My hour is almost come. / When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames / Must render up myself," and as such no political court or ethical schematic can be of any use. The Ghost exists beyond

matters of political justice, and so becomes the trope of the wounded figure for whom only spiritual justice can cure.

Jacques Derrida remarks in his *Specters of Marx*, on these nuances of the Ghost in *Hamlet* that:

> Ghosts…are everywhere where there is watching…To exorcise not in order to chase away the Ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants* who would no longer be *revenants*, but as other *arrivants* to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome – without certainty, ever, that they present themselves as such. Not in order to grant them the right in this sense but out of a concern for justice…One must constantly remember that it is even on the basis of the terrible possibility of this impossible that justice is desirable: *through* but also *beyond* right and law. (175)[11]

Hamlet's ghost demands revenge – and it is a revenge that comes at the terrible price of murdering another, but also of disrupting the entire social order of a country. Lives far beyond those within the immediate surroundings of the play will be affected – and yet, the presentation provided in *Hamlet* suggests that all

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[11] *Revenants*: from Old French *to return*, e.g. someone who returns after death; *Arrivants*: newcomers.

that matters is this one particular absurd instance of a ghost who returns to demand revenge, that is largely "*through* [and] *beyond* right and law."

Nevertheless, the Ghost, as Derrida notes, is also about something thematically larger than simple revenge. When he remarks that ghosts must be welcomed "out of a concern for justice," and furthers this with "one must constantly remember that it is even on the basis of the terrible possibility of this impossible that justice is desirable" – the revenge sought by the Ghost can, in fact, be viewed as a matter of justice beyond avenging a murder. In fact, the imperative that the Ghost in *Hamlet* demands is both a request for immediate justice, that of revenge, but more importantly inherent in its consequences is also a demand for a restorative justice to larger wrongs within Denmark. The remark by Derrida that such a demand is both "*through* [and] *beyond* right and law" – because the really interesting issue is the consequences such a justice will have beyond the avenging old Hamlet's murder.

Margreta De Grazia in *Hamlet without Hamlet* takes a critical stance against this interpretation, arguing that, "In *Specters of Marx*...Hamlet's hesitation in this convoluted configuration prescribes for the present...not a course but a stance...It is a justice that has nothing to do with the retribution of revenge tragedy" (21). What de Grazia is taking issue with is the removal of Hamlet and the Ghost from their particular historical moment, where revenge tragedy (and not the larger effects of Derrida's utilizing the ghost as a metaphor for the

harbinger of communism) is the key to understanding the idea of justice being demanded. While de Grazia's historical approach is certainly correct in its answer, it is of less use here, where we can see that the Ghost's demand has consequences that far surpass mere revenge. In effect, whether or not is it is explicitly stated as such, Hamlet's willingness to undertake the revenge demanded by the Ghost is, in fact, a willingness to pursue justice that goes far beyond the revenge involved in murdering another, it is in fact the disruption (and possible destruction) of an entire order within a social community.

Objections that Hamlet might lodge to the practical effects of the Ghost's request dissolve as he relates that "I am thy father's spirit, / Doomed for a certain term to walk the night / And for the day confined to fast in fires / Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away" (1.5.10-13). The dramatic tension is heightened by Hamlet's cry of "O God!" and we know that there can be no denial - on the part of Hamlet and only Hamlet - to the Ghost's apparent suffering: justice will be had, even at a terrible price that defies conventional morality and its envisioning of equitable justice. It is also fitting that Derrida speaks of memory in his discussion of ghosts, for *revenant* means one who has returned after a lengthy absence, or from the dead; and to what do we as the living owe to such an entity? - Memory. To forget is to commit the worst crime of all, for it is in the work of memory that we preserve indefinitely a permanent image and life-like essence within ourselves. Love, is a fundamental

necessity for memory, that acts out of a permanent belief even after the end of the relationship that caused it, and it is Hamlet's ability to preserve his father in love that makes him the most suited (and also the most dangerous) for the justice demanded. It is he who remembers the one who has been wronged, and who welcomes the Ghost back, because as Hamlet earlier replied to the Ghost's presence "…I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet, / King, father, royal Dane" (1.4.44-45); it is Hamlet's ability to conceive of worlds beyond the world, and to actualize these deep philosophical questionings within his self.

In his personal self-critique *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung says that "…the possibility that through the achievement of an individual a question enters the world, to which he must provide some kind of answer" (318-319) resonates with Hamlet, who alone must answer the problem which the Ghost presents, and which Hamlet in his declarative statement makes clear that he cannot refuse because his "fate cries out" (1.4.82). That comment by Jung is also useful because its premise rests on an individual understanding his individual purpose, where an "individual question" is brought into existence by the individual, to which he "must provide some kind of answer." But for it to mean anything for Hamlet, he has to make the demand of the Ghost his own; it is this effort of making the revenge his own, but which he will reshape into his own question – where the initial revenge for revenge's sake will lessen, and be overtaken by Hamlet into a pursuit of larger concerns about justice.

GHOST. A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abused. But know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown.
HAMLET. O my prophetic soul!
My uncle!
GHOST. Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wits, with traitorous gifts –
O wicked wit and gifts that have the power
So to seduce – won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous Queen.
O Hamlet, what falling off was there…
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.
But howsomever thou pursues this act
Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her…
Adieu, adieu, adieu, remember me. (1.5.36-47; 82-88; 91)

Communication is a key theme that dominates *Hamlet*, and here again we see the recurring pattern that speech, direct and indirect communication, and listening form within the play. The Ghost relates that the "whole ear of Denmark / Is by a forged process of my death / Rankly abused," relating the political state of the country with the individual act of Claudius' poisoning old King Hamlet by pouring poison into his ear. It is an image that suggests a disruptive rupturing of communication within the social state; no one is capable of listening to the Ghost, perhaps because no one has saw fit to challenge or question Claudius' actions – or Gertrude's fidelity – and especially because the King remains unremembered,

a forgotten figure who Gertrude and Claudius urge Hamlet to relinquish, because as they suggest the death of Kings and fathers is a common theme in life.

It is through love and remembrance that we do not forget, and as Sigmund Freud suggests in an essay in *Character and Culture*, it is when we are able to sympathize with the loss of an other – that is to say we can imagine ourselves as the one now dead – we envision with deep anguish our own loss, as opposed to that of enemies or strangers with who we simply dismiss from our memory. Freud writes, "During his [man's] contemplation of his loved one's corpse he invented ghosts…The enduring remembrance of the dead became the basis for assuming other modes of existence, gave him the conception of life continued after apparent death" (127), and with regard to those with whom we have no meaningful ethical bonds that "On the other hand, for strangers and for enemies, we do acknowledge death, and consign them to it quite as readily and unthinkingly as did primitive man" (130). Hamlet succeeds in that act of "enduring remembrance of the dead," and keeps and the Ghost and his purpose alive. Of course this Ghost is no imaginative psychical invention, but it is a ghost whose message can only be understood by Hamlet's suffering psyche, which gives the Ghost "conception of life continued after apparent death" to the Ghost and his purpose.

Even with the appearance of a supernatural spirit that confounds – among others – the scholar Horatio, Hamlet continues to be the only figure prepared (or

ready to prepare) for the purpose to which he is called. Kierkegaard comments extensively on this issue in *Fear and Trembling* where he makes clear that only Abraham could have understood God's command that he murder Isaac, committed the act out of (and through) faith, and ultimately regain him. That idea of the absolute is made concrete through Abraham's faith, and so from the very instance that Hamlet and the Ghost communicate we see this similar theme of faith in the absurd. Hamlet doesn't question the Ghost's imperative, or even his authority, instead he sympathizes with the plight of the Ghost, and after hearing of the suffering the Ghost must endure in purgatory replies "Alas, poor ghost." The Ghost, a true parental figure, responds that Hamlet must "Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing / To what I shall unfold," to which Hamlet replies "Speak, I am bound to hear." Much as Abraham instantaneously knew at the point that God indicated to him that he had to sacrifice Isaac to prove his faith, Hamlet too knows that he cannot mediate, theorize, place conditions upon, or rationalize his position or the task set for him. In *Acts*, an exegetic reading of that book of the Bible, novelist Larry Woiwode notes that "Miracles do not bring about belief if one isn't prepared to believe. Jesus says that anybody who won't listen to Moses and the prophets won't be persuaded even if a person is raised from the dead (Luke 16.31), as Lazarus was" (53). And similarly Kierkegaard notes, if another person were to go out and commit the act that Abraham was set to do (and ultimately was prevented from completing), that they could never

attain the absolute – if anything, they'd be committing one of the most horrific crimes of which humans are capable; it is because Abraham acted out of love and faith that he is not a murderer. Hamlet's love for his father is present, and is I think genuine – but the faith which came immediately to Abraham is what Hamlet must build upon, in order to have that depth of faith that allowed Abraham to succeed.

Like Hamlet, the Ghost also shares his distaste for the incest (by marriage) being committed by Claudius and Gertrude. Particularly useful in discussing this issue are Freud's remarks in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, that:

> The mother gave the child his life and it is not easy to replace this unique gift with anything of equal value…[So] the mother gave him [the son] his own life and he gives her back another life, that of a child as like himself as possible. The son shows his gratitude by wishing to have a son by his mother that shall be like himself; in the rescue phantasy, that is, he identifies himself completely with the father. All the instincts, the loving, the grateful, the sensual, the defiant, the self-assertive and independent – all are gratified in the wish to be *the father of himself.* (56-57)

The Ghost makes clear to Hamlet: "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest." And if we take Hamlet's remarkable abuse of Gertrude in Act III, where he counsels her – with numerous vulgar innuendos

– to avoid sexual contact with Claudius, then we can see that this application of Freud is useful; in an especial way that notion of the "rescue phantasy," appeals to Hamlet's need to become a figure of authority for himself, which in turn is made easier by having others submit to you as an authority figure. Hamlet is uncertain about his cause, and himself; he is deprived of the authority of the father, and so in rescuing others, or by preventing what he considers to be their immoral actions, he is also able to assume an authority over himself that allows him to act. That the son desires "to be the father of himself," in other words to possess the control and ownership of himself and to return to his mother the gift of his own existence, and so rescue her from other men seems especially relevant for Hamlet's desire to prevent Gertrude's relation with Claudius. That Hamlet desires "to be the father of himself" more generally, will manifest itself more clearly as Hamlet develops as a character within the play.

While Freud's commentary on the relationship between mothers and sons is interesting, it strikes me that Hamlet's problems with the incestuous affair between Claudius and Gertrude is marked by an almost infantile and neurotic anxiety to keep his mother chaste – to force her to *remember* his father, and to assume the role of the widow who wears clothing of mourning for many decades after her husband has died. Similarly, the Ghost too seems to be a jealous figure – decrying his wife's almost too easy move to the new King. What neither Hamlet or the Ghost seem to recognize in their criticism of Gertrude's actions are the

practical issues that might have surrounded Gertrude in the face of King Hamlet's untimely death. In no instance do we receive Gertrude's story – her voice is mute, and we're never given sufficient textual evidence to know if her urging Hamlet to stay in Denmark or to release the memory of his dead father is done out of malicious, loving, or practical concerns.

It is no coincidence that *Hamlet* revolves around male figures, and in particular a father and son. Nor is it particularly surprising that the two characters who form the thrust of the play's purpose and action are a ghostly-father figure, and his overly thoughtful and sensitive son. Harold Bloom says in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* of Hamlet that "Everything in the play depends upon Hamlet's response to the Ghost, a response that is as highly dialectical as everything else about Hamlet. The question of *Hamlet* always must be Hamlet himself, for Shakespeare created him to be as ambivalent and divided a consciousness as a coherent drama could sustain" (387). So Hamlet has to contend with the Ghost of his father, upon which "everything in the play depends." But Hamlet's dialectic is forcibly contained within himself – he has no physical father or authority to whom he can turn (he's uncertain as to the ethical origins of the Ghost), and instead he can only come back to himself. We begin to see how Freud's assertions concerning the son's desire to become the father of himself gain relevance for an understanding of Hamlet's position: if Hamlet's sense of self is filled with doubts or competing motives for completing the task

that the Ghost sets for him, then Hamlet has failed to take ownership of his actions and purpose, and ultimately fails to become the father who possesses such authority to act. It is the only through the ability to will one thing absolutely, that our actions can have true meaning; if our love becomes conditional, if we are only friends with others because they fulfill something in us, if we give money only because we expect something in return – these things all confine us to the realm of the transaction, for which the ethical is king. It is not, therefore, about Hamlet's response to the Ghost as much as it is Hamlet's response to the larger thematic purpose that is his goal, and that rests in the dialectical acts that Hamlet must undertake in order to find individuality authority within himself, to enable him to act. The initial effort for Hamlet is to establish a fatherly authority over himself, to gain a sense of control over his own emotions, and being, and then to apply that authority to others.

HAMLET. Remember thee?
Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there
And thy commandment all alone shall live…
It is 'Adieu, adieu, remember me.'
I have sworn't. (1.5.95-102; 111-112)

Remembrance and its affective force, formulate the thrust of Hamlet's suitability for the mission given by the Ghost. Indeed, Hamlet goes so far as to repeat the issue of remembrance and memory that begins with the rhetorical question "Remember thee?" and continues with Hamlet assuring himself that "Yea, from the table of my memory / I'll wipe away all trivial fond records," and culminates with the promise that "thy commandment all alone shall live." This is a powerful statement on the part of Hamlet, and reveals the deep structural workings of his psychological position: he has faith – both in the memory of his father and in the purpose for which he has been called – and it is through this faith that Hamlet will eventually be able to act. Hamlet does not merely say that 'I shall perform your will,' or 'I must do this because it has been demanded,' – he says, "thy commandment all alone shall live"; it is an avowal that impresses upon us the depth and seriousness with which he delivers his promise: thy commandment (a Biblical allusion) with "*all* alone," that carries with it the exclusion of any self-concern for himself or the politics of the request, and finally the words "shall live," indicating that the initial idea of memory and faith has come into the material existence of actuality within Hamlet's psyche.

Derrida says in *Specters of Marx* that "The one who says 'I am thy Father's Spirit' can only be taken at his word. An essentially blind submission to his secret, to the secret of his origin: this is a first obedience to the injunction" (7) – but it is about more than the secret, which will play a powerful role in the

destructive effects Hamlet's actions have on others. It is the fact that the "'Father's Spirit'can only be taken at his word," and that that essential submission to a secret and faith is key, and it marks an important quality of obedience, but mere obedience to the Law is insufficient. The Law serves as a remembrance for how to live in the present, and so must include a quality that permits the listener to accept blindly the request made by another. William Desmond notes in *Philosophy and its Others* that "The priest advises submission; yet such self-belittlement is paradoxically an *elevation* through faith. Through self-negation, the previously insignificant individual becomes absolutely significant in god's eyes...Kierkegaard's sometimes absurd glorying in the absurdity of faith, are instances of such fideistic insolence to thought" (42). Hamlet's creative impulses – which at times border on epic concentrations of faith, sorrow, lament, and purpose – make him more than appropriate for the remembrance the Ghost desires, and for the singleness of will for which he is able nonetheless to perform this remembrance "In this distracted globe" that the restoration of what is right requires.

Philip Edwards comments "It is in Hamlet above all of Shakespeare's plays that...an openness towards both past and future in which the possibility of restoration is balanced against the futility of trying" (51). Through envisioning Hamlet's character as a dialectical moment – collision, really – of the past that are his memories and the future that the Ghost obliges, we are able to see the true

effort that being requires. If anything Hamlet is Kierkegaard's living emblem of his philosophy: he is that figure who is completely concerned with obtaining a totality of self and purpose, and who must struggle "against the futility of trying" (existential claims that we encounter frequently in literature of the twentieth century). Further on in his discussion of Hamlet Desmond remarks that "Hamlet is prototypical of the modern self in that his elusive innerness overflows every possible external manifestation" (*Philosophy and its Others* 94), and Hamlet resonates in such a manner with the characters of Kierkegaard's literature – from the Aesthete in *Either/Or* (or the ethical Judge) to the religious renderings of those individuals who strive to become something more than the societal dictates allow; his innerness which remains "elusive" even, at times to himself, drives the play, and become the bulk of its emphasis after Hamlet's first encounter with the Ghost.

MARCELLUS. Illo, ho, ho, my lord!
HAMLET. Hillo, ho, ho, boy, come and come!
MARCELLUS. How is't, my noble lord?
HORATIO. What news, my lord?
HAMLET. O, wonderful!
HORATIO. Good my lord, tell it.
HAMLET. No, you will reveal it…
HORATIO. These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.
HAMLET. I am sorry they offend you – heartily….
HAMLET. As you are friends, scholars and soldiers
Give me one poor request.
HORATIO. What is't, my lord? We will.
HAMLET. Never make known what you have seen tonight…

HORATIO. O day and night, but this is wondrous strange.
HAMLET. And therefore as a stranger give it welcome:
There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (1.5.114-119; 131-132; 140-143; 163-166)

Hamlet returns from his propitious meeting with the Ghost sounding joyous and triumphant, returning Marcellus' greeting with "Hillo, ho, ho, boy, come and come!" And to Horatio's enquiry of "What news, my lord?" – a reasonable enough question, especially since it entails a meeting with a specter – to which Hamlet replies "O, wonderful!" These are not words one would typically expect to hear from someone who has just had a conversation with their dead father, and when Horatio says to Hamlet "Good my lord, tell it," Hamlet interestingly replies, "No, you will reveal it." Hamlet cannot enter into a relationship of direct communication with Horatio: instead it will be Horatio who must find the dialectical relationship within himself to 'reveal it' – an understanding of the Ghost's presence and Hamlet's purpose – and so cannot be revealed by Hamlet, because it would not be understood by Horatio. Much as in *Fear and Trembling* where Abraham does not communicate to anyone what God has demanded, Hamlet cannot reveal to others what the Ghost has imparted. Kierkegaard troubles over this issue though in *Fear and Trembling*, and discusses it at length in one of his sections entitled "Problemata III," where he is able to understand and see Abraham's actions justified in an ethical way, by asserting that only through

a leap of faith through the absurd and into the absolute could Abraham have the faith to commit the deed that God commanded him to, and as such nobody could have understood Abraham. Kierkegaard also recognizes the problems between these conflicting demands he writes of the problem between such love and duty to God, that manifests itself as a paradox, where Kierkegaard writes in *Fear and Trembling*:

> ...if the will of heaven...had come to his knowledge quite privately, if it had entered into a purely private relation to him, then we are in the presence of the paradox, if there is any at all...then he could not speak, however willing he might be to do so. Then he would not enjoy his silence but would suffer the agony, but this indeed would be the assurance that he was justified. Then his silence would not be due to his wanting to place himself as the single individual in an absolute relation to the *universal* but to his having been placed as the single individual in an absolute relation to the *absolute*. Then, as far as I can see, he would also be able to find inner peace therein, whereas his noble silence would always be disturbed by the demands of the ethical. (93)

To be within the world of the universal is to find oneself in the world of the ethical, where we are commanded to speak, to make our intentions known to others. Abraham, however, can not do this, for a purpose has been spoken to him

that is beyond the conceptualization of the ethical. This is true too of Hamlet: he has been communicated with by a spirit that is not of the material universal world, and because the knowledge of Claudius' murdering his father, and of what he must do to set it right has "come to his knowledge quite privately" he too cannot be understood by others, no matter how hard he might wish them to know of his suffering. Were Hamlet to communicate to Horatio or Marcellus what the Ghost had spoken, one could feasibly imagine the objections that scholarly Horatio would lodge, of the questions he would ask pertaining to the trustworthiness of the Ghost and its intentions; Marcellus might very well report to King Claudius what had transpired. There is no shortage to the kinds of ethical questions, interrogatives, and roadblocks that any figure in *Hamlet* might place to fulfilling the command of the Ghost – except for Hamlet. He alone has the will to communicate with and understand the Ghost, and so must exclude from others the nature of what he is about to do, because his silence is derived from "having been placed as the single individual in an absolute relation to the absolute."

There are of course other ways to interpret this without needing to leap to the Ghost or the supernatural. As Kierkegaard relates in *Fear and Trembling* "A dozen sectarians go arm in arm with one another; they are totally ignorant of the solitary spiritual trials that are in store for the knight of faith" (80). Throughout our lives there are moments in which knowledge (in a variety of ways) comes to

us, and to answer it we often cannot make our intentions, our "solitary spiritual trials" known to others – they simply wouldn't understand; with their ethical objections they would try to stop us. This is not to suggest that Kierkegaard is advocating a kind of lawless recklessness with the lives of others. To the contrary, he considers the dictate of the absolute to be in accord with the highest concept of what is right, where real and true justice comes out of love. It is thus no coincidence that he chose for his subject Abraham – a father who loved his son – to illuminate the sincerity and love required of one to commit an act so absurd that it defies all rational ethicality. For Hamlet the relationship entered into with the Ghost is a "purely private relation," and so cannot be directly communicated to those around him. Horatio acknowledges the absurdity of communication that Hamlet commits, noting "These are but wild and whirling words, my lord" (1.5.131), and indeed they are; they do not communicate anything of meaning regarding the actual conversation between Hamlet and the Ghost, or the truth of the crimes committed by Claudius. But they tell us everything we need to know about Hamlet's state of mind. It is now focused on the task at hand, and sets the stage for the possibility of tragic action. Hamlet seals this moment by his request: "As you are friends, scholars and soldiers. / Give me one poor request" – taking care to demarcate each of the individual's archetypal psychologies: the scholar and soldier, though still nevertheless friends – that they "Never make known what you have seen tonight." It is then – in an

exchange that sets the stage for Hamlet's indirect communication, and for the contrast of the universal and absolute - that Horatio remarks "O day and night, but this is wondrous strange" (1.5.163), indicating the confusion and strange cloudiness that confounds the scene. To this Hamlet gives one of the most brilliant lines of the play: "And therefore as a stranger give it welcome: / There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.164-166). That suggestion on Hamlet's part of "as a stranger give it welcome" strikes me as being steeped in a charity and love, whose goal is to open wide the doors of the community to others. Something akin to this is suggested in W.H. Auden's poem "Postscript" from "The Sea and the Mirror" where he writes, "Tempt not your sworn comrade,- only / As I am can I / Love you as you are"(*Collected Poems* 445) - that idea that even if someone or something is different from us we must nevertheless make the effort to "give it welcome." Yet these lines will serve to establish until the late moments of the play, Hamlet's inability to communicate with the other characters in the play, for they are haunted, as Hamlet so profoundly suggests, by a bankruptcy of philosophy. Just to confine oneself to the ethical, the here and now, and to the immediate sensations of what can be seen (the "real") or quantified and (re)experienced to ensure accuracy is to deny the magnitude of the world for which we cannot see, hear, or understand. It's a question of faith, will, and the willingness to believe. As Hamlet remarks to Horatio - a figure whose ontology

is locked within the concerns of the immediate, the practical, the rational – "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.165-166). Only by self-limitations do we fail at opening and enhancing the community of others around us, and as Kierkegaard's philosophy and Hamlet's remarks remind us, in order to believe we have to have – for Kierkegaard, religious – faith, and often that faith is in something we have never dreamed, pondered, or can fully understand, and which could only be classified as the absurd.

CHAPTER III

THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF BEING AND ACTING

> I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself! To God, if you want to put it that way…The peace, the end of the quest, the last harbor, the joy of belonging to a fulfillment beyond men's lousy, pitiful, greedy fears and hopes and dreams!
>
> – Eugene O'Neill
> *Long Day's Journey into Night*

As Hamlet embarks upon the directive of the Ghost, indirect communication dominates the second act of *Hamlet*, and manifests itself to varying degrees through several characters in the play. The difficulty – and at times doubts – that Hamlet exhibits through the form of delay and indirect communication are suitable (one would also think expected), given the nature of the request. In his approaches to teaching *Hamlet* Philip Edwards remarks that:

> I have for several years suggested to my students that the central dilemma in Hamlet is that which Kierkegaard describes, concerning Abraham and the intended sacrifice of Isaac, in his work *Fear and Trembling*…[that] the conduct of Hamlet and the authority of the Ghost has unintentionally moved the play right

> into the point of terrible balance described by Kierkegaard. Is Hamlet's sense of mission divine or demoniac? (Phillips)

There is certainly no doubt that there is a "point of terrible balance" that Hamlet must deal with – a balance that drives him to question, at times, the Ghost's mandate. It is important to note however that that "balance" which Edwards refers to is, also, a misunderstanding of Hamlet's role as an individual who seeks to transcend the universal and merge with the absolute. Instead of there being a "terrible balance" that the Ghost moves Hamlet to, the question really is whether Hamlet will be able to surpass the ethical (the universal), and in doing so commit an action that is truth for him. Indeed, it is because Hamlet is able to communicate directly with the Ghost – the bearer of what we later discover to be truth about the murder committed by Claudius – and his will to believe that he becomes more than a tragic figure locked in a struggle, he becomes rather the most psychologically full character that Shakespeare produces because he questions *his* being, *his* purpose, and so is able to enter fully into a relationship with the absolute by taking ownership of himself. If there was no questioning, no deep struggle within his own psyche as to the rightness of his actions, then Hamlet would be a heroic figure who acts only out of what is morally and conventionally right.

> POLONIUS. Do you know me, my lord?
> HAMLET. Excellent well, you are a fishmonger.

POLONIUS. Not I, my lord.
HAMLET. Then I would you were so honest a man.
POLONIUS. Honest, my lord?
HAMLET. Ay, sir, to be honest as this world goes is to be one man picked out of ten thousand…
POLONIUS. What do you read, my lord?
HAMLET. Words, words, words.
POLONIUS. What is the matter, my lord?
HAMLET. Between who?
POLONIUS. I mean the matter that you read, my lord.
HAMLET. Slanders, sir. For the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plumtree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit together with most weak hams – all of which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down. For yourself, sir, shall grow as old as I am – if, like a crab, you could go backward.
POLONIUS. [*aside*] Though this be madness yet there is method in't. – Will you walk out of the air, my lord?
HAMLET. Into my grave. (2.2.170-175; 188-204)

Polonius believes that Hamlet's "madness" is a result of his love for his daughter Ophelia – but this is a mistaken belief, for as one looks at the replies given by Hamlet they are in fact alluding to much larger thematic elements than any relationship with one individual. When Polonius asks Hamlet "Do you know me, my lord?," Hamlet replies "Excellent well, you are a fishmonger," and Hamlet means it. Polonius' faults are that he is a chiefly political figure who does not grasp the depth of what Hamlet speaks, nor does he seem to comprehend the

direct piercing remarks that Hamlet makes of his character, such as when Hamlet says "Then I would you were so honest a man," metaphorically creating the typical image of the fishmonger as one who performs honest work, unlike Polonius' word-play and spying.

Indeed Polonius' response is to say "Honest, my lord?" to which Hamlet laments being able "to be honest as this world goes is to be / one man picked out of ten thousand." It is a striking commentary and criticism by Hamlet of the world in which he finds himself, a world filled with deceit, and is one which clings falsely to ideologies which it does not honestly endorse. One can see a parallel to Nietzsche's critique of the falseness of Christians: that in their Church-going, and preaching, and claims of morality they would, immediately, commit acts utterly contrary to the teachings they preached. Hamlet, however, is trying to find that authentic self that is able to act with a complete singularity and genuineness of meaning, and Polonius stands in stark contrast to that purpose. When Polonius asks of Hamlet (who enters the scene reading a book) "What do you read, my lord?," Hamlet famously replies "Words, words, words." It is within that vacuity of words in and of themselves – words without any genuine meaning – that Hamlet finds offensive, and makes him disgusted with the character of Polonius, whose entire existence is founded on a life of words meant to obsequiously serve, but not to live authentically.

In Matthew 12:36-37, Jesus says of idle words, "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." Words are not the answer: rather they are a means to attain the answer which is to be found in life, and even though Hamlet spends a good deal of the play talking, they are words with meaning, and are meant to progress through the various stages in order for him to find meaning that is truth for himself. When Polonius says "What is the matter, my lord?" in reference to what Hamlet reads, Hamlet remarks: "Slanders, sir. For the satirical rogue says here /that old men have grey beards.../...and that they have a plentiful lack of wit together," all of which Hamlet believes - and which we can mark as true with respect to Polonius. Hamlet continues that "For yourself, sir, shall / grow as old as I am - if, like a crab, you could go / backward" indicating that Hamlet believes himself to have grown since encountering the Ghost, from his previous aesthetic figure. It is also here that we see Hamlet communicating indirectly what he is unable to speak, because if he did speak these things directly to Polonius - indeed he says, "all of which, sir, though I most / powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not / honesty to have it thus set down" - they would be merely interpreted as base and vulgar insults, which the politically oriented Polonius could ignore, and which would also complicate Hamlet's ability to revenge against Claudius. If anything, Hamlet is being politically savvy

at this moment by *not* communicating what he knows Polonius to be and represent - namely, a pawn for Claudius - but more significantly it also reflects Hamlet's commitment to his deeper spiritual development towards his purpose.

To all of this poor Polonius doesn't know quite know how to respond, except that Hamlet is a young man struggling with youthful love. Polonius reflects that "Though this be madness yet there is / method in't," illustrating that he doesn't fundamentally understand Hamlet's "madness" though he recognizes "there is / method in't." In *Going Sane*, the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips says of this scene between Hamlet and Polonius that:

> ...Hamlet's madness, though these would not be Polonius' words, is more poetic, more suggestive, more evocative, more flaunting of its verbal gifts and talents than mere sanity. Words can be delivered more or less prosperously; a happiness can be struck by madness that reason and sanity can diminish. Sanity tempers where madness excels. Both are "pregnant," promising the new life that is new words, but they deliver quite differently...The words of the mad are more prosperous than the words of the sane. (6)

It is Polonius' recognition that Hamlet's "madness" contains "method in't," but that he is nevertheless deprived of the deep structural understanding of the situation at hand, that Hamlet possesses. But there's also something more going on here, because in Polonius voicing his thoughts about Hamlet being mad, he's

also responding to a concern of the reader: what are we to make of Hamlet's behavior? How can we interpret crabs, and backward-walking, and make any use of the lines that Hamlet here (and subsequently) delivers? In part, Hamlet is making a point about our conceptualizations of life, of the dialectical struggle between the conventional and unconventional, that which is sane or insane. In doing so, he is challenging the normative values ascribed for mapping correct actions – because the task set before him requires to write his own understanding, for the Ghost, the imperative demanded of him, and his ability to navigate the ethical framework of which he is historically, culturally, and politically a part.

> POLONIUS. How
> pregnant sometimes his replies are – a happiness that
> often his madness hits on, which reason and sanity could
> not so prosperously be delivered of…
> HAMLET. You cannot take from me anything that I will
> not more willingly part withal – except my life, except
> my life, except my life.
> POLONIUS. Fare you well, my lord.
> HAMLET. These tedious old fools. (2.2.205-214)

Phillips in his study of our descriptions and characterizations of sanity continues by asserting that:

> Polonius connects reason and sanity, an association that has become all too familiar to us, and suggests that compared with Hamlet's madness they are lacking in something. It is precisely

> what sanity may be lacking that Hamlet's madness makes Polonius wonder about (as though the mad expose the sane in the same way that the Fool exposes his Master). The replies of the mad are somehow more pregnant; the dialogue of the sane is poorer…The mad don't let us take it for granted that we know where we are with them. (6-7)

Phillips says that the last line is particularly useful here, because it reveals something very sociological about our own constructed social communities, and is telling of Hamlet's Danish social community. That Hamlet is very much playing the part of one of Shakespeare's fools (by relating truth to those who are blind to themselves), reveals much of what is powerful in Hamlet's character: that he is finally beginning to come into the process of being himself, and so can articulate (justifiably) the faults of others. For Hamlet, Polonius is all too easy to comprehend, and the political issues of *Hamlet* are equally easy to deal with; the genius of the play is found, however, in its examination of the spiritual coming-to-be that is Hamlet's rejection of what society expects – be it Claudius, Gertrude, or even the Ghost – because Hamlet makes the play his own through his continuous psychosocial development. In other words, it is through his so-called insanity that he is actually able to be a character of significant meaning who has the power to change the course of events profoundly, in both the play and the audience's interpretation of their own interactions in the social community, by

dislodging himself from any identifiably 'sane' or, to an outsider, comprehendible position.

Much as Kierkegaard's Abraham is dislocated from his own social community by the imperative given to him by God, Hamlet and those who live outside the social confines of moral conventions "lack a sense of community, isolated by the pregnant ambiguities of their speech; the sane seem to lack a certain complexity, but live at relative ease in a commonwealth of shared understandings" (*Going Sane* 7-8). That "commonwealth of shared understandings" in *Hamlet* is the political continuation of the State, of resisting the Norwegians, of preserving the monarchy and the social order – but it's founded on everything that is wrong. Much as in our present day where those who speak out against the ruling authorities, who question societal definitions of what constitutes the "right," "good," and "meaningful" are classified as either subversive, insane or odd, Hamlet's imperative puts him into a situation that commands a higher authority of the self, to which he alone – like Abraham – must answer. In a modern social connection, Phillips comments of modern psychiatry that "...in the late 1960s the antipsychiatry movement was inspired to intervene in the contemporary treatment of the mad...because there is something about sanity as an available norm that oppresses by impoverishing the human spirit" (8). And Hamlet represents the human spirit at its core, because unlike the other characters in the play he isn't concerned about a topical understanding of

the human condition. Rather he is searching for – and arguably finds – the purpose to which he is called, which is the truth. Truth that is in Hamlet (and life), not defined by a social hierarchy or social convention, but by Hamlet's own unique rendering of his position, his communication with the Ghost, and his ability to truly see others around him as flawed individuals. After all, even Polonius remarks that "Often his madness hits on, which reason and sanity could / not so prosperously be delivered of." We can certainly see that this not a new theme (though it is one that gets less coverage today), as most of literature since the Great War and even more so after World War II and the Vietnam War, is concerned with the issues that occupy Hamlet's mind. As Phillips comments, "Madness was an authentic response to the horrors of contemporary life; to be sane in a world like this was to be out of touch with reality" (10). It is no surprise that when Polonius asks of Hamlet "Will you walk out of the air, my lord?" that Hamlet replies, "Into my grave" – for Hamlet the material world with all its political confines has irrevocably lost meaning, and so has left him only his unmediated purpose, and death (also as far as we know an unmediated experience), as the only objectives to which he can ascribe true authentic meaning. Hamlet's response goes further than this though, because it is concerned with a reality that only he alone can envision, and is one that he alone believes will reinstate a true and meaningful reality in the fractured social community of a Denmark gone terribly awry. When Hamlet says to Polonius,

"You cannot take from me anything that I will / Not more willingly part withal – except my life, except / My life, except my life," it is Hamlet's recognition that without one's life nothing can be accomplished in the material space of the universal, but that do so one must take ownership of one's self.

In Hamlet's interactions with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern we again see a continuation of Hamlet's astute ability to discern the underlying politics of a given situation, tempered by his internal struggle with what constitutes meaning and purpose. Upon the entrance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Hamlet is aware that they were sent for by Claudius to spy on him), he makes clear in his questioning of them that he knows they are on a mission, to which Rosencrantz replies (and lies) that the only reason they are there is "To visit you [Hamlet], my lord, no other occasion" (2.2.237). In Hamlet's response we see that he is capable of interpreting the presence of these two intellectually less astute figures, but also to discern something more telling about how others are attempting to map Hamlet's irregular behavior.

> HAMLET. Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks, but
> I thank you, and sure, dear friends, my thanks are too
> dear a halfpenny. Were you not sent for? Is it your own
> inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, come, deal justly
> with me. Come, come, nay speak.
> GUILDENSTERN. What should we say, my lord?

HAMLET. Anything but to th'purpose. You were sent for, and there is a kind of confession in your looks, which your modesties have not craft enough to colour. I know the good King and Queen have sent for you.

ROSENCRANTZ. To what end, my lord?

HAMLET. That you must teach me. But let me conjure you, by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved love, and by what more dear a better proposer can charge you withwal, be even and direct with me whether you were sent for or no.

ROSENCRANTZ. What say you?

HAMLET. Nay then, I have an eye of you. If you love me, hold not off.

GUILDENSTERN. My lord, we were sent for. (2.2.238-258)

Intention, purpose, categorizations of normal and abnormal behavior continue to be dominant themes in the play, especially as the other characters try to make sense of what (if any) motives Hamlet has for his unusual and out-of-character behavior. These attempts serve to reveal the political framework within which the major figures of the play operate, and also to reveal that Hamlet's political sensibilities are not quite so out of touch with what's going on around him. It seems quite clear in his dealings with his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, that Hamlet immediately senses their framework of presence as they stand before him. His communication with them continues his indirect mode of communication, because even though he confronts them directly with "Were you not sent for? Is it your own / inclining? Is it a free visitation? / Come,

come, deal justly / with me. Come, come, nay speak," we are still confronted with the issue of speech, where a declaration to speak is demanded by Hamlet to know the purpose of why his friends have come to him. When Guildenstern foolishly asks "What should we say, my lord?" Hamlet replies "Anything but to th'purpose," because he already knows that they were sent for, which he confirms with "You were sent for." The bumbling (though kind) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are simply incapable of comprehending Hamlet beyond anything more than a surface approach, and Hamlet reveals that "...there is a kind of confession in your looks, which / your modesties have not craft enough to colour. I know / the good King and Queen have sent for you." Here we see Hamlet's careful attention to the details of others through their "looks," which he then relates to the typology of character each figure in the play represents – which, one might add, is hardly a characteristic trait of someone who is unaware of his surroundings. And finally Hamlet shades his own response with a touch of politics, labeling the King and Queen as ironically "good," while noting that it was they who sent the two witless spies, to observe Hamlet. Rosencrantz attempts to play games with Hamlet and responds with "To what end, my lord?" to which Hamlet says, "That you must teach me" – though he already knows the answer. There seems, instead, on the part of Hamlet an attempt to get Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to not be deceptive, and to answer him truthfully out of "the obligation of our ever-preserved love," by which they should "be

even and direct" about whether or not they were sent for. Again Rosencrantz attempts to be deceptive, and it is Hamlet who with resignation and clarity says "I have an eye of you," because he possesses a clearer vision, that extends far beyond the social politics that encumber the others of the play. Finally Hamlet asserts that "if you love me, hold not off," to which Guildenstern is moved to confess "we were sent for."

In understanding Hamlet's ability to discern the true motivations of others, one should look to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* - a philosopher with whom Shakespeare was presumably acquainted, given his education[12] - particularly of where he speaks of greatness in an individual. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle writes that "Greatness of soul, then, seems to be a sort of crown of the virtues, because it makes them greater and does not occur in isolation from them. This is why it is hard to be truly great-souled, since it is not possible without a noble and good character" (69). The implications of which Aristotle

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[12] In *Troilus and Cressida* there is an explicit reference made to Aristotle, where Hector remarks, "Unlike young men, whom Aristotle thought / Unfit to hear moral philosophy" (2.2.166-167). A.D. Nuttall in *Shakespeare the Thinker*, Yale UP, 2007, makes note of this *and* discusses a particularly interesting point in Aristotle (and its possible relation to Shakespeare), where Nuttall remarks "There is a place in the surviving collection of crabbed lecture notes known as the *Poetics* of Aristole where the philosopher remarks that moral character is shown when a person makes an "unobvious decision'" (283), which Nuttall suggests could be used to interpret Shakespeare's dramatic works. This is a very interesting point, which would undoubtedly provide greater depth and understanding of Hamlet's actions through Aristotle's philosophy - and is something which, one could argue, influenced Shakespeare's understanding of moral character.

writes are not to be taken lightly, because character, nobleness of purpose, and spirit are all fundamental aspects of Hamlet's psychology. He represents that "crown of virtues" because he tries to become something more than those around him, and is working to restore true and meaningful justice to an insane situation. What is more, he does not do these acts alone or for himself, because in his act of becoming better (in character), the greater individual tries to get others to be direct and honest for themselves. While we could certainly argue as to the political value of a confession to their purpose, it seems far more beneficial to see Hamlet's actions as being about character. Much as Kierkegaard studies Abraham as a great figure imbued with a greater purpose. Aristotle's philosophy is particularly useful for such an examination of *Hamlet* – not simply for an historical analysis of the play – because so much of Hamlet's psychological character, his interactions with others, and the lamentations he endures are a direct result of the burden he must bear to be great.

Aristotle continues in his observations of the great-souled individual that,

> The great-souled person looks down on others with justification, because he as the right opinion of himself, but the masses do so capriciously. He does not face trivial dangers, nor, because he holds few things in honour, does he enjoy danger; but he will face great dangers, and when in danger will not spare his own life, thinking that the price of life can be too high…[and] He must also be open in

> his likes and dislikes, since hiding one's feelings is characteristic of a fearful person, and he cares more for the truth than for what people think. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 70-71)

It is because the "great-souled person" knows himself, that he is able to look down upon other's actions, and see their deficiencies of character. Whereas others clamor for false glory and rewards, the great-souled individual above all else, values truth, and he is willing to face dangers to achieve real and meaningful truths, despite what other people might think. Kierkegaard – who had read the Greek philosophers – identifies this idea of greatness of soul in Abraham, and also is appreciative of the ethical, and paradoxical clash that arises when the great-souled individual does something against what is considered to be right. Kierkegaard writes in *Fear and Trembling* that "During the time before the result [the possible murdering of Isaac], either Abraham was a murderer every minute or we stand before a paradox that is higher than all meditations" (66). Here of course Kierkegaard is speaking of the teleological suspension of the ethical – that point at which the figure who embodies the absolute must suspend the ethical laws, conventions, and morality that governs the social community, and leap into the absurdity of his action on the basis of the absurd. It's arguably one of Kierkegaard's most powerful formulations of the individual, basing his actions solely out of himself, and is one of Kierkegaard's most notable contributions to existential philosophy. (What has been removed from his

philosophic rendering by later philosophers, however, is the necessity of faith in a higher moral spirit, beyond oneself, in order to commit such an action.) For Kierkegaard, Aristotle, and Hamlet there is *real* meaning in the act that must be committed, in the absurdity in which the imperative is issued, and on the basis of absurdity through faith that the act must be completed.

Hamlet shapes the matter of the play through of his interactions with the other players, and divulges to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the reasons for their being sent to see him, because for Hamlet the essence of his purpose is self-development, to come into his own sense of being. He tolerates attempts at subversion by others, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and says,

> HAMLET. I will tell you why [you were sent for]. So shall my anticipation
> prevent your discovery and your secrecy to the King and Queen moult no feather. 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, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What piece of work is a man – how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form and moving; how express and admirable in action; how like an angel in apprehension; how like a god; the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals; And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me – nor women neither. (2.2.259-275)

Hamlet's contemplation of the world here, is the beginning of his resignation of it. With intellectual and philosophical clarity, he begins his long declarative remarks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by telling the reasons they were sent for, and that he will preserve their political purpose, commenting that in doing so it will "Prevent your discovery and your secrecy to the King and Queen moult no feather" - that is shall not suffer any loss to their purpose, for they shall still be able to deliver their report. What Hamlet then imparts is a moving analysis of his own suffering wherein he says "Wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises." We see, however, that he is still performing the work of coming-to-be, that he has not reached the point at which he can merge himself with the absolute and commit his act. At moments like this, other Kierkegaard scholars who have taken up the issue of Hamlet and Kierkegaard's philosophy have come to much the same conclusion: that Hamlet, because of his struggles, doesn't quite fit the mould for a religious-hero.

Richard Kearney in his essay on *Hamlet* in *The New Kierkegaard* writes that "...Kierkegaard was incapable of moving from a traditional Christian understanding of the religious to a deconstructive understanding of religion-without-religion as a "messianicity" - and so he was unable to appreciate the positive implications of Hamlet's *failure* as a "religious hero" (in the traditional sense)" (237). Again, however, it's important to see that the brief critical appraisal that Kierkegaard delivers in *Stages on Life's Way* is incomplete at best,

especially when one considers his voluminous amount of work that corresponds to the rich depth that is Hamlet's psychology. At one point Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author, Father Taciturnus says of Hamlet that "His scruples are in this case of no interest at all; his procrastination and delay, his postponement and his self-deceitful purpose in renewing his purpose when at the same time there is no outward hindrance, merely abase him…and so [Hamlet] becomes nothing at all" (*Stages on Life's Way* 410). Such comments on the part of Kierkegaard are, more than anything, overly brief, and reflects the specificity of analysis that often accompanies his pseudonymous character's reflections. As for being solely guided by Kierkegaard's remarks in *Stages on Life's Way* it is important to note that the critics should perhaps know better than to place all of their focus on it as a volume of end-all commentary on *Hamlet* (or anything else for that matter), because that work is, after all, just one of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, and so should be viewed as being a particular part of the complex Kierkegaard canon that interweaves signed works (that is Kierkegaard's ascribing his own name to the work) and ones that are pseudonymous, which Kierkegaard sought to distance himself from.[13]

Stages on Life's Way was not intended to be a complete commentary on either *Hamlet* or the issues that Kierkegaard wrote on – if anything it's largely an extension of questions concerning aesthetic and ethical living – and so should be

[13] Kierkegaard takes these issues up in *My Point of View for My Work as an Author.*

seen in that light. Of course, Richard Kearney also adds to his study of *Hamlet* and its relationship to Kierkegaard that "In other words, the problem with Kierkegaard, on this account, would be that he hadn't read Derrida" (237). One does not need to presume that Kierkegaard's account suffers from his historical moment, rather one need only to look to *other* places to find that Kierkegaard's consideration of the human condition is one that manifests itself in ways that defy the singular, and reveal the manifold methods that the individual comes to an authentic existence within himself. Hamlet is attempting just such an existence, and it comes with all of the attendant trials that any human being encounters when they question their significance in and for the world. In existential fashion, Hamlet declares that "this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors." It is a soaring, aesthetically oriented critique of the world that Hamlet is on the way to rejecting, in order to attain something more meaningful. Hamlet's comments here are also not very far away from those of the Aesthete in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, particularly where 'A' relates that, "A fire broke out backstage in a theatre. The clown came out to warn the public; they thought it was a joke and applauded. He repeated it; the acclaim was even greater. I think that's just how the world will come to an end: to general applause from wits who believe it's a

joke" (49). The problem with 'A' however, as we come to understand it in the context of *Either/Or*, is that he relates to everything in a purely aesthetic way – there is no requirement to take ownership of his actions, feelings, or relations to others, and so there is no meaning beyond his one dimensional self. As Hamlet – who began as an aesthetic figure – comes into the realization of the sociopolitical sphere that surrounds him, he must also confront the ethical relationships that he has with others, and finally to break for something higher that he alone constitutes. Nevertheless, here Hamlet's comments mirror the aesthetic remarks made by 'A,' such as where Hamlet says, "What piece of work is a man – how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form and moving; how express and admirable in action; how like an angel in apprehension; how like a god; the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals," which he does as an act of irony to rhetorically illuminate the fact that despite the beauty of the world, and that despite the possibilities inherent in man's "infinite faculties," man is nevertheless capable of tremendous cruelties and wrongs, and all too often (as Hamlet must confront) is hypocritical with its ideals and with itself. Hamlet notes this terrible hypocrisy with the extremely elegant line "And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?" – for quintessence (that idea that haunts theoretical physicists seeking to map the universe) is the coming together of all the elements of a thing, it's perfected substantive essence coming together in a perfect whole. Much like the Aesthete who resigns himself *to* the woes of the world, Hamlet

here too is lamenting the tragedy that is human existence. Despite being in possession of the most beautiful and artful of abilities, we nevertheless produce horrifying wars, prisons, and bloodshed that we use against one another. And so Hamlet concludes "Man delights not me - nor women neither," clearly moving himself away from his intellectual fellowship with humanity, and his physical passions towards others.

It is too often a condition of an either-or mentality that produces the mindset that either I must be bored with existence, recognize death as an end, and so enjoy my immediate pleasures, *or* turn wholly to the ethical and so attempt to make a life of meaning through being honest in my dealings with others. Neither Kierkegaard nor Hamlet is quite so simple though, and that's one of the criticisms that Kierkegaard is dealing to the moral spectrum that governs our philosophic limitations of behavior. Kierkegaard articulates with excellent depth the kind of substantive remarks an aesthetic individual might make as one who is governed solely by an ontology of selfishness, where 'A' relates:

> Something wonderful happened to me. I was transported into the seventh heaven. All the gods sat there in assembly. By special grace I was accorded the favour of a wish. 'Will you,' said Mercury, 'have youth, or beauty, or power, or a long life, or the prettiest girl, or any other of the many splendours we have in our chest of knick-knacks? So choose, but just one thing.' For a moment I was at a loss.

> Then I addressed myself to the gods as follows: 'Esteemed contemporaries, I choose one thing: always to have laughter on my side.' Not a single word did one god offer in answer; on the contrary they all began to laugh. From this I concluded that my prayer was fulfilled and that the gods knew how to express themselves with taste, for it would hardly have been fitting gravely to answer, 'It has been granted you.' (*Either/Or* 57)

In a neurotically reflexive way 'A' has asked only that the gods be able to abuse others, to take everything – including (and especially) one's relationship to others – as a joke, so that his wish to "always have laughter on my side" could be granted. Laughter, above all, is a powerful element that allows for one to not take seriously the concern of others; indeed it is a device of empowerment which enables us to feel as though we are in control of a situation, or that we need not bother about one. The use of the gods and their "chest of knick-knacks" which include, among other things, "youth, or beauty, or power, or a long life, or the prettiest girl," are a trivializing of the elements that are sought by, haunt, and destroy the human spirit. Yet again for the aesthete these are mere trifles, and the tone of the aphorism clearly conveys the lack of seriousness which either a meeting with the gods, or their possible gifts have for the Aesthete. We might very well interpolate Hamlet's comment about quintessence – the bringing together of all the things that we so often seek in life and that the gods keep in

their box of treasures – and see that everything is nothing more than diffusion into nothingness, which in their particular ways both Hamlet and the Aesthete experience. For 'A,' in the end, none of it matters – because life is a finite affair, and none of the material objects or our ethical relationships with others persist past physical life. If everything we have, if the entire quintessence of life is ultimately turned to dust (again we can see the underlying issue of mortality that Hamlet contemplates), then what good is any of it? The answer for the Aesthete is that there isn't any use, and so we shouldn't care about anything except amusing ourselves at the expense of others. Hamlet, however, isn't quite so solidly in the camp with the Aesthete, – after all he's had a fairly profound reckoning of meaning with the Ghost – but that doesn't mean that he doesn't have despair over the finitude of material life, and over the conditions within the social community that he desires to repair. To the contrary, it is very tempting for the suffering individual to want to become the Aesthete, to embrace nothingness – because if life really is one big joke, then my actions (be they counted as morally good or evil) don't matter except in an immediate sense. Hamlet isn't in that category, instead he's making an attempt to make sense of and do the work that love and justice require, and that is never an easy task.

The arrival of the players marks an important opportunity for Hamlet, because it allows him to speak the parts of famous roles regarding avenging a

father's death, and has an allegorical importance for Hamlet, who needs to be reminded of the Ghost's mandate.

> 1 PLAYER. What speech, my good lord?
> HAMLET. One speech in't I chiefly loved –
> 'twas Aeneas' talk to Dido, and thereabout of it
> especially when he speaks of Priam's slaughter. If it live
> in your memory begin at this line – let me see, let me
> see –
> *The rugged Pyrrhus like th' Hyrcanian beast…*
> – 'Tis not so. It begins with Pyrrhus.
> *The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms,*
> *Black as his purpose, did the night resemble*
> *When he lay couched in th'ominous horse,*
> *Hath now this dread and black complexion smeared*
> *With heraldry more dismal, head to foot.*
> *Now is he total gules, horridly tricked*
> *With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons*
> *Baked and impasted with the parching streets*
> *That lend a tyrannous and a damned light*
> *To their lord's murder; roasted in wrath and fire,*
> *And thus o'ersized with coagulate gore,*
> *With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus*
> *Old grandsire Priam seeks.*
> So proceed you. (2.2.371; 383-403)

Hamlet references Virgil's *Aeneid* and the story of Dido and Aeneas with "One speech in't it I chiefly loved – / 'twas Aeneas' talk to Dido…/ especially when he speaks of Priam's slaughter," evoking an interesting diegetic narrative structure. In the *Aeneid* Aeneas and his crew become shipwrecked in Carthage where Aeneas meets the Queen of Carthage, Dido, who ultimately falls in love with him. During a banquet Aeneas recounts the destruction of Troy, where King

Priam was murdered in cold blood – we can of course connect this to the Ghost's emphasis on his own murder with "Murder most foul" – by Achille's son Pyrrhus. This is coupled with Dido's recognition that she has fallen in love with Aeneas, who of course must leave, and is further complicated by her previously sworn fidelity to her late husband Sychaeus, murdered by Pygmalion (her brother). Aeneas and Dido have intimate relations, that Dido interprets as a kind of marriage bond between them, though Aeneas' duty requires him to leave, whereupon Dido stabs herself upon a funeral pyre with Aeneas' sword, and dies. As Aeneas and his crew sail away, he turns to look back upon Carthage and sees the smoke rising, and understands that Dido has committed suicide. It is impressive that Hamlet has so adeptly chosen a narrative tragedy that so closely mirrors the psychological issues that he is dealing with, the roles that the characters of the play embody – notably Claudius, old King Hamlet, Gertrude, and Hamlet – and that in doing so he also complicates the structure of the play. Hamlet utilizes a moment between two heroic figures – Aeneas and Dido – who fall in love, and who are irrevocably torn apart by duty, and in the case of Dido by love, to death. It is a heightening of dramatic tension by Hamlet, a remembrance of an epic story that is now being used to memorialize his own father's death, and the task that lies before him. It is no surprise that Hamlet chooses a heroically romantic figure like Aeneas, a great soldier who because of destiny must travel and endure terrible hardships in order to fulfill the prophecy

that was given to him, and that Hamlet finds himself in Aeneas' position. The divine injunction that demands fulfillment, the terrible struggles that must be gone through, and the necessity that is the beginning for the finality of action. Like Aeneas, Hamlet too must go through trials that force him – both by choice and by circumstance – to delay the purpose of his journey. Aeneas' journey of course is a literal and figurative journey: He goes to different places, encounters different people, cultures, and gods, but the inner turmoil of Hamlet's own psychodynamics is no less a journey. Indeed, the independent and solitary questionings, trials, and assays are often even more difficult than a literal journey (like Aeneas') that allows the individual to displace internal sufferings into outward goals and entities. As Kierkegaard notes "Abraham remains silent – but he *cannot* speak. Therein lies the distress and anxiety. Even though I go on talking night and day without interruption, if I cannot make myself understood when I speak, then I am not speaking" (*Fear and Trembling* 113). For the single suffering individual, the totality of the self reconciling with the self is a journey that requires just as much, if not more, effort, endurance, and pain as that undertaken by Aeneas.

Hamlet has chosen a story of epic suffering, where the context of Virgil's *Aeneid* mirrors the patterns of conflict we find in Hamlet's fractured psyche. That it is connected to a love story seems also apt, though the love is not between Hamlet and a woman, as was the case of Aeneas, rather Hamlet seems to suggest

that the love is for his father, that physically absent figure who haunts Hamlet. That Hamlet recognizes his own foreseeable death – which we will encounter in his reference to the undiscovered country – in the service of memory, remembrance, and the work of love seems suggested by his evocation of this particular moment in the *Aeneid*.

The second structural element which replicates *Hamlet* is the totality of mind that is represented by Pyrrhus. What distinguishes Pyrrhus from Hamlet is, however, the former's cold and brutal nature: Pyrrhus is a savage individual who deliberately murders Priam. One can certainly see the wish-impulse on the part of Hamlet to possess this kind of devotion to barbarous murder for the sake of murder – after all, it would certainly make his task much easier to fulfill. One can also envision the ferocity and depth with which Hamlet speaks the lines: "*The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms, / Black as his purpose, did the night resemble*," where the emphasis is on Pyrrhus' "sable arms" that are "black as his purpose," with a final repetition of this theme on black signifying Pyrrhus' deeds which, "did the night resemble." The continuous emphasis on black and its connection to Pyrrhus' purpose serve to reveal the ferocity and heartlessness with which he committed his deeds – something that Hamlet is attempting to mimic, both in speaking the lines, and through that dramatic process allow the eventual actualizing of that state of mind. Pyrrhus is presented in such a stark way that the lines "*Hath now this dread and black complexion smeared / With heraldry*

more dismal, head to foot" which indicates Pyrrhus' having applied blood to himself – a mark of "heraldry" – seem merely to complement the overall bloodiness of his mind. Hamlet continues delivering the speech with "*Now is he total gules, horridly tricked / With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons*" and we emerge with the understanding that nobody is spared, that all are punished be they "fathers, mothers, daughters, [or] sons." There's something too powerful at play in the recitation of this speech for Hamlet to be able to devote the entirety himself to it, though that is something that Shakespeare could have surely endowed him with had he so desired. Instead, Hamlet turns the speech over to the Player with, "So proceed you," allowing Hamlet to break away from complete immersion with the role of Pyrrhus. One of the dangers inherent in playacting that every actor must confront, is that danger of going so deeply into the psychology and situatedness of a particular role that they forget their own identity. Even Polonius – though he might have said it for purely sycophantic reasons – declares "'Fore God, my lord, well spoken – with good accent and good discretion" (2.2.404-405). It is because of this inherent danger, however, that Hamlet breaks away from complete identification of himself with Pyrrhus, though the Player continues the speech, and so allows the fullness of the structural relevance that it has for the play to be revealed.

1 PLAYER. *Pyrrhus at Priam drives, in rage strikes wide, /*
But with the whiff and wind of his fell sword

Th'unnerved father falls. Then senseless Ilium
Seeming to feel this blow, with flaming top
Stoops to his base and with a hideous crash
Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear. For lo, his sword
Which was declining on the milky head
Of reverend Priam seemed i'th' air to stick.
So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood
Like a neutral to his will and matter
Did nothing. (2.2.410-420)

"Th'unnerved father falls" – what line could speak more to Hamlet's own desire to remove from his psychology the memory of his father, particularly in light of the amount of pain and trauma it has caused (and continues to cause) him. Especially in lieu of Freud's comments about the son seeking to become the father of himself, we can appreciate the desire Hamlet has to take ownership of himself *and* the familial situation that he deals with. The family dynamic further complicates Hamlet's purpose, after all it's much easier to kill others when they're not a part of your family, and it's much easier to commit any action (be it good or bad) when it's not one that involves your own family. As the Player relates, Pyrrhus' actions are discovered by "senseless Ilium," which "Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear," revealing that even the murderous Pyrrhus whose bloodlust was so powerfully articulated by Hamlet is, nevertheless, delayed. Taking Pyrrhus prisoner reveals further that he is resigned to being "*as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood / Like a neutral to his will and matter / Did nothing*" – we need not look very far to see a figure who stands "Like a neutral to his will and

matter" and who ultimately, at this particular moment in the play, "Did nothing." What distinguishes Pyrrhus' inaction from Hamlet's however, lies in that mention of "will and matter." Hamlet is, at base, not – anymore than any ordinary individual might be – a wrathful person; he has to be provoked, either by internal or external forces, to action. Furthermore, unlike the bloody Pyrrhus' cold murder, Hamlet has moral questionings, because he is at heart the modern existential individual searching to find meaning; simply murdering someone – even if they've done a terrible deed – is not easy. Indeed, even in our modern social community we still debate issues such as the death penalty, and its use as either a moral or immoral tool of social control and domination. Hamlet's mind is built quite differently from that of Pyrrhus the soldier, the figure who can so easily do what he has been culturally inculcated to do – but Hamlet (whose cultural teachings probably aligned more closely to those of Pyrrhus' than his psychology suggests), is a figure who endures because he goes beyond mere acts of revenge; his greatness lies in his ability to pause – and then, to pause again and question himself. Here Kierkegaardian critics pause to argue that Hamlet hasn't acted, that he's still contemplating what ought to be his appropriate course of action.

In his book-length study of Kierkegaard and Hamlet *Is Hamlet a Religious Drama?*, Gene Fendt remarks that "It strikes me that...Hamlet is the infinitely dialectical hero, who engenders thoughts beyond the reaches of our more

positive souls, as he is likely to do until God comes back to give us the result – or not" (197). What Fendt is alluding to, in an indirect way, is Hamlet's ability to remake himself continuously, – as individuals in life do – to reshape meaning both internally and externally so as to act with authentic meaning. And if we look to Kierkegaard's other works, especially *Either/Or*, *The Sickness unto Death*, or even his signed works such as *Works of Love*, then what we find is the progressive development of the self by the individual is ultimately what we – and Hamlet – are after. Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death* relates that "A person in despair wants despairingly to be himself" (50), and it strikes me that Hamlet is in despair at wanting to become himself, for if he had reached that stage of development he wouldn't feel either the need or excitement (which he clearly exudes), to displace his purpose through a portrayal of a story that encompasses and structurally forms his own material position. Indeed, Kierkegaard continues that, "To be 'self' in the way he wants to be it, that would be – even if in another sense just as despairing – everything he desired; but to be forced to be 'self' in a way that he doesn't want to be, that is his torment – not being able to be rid of himself (*The Sickness unto Death* 50)." It is the desire of the suffering individual – suffering because he is trying to become a 'self' – that compels him to seek out ownership of himself. However, Hamlet's own path towards taking ownership of his self and his purpose is, in a way, forced along by the Ghost, and so we see the doubts and suffering that afflict him as he attempts to find his own genuine

meaning, that obligates Hamlet's pauses in the play. And we will of course continue to see the desperate Hamlet – eager to rid himself of himself – displace his intentions into and through others, hence his desire to utilize the *Murder of Gonzago* as a way to "catch the conscience of the King [Claudius]" (2.2.540). For the moment however the Player continues the story of Pyrrhus, recounting how he was finally able to come to action and brutally murder Priam.

> 1 PLAYER. *But as we often see against some storm*
> *A silence in the heavens, the rack stand still*
> *The bold winds speechless and the orb below*
> *As hush as death, anon the dreadful thunder*
> *Doth rend the region, so after Pyrrhus' pause*
> *A roused vengeance sets him new a-work.* (2.2.421-426)

As the parallel structural elements between Hamlet and Pyrrhus emerge, we also see a justification for Pyrrhus' delay: "But as we often see against some storm / A silence in the heavens, the rack stand still…/…so after Pyrrhus' pause / A roused vengeance sets him new a-work." Clearly the dramatic tension is increased by Hamlet's (and Pyrrhus') delay; we as readers and viewers want the action to commence, but in the case of Hamlet's delayed actions we have to formulate an understanding different from that of Pyrrhus. Whereas his bloodlust is thwarted by being taken a prisoner, the deep structural pauses undertaken by Hamlet on his course to murder Claudius occur because Hamlet's psychology isn't that of Pyrrhus; Hamlet simply doesn't have the revenge-murderer qualities. It is Hamlet's sensitive persona and his intellectual faculties

that unite us as an audience to his suffering, because our own lives parallel, to varying degrees, the intellectual suffering that occurs as we attempt to become a fully-fledged self. Were Hamlet to act as Pyrrhus does, and with his only thought being turned to blood, than the play's actions would contain no more inherent meaning than a crime committed – and appropriate justice done. It is Hamlet's ability to transcend those mere renderings of direct and consequential justice (that is to say justice as punishment and equalization of wrongs), into a restorative justice that acts out of principles for which only he can attain and bear. In our culture of late capitalism, a figure such as Hamlet takes on an especial importance by being able to resist the vulgarity of justice acted out of revenge, because he is able to avoid the immediacy of aesthetic action that dictates our responses to be nothing more than mere stimuli acting against stimuli: in other words, crime and revenge, as meaningful justice.

As Fendt remarks, "Something in Hamlet has always resisted being made a thing, an element of the world that is thoroughly profane. But that world (he sees) is not the world: that is the apparent world…*Hamlet* is the drama of religion; Western culture since Wittenberg is the mimesis of this play" (222). Against the greedy material existence of Claudius who murders for power and control, and against even his best friend Horatio who embodies the political sensibilities of social justice, Hamlet remains that character who "has always resisted being made a thing," and who indeed goes so far as to resist being "an

element of the world that is thoroughly profane." It is Hamlet's power as an individual - an individual who becomes something more than his rank of Prince or his education at Wittenberg (and everything symbolic that that represents) - to remake himself as an individual that gives him a spiritual significance in the play, and for us as audience members. He transcends his particular moment - unlike Pyrrhus who forever remains locked in bloodshed and who is remembered for the horrors he commits - and as such Hamlet is never easy to contain; he shifts continuously and becomes a protean character that we're never quite able to pinpoint, or to whom we are able to ascribe any absolute value. Harold Bloom was compelled to say in *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* that "*Hamlet* is part of Shakespeare's revenge upon revenge tragedy, and is of no genre. Of all poems, it is the most unlimited. As a meditation upon fragility in confrontation with death, it completes only with the world's scriptures" (3). While a comparison with the "world's scriptures" is probably too hyperbolic an interpretation to grant *Hamlet*, Bloom and Fendt capture that feeling of Hamlet being a character who is doing something that is profoundly concerning with human psychological development, and an individual's coming-to-be in relation with himself.

The delivery of Pyrrhus' tale continues its relationship with Hamlet's own psychosocial drama, where Hamlet again returns to that desire to punish

Gertrude (and one might even go so far as to say women generally) when Hecuba – the wife of Priam – discovers that Pyrrhus has murdered him.

> POLONIUS. his is too long.
> HAMLET. Say on, come to Hecuba.
> 1 PLAYER. *But who – ah woe – had seen the mobled queen –*
> HAMLET. 'The mobled queen'!
> POLONIUS. That's good.
> 1 PLAYER. *– Run barefoot up and down, threatening the flames*
> *With bison rheum, a clout upon that head*
> *Where late the diadem stood and, for a robe,*
> *About her lank and all-o'erteemed loins…*
> *When she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport*
> *In mincing with his sword her husband limbs,*
> *The instant burst of clamour that she made*
> *Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven*
> *And passion in the gods.* (2.2.436; 439; 440-446; 451-456)

While Polonius declares that the speech delivered by the player to be "too long," Hamlet urges them on, crying out "Say on, come to Hecuba." Hecuba is significant because she is the wife of Priam, and who clearly represents a figure that is strikingly similar to Gertrude. Hamlet also takes a peculiar interest in the use of the word "moubled" in reference to Hecuba. The Arden Shakespeare edition of *Hamlet*, in a footnote regarding the word, assesses that "it [moubled] has subsequently been supported…as meaning either 'made noble' or its opposite, 'ignobled' (degraded)" (271). Either of these uses would make sense in the context of Hamlet's relationship with his mother – though, it would seem that to consider Gertrude in a degraded sense would please him most, because it

would allow him to vicariously punish her for not mourning (in the way that he thinks is fit) the loss of her husband, his father.

This interpretation was not lost on James Joyce, who makes use of this particular theme and word 'moubled' in *Ulysses*, when Stephen Deadelus gives his theory of Shakespeare's biographical imputations into his artistic work, notably *Hamlet*, involving presumed adultery on the part of Shakespeare's wife Anne Hathaway. Joyce writes "– She lies laid out in stark stiffness in that secondbest bed, the mobled queen" (169) – although Joyce carries it extensively further, commenting on fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, relations, and emphasizes considerably Shakespeare having left his wife their second best bed.

> – Sabellius, the African, subtlest heresiarch of all the beasts of the field, held that the Father was Himself His Own Son…When Rutlandbaconsouthamptonshakespeare or another poet of the same name in the comedy of errors wrote *Hamlet* he was not the father of his own son merely but, being no more a son, he was and felt himself the father of all his race, the father of his own grandfather, the father of his unborn grandson. (*Ulysses* 171)

Joyce's allusions to the creative impulses for *Hamlet*, particularly those concerning the issues of fathers and sons and their relations to each other for creation, strike at the very core of Hamlet's power-dynamics within himself. While one can speculate endlessly about Shakespeare, an individual of whom we

know very little, at least from a biographically personal perspective, it seems that to apply these creative tendencies to a figure like Hamlet, who Stephen at one point declares to be "Hamlet, the black prince, is Hamnet Shakespeare" (171), that the greatest benefit to be derived is to see the perspective of the father-son dynamic which contaminates the essence of the play. The Player relates that Hecuba comes out to witness Pyrrhus' murdering her husband, where she "Run[s] barefoot up and down, threatening the flames / With bison rheum, a clout upon that head / Where late the diadem stood and, for a robe, / About her lank and all-o'erteemed loins." Thus with blinding tears did Hecuba come and find her husband where "late the diadem (crown) stood," and in robes that revealed her "lank and all-o'erteemed loins" – a concluding vulgar image for the number of children that Hecuba was said to have born. It is a scene that compels Hamlet's excitement, and the Player delivers extraordinarily as he retells how "When she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport / In mincing with his sword her husband limbs, / The instant burst of clamour that she made / Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven." It is a tremendously moving scene: Hecuba comes to find her husband being made "malicious sport" of by Pyrrhus, who is "mincing...her husband['s] limbs," and upon witnessing this bursts into tears that would have made the very universe stop to weep, to the point of even causing passion in the notoriously stoic gods. It is an incredibly moving scene, but when contextualized within the parallelism it shares with Hamlet's own

story seems to be tantamount to tremendous cruelty. It is the most defiantly punishing act that Hamlet could commit: to dismember – indeed play – with Claudius' body, while Gertrude looked on in utter horror as Hamlet did his murderous deed. Even Polonius seems wracked sufficiently by the emotion that occurs in the Player's recreation of Hecuba's torment and says "Look where he [the Player] has not turned his colour and / has tears in's eyes," concluding with the cry "– Prithee no more!" (2.2.457-458). Polonius' declarative plea of "Prithee no more!" speaks to that point at which dramatic intensity reaches a point at which it becomes too painfully unbearable for the viewer to witness any longer, when the pain created by the actor is too vivid and corresponds too deeply with our psychological recesses to go on without some consequential damage to our rational selves. Hamlet doesn't seem fazed however the player's recreation of the murder by Pyrrhus, rather he seems to concern himself chiefly with his own lack of emotion – and it is here that we begin to see the structural similarities between the murderous Pyrrhus and the intellectual Hamlet part ways. Before he does that however, he has already begun preparing for *The Mousetrap* play – and the ulterior purposes it will serve – to be performed before Claudius. Hamlet says to the Players "Follow him [Polonius], friends. We'll hear a play / tomorrow. [*aside to First Player*] Dost thou hear me, old friend? Can you play *The Murder of Gonzago*?" [2.2.472-474).

Our confrontations with the unknown, negative feelings, encounters with entities, memories, or circumstances that haunt us, often lead us to find ourselves unwilling or unable to act; we are overcome by feelings of powerlessness, fear, or helplessness. Often times we retreat into the realm of fantasies, dreams, and intellectual discourse – what better way to avoid actually doing something than by speaking about it. Endlessly Hamlet does this, even though efforts at forcing himself to confront and act on the imperative of the Ghost occur, such as in the performance of Pyrrhus' murder of Priam. Even Hamlet is impressed by the Players' ability to sympathize with his role, to be able to enter into it so closely and realistically that it is as though the Player really were Pyrrhus – or Hecuba.

> HAMLET. Is it not monstrous that this player here,
> But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
> Could force his soul so to his own conceit
> That from her working all the visage wanned
> – Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
> A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
> With forms to his conceit – and all for nothing –
> For Hecuba? (2.2.486-493)

Hamlet's surprise that the player could act out a "fiction," and yet simultaneously "Could force his soul…[that] all the visage wanned" with "– Tears in his eyes," for someone who is of no material relation to the player, indeed "For Hecuba?" is unsurprising considering his own inability to generate the type of psychic revenge-power embodied by Pyrrhus. Hamlet's own

resignation from the material ethics of politics and the social community has left him with a gap in his own development. Hamlet is left grasping at straws for some semblance of deep emotion that will enable him to act, to truly feel the anger that would be necessary for an ethical revenge. Such a reaction was catalogued by Jung in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* when he describes his own confrontation with negative experiences.

> One of the greatest difficulties for me lay in dealing with my negative feelings. I was voluntarily submitting myself to emotions of which I could not really approve, and I was writing down fantasies which often struck me as nonsense, and toward which I had strong resistances. For as long as we do not understand their meaning, such fantasies are a diabolical mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous. It cost me a great deal to undergo them, but I had been challenged by fate. Only by extreme effort was I finally able to escape the labyrinth. In order to grasp the fantasies which were stirring in me "underground," I knew that I had to let myself plummet down into them, as it were. I felt not only a violent resistance to this, but a distinct fear. For I was afraid of losing command of myself and becoming a prey to the fantasies…After a prolonged hesitation, however, I saw there was no other way out. I had to take the chance. (178)

Jung's confrontations with his personal dreams and haunting thoughts don't seem too different than those of Hamlet's, except that Hamlet is trying to reconcile himself to his father's ghost, and the imperative to commit murder. But in a more deeply psychological way Hamlet too is trying to deal with negative feelings towards himself, his uncle, his mother, and whether or not they are justified (in most cases they probably are. Consciously, Hamlet's journey, like the one undertaken by Jung, is essentially a journey through both the unconscious and conscious mind that is his own, through which he can come to understand that while he has "been challenged by fate" it will be only "by extreme effort" that he "will be able to escape the labyrinth." For all of us this is the fear: that we – and only ourselves alone – can come to know and grasp the fantasies and realities ("the labyrinth") that control our existence, and so free ourselves (from ourselves). As Jung notes however, "I knew that I had to let myself plummet down into them" – and Hamlet too has to "plummet down into" himself, in order to regain a higher and more meaningful self.

Yet at this point in the play Hamlet's resistance to resignation, through his desire to have the kind of pathological emotion that characterized Pyrrhus' violence towards Priam, suggests that he is still attempting to navigate the labyrinth of himself. Again, if Hamlet were a purely practical figure, a character governed by the political or social, we wouldn't have this problem. It is because

Hamlet's psyche is decidedly something more profound and spiritually oriented that he must confront himself in order to go beyond himself.

> HAMLET. What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,
> That he should weep for her? What would he do
> Had he the motive and that for passion
> That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
> And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
> Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
> Confound the ignorant and amaze indeed. (2.2.494-500).

Hamlet remarks that "Had he [Player] the motive and that for passion / That I have? He would drown the stage with tears," and yet Hamlet does not possess the ability to feel the tremendous weight of his task, nor does he have the means to articulate his feelings: they are prevented by his intellectual thought. Hamlet lacks the means by which to make known to others directly the weight of his task that would "Make mad the guilty and appal the free, / Confound the ignorant and amaze indeed," and that's the point; Hamlet is a figure who is representative of the indirect, the tragic hero (and more) who must by way of action illuminate to others the deep structural meaning inherent in his act. Were Hamlet merely to relate to the other characters of the play – or even to us – the purpose that commands him as he saw it, no one would be convinced; no one would be moved. We are moved rather by the quality of his action more than his speech, but in that essentiality that is speech, our dramatic expectation is heightened.

Hamlet complains "Am I a coward?" (2.2.506), to which he ultimately responds "…I am pigeon-livered and lack gall" (2.2.512). Hamlet's self-questioning should do more for us than to merely question his reasons for pausing in the necessity to act against Claudius – it should serve to remind us of our own inherent unknowingness; the question of how would we act were we to be placed in Hamlet's situation should haunt us. It is in the pause, in the denial of action, that we are forced to understand that our own cowardice is in not sympathizing with the suffering Hamlet in the here and now, but only in the act. Much as Abraham is ethically misunderstood, and would have been prevented from acting out God's will by others, the murdering of Isaac, Hamlet too must be misunderstood and not sympathized with until he acts – he is the suffering individual alone. And Kierkegaard commends this aloneness in the single individual who carries his burden and duty, without the sympathy or help of others. He remarks that, "The true knight of faith is…never the teacher, and therein lies the profound humanity, which has much more to it than this trifling participation in the woes and welfare of other people that is extolled under the name of sympathy, although on the contrary it is nothing more than vanity" (*Fear and Trembling* 80). Kierkegaard derides those who sit in Church and listen to and speak of the tremendous faith of Abraham – but who themselves could never bear witness to what Abraham endured in his faith in God. He criticizes – but does not condemn – the false sympathies that we have for the suffering

individual for his burden, but nevertheless make ourselves secure so that we ourselves will never have to carry such tremendous solitary burdens. Kierkegaard's philosophy sympathizes with the suffering individual who works in a world that does not care, that offers a thinly-veiled vanity in the form of congratulations or admiration – but that was never any use to the individual who suffers to begin with.

Kierkegaard says of this suffering individual that "...not even the most unimportant man, needs another's participation or is to be devalued by it in order to raise another's value" (*Fear and Trembling* 80). This is not a philosophy intended to devalue community, but rather is meant to openly critique the hypocrisy of society. It upbuilds the suffering individual who, if he can bear witness to the truth (and the truth often comes in the form of being against all social convention) than they shall never need vain praise in order to raise their – or anybody else's – value.

Hamlet doesn't know this though: he doesn't have the benefit of knowledge that comes at the end of the journey, because he's still struggling through it – he's still trying to find authentic feeling and meaning. Hamlet goes on, declaring "Why, what an ass am I: this is most brave, / That I, the son of a dear murdered, / Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell, / Must like a whore unpack my heart with words" (2.2.517-520). T.S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" laments:

> And indeed there will be time
> For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
> Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
> There will be time, there will be time
> To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
> There will be time to murder and create,
> And time for all the works and days of hands
> That lift and drop a question on your plate;
> Time for you and time for me,
> And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
> And for a hundred visions and revisions,
> Before the taking of a toast and tea. (23-34)

Eliot's comment upon the plight of modern humanity's existential essence, that concludes with a resignation in "the taking of a toast and tea," mirrors the point being made here: that that modern sense of delay that we all experience in our effort to discover something genuine about the lives we lead, is common and necessary; such dialectical movements of being require pause, and reflection. Through all this Prufrock relates "There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet," and we find Hamlet doing that – preparing faces for Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, his mother, Horatio, Claudius – because he is on the road towards existential meaning, and in going by the "faces" that Prufrock speaks of, in order to find his own authentic 'I.' If we are to judge Hamlet's success – or for that matter the dramatic success of *Hamlet* – then we should do so on the basis of his psychological experimentation, his effort to – for lack of a better term – become more human. Hamlet is reduced to considering

himself "a whore" who must "unpack my heart with words," rather than through feeling like a figure such as Pyrrhus who was able to act with action. Not only that, Hamlet is also ambivalent about his feelings in general towards what he is still preparing to do, commenting, "That I, the son of a dear murdered / [is] Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell" – being both a reminder of the line spoken by Hamlet to the Ghost "Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned" (1.4.40), and a question as to Hamlet's own state of being, and ambivalence towards his purpose.

It is Hamlet's transcendence of his own particular moment through words and the search for meaning, that endows him with dramatic and existential meaning. For Kierkegaard, Abraham's success is to be measured only by his existence, where he formulates the rhetorical question in *Fear and Trembling* as: "How did Abraham exist? He had faith" (62). Kierkegaard notes this important function for the suffering individual who journeys towards the absolute, that they do so without the support of institutions or formal structures, on the sole strength of their own individual being. Kierkegaard critically remarks that in his own time (and certainly ours) we judge the paradox that is represented by both Abraham and Hamlet by the success (or lack thereof) of the result. And indeed as our own period of late capitalism marches onward we began to see more and more the detriment to which our own interpretation of success and profitably

has come at the cost of ignoring everything, except the end exploitations and results. Kierkegaard asserts:

> If occasionally there is any response at all these days with regard to the paradox, it is likely to be: One judges it by the result...When in our age we hear these words: It will be judged by the result – then we know at once with whom we have the honor of speaking....With security in life, they live in their thoughts: they have a *permanent* position and a *secure* future in a well-organized state...Their life task is to judge the great men, judge them according to the result. Such behavior toward greatness betrays a strange mixture of arrogance and wretchedness – arrogance because they feel called to pass judgment, wretchedness because they feel that their lives are in no way allied with the lives of the great. Anyone with even a smattering *erectioris ingenii* [nobility of nature] never becomes an utterly cold and clammy worm, and when he approaches greatness he is never devoid of the thought that since the creation of the world it has been customary for the result to come last and that if one is truly going to learn something from greatness one must be particularly aware of the beginning. If the one who is to act wants to judge himself by the result, he will never begin. (*Fear and Trembling* 62-63)

There's something perceptively profound about that last line "If the one who is to act wants to judge himself by the result, he will never begin," and it seems plausible that Hamlet's psychology throughout the play reveals the tension that he walks between planning a particular result, and resigning himself to the unknowingness of his fate. Kierkegaard's remarks go to the very heart of the matter though: readers should begin looking at why Hamlet is such a success as an individual. They will find that it is because he asks the right questions, tries (with varying successes and failures) to navigate life; lives in "a well-organized state" governed by a murderer and hypocrisy; and is surrounded by those who see fit only to judge while they themselves live in a state of security offered to them by the ruling ideologies; that Hamlet's inability to grasp his own emotions, and his impotence in projecting them into action are a testament to the humanity of his character. That he struggles to find the correct answer (if there is such a thing), and that the result of his actions come at the expense of a deeply personal period of intense questioning that he alone endures, are to be admired above all else. If we take Kierkegaard's remarks, and remember that "if one is truly going to learn something from greatness one must be particularly aware of the beginning," then that for us is the fractured state of Denmark, the untimely death of old King Hamlet, Gertude's hasty marriage to Claudius, and most significantly the aesthetic student from Wittenberg who is called upon by the Ghost of his dead father to restore what is right. This is not, for anyone, an easy

beginning to a difficult task, and so Hamlet's internal dramas become the substance of the tragedy of the play, and its usefulness as something beyond the genre of mere revenge-tragedy, or even of something that might be appropriated as existential. It's about finding the true spirit and commitment to an internal belief that is acted through faith, even (and especially) under the absurd conditions that Hamlet's (and our own) environment accord us.

Hamlet is not a terrible person, or even immoral. In fact, in order to preserve the idea of moral authority, he goes so far as to question the Ghost. This questioning is very much in accord with our modern conceptions of skepticism, and is something that strengthens, rather than weakens, Hamlet's own search for meaning.

> HAMLET. I'll have these players
> Play something like the murder of my father
> Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks,
> I'll tent him to the quick. If 'a do blench
> I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
> May be a de'il, and the de'il hath power
> T'assume a pleasing shape. Yea, and perhaps
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits,
> Abuses me to damn me! (2.2.531-538)

Abraham's faith is unquestionable, and even Kierkegaard admits that. There are no other Abrahams, and there perhaps never will be again. That does not, however, negate the potential that an individual has to merge into the absolute.

Indeed, Hamlet's acknowledgement that "The spirit that I have seen / May be a de'il, and the de'il hath power / T'assume a pleasing shape. Yea, and perhaps / Out of my weakness and my melancholy, / As he is very potent with such spirits, / Abuses to damn me!" strengthens his position as an individual struggling against the binds of the universal. His recognition that he is in a period of personal 'weakness' and 'melancholy' shows that he is aware of his current state of mind – and, if anything, those who are suffering from depression or a weak state of mind are much more liable to commit acts out of suggestion, rather than authentic self-decision. Furthermore, that Hamlet questions the Ghost (Abraham of course had the voice of God) reveals his unwillingness to condemn Claudius to death, even though he clearly resents his relationship with Gertrude. Much like monks, who in the Middle Ages performed cycle-plays to allow them to purge their own self-doubts concerning faith,[14] Hamlet too utilizes self-doubt (and general doubts) concerning the supernatural, as a way to authenticate the Ghost's message; in other words, Hamlet is unwilling by his own moral code to consign to Claudius the guilt for the death of his father without proof. This is a powerful formulation of Hamlet's humanity, and his unwillingness to allow his "weakness and…melancholy" to decide completely

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[14] The mystery plays were still being performed when Shakespeare was a child, so it is conceivable that he saw them before he authored his own creative works. For more information on Medieval cycle plays, see *Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays: A Re-Evaluation*, Stanford UP, 1961.

the fate of another. And Hamlet is also hesitant to commit the act of murdering Claudius because of the possibility of committing acts demanded by an evil spirit that intends "Abuses me to damn me!" Hamlet's inherent resistance to becoming or playing the role of the martyr for the sake of martyrdom in itself, is something that further situates his position as a character that fits well with our modern consciousness. We can appreciate his desire to challenge the authority of both state and spirit, in order to find and become something more. Michael Bielmeier in *Shakespeare, Kierkegaard, and Existential Tragedy* remarks that "...Hamlet did have an ethical religious system to which he felt accountable" (33), and so his attempts to question and prove - both to himself, and also to Horatio - Claudius' guilt shows that he is not simply acting irrationally, or solely on the basis of personal whim, but rather is trying to do what is right. Hamlet doesn't eschew ethics in the course of the play (though he does transcend them), instead he is trying to make them something more than the workhorses of hypocrisy in the rotten state of Denmark.

CHAPTER IV

THE DIALECTIC OF THE SELF

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in the rain – and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

– Robert Frost
"Acquainted with the Night"

When Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony" (known as the *Choral* Symphony) was first performed, it was conducted by Beethoven. He had been going deaf while composing the work, and by the time of the debut performance, was deaf. Of course the music hall didn't entrust the actual work of conducting to Beethoven (they had positioned a stand in conductor, who was seated nearby, and who had prior to the concert informed the performers to follow his directions). The music hall was filled, and Beethoven ascended to take his place as conductor, of his last and greatest full symphony. As the symphony went on it became clear that every performer – to an extent – was playing on their own, without either guidance from Beethoven or the actual conductor of the evening. Beethoven didn't take

any notice. He kept on conducting, his arms flailing to music that he could only hear in his mind, but which was nevertheless as real for him as for any member of the audience. When the musicians reached the end of the symphony, Beethoven continued to conduct until one of the members went over to him, tugged at his shirtsleeve, and turned him around so that he could see the standing ovation given by the audience. To my mind there are few stories that compare to this: Beethoven's devotion to his work, to cause it to come into *being*, despite the tremendous personal (especially physical) difficulties that he endured, and prompts the question as to whose experience was more real, and more valid – the audience, or Beethoven? In the end his persistence, vitality of spirit, and dedication to his creative work overcame great obstacles, and something of the beauty of the "Ninth Symphony," its success, and meaning became permanently internalized in Beethoven the individual.

That essential quality of being necessary to act and create something of substance and meaning, that goes on powerfully despite your (especially as in the case of Beethoven because of his physical disabilities) present absence. The work of great art, theory, criticism, creation is that the act itself becomes the embodiment of the meaning, and the individual who caused it to come into being finds their own being within the act. Hamlet's endeavors, especially in Act III of the play, are little different than what Beethoven strove to achieve. And the internal dialectical maneuvers that Hamlet exudes and exhorts, both in what is

probably the most famous monologue (or at least line) in all of the Western Canon, and his dialogues with Ophelia, and Gertrude speak to the titanic obstacles that Hamlet is trying to overcome in order to come into being.

HAMLET. 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; to die: to sleep –
No more, and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished – to die: to sleep –
To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause. (3.1.55-67)

While Claudius and Polonius remain hidden in this scene, attempting to discern the nature of Hamlet's melancholic affliction (Polonius' continuous suggestion is Hamlet's affections for Ophelia), Hamlet manages in one line to articulate the nature of existential questioning: "To be, or not to be." It is a statement and a rhetorical question that has occupied much of twentieth century American literature, and has certainly played a fundamental aspect in the development of Sartre's rendering of existentialism (what most interpret to *be* existentialism), and Camus' treatment of it in *The Stranger*. This question has found welcome listeners in artists, writers, musicians – the list goes on, and in this speech Hamlet probes the very essence of the struggle between what constitutes moral right and evil,

civil justice, crime and hypocritic punishment, and ultimately material and spiritual conceptualizations of life.

Fendt comments "So, where the aesthetic hero was great by conquering, the religious hero is great by suffering" (*Is Hamlet a Religious Drama?* 189), and Hamlet's aesthetic sphere seems to be rapidly crumbling, as is his hold on the ethical. If we lived in a truly ethical society then crimes would be appropriately punished, and we would probably have no need for supernatural spirits to remind us of our duties. But as Hamlet brilliantly remarks "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," we too are often called to ask ourselves whether it is better to suffer in our minds (sometimes to the point at which we can no longer bear it) the terrible burdens given to us by merely existing, or should we proactively take up arms against the oppressors and in the act of opposition (notice, Hamlet doesn't say by winning) end our sufferings.

Much of one's life is, I think, a combination of the various questions Hamlet deliberates in this monologue, and through each question a dialectical leap is made into a different sphere of thinking, such that he ends this particular line of thought with "to die: to sleep – / No more, and by a sleep to say we end / The heartache and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to," and this certainly seems to be the next step taken – particularly by Sartre and the young

Camus – in most human thought: isn't it simply better "to die: to sleep"; that romantic rendering of death as a sleep, where in the act of dying "we end / The heartache and the thousand natural shocks" that our weak, physical existence is "heir to." Hamlet goes further and asks what might come after death, after that sleep that we enter into with the hope of freeing ourselves from suffering in the here and now. He relates in beautiful elegiac prose "to die: to sleep – / To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub, / For in that sleep of death what dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil / Must give us pause." This line has been echoed throughout the course of literary history, both before and after *Hamlet*. It speaks to that common thread that unites the whole of suffering humanity to an idea that there is something "in that sleep of death," where "what dreams may come…must give us pause." It speaks to us because it offers us the possibility of dealing with our suffering existence, that no matter the abuses we suffer in our temporal lives, we shall be freed in a world that we have no possibility to conceive of, where dreams will come that will cause us to pause in our conscious calculations of meaning. Hamlet notes that it's in these thoughts "…there's the respect / That makes calamity of so long life" (3.1.67-68), where Hamlet indicates that these thoughts are also an act of displacement: these are not sentiments that cause one to act. While death may free us from the temporal bonds of servitude that constitute our mortal obligations, there is nevertheless a

will by which we are bound to act - namely, our human will to become authentic, and to act with meaning.

> HAMLET. For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
> Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
> The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
> The insolence of office and the spurns
> That patient merit of th'unworthy takes…
> To grunt and sweat under a weary life
> But that the dread of something after death
> (The undiscovered country from whose bourn
> No traveller returns) puzzles the will
> And makes us rather bear those ills we have
> Than fly to others that we know not of. (3.1.69-73; 76-81)

It is a work of art that Hamlet creates here, in that he manages in a concise list to detail some of the greatest afflictions that occur in one's lifetime. Hamlet asks, "For who would bear the whips and scorns of time" - and a litany of other wrongs coupled with it, such as being rejected in love, enduring the "law's delay" or "The insolence of office," to which we have only one recourse: to endure, because as Hamlet says it is "that the dread of something after death" that haunts us, and makes us bear the material wrongs of life. This important monologue becomes, for Hamlet, a remembrance of his duty - of his torn psyche between an ethical response to the Ghost, and the larger spiritual impulses which drive him forward - and also reminds the audience of the tremendous burdens which Hamlet labors under. This monologue is spoken by Hamlet to himself, but its message corresponds with issues that everyone has at one point or another encountered, and ultimately it attempts to answer larger theoretical and

metaphysical questions about the nature of the after-life, and its meaning. "The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns" is again an issue which every human must confront: the finality of death, and the impossibility of return. Of course the Ghost manages to return from death, albeit in a phantasmagoric way, but nevertheless he does return. Hamlet here, however, means that place beyond where the Ghost is (presumably purgatory), where eternal sleep means literally that place from which "No traveller returns." And it "puzzles the will," Hamlet says, as he attempts to discover for himself the impetus for meaning and the will to act as the absolute demands, and ultimately "makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of." Death – whatever we may wish to make of it, is for our physical materiality an end; it may not be, as Hamlet struggles to discern, the final end, but for our momentary physical existence, it is. It seems evident that Hamlet is grappling in a very serious way with the demands that the Ghost has placed upon him, and senses that his own life will come as a cost for the act, because this speech has action and the cost of action intimately intertwined. Yet this speech is more substantial in a dramatic way, as a method for heightening the audience's awareness of the issues at stake in the play, than it is a real development for Hamlet as an individual.

It illuminates for us the deep psychosocial questions that Hamlet is undergoing, and allows for us to see the more thematic and universal problems

that he is attempting to address, but it isn't anything new, per se, than the earlier dramas he has endured. What becomes new is his ability to formulate more clearly the problems of his (and for the most part, everyone else's) existence; it becomes a kind of beginning for what will pave the way for his final ability to act. When questions of great meaning confront us, the process by which we acclimatize ourselves to the significance of the question and the ramifications that will be caused by action, there is often a struggle between conventional questions of right and wrong, as well as deeply spiritual issues which only an individual himself can answer. In certain ways then, Hamlet in this scene is paving the way for what Josef Breuer referred to as "the talking cure,'[15] which later manifested itself as psychoanalysis. Hamlet is trying to understand his place in the world, the trauma that confronts him, and his inability to do anything more than think; he is unpacking – for lack of a better term – all of the questions he has probed as a student of theology, as a philosopher of life, as a prince in a particular moment of time, in a particular geographic state. In *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* Freud notes:

> Our civilization is, generally speaking, founded on the suppression of instincts. Each individual has contributed some renunciation – of his sense of dominating power, of the aggressive and vindictive

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[15] See *Studies on Hysteria*, Basic Books, 2006. And, "Anna O and the talking cure," *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 98, No. 6, pp. 465-466.

> tendencies of his personality. From these sources the common stock of the material and ideal wealth of civilization has been accumulated. Over and above the struggle for existence, it is chiefly family feeling…which has induced individuals to make this renunciation…The man who in consequence of his unyielding nature cannot comply with the required suppression of his instincts, becomes a criminal, an outlaw, unless his social position or striking abilities enable him to hold his own as a great man, a 'hero.' (25)

Hamlet is at its base a family drama – the major characters are part of an intimate biological and extended family – and its roots are centered around the destructive relationships that each member shares with another. Freud's remarks, however, help us to also see the overarching structural elements that permeate Hamlet's monologue, the issues which he is confronting, and to understand them as an attempt to overcome "the suppression of instincts," to which "each individual has contributed some renunciation – of his sense of dominating power." To exist in the material world requires our acceptance and resignation of our instincts, which often times powerfully conflict with the dictates of the social community. Daily we are required to resign ourselves to the immorality of unfair laws, unfair politicians, and the obligations that bind us (often times against our will) to others. Freud traces this suppression and

(un)willingness to submit to being a "chiefly family feeling," and it useful to view Hamlet's monologue as one which not only references universal problems, but equally speaks to his own familial ties that bind.

Failure to follow the rules prescribed by a family means punishment, and possible ostracism; modern despots have often invoked the idea of being the head of a family, largely because it is a rule of order to which we are accustomed. Hamlet's breaking free from the anxiety and rule that is particular to his condition – notably his family – corresponds with his need to resign himself away from the universal demands to which the sociopolitical structure binds him. And, Freud remarks that such an individual will be labeled "a criminal" or "an outlaw, unless his social position or striking abilities enable him to hold his own as a great man, a "hero.'" We do not often look upon Hamlet as a hero – but we should nevertheless recognize his heroic intentions that are fundamentally about breaking away from the social bondages that corrupt the individual will, and which in breaking free from them allow him to act. Furthermore, Hamlet is certainly one who possesses both "social position" and "striking abilities," and so becomes a perfect candidate for the characterization of the hero. And of course our relationships with heroes are always problematic, because as Kierkegaard remarked (and as was discussed previously) we always admire the result, but can never permit the actuality from taking place. Hamlet recognizes this, and the end of his monologue declares that "Thus conscience does make cowards – /

And thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, / And enterprises of great pitch and moment with this regard their currents awry / And lose the name of action" (3.1.82-87).

In lieu of the tremendous questions that weigh upon Hamlet's mind, and which correspond to the purpose for which he has been called, it is not very surprising that he treats Ophelia as abusively as he does.

> HAMLET. I did love you once.
> OPHELIA. Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.
> HAMLET. You should not have believed me. For virtue cannot so inoculate our old stuck but we shall relish of it. I loved you not.
> OPHELIA. I was the more deceived.
> HAMLET. Get thee to a nunnery! Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves – believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. Where's your father? (3.1.114-129)

Hamlet heaps abuse upon the unsuspecting Ophelia, declaring that she should "Get thee to a nunnery!" – that is she should find her way to a whorehouse. There are many reasons, however, for Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia, among which the line "Where's your father?," could be seen as an indication that he suspects that Ophelia has been sent to spy on him. From a Kierkegaardian

approach Hamlet's motives are not so difficult to understand - his purpose and the thoughts that consume his mind have separated him from others, and cause him to lash out against individuals like Ophelia, who quite innocently loves him. The search for the freedom to act comes at the cost of severing one's bonds with others, because it requires a higher understanding of the act. Much as Kierkegaard's Abraham is isolated from others because no one could understand him, Hamlet's psyche is all-consumed by inward thinking and so he is unable to communicate with Ophelia in a way that does anything more than harm her. His purpose, and the destructive power inherent in the secret, has unfortunately made Hamlet become the monster that his earlier demeanor did not suggest. After all, the conversation initiated by Ophelia is to return "remembrances of yours" (3.1.92) - which Hamlet denies having ever sent. It is the pain of the suffering self that motivates Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia, and the totality with which he is concerned with the purpose given to him makes him suspicious of her intentions. But it is ultimately the secret (that Hamlet can not reveal), that prevents Hamlet's love for Ophelia to surface (as it later does when he comes to know she has killed herself). The secret by its very nature consumes the individual, and distances him from others destructively. Whereas the Aesthete - particularly in *Either/Or* - enjoys the ironic knowledge that the secret gives him, the ethical individual is haunted by it, because in his nature he seeks humane relations with others. Vocations, calls, secrets - these are all particular moments

in an individual's life that distance him from others in the immediate sense of day to day relations. Hamlet's dilemma – which is a problem of the self relating to the self – consumes him, and so makes him unable to act any differently towards Ophelia than he does

Kierkegaard's own life speaks well to this: when he was a young man he had been engaged to Regine, a girl that he loved very much. Despite this love for her he ultimately came to feel that he had a higher purpose to pursue, and so – in much the way that Hamlet selfishly abuses Ophelia – broke off his engagement. De Rougement noticed this in "Kierkegaard and Hamlet," writing: "Without dwelling on the coincidence of Hamlet's being a Danish prince – though one might muse over it – we should like, first, to run over the salient features of the tragedy *invented* by Shakespeare…[to] the tragedy *lived* by Kierkegaard" (110-111). There are certainly parallels to Kierkegaard's own life with that of Hamlet: they both studied theology; were both aesthetic and prince like in their demeanor towards others – Kierkegaard (aside from a brief stint as a Latin teacher, never held a regular job); both felt called to a higher purpose (for Kierkegaard by ghosts and spirits as well). And both repelled those that to whom they had previously promised themselves, because they could not formulate an ethical framework from which to enter into ethical relations with others. In his Joakim Garff's highly sensitive and perceptive treatment of Kierkegaard's life *Soren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, he writes:

Kierkegaard returned his engagement ring, accompanied by a letter of farewell – which he found in other respects to be such a literary success that it was subsequently incorporated *word-for-word* in the "'Guilty?'/'Not Guilty?'" section of *Stages on Life's Way*. The original letter has been lost, but in the book it reads: "So as not to have to rehearse yet again something which must, in the end, be done; something which, when it has been done, will surely give the strength that is needed; let it be done, then. Above all, forget the person who writes this; forgive a person who, whatever he might have been capable of, was incapable of making a girl happy. In the Orient, to send a silk cord was a death sentence for the recipient; here, to send a ring will likely be a death sentence for the person who sends it." When Regine read these lines she was beside herself and immediately ran over to Kierkegaard's place on Nørregade. He was not at home, however, so she went into his room and left what Kierkegaard described as a "note of utter despair" in which she pleaded with him for "the sake of Jesus Christ and the memory of my late father, not to leave her." Regine certainly knew where her beloved was most sensitive. "So," Kierkegaard continued, "there was nothing else for me to do but to venture to the uttermost, to

> support her, if possible, by means of a deception, to do everything to repel her from me in order to rekindle her pride. (186)

Even here we can see parallels operating between Kierkegaard's treatment of Regine and Hamlet's of Ophelia. Ophelia, like Regine, declares in an aside "O help him, you sweet heavens!" (3.1.133), and again with "Heavenly powers restore him" (3.1.140). And Kierkegaard tried – albeit in a fairly shoddy way – to make Regine understand why he could never be with her, writing "Above all, forget the person who writes this; forgive a person who, whatever he might have been capable of, was incapable of making a girl happy" – and that's the point, that neither Hamlet nor Kierkegaard can make anyone happy; they feel that their callings supersede those immediate necessities for and by others around them. They were both determined to satisfy a spiritual need that ran counter to the immediacy of interpersonal relationships. This is not, however, intended to excuse either of their behaviors – neither Kierkegaard nor Hamlet are discharging themselves in very ethical ways (and one can see certain levels of the aesthetic in their behavior), but what overrides their treatment of Regine and Ophelia respectively, is their genuine commitment to their perception of an authentic existence imbued with meaning, a meaning for which they alone are responsible for, and to which they alone must dedicate the whole of their lives. That was the commitment made by Abraham, and while neither Kierkegaard or Hamlet is an Abrahamic figure, they nevertheless represent some of the highest

of life's stages in the pursuit of something more individually powerful than resignation to a material life of marriage, wealth, and power.

HAMLET. I have heard of your paintings well enough.
God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't. It hath made me mad. I say we will have no more marriage. Those that are married already – all but one – shall live. The rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go!

OPHELIA. O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword,
Th'expectation and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
Th'observed of all observers, quite, quite down.
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That sucked the honey of his musicked vows,
Now see what noble and most sovereign reason
Like sweet bells jangled out of time and harsh –
That unmatched form and stature of blown youth
Blasted with ectasy. O woe is me
T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see. (3.1.141-160)

Hamlet's tirade against Ophelia specifically, gives way to an overarching criticism towards women. Such behavior on the part of Hamlet isn't entirely surprising – after all, in addition to suspecting Ophelia's employ as a spy for Polonius (and subsequently the King) there's also the issue of Gertrude to contend with, and in Act III Hamlet takes the opportunity to chastise both of them. More significant, however, is Hamlet's juxtaposition in "God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble and you lisp,

you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't," from which we can see threads of his emotions towards Gertrude emanating from these biting remarks. Moreover it is Hamlet's focus on "God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another," a reference that seems to suggest a disfiguring on the part of the individual from something divine into the profane. Gertrude's nobility as a queen is made ugly by her hasty marriage to Claudius, and Ophelia's nature (by spying) is much the same. Hamlet is also addressing the fidelity required by marriage, arguing that it is a sacred bond that is trodden upon by those who are committed in word, but not in heart - thus the remark, "It hath made me mad. I say we will have no more marriage. Those that are married already - all but one - shall live. The rest shall keep as they are." Hamlet's self-referential remark "It hath made me / mad" suggests Hamlet's frustration with the situation and its unfolding, and much like Kierkegaard who takes a stab at those who make vows (such as marriage vows) and who have no intention of holding to them in spirit. Those who "are married already" get grandfathered in, except of course "all but one," that being Gertrude and Claudius. There is little justification here for Hamlet's behavior - he is being misogynistic in his remarks - but it also seems that in addition to attacking Ophelia and her sex, he's also making larger claims about the nature of human beings, and their ability to destroy what is God given: those faces that we change

through paint, alteration, guile, and so become something that lacks any trace of grace.

A novel which powerfully articulates this concept is C.S. Lewis' *Till We Have Faces*, which is his retelling of the Greek myth of Cupid and Psyche. In it, Psyche's sister, Orual, - who is incredibly ugly - rules over a kingdom, but unlike the beautiful Psyche lacks the grace to communicate with the gods. Where Psyche is universally loved and charmed, her ugly sister permanently covers herself with a shroud. It is only by the end of the story, when Psyche's sister Orual discovers the will to love purely and without selfishness or jealousy that the gods speak to her; in other words, it is only until she has a genuine 'face' that she is able to interact with others in an authentic way. This is why Kierkegaard's aesthetic figure 'A' lacks the ability to have meaningful relationships he's always trying to be ironic in his communication; to be more clever; to have the upper hand, so that he can always have laughter on his side, and so can ultimately never have a true face to know others with, or to be known by.

Ophelia remains a character who grips our sympathy, however, and when she cries "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! / The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye,/ tongue, sword," we can appreciate the mutability and unknowningness that she applies to Hamlet. What is he? - 'courtier, soldier, or scholar'; and does he himself even know? Perhaps he occupies all of those roles

at once – or none at all. If we return again to the parallels between the life lived by Kierkegaard we again find that he too didn't know what his calling would be, and that he struggled through possible career choices: joining the ministry, law, teaching – and by the end of his life had spent it writing books. (Though even at the end of his life he was still mulling the possibility of becoming a pastor.) The indecisiveness that plays in Hamlet's character (and Kierkegaard) speaks, however, to a deeper need in the suffering intellectual to want to overcome time and particularity, and attain to some higher and more transcendent sphere of life. Such as in D.H. Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow*, where the main character Ursula, must strive against the bonds – from womanhood, to marriage, to social position – to discover what will bring her hope and happiness for herself, to discover what is truth for herself.

While there's no easy way to quantify suffering (and one shouldn't seek to do this anyway), Hamlet's and Kierkegaard's pain emerges from conditions that are internal; their external source of suffering is the social structure in general, and so there are no easy cures. This is one of the reasons that we sympathize with the suffering Ophelia – she's an innocent, and aside from loving a rather immature and unstable individual, she hasn't committed any wrongs. Ophelia laments, "And I, of ladies most deject and wretched, / That sucked the honey of his musicked vows, / Now see what noble and most sovereign reason / Like sweet bells jangled out of time and harsh" echoing Hamlet's own remark of "The

time is out of joint; O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" (2.1.186-187). There is no happy ending for either Hamlet or Ophelia in the traditional sense, and the dramatic tragedy that is the result of Ophelia's eventual suicide because of Hamlet's treatment of her is incomprehensible in its magnitude: it gives us the drama of the play, and is the death that we come to identify with the most. Much as Claudius (who with Polonius has been hiding and listening in on Hamlet and Opehlia's exchange) remarks, "Madness in great ones must not unwatched go," we want Hamlet's madness to be checked - but the play becomes a tragedy because of the detrimental effects of Hamlet's behavior on others, and the most innocent of all the characters is Ophelia.

In *Being and Doing*, Marcus Raskin asserts that:

> Through no fault of his own, the agent may not have known all the relevant facts. What action the principles of morality called for in the situation may not have been clear to him, again through not fault of his own, and he may have been honestly mistaken about his duty....Morality must therefore recognize various sorts of excuses and extenuating circumstances. All it can really insist on, then, except in certain critical cases, is that we develop and manifest fixed dispositions to find out what the right thing is and to do it if possible...But it must be remembered that "being" involves

> at least *trying* to "do." Being without doing, like faith without works, is dead. (208)

For Kierkegaard religious experience is to be found firmly in subjectivity, in existential inwardness and genuine feeling, and our holding Hamlet to a certain degree of moral culpability is warranted, and required by the genre of tragedy. How much leeway we wish to accord him because of his ignorance about her true affections towards him, is of course an individual choice. Much as Hamlet must bear on the strength of himself the choices he makes, so too must we ascribe our own individual level of sympathy and forgiveness for his terrible treatment of Ophelia. At this moment *Hamlet* becomes something very real for the audience, because more personally resonating than anything else in the play is this one choice of how to act towards another sincere and innocent individual. And, if Hamlet's own behavior is to account for his own sense of moral guilt for Ophelia's death – he in the end judges for himself – then the change that happens in Hamlet's psychology is evident of the type of leap that Kierkegaard speaks of in *Fear and Trembling*. At this point in the play however, Claudius' comment that "...what he spake, though it lacked form a little, / Was not like madness. There's something in his soul / O'er which his melancholy sits on brood / And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose / Will be some danger" (162-166), recognizes that Hamlet poses a threat, and not just to his rule. Indeed, Hamlet's behavior is rapidly deteriorating away from the purpose he initially set to undertake, and

the methods of his thought are both erratic and in opposition to the true spirit of his task. As Hamlet embarks upon his effort to use *The Murder of Gonzago* to get Claudius to confess to murdering his brother, we find Hamlet attempting to displace the imperative given to him by the Ghost outside of himself. Kierkegaard notes in *Either/Or* that "...the unhappy person is he who has his ideal, the content of his life, the fullness of his consciousness, his real nature in some way or other outside himself. The unhappy man is always absent from himself, never present to himself" (214). In avoiding the ownership necessary to act authentically, Hamlet is displacing his self outside of himself, and so becomes the perpetually unhappy man who can only act by external stimuli; the real heart of the matter is never present within himself.

Kierkegaard's theories are also, from a religiously oriented point of view, not terribly far away from those of William Perkins, who at one point outsold John Calvin, and authored a highly popular treatise on witches. Witches aside, Perkins' *A Discourse of Conscience* of 1596 (a treatise which could certainly be read side-by-side with Kierkegaard's works on ethics) states: "For the bonde of confcience is betweene man and God; but the bonde of an obligation is only betweene man and man" (83). As Hamlet continues his struggle of conscience and the bonds entered into with the Ghost, we find that the struggle becomes one by which Hamlet shows no bond with other individual characters in the play. The promises on Hamlet's conscience are owed to something higher and more

omnipresent than to any political laws or social conventions. This is certainly Kierkegaard, and it also speaks to a fundamental relationship that hasn't entirely altered, except perhaps in the Enlightenment and our own period of modern literature, of the relationship one has to the self - certainly something which is exemplified in modern misconceptions of existentialism - which for Kierkegaard can exist only through God. The self for Kierkegaard is eternal, and much of Hamlet's intellectual efforts are directed towards trying to understand his self, and the bond into which he has entered. Hence the degradation that occurs, the constant reminders by Hamlet to himself to break away from conventions, to demand that others honor their vows and commitments, and in the end these issues manifest themselves in Hamlet's own inability (until Act V) to reconcile himself to that all-encompassing and all-demanding self which is something much more profound than a mere physical particularity.

In elaborating on the sociological conditions which form an undercurrent in the play, Hamlet instructs the players to not overact *The Murder of Gonzago*, so as to preserve the genuine emotional thrust of the work itself.

> HAMLET. Nor do not saw the air too much with
> your hand, thus, but use all gently; for, in the very
> torrent, tempest and, as I may say, whirlwind of your
> passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that
> may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to
> hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to
> tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings,

who for the most part are capable of nothing
but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise. (3.2.4-12)

Those last two lines directed at the "groundlings" - those individuals who for the price of admission they paid had to stand on the ground in the theater - are of particular interest for the sociological examination that Hamlet articulates in his instructions to the Players. Hamlet remarks that he despises those individuals who "tear a passion to tatters, to very rags," and more importantly who do so for the groundlings "Who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise." To whom is Hamlet really referring in these lines? - The first character who leaps to mind could very well be Polonius, and certainly Hamlet's lack of remorse at killing him and his remark to Ophelia: "Let the doors be shut upon him that he may play the fool nowhere but in's own house" (3.1.131-132), suggest that Polonius isn't, for Hamlet, an admirable figure. If anything he's also probably the character with whom we least sympathize (even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern got their own immortalization in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*), and upon his death we aren't even very moved, instead our attention is riveted on Hamlet and his psychology. But Hamlet is also speaking about a psychological archetype - the groundling - and what that represents. It's not a new complaint, that entertainment, art, music, etc. are created as mere noise for the rabble, but it does speak to Hamlet's consciousness and his relationship with others.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's remarks in his brilliant treatise on governments *The Social Contract* asserts that "...each man having been born free and master of himself, no one, under any pretext at all, may enslave him without his consent. To conclude that the son of a slave is born into slavery is to conclude that he is not born a man" (137). Rousseau is of course treating political issues, but so much of his studies were occupied with what constituted freedom, will, and being, and their relationship to the social community that his remarks have more central thematic similarities to Hamlet's situation. Hamlet's task situates him contrary to the general majority of the "groundlings," and his complaints about "periwig-pated" fools is a direct insult to the entire court of Denmark; it is a hypocritic court, founded upon murder (and incest), and so becomes nothing more than an audience of 'groundlings' to whom fools like Polonius create 'noise.' It is a structural critique of the social (non)community that Hamlet occupies, and much like Kierkegaard's criticism of the phoniness and false morality of his contemporary Copenhagen,[16] there is a desire for something more genuine and meaningful. There is of course a practical concern too on the part of Hamlet: he wants *The Murder of Gonzago* to come off perfectly, and to strike the King right at the heart of the matter – his guilt.

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[16] Kierkegaard was a prolific contributor to the periodicals of his day, and authored a number of pieces attacking various institutions. For more information see, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Princeton UP, 2005.

Hamlet is also being self-referential, however, with the Players, especially when he advises:

> HAMLET. Suit the action to the word, the
> word to the action, with this special observance – that
> you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so
> o'erdone is from the purpose of playing whose end,
> both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere
> the mirror up to Nature to show Virtue her feature,
> Scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the
> time his form and pressure. (3.2.17-24)

"Suit the action to the word, the / word to the action," says Hamlet to the players, and while the line suggests an aura of hypocrisy on the part of Hamlet (after all he *still* hasn't managed to fulfill the duty he was given) it also reveals Hamlet's own unwillingness to act. There is, however, a meaning and a method to Shakespeare's use of length: we're again looking deeply into the psychology of Hamlet, and the depths that we're able to come to are largely a result of Hamlet's self-reflections, his communications with others, and his (for any audience, understandably frustrating) directions and exhortations to others to act. But Hamlet is acting, and the goal of acting as Hamlet reveals "is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to Nature to show Virtue her feature, Scorn her own image," in other words to utilize acting to reveal a mirror-image of ourselves, to see ourselves for who we truly are. Hamlet's own search for authentic meaning necessarily invokes the need to force others to recognize who they are, and

Hamlet wants Claudius to atone (of his own accord) for his sins. Our own bloodlust for Hamlet to act, our desire for him to kill Claudius and avenge old Hamlet's death, is thwarted by Hamlet's embodiment of authenticity as the highest principle; his approach is, at times, legalistic – he wants assurances that the Ghost isn't an evil spirit, and to this end Hamlet wants Horatio's second opinion of Claudius' reaction to the play.

The formative principle of Hamlet's use of *The Murder of Gonzago* is towards self-recognition, especially for Claudius and Gertrude. Self-recognition forced by others doesn't often make good drama, it's simply too psychologically indepth, too subtle, and too unreliable to come off at the right time and with the right amount of tension – indeed, Hamlet's own final battle with Laertes isn't even dramatically interesting. It comes off as limp, tepid, and too late for us to have had any fun with it – but the psychological explorations that Hamlet undertakes are fascinating, and if there is any tension, it is arrived at only in those moments when Hamlet is trying to *be*. The stress that Hamlet places on Horatio's supporting his effort to expose Claudius' guilt through the use of *The Murder of Gonzago* continues this desire for the guilty to recognize of themselves their own moral culpability, and also to satisfy Hamlet's legalistic need to prove them guilty in order to act. Hamlet says to Horatio "There is a play tonight before the King – / One scene of it comes near the circumstance / Which I have told thee of my father's death. / I prithee when thou sees that act foot…Observe

my uncle" (3.2.71-74; 76), and so Hamlet says "If his [Claudius] occulted guilt / Do not itself unkennel in one speech / It is a damned ghost that we have seen / And my imaginations are as foul" (3.2.76-79). This is not the Hamlet we're used to: he sounds rational, in control, and thoughtful as to the practical concerns that he's dealing with in putting on the play. At the same time we also have to question Hamlet's ability to mask himself in such a variety of ways, even as he demands of others genuine communication, and so in this respect loses the defining characteristic of a tragic hero. For Kierkegaard Hamlet loses this tragic significance by being in despair, not simply in being unable to act, but in being unable to be. As Kierkegaard writes in *The Sickness unto Death*, "In his own ignorance of his own despair a person is furthest from being conscious of himself as spirit. But precisely this – not being conscious of oneself as spirit – is despair, that is to say, spiritlessness – whether the state is one of total extinction, a merely vegetative life, or a life full of energy the secret of which is nevertheless despair" (75). Hamlet's inability and unwillingness to will himself to make the leap from play-acting – in the form of directing *The Murder of Gonzago* – is for Kierkegaard an action not to be admired; it doesn't further the individual's effort to transcend a material understanding of their individual existence. On this issue one would equally do well to observe Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, where he remarks:

> But consider, my friend, whether possibly high spirit and virtue are not something other than saving one's life and being saved.

> Perhaps a man who is really a man must leave on one side the question of living as long as he can, and must not love his life, but commit these things to God, and, believing the women's proverb that no one ever escaped his destiny, must consider, with that in his mind, how he may live the best possible life in the time that is given him to love. (62)

The question of devotions haunts the play and especially the character of Hamlet, much as for Kierkegaard who wracked his mind over his idealisms as to how to choose and live his life. While Kierkegaard is justified in asserting that an individual who avoids given duties - which they know in principle and by faith to be right - is in despair, we must also consider Hamlet's actions with some degree of sympathy. For Hamlet *The Murder of Gonzago* has great significance, it is a way in which he can balance and justify his relationship with his father(s). While Hamlet's biological father is dead, he must nevertheless counter-balance the relationship and psychosocial duty he owes to the King, a kind of surrogate political father with that of the Ghost, and finally with his own desire to assume the role of the father, and ultimately destroy the current social order. This is no easy task, and it is made psychologically easier for him to edge closer to it by having a visibility of guilt displayed by Claudius, in order for Hamlet to become what Kierkegaard and Aurelius consider to be the higher purpose where "[one] must not love his life, but commit these things to God." Similarly the self in

Kierkegaard's philosophy is eternally in relation with God – indeed is made up of him, and much of our life therefore is spent attempting to reconcile this position within ourselves, and to answering the question of how to understand and become the self in relation to the self. Kierkegaard points out "The despair is intensified in proportion to the consciousness of the self" (*The Sickness unto Death* 112), where Kierkegaard rails against the selfishness inherent in inwardly becoming aware of the self *without* merging that self into a higher purpose, in other words without becoming one in relationship with Being. Hamlet's effort is no less total in its ambitions to become one, to merge with the eternal, thus allowing him to act infinitely, though not as a tragic hero but as a figure who represents – for Kierkegaard – the religious, and for us, the modern image of one who acts solely on the basis of an authority found in his becoming a true self. Indeed, Kierkegaard and Aurelius are again united in the latter's meditation that "the women's proverb that no one ever escaped his destiny, must consider, with that in his mind, how he may live the best possible life in the time that is given him to love.'" For Kierkegaard being merged with the Spirit (in the religious) was about being in total love in a social community of others, and to be truly united as an other. To achieve *being* is not to do so selfishly, to *be* is to live in the infinitude of love. For Kierkegaard that is the only way to achieve any momentary being of authenticity, and is what Hamlet is struggling towards.

The performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* can be viewed as a success, insofar as it does compel Claudius to go into the Chapel to confess his sins. It also gives Hamlet the opportunity to be vulgar to Ophelia, and to again return to the problems he has with her, his mother, and more generally women and marriage. When Gertrude says to Hamlet, "Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me" he responds with "No, good mother, here's metal more attractive," (3.2.105-106) and turns to sit by Ophelia. Hamlet remarks to Ophelia "Lady, shall I lie in your lap" (3.2.108) and further on says to her, "...What should a man do but be merry, for look you how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours" which Ophelia corrects as "Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord" (3.2.118-121). Hamlet's response to Ophelia after she has responded that it's actually been much longer than the short time Hamlet supposed is met by Hamlet with "...O heavens – die two months / ago and not forgotten yet? Then there's hope a great / man's memory may outlive his life half a year" (3.2.123-125). Hamlet is still obsessively trying to force those around him to recognize the death of his father, of the man that Hamlet has not yet forgotten. Of course this issue of the erasure of memory – particularly of a "great man's memory" – is not new, and again we can see Hamlet commenting on the central problem of playing to the groundlings, the base mass who have no memory, either for the good or bad; in some ways Hamlet is saying (and he is actually living it) that we can only be haunted in the present if we're the self-aware groundlings. There's

also a message of truth for our own age of late capitalism, where we too seem so caught up in the noise that it is almost an impossibility to fully engage in the work of memory; we're always stopped by the harangue, and ever-present images and noise of the aesthetic present.

As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer note in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

> Every film is a preview of the next, which promises yet again to unite the same heroic couple under the same exotic sun: anyone arriving late cannot tell whether he is watching the trailer or the real thing. The montage character of the culture industry…not only in the film studio but also, virtually, in the compilation of the cheap biographies, journalistic novels, and hit songs – predisposes it to advertising: the individual moment, in being detachable, replaceable, estranged even technically from any coherence of meaning, lends itself to purposes outside the work. (132)

Without the moment there can be no moment of being. It is a work of art that Hamlet constructs in *The Murder of Gonzago*, coupled with the demand that attention be paid to past and present; that moment of the Queen's delight at the murder of the old King by his nephew, and their ability to unite in (in an eternal recurrence) an incestuous bed is meant to terrify the guilty, and to have them recognize their crimes and sins. Nobody, in Hamlet's eyes, is spared the crime of

not remembering; of purposefully allowing the "montage character" – not just of the Culture Industry – of life, and the political and social demands that constitute conventional existence, to let them forget that a terrible act has been committed (and continues to be committed). The entertainment that is set for Claudius and company is anything but: it has purposefully been constructed to contravene the noise given to the groundlings, and to force each of the characters to endure the pain and suffering that Hamlet believes they have reduced in order to forget. It is his attempt to become the role of the father, to replace the absent father that cannot restore order, and to be rid of his surrogate father; to become the *logos* that can install appropriate right and order. If there is a tragedy it is that this cannot be accomplished, but the will of the individual is magnified and gives us hope. Indeed, Hamlet's ploy works. He narrates: "'A poisons him i'th' garden for his estate. His name's Gonzago. The story is extant and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife" (3.2.254-257), sounding almost like a waiter at a restaurant detailing the specials being served that night. To which Ophelia (not Hamlet) notes "The King rises," and the Queen says "How fares my lord?" and Polonius declares "Give o'er the play" (3.2.258-260). Clearly everything is not right, and the King is definitely affected by the play – more perhaps than any director (save Hamlet) would want his audience affected – declaring "Give me some light, away," while his lackey Polonius reiterates "Lights! Lights! Lights!" (3.2.261-262). The release that light

offers in a darkened theater, is sought by the individual who would most wish to keep his own secrets in the dark. A reaction that is not overlooked by Hamlet who cries out, "Ah ha! Come, some music! Come, the / recorders! / For if the King like not the comedy / Why then belike he likes it not, perdie!" (3.2.283-286).

In George Bedell's treatment of Kierkegaard's notion of the ethical in *Kierkegaard and Faulkner* he writes:

> The one human act that most profoundly illustrates what is meant by the ethical in Kierkegaardian terms is marriage…Marriage is the paradigm, in fact, for all ethical behavior, for it is within the marital state that one can achieve selfhood in the deepest possible way. When one says "I will" in the wedding ceremony and sincerely promises to live faithfully with a spouse, one is performing the ultimate ethical act. Nothing can be higher; nothing can be more exhaustive. It is asserting one's individuality in universal terms. (148)

Hamlet wants the queen to acknowledge in memory and practice her "exhaustive" "I will" that she gave to her husband. It is within the ethical that one acknowledges and lives the self in universal terms. Hamlet is enraged that Gertrude has forgotten, forsaken, and deviled her marriage vows by making them again. A direct result of this is that Hamlet resolves to become the father, while still being in the shadow of the father, and so verbally (and quite nearly

physically) sets out to abuse his mother, to illustrate to her in the most obvious of terms her failure to uphold the terms of her ethical agreement that is to be found in marriage. This is done with the backdrop of Claudius declaring after the play-within-the-play to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that "I like him not, nor stands it safe with us / To let his madness range. Therefore prepare you. / I your commission will forthwith dispatch / And he to England shall along with you" (3.3.1-4), where of course Claudius plans to have Hamlet murdered by the English upon his arrival (clearly Hamlet touched a meaningful nerve in the evil Claudius' heart with the performance). And he is wise to consider doing this, for Hamlet is now convinced that Claudius did in fact commit the crime that the Ghost related to Hamlet, and he rages "'Tis now the very witching time of night / When churchyards yawn and hell itself breaks out…/…Now could I drink hot blood / And do such business as the bitter day" (3.2.378-381), and the emphasis with which he makes this declaration gives us cause to pause and believe him.

Rosencrantz responds both prophetically and practically to Claudius' understanding that Hamlet must forthwith be removed from Denmark with:

ROSENCRANTZ. The cess of majesty
Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw
What's near it with it; or it is a massy wheel
Fixed on the summit of the highest mount
To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
Are mortised and adjoined, which when it falls
Each small annexment, petty consequence,

Attends the boisterous ruin. Never alone
Did the king sigh but with a general groan. (3.3.15-23)

In his speech Rosencrantz draws on the political implications of Hamlet's madness, and the necessity of complying with Claudius' request, while noting that "The cess of majesty / Dies not alone," because royalty always presumes to take down the whole of the social structure with it. That even Rosencrantz should recognize the realistic problems that Hamlet poses in his indirect challenge to Claudius' authority and the situation in Denmark is evident, particularly as he notes that the center of politics is the King, who is connected and "Fixed on the summit of the highest mount / To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things / Are mortised and adjoined" – something that Hamlet doesn't seem too concerned with. And Hamlet isn't a ruler, he isn't political – that's a role that is best played by his friend Horatio, who (wisely) walks a middle ground throughout the play. Rosencrantz also seems to lament the politics of the situation noting that "Never alone / Did the king sigh but with a general groan," echoing the suffering that all minor characters endure at the behest and fall of great ones. And to echo Hays' comments regarding Shakespeare and the rulers he leaves us at the end of his plays: while they are eminently better qualified to rule than their predecessors, they lack the aura of greatness that their predecessors had as well. While individual citizens might fall because of the poor leadership of someone like Claudius, or Horatio, it would

never be quite the same fall as that which they would endure at the hands of a Hamlet; his internal emphasis on the eternal makes the "summit of the highest mount" all the more dangerous to ascend and fall from.

Claudius, dismissing his faithful Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and being told by Polonius that Hamlet is "going to his mother's closet" (3.3.28), believes himself alone and so commences his famous confession scene, where he prays for the terrible crimes he has committed.

> CLAUDIUS. O, my office is rank: it smells to heaven;
> It hath the primal eldest curse upon't –
> A brother's murder. Pray can I not:
> Though inclination be as sharp as will,
> My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent…
> My fault is past. But O, what form of prayer
> Can serve my turn: 'Forgive me my foul murder?'
> That cannot be, since I am still possessed
> Of those effects for which I did the murder,
> My crown, mine own ambition and my Queen…
> In the corrupted currents of this world
> Offence's gilded hang may shove by justice
> And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
> Buys out the law; but 'tis not so above:
> There is no shuffling, there the action lies
> In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled
> Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
> To give in evidence. (3.3.36-40; 51-55; 57-64)

Everything that Hamlet has thought or imagined Claudius to be guilty of proves correct. But that's largely irrelevant to the individual psychology that Hamlet endures, – it's his faith in his ability to *act* and *be* that is interesting. Yet in

Claudius we see a very real and individual struggle over the universal demands of his own evil actions. That he admits to himself (and to Heaven) that he has committed one of the worst acts upon it: "It hath the primal eldest curse upon't – / A brother's murder" – is acknowledged, and Claudius also understands that "Pray can I not." He cannot pray because he cannot take ownership of his actions in a spiritual way, because he's still locked in the ethical materialism of his choices, noting that "Though inclination be as sharp as will," he still nevertheless is "possessed / Of those effects for which I did the murder, / My crown, mine own ambition and my Queen." This has been planned, plotted, and thoroughly executed by Claudius – including the obtaining of "my Queen." It is in Claudius' separation of the absolute spirit from himself – he sees it as something external, something *out there* – rather than understanding that he is locked within an eternal relationship with it, as Kierkegaard notes in *The Sickness unto Death*, and as Hamlet is monumentally struggling to ascend to and recognize.

That Claudius' deeds are firmly rooted in concepts of legal justice (and equally suited to them) is noted in his remarks that "In the corrupted currents of this world / Offence's gilded hang may shove by justice / And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself / Buys out the law." Were Claudius to submit to a court of law what would be gained? Would Denmark ever be restored truly to the state in which it existed prior to his act? – Possibly, but only in a purely materialistic and ethical sense. It is because Claudius is the embodiment of base materialism, that

his simplistic rendering of complex philosophical and meaningful issues of self are brought down to nothing more than "mine own ambition" that he cannot rise above it, and furthermore, it's something that political courts of law can't alter or restore. Only – and Claudius recognizes this in a theoretical sense – that justice "'tis not so above," because "There is no shuffling, there the action lies / In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled /Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults / To give in evidence"; in those other absolute realms from which Claudius is so far removed, he vaguely (and only in a very base way) understands that in that undiscovered country that Hamlet contemplated in a very deep and philosophical way, is something for which the corruptions of day-to-day law, where the noise of the law courts overrides true and meaningful justice that there is judgment – and just deserts. Hamlet's earlier cry about the "groundlings" shouldn't be taken to mean simply the destitute or uneducated who through no fault of their own are compelled to be groundlings, rather it should be taken to mean all those individuals who through personal corruption of the ethical (which they claim to adhere to and admire) abuse others, and control the apparatuses of noise to distract the general masses who do not know who controls the greater superstructure of which they are a part. Hamlet's direct criticism isn't political, it is spiritual – and it is meant to be a direct action against those vulgar individuals who can only conceptualize of Heaven and Hell as a

place where they must "give in evidence" regarding the truth; only a minor spiritual figure would configure his murder through such terrible schematics.

Claudius doesn't immediately recognize his inability to repent, or his unwillingness to take spiritual ownership of his terrible crimes, continuing his prayer with:

> CLAUDIUS. Try what repentance can – what can it not? –
> Yet what can it, when one cannot repent?
> O wretched state, O bosom black as death,
> O limed soul that struggling to be free…
> All may be well. (3.3.65-68; 72)

Claudius is very probably in a "wretched state," yet the self-questioning that he engages himself in lacks the depth and feeling of Hamlet's theology. It, again, is concerned with what "repentance can" and cannot do, and articulates a conceptualization of either/or with regard to his horrific acts. As the Judge in *Either/Or* advises the Aesthete regarding the choosing (within the ethical) of one's life, he says "The only absolute either/or there is is the choice between good and evil, but it is also absolutely ethical" (485) – and Claudius' struggle isn't between *good and evil*, but is instead is the immediate sensation of repentance that occurs after the fact. Thus the Judge continues to the Aesthete, "What is it, then, that I separate in my either/or? Is it good and evil? No. I simply want to bring you to the point where that choice truly acquires meaning for you. It is on this that everything hinges" (486), and for Claudius he has not been able

(either from an ethical or absolute perspective) to unite himself wholly behind a choice for how to live his life, to attain that "point where that choice truly acquires meaning for you," and so is an inauthentic figure who chooses instead to live a momentary lie. The Judge notes that "...if one does not choose absolutely, one chooses for that moment only and can, for that reason, choose something else the next instant" (485), and so lacks the wholeness of character to be a truly just individual within himself. At this point Hamlet enters the scene and is compelled to murder Claudius – though the latter doesn't notice his presence – but prevents himself from doing so by realizing that Claudius is in the act of praying.

> HAMLET. Now I might do it. But now 'a is a-praying.
> And now I'll do it [*Draws sword.*] – and so 'a goes to heaven,
> And so I am revenged! That would be scanned:
> A villain kills my father, and for that
> I, his sole son, do this same villain send
> To heaven. (3.3.72-78)

Such a murder needs to be "scanned" Hamlet says to himself, and so he questions whether or not Claudius deserves to go "to heaven," presumably because Hamlet believes him to be in the act of confession. It is a tremendous pause on Hamlet's part because his failure to act now results in the tragic death of many others at the play's end, but it is an appropriate one, that shows Hamlet's learning as a student at Wittenberg, and also his own ethical structure

to which he adheres. Bielmeier notes that "...Hamlet did have an ethical religious system to which he felt accountable" (33) and we see that emerging here, where his hesitance to send an individual like Claudius to heaven, something which Hamlet has no real control over in the undiscovered country, but which he nevertheless has to justify to himself in the here and now. More systematically, for perhaps the first time in the play we see Hamlet's delay as his coming-to-be almost a figure for whom the role of Prince Hamlet seems appropriate, and Bielmeier further remarks that "...it is advantageous to recall Kierkegaard's contention that duty and responsibility are the chief characteristics of the ethical sphere and friendship, profession, and marriage are its three best expressions...Hamlet ascends to the ethical through his heightened awareness of his role as Prince" (51). That Hamlet recognizes something of worth in the here and now is itself noteworthy, but this is compounded with the memory of his own father's death (we're starting to see clear lines delineating Hamlet's "ethical religious system") and he compares the method in which his father was killed remarking that "'A [Claudius] took my father grossly full of bread / With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May, / And how his audit stands who knows, save heaven" (3.3.80-82), which is an allusion to a sin described in Ezekiel 16:49 as "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy." Hamlet's concern is justified with respect to the torment he presumes his father's

soul to be in, considering that the Ghost has claimed to be his father's soul that is in torment, because he was unnaturally murdered "With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May," and so was not given an opportunity to repent. Hamlet thus resolves to not take Claudius' life unless he finds him "When he is drunk, asleep or in his rage, / Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed…/ or about some act / That has no relish of salvation in it" (3.3.89-92). In articulating this Hamlet is also suggesting that while he may not wish to kill Claudius at the moment he is in prayer, because it might possibly send him to heaven, he is also revealing something about his own nature: that he's still unwilling to commit the deed; to not act, despite having sworn previously that "Now I could drink hot blood / And do such business as the bitter day / Would quake to look on" (3.2.380-382), and so continues to reveal his adherence to a typological moral code; it's one that does advocate deep moral questioning and so prevents him from killing another easily. Such a prohibition against murder will last only as far as his verbal dialogue (and punishment) of his mother Gertrude, whereupon he thinks Claudius to be hiding behind an arras (in fact it's Polonius) and so finally has the mettle to kill. Irrespective of this, we quickly discover upon Hamlet's departure that all of Claudius' non-spiritual struggle has been, in the end, for nought. Claudius declares "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (3.3.97-98), and we're left at the conclusion of Act III, Scene III with a very interesting dialectic of difference with that line of

Claudius' "Words without thoughts never to heaven go." The vast majority of *Hamlet* is very much concerned with Hamlet's *words* and *thoughts*, and so again we see Shakespeare stressing that division of words, thoughts, and ownership that separates the archetypes of Claudius and Hamlet, and we find that Hamlet emerges as the one individual who combines the sincerity (even though it often comes in the form of uncertainty) of his thoughts with his words, and through that ultimately finds the will to act.

The dialogue between Hamlet and Gertrude in Act III reveals much of the texture of the sociological issues that Hamlet is frustrated and angered by. As Bloom aptly notes in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, "Transcendence is a difficult notion for us…[but] Hamlet's desires, his ideals or aspirations, are almost absurdly out of joint with the rancid atmosphere of Elsinore" (385). It's that idea of "transcendence" that I think is so important for understanding the functionality of Hamlet's presence – his way of interacting with the other characters of the play, and the essence that he exudes in his interpersonal search for meaning – especially from our modern (and often cynical) perspectives. Hamlet's continuous dialectical movement towards certain truth through uncertainty, forces and propels us to negotiate our own internal movements and struggles, and the capstone for Hamlet's efforts are to demand from others that they recognize their own inauthentic being, which significantly surfaces in the form of a tirade against his mother to remember the father. This emerges in the

very beginnings of the dialogue where Hamlet asks "Now, mother, what's the matter?" as it was she who sent for him, to which she remarks "Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended," to which Hamlet declares "Mother, you have my father much offended" (3.4.6-9).

The stage is set for the a clash concerning fathers, and is of course one of the central issues in Hamlet's psychodynamics. Indeed, Hamlet says "What's the matter now?" and Gertude says "Have you forgot me?" – the issue of memory is preeminent in this scene as one of the major foregroundings for the dialogue – to which Hamlet declares "No, by the rood, not so" – no mother, by the Cross, I have not forgotten you (3.4.13-15).

HAMLET. No, by the rood, not so.
You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife,
And, would it were not so, you are my mother.
GERTRUDE. Nay then, I'll set those to you that can speak.
HAMLET. Come, come, and sit you down. You shall not budge.
You go not till I set you up a glass
Where you may see the inmost part of you.
GERTRUDE. What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me –
Help, ho!
POLONIUS. [*behind the arras*]
What ho! Help!
HAMLET. How now! A rat! Dead for a ducat, dead!
[*Kills Polonius*]
POLONIUS. O, I am slain!
GERTRUDE. O me, what hast thou done?
HAMLET. Nay, I know not. Is it the King?
QUEEN. O, what a rash and bloody deed is this!
HAMLET. A bloody deed – almost as bad, good mother,

As kill a king and marry his brother.
GERTRUDE. As kill a king?
HAMLET. Ay, lady, it was my word.
[*Uncovers the body of Polonius.*]
– Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell:
I took thee for thy better. (3.4.13-30)

And so we come to the heart of the matter for Hamlet – "You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife" – the obligations inherent in duty, the act and bonds of marriage, the role of Queen, and the unnatural (and unbroken) "husband's brother's wife." The Queen is unable to reply, she remarks "Nay then, I'll set those to you that *can speak* [my italics]" and this furthers Hamlet's unspoken demand as he attempts direct communication, that others recognize who and what they are, where he remarks "You shall not budge. / You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you." Again there is the desire to utilize a particular situation, such as *The Murder of Gonzago*, in order to force self-recognition on the part of others, and in this respect the role of violent recognition and its relationship to memory cannot be undervalued – as is well noted by Gertrude's response, and her call for help that results in Hamlet's killing of Polonius. And yet her response is curious, that she thinks her son will murder her, and prompts us as the outsider looking in to ask: is Hamlet truly conveying an absolute image of insanity that would promote such a fear on the part of Gertrude? Or is Gertrude's response more revealing in this matter? – The answer to this isn't easy, and there's no direct reply by Gertrude to suggest any

actual culpability in the murder of old King Hamlet. But what does emerge is a genuine fear of being shown the mirror by Hamlet of herself – and who wouldn't fear such a mirror? Again, however, we're not given enough of Gertrude's psyche from which to understand fully her position – everything endlessly returns to Hamlet, and so our understanding of Gertrude can be only (however unjustly) derived from him as an ontological center, from which to understand the circumstances we find him (and ourselves) in.

Whatever we take, however, from Gertrude's stance in this dialogue one thing is certain, that Hamlet has finally been able to act, although the target is the unintended Polonius. We have to question Hamlet's motives in this respect, however, for when Gertrude says "O me, what hast thou done?" Hamlet replies "Nay, I know not. Is it the King?" whereupon Hamlet reveals his amateurish attempt at committing the act of murdering Claudius. There's no ownership in this deed, nor is there courage – and that's problematic, especially in light of Hamlet's delay during Claudius' confession. Gertrude sums it up best, declaring "O, what a rash and bloody deed is this!" because it is precisely that – 'rash and bloody' – lacks the authenticity that any of Kierkegaard's figures (save the Aesthete) are motivated by. This is undoubtedly Hamlet at his worst – killing others and feeling no compulsion to regret in the moment his act, and even worse for killing the wrong person. Hamlet merely shrugs this murder off as "A bloody deed – almost as bad, good mother, / As kill a king and marry his

brother." Hamlet's play on 'bad' and 'good' are his aesthetical impulses at their worst, and his justification even poorer. Hamlet's loss of existential inwardness and his reliance upon external matter to support his acts are without meaning, without merit, and lack any of the deep thought that allowed us to connect with his psychological turmoil. Nevertheless, we don't, as an audience, regret Polonius' death, and are inclined to agree with Hamlet's assessment that "– Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell: / I took thee for thy better," and there is perhaps something almost as revealing about Hamlet's ethical decline, as there is about our own (non)sympathetic reaction to Polonius' death.

In the section entitled "The Unhappiest One," regarding memory in *Either/Or* Kierkegaard writes:

> Memory is pre-eminently the real element of the unhappy, as is natural seeing the past has the remarkable characteristic that it is gone, the future that it is yet to come; and one can therefore say in a sense that the future is nearer than the present than is the past. The future, for the hoping individual to be present in it, must be real, or rather must acquire reality for him…The first of these one might think impossible, or consider sheer madness, but that is not so, for though the hoping individual does not hope for something that has no reality for him, he hopes for something he himself knows cannot be realized. (215)

Hamlet's memories serve to construct a reality which for him is more real than the present, but which "he himself knows cannot be realized." As Kierkegaard says, therein lies one of the major tenets of existence, that "memory is pre-eminently the real element of the unhappy" (215). It is Hamlet's position as a character of memory (indeed he's locked in memory), that makes his situation both uncertain and untenable, and yet equally admirable. Nevertheless, this issue with memory is, for Kierkegaard, one of the stages through which we must grow and develop, in order to merge ourselves with something that dissolves these human-defined modes of operational thinking that divide past, present, and future. It is a part of the journey to (and through) the absolute that frees the individual from worries about time, and allows them to understand and recognize their eternal nature, and to further see that their material actions only have any meaning in this material world. Save for the deletion of theism from that statement, it isn't too far from the one emulated by Albert Camus or Jean-Paul Sartre, that our actions are the defining means by which we exist. For the negation of memory to occur, however, one must have Kierkegaard – because it's only by recognizing that eternality of the self (which is not a material entity), that we are truly ever able to free ourselves and become absolutely meaningful. There is something of this movement taking place in Hamlet, particularly in the final lines of Act III as he derides Gertrude for lacking memory, and for degrading the purer substance that he argues is her human spirit.

HAMLET. Look here upon this picture, and on this,
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers:
See what a grace was seated on this brow…
This was your husband. Look you now what follows
Here is your husband like a mildewed ear
Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed
And batten on this moor? Ha, have you eyes?
You cannot call it love, for at your age
The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble
And waits upon the judgement, and what judgement
Would step from this to this? (3.4.51-53; 61-69)

Hamlet presents Gertrude with a literal "picture" (or mirror image, which he has stressed previously) of his father and Claudius, and delves into a list of all of the great attributes that embodied old King Hamlet, beginning with the demand that Gertrude look and "See what a grace was seated on this brow." Hamlet's father is endowed with no shortage of virtues, and to this Hamlet says to Gertrude "This was your husband," and so assumes the role of an authoritative father figure. This is Hamlet's opportunity – and he seizes it – to lecture and command his mother to remember and suffer for his father, and for himself. "Look you now what follows / Here is your husband like a mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother," Hamlet declares, followed by "Have you eyes?" – in other words, can you not recognize the terrible mockery you make of the vows you agreed to? Of the promise of fidelity you made? And, above all, how can you choose so less an individual over the greatness of the father; this inadequate

power-hungry murderer is no rightful father-figure replacement, instead you've gone for the worst possible "moor" there is, whereupon Hamlet repeats "have you eyes?" Hamlet very much wants Gertrude to recognize by sight the choices she has made, and the denial of memory that she has given herself over to, and Hamlet wants to see this visibly happen. Hamlet also wants to attack Gertrude for her sexual relations with Claudius – something that he is tremendously bothered by – calling into question her "judgement" for her relations with Claudius, which one could not "call it love, for at your age / The heyday in the blood is tame" – it's Hamlet, again, at his worst, and he's reeling from one destructive act (the pointless murder of Polonius), to going beyond what is necessary in his criticism of his mother. But Hamlet wants others at this point to suffer too – and that's again a return to the Aesthete.

It's not enough for the aesthetical individual to suffer by himself: he has to draw others into his web of unhappiness, for he cannot bear to sustain of himself the terrifying aloneness and pain that he endures. It is to this idea that the Judge in *Either/Or* writes "You are not going to give birth to another human being, you will give birth only to yourself…to be conscious of oneself in one's eternal validity is a moment more significant than everything in the world" (509), but it is nevertheless a moment that the aesthetic individual is terrified by. The aesthetic individual wants to manipulate others into feeling or being a certain way – hence that idea of giving "birth to another human being" – but it's not

genuine, nor can it sustain itself. And, furthermore, it's undertaken by the aesthetic individual because he is afraid of becoming himself, of truly *Being*. Hamlet's behavior towards Gertrude is erratic, selfish, and cruel – and moreover she is genuinely perturbed and hurt by his remarks to her. She says "O Hamlet, speak no more. / Thou turn'st my very eyes into my soul / And there I see such black and grieved spots / As will leave there their tinct" (3.4.87-89). It is not Hamlet's duty or delegated purpose to force another to remember – that is an individual choice, by which only the suffering individual can make the move towards authentic memory and subsequently, genuine feeling. But Hamlet replies that "Nay, but to live," – he's not content with Gertrude's "black and grieved spots" – "In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty –" (3.4.89-92). Yet again Hamlet returns to the terrible suffering that *he* endures by thinking of his mother and his uncle engaging in sexual intercourse, but that doesn't make him any more aware of *his own* suffering, which as Kierkegaard's Judge notes is the mark of the ethical individual who has taken ownership over his own self.

Gertrude is again deeply pained by Hamlet's commentary, and cries "O speak to me no more! / These words like daggers enter in my ears. / No more, sweet Hamlet" (3.4.92-94). Kierkegaard's Judge in *Either/Or* advises the aesthetic individual that mirrors, to an allegorical extent, the Ghost's presence in the play:

> Look: here, then, is an either/or. Let me talk to you in a way I never would if another were listening, because in a sense I have no right to do so and because really I am speaking only of the future. If this is not what you will, if you want to keep on diverting your soul with the vanities and vacuities of wit and *esprit*, then do so; leave your home, travel, go to Paris…forget…that there was piety in your soul and innocence in your thought, deaden every higher voice in your breast, drowse your life away in the petty brilliance of the soirée, forget that there is an immortal spirit in you. (509)

In other words the Judge suggests, if you are not prepared to truly become your self, and to take ownership of your own existence and its inherent meaning: "then do so." There can be no forced effort on the part of another individual to make the leap into faith, in order to find one's inherent value-structure and reason for existence. Yet in his confrontation with Gertrude Hamlet does precisely that, he has forgotten "that there was piety in your soul and innocence in your thought" and as a result has "deaden[ed] every higher voice" that gives way to one understanding "that there is an immortal spirit in you." It is all-too-easy to give one's self away to "the petty brilliance of the soirée" and so forget their purpose, their search for self-meaning and authentic value.

This conceptualized structure of individual purpose could certainly be applied to much of modern literature (if not all of it), and one could certainly see

a successful reading of Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* from this perspective. Much of that novel centers around individual relations, and the search for authentic personal meaning in the psychologically depressed cities of Europe, under the omnipresent brilliant soirée meant to distract from the destruction of the Great War. One particular relationship between Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley forms much of the crux of the novel, where Jake is the man who can never have the woman (Ashley) that he desires. Throughout the novel she fluctuates in and out of his life, and as he distracts himself in aesthetic ways, the question that is ultimately posed in the novel could be read as: does Jake make move away from the aesthetic to the ethical in his personal journey to self, or does he go further? There is, a remarkable rendering of this question at the end of *The Sun Also Rises* which reads:

> Down-stairs we came through the first-floor dining-room to the street. A waiter went for a taxi. It was hot and bright. Up the street was a little square with trees and grass where there were taxis parked. A taxi came up the street, the waiter hanging out at the side. I tipped him and told the driver where to drive and got in beside Brett. The driver started up the street. I settled back. Brett moved close to me. We sat close against each other. I put my arm around her and she rested against me comfortable. It was very hot

and bright, and the houses looked sharply white. We turned out onto the Gran Via.

"Oh, Jake," Brett said, "we could have had such a damned good time together."

Ahead was a mounted policeman in khaki directing traffic. He raised his baton. The car slowed suddenly pressing Brett against me.

"Yes." I said. "Isn't it pretty to think so?" (247)

The deft ability with which Hemingway builds up the aesthetic seduction at the conclusion of the novel is powerful. Jake begins by getting "in beside Brett," and then "Brett moved close to me," and again "We sat close against each other," and finally "I put my arm around her," but that nevertheless the situation must be regarded as one which can never be authentic for Jake. His remark to her aesthetic rhetorical statement "we could have had such a damned good time together," is met with "Yes…isn't it pretty to think so," and there is the distinct sense of the leap that Kierkegaard talks about, and which the Judge alludes to, about not deceiving one's self. And that's the point of *The Sun Also Rises* – and certainly the central issue in *Hamlet* – the difficulty we have of *not* being dishonest with ourselves, and of having the courage and faith to acknowledge our flawed humanity, and so begin to live truly with meaning and feeling. Above all, however, there is no easy way to attain this form of insight or understanding

– it's an individual action, an individual leap, and an individual faith that then merges with the wholeness of everything, and so Hamlet's abuse of Gertrude becomes just that, a failure to take up the whole of his self in relation to his self; he displaces his pain, his questioning, the agonizing burden of his individual search for meaning into, what he considers to be, her betrayal of his father, the father, and himself. Nevertheless he remains relentless in his criticism and accuses Gertrude of sleeping with "A murderer and a villain, / A slave that is not the twentieth part the kith / Of your precedent lord," to which Gertrude pleads "No more!" (3.4.94-96; 98). It is at this juncture that the Ghost makes his reappearance, and says to Hamlet:

> GHOST. Do not forget! This visitation
> Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.
> But look, amazement on thy mother sits!
> O step between her and her fighting soul.
> Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.
> Speak to her, Hamlet. (3.4.106-111)

The Ghost is reminding Hamlet (who continuously tries to force others to remember): "Do not forget! This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose," and it is interesting that the Ghost would need to reappear in order to make a second reminder to Hamlet. It lucidly alludes to Hamlet's complete lack of materialism, and his inability to assume a physical and practical grasp of the situation that he has hitherto tried only to comprehend intellectually. It also speaks to a deficit in Hamlet's character that he lacks this practical hold and

understanding of his actions and relations to those around him, a sign that he is unwilling to take ownership of his self, and equally that he has failed to sympathize with others. That is to say, that he hasn't taken the steps to look outside of himself and into the lives of others, in order to understand their place and situation from their perspective. It is a fault which the Ghost reminds him of, telling him "But look, amazement on thy mother sits! / O step between her and her fighting soul" – that is do not encourage torments in her, but rather give her peace as she herself will come to know her own soul in her own way, and finally "Speak to her, Hamlet"; an encouragement towards communication that is neither aesthetical, nor intended to force a mirror for Gertrude to see herself.

The Ghost has also successfully played the role of the father – a position for which Hamlet is, at this point, not suited; he lacks the force of material life to play either the King, or the father. Gertrude is genuinely surprised by Hamlet's reaction at seeing the Ghost, remarking "O gentle son, / Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper / Sprinkle cool patience. Whereon do you look?" (3.4.118-120). Again only Hamlet is able to see the Ghost, because Gertrude is not meant to see the apparition of remembrance; she has to come, within herself, to the work of memory and love. Hamlet is also vexed by the appearance of the Ghost, remarking to him "Do not look upon me / Lest with this piteous action you convert / My stern effects! Then what I have to do / Will want true colour, tears perchance for blood" (3.4.123-126), and it's an interesting remark, suggesting the

fragility of Hamlet's state of mind, and speaks profoundly to the difficulty he has of coming to find himself, in order to set himself up for the completion of the purpose given to him by the Ghost. That "what I have to do / Will want true colour, tears perchance for blood" suggests the sincerity that Hamlet must possess in order to take ownership of the revenge sought by the Ghost, and Hamlet indicates the true price will cost "tears perchance for blood."

To Gertrude Hamlet says, "It is not madness / That I have uttered" (3.4.139-140), and so reveals to her that his actions have a much deeper and more potent meaning (at least for him). Despite the Ghost's appearance and his injunction to "step between her and her fighting soul" Hamlet remains very much concerned with the relationship that Gertrude and Claudius have. He urges her to "Confess yourself to heaven, / Repent what's past, avoid what is to come" (3.4.147-148), because in Hamlet's methodology he's still oriented around her broken vows, with her failure to assume the ethical inherent in the concept of marriage. Hamlet has failed to see, at this point, the larger and more significant spiritual spheres which operate beyond the material and ethical – though he's spent a large amount of the play contemplating them. But there is a difference between contemplating something and making it one's own, and we see that difference delineate itself clearly in Hamlet's inability to relinquish his own psychosocial problems with Gertrude's sexual relations with Claudius. He tells her to "Refrain tonight / And that shall lend a kind of easiness / To the next

abstinence, the next more easy" (3.4.163-165), where we see that Hamlet's sensual sensibilities in this regard are deeply offended, and also that he has failed to undertake the resignation inherent in Abraham's leap. For Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* there would be none of this adherence, on the part of Abraham, to these societal (and individually psychological) conventions or demands; the resignation of the material here and now for the great(er) purpose to which he was called overtook everything, allowing himself to be able to act on the strength of the absurd.

As Kierkegaard writes, "Faith is preceded by a movement of infinity; only then does faith commence, *nec opinate* [unexpected], by virtue of the absurd" (*Fear and Trembling* 69). Hamlet has failed to see the infinite that constitutes the human spirit, and so locks himself continually in an internal lyric that is his dialectical struggle towards self. The Queen even (rhetorically) asks "What shall I do?" to which Hamlet says, "Not this, by no means, that I bid you do – / Let the bloat King tempt you again to bed / Pinch wanton on your check, call you his mouse / And let him for a pair of reechy kisses" – again Hamlet's practical intent is counter-balanced by his continuous reference to crude and vulgar sexual acts – "Make you to ravel all this matter out / That I essentially am not in madness / But mad in craft" (3.4.178-186); he wants assurances from Gertrude that she will not make known to the King that he is "mad in craft," to which she agrees. The scene concludes with Hamlet reminding her that "I must to England – you know

that" (3.4.197) and the foreshadowing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's being outwitted by Hamlet is apparent, when he says: "I will delve one yard below their mines / And blow them at the moon. / O, 'tis most sweet / When in one line two crafts directly meet" (3.4.206-208). It is an interesting alteration that we are witness to, rapidity with which Hamlet can change the motifs of his psychodynamics – from angered intellectual to vulgar egoist to practical individual in one movement. The scene closes with a sense that through Hamlet's negotiation (and ultimate outwitting) of the plot to have him killed, he begins to develop more into the ethical substance that will form the prelude to his own personal leap, which occurs after the discovery of Ophelia's suicide. For now, Hamlet closes the scene by saying goodnight to his mother, and while dragging off Polonius' body – a fitting literal and figurative closing to a moment in Hamlet's own dynamic development – remarks: "This councilor / Is now most still, most secret and most grave, / Who was in life a most foolish prating knave" (3.4.211-213). There is a final striking commentary commentary on Hamlet's own psychical self and being at this moment in the play, with a foreclosing on his own life through an acceptance of what must come with "Come, sir, to draw an end with you" (3.4.214).

CHAPTER V

HAMLET UNBOUND: THE RETURN TO THE ETHICAL AND THE LEAP TO THE ABSOLUTE

> Facilis descensus Averno:
> Noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis;
> Sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras
> Hoc opus, hic labor est
>
> –Virgil
> *Aeneid*

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard alludes to Brutus' execution of his sons who plotted to help the Tarquins, after their expulsion by the Romans, where he writes:

> When a son forgets his duty, when the state entrusts the sword of judgement to the father, when the laws demand punishment from the father's hand, then the father must heroically forget that the guilty one is his son, he must nobly hide his agony, but no one in the nation, not even the son, will fail to admire the father, and every time the Roman laws are interpreted, it will be remembered that many interpreted them more learnedly but no one more magnificently than Brutus. (58)

Keriekgaard, while speaking of the nobility with which the tragic hero must "hide his agony," is also attempting to distinguish the suffering that is endured by the father, in this case through a discussion of Brutus, though he also makes reference to Agamemnon, and Jephthah.[17] And *Hamlet* is a play that is equally situated within the world of fathers, the state, loss, suffering, and (as in the case of Brutus) sons. As Kierkegaard notes it is a heroic action that "the father must heroically forget that the guilty one is his son" – but Abraham doesn't do that, he continually remembers that Isaac is his son, *and* that his duty is to God. Similarly, Hamlet attempts to possess "the sword of judgement" within himself as the father, and so further tries to interpret the laws and restore justice. The qualitative difference to be found, however, is in the kind of suffering that is endured by Hamlet, and Brutus. That difference, as Kierkegaard notes is that they "have only to complete the task eternally," and further that "If they went on to explain: This we believe by virtue of the absurd – who would understand them any better, for who would not readily understand that it was absurd, but who would understand that one could then believe it?" (*Fear and Trembling* 58-59). The suffering endured by Brutus (and the others) are understood; their

[17] Agamemnon was forced to sacrifice his daughter to appease the goddess Artemis, thus being bound by duty to the ethical good of the state. Similarly, Jephthah vowed to God that if he was victorious in fighting against the Ammonites he would sacrifice the first person to come through the doors into his house. The first person was his daughter, where again duty to the *vow*, to *the promise*, trumping the individual for the idea of the collective whole. For further reading see *Jephthah and His Vow*, Texas Tech UP, 1986.

suffering is externalized, and everyone is awed by the suffering that their noble souls endure in the upholding of the laws. That Brutus' sons committed traitorous actions against the State is one which is understood ethically, and so while the punishment (however severe) delivered by the father is agonized over, it is nevertheless appreciable by the general society. Not so, Kierkegaard says, with someone like Abraham (or Hamlet); Kierkegaard writes "The difference between the tragic hero and Abraham is very obvious. The tragic hero is still within the ethical...he scales down the ethical relation between father and son or daughter and father to a feeling that has its dialectic in its relation to the idea of moral conduct" (*Fear and Trembling* 59). It is because the suffering ethical individual – in this case Brutus – locates his suffering, his relationship to his sons, their actions, and ultimately their punishment by way of the ethical and "the idea of moral conduct," that his actions remain within the ethical, and so we can understand them; we too can apply them to our own condition; we too can sympathize and recognize the universality of actions by sons and the subsequent reaction by fathers. But how can we, Kierkegaard asks, find any applicability to our own social condition from Abraham's task? – That request, Kierkegaard asserts, remains outside the bounds of the universal, and so for Abraham there is a teleological suspension of the ethical, by which he supersedes the ethical laws of conduct and becomes the absolute. Kierkegaard notes this when he writes that in comparison to Brutus (or Agamemnon, and Jephthah) that "Abraham's

situation is different. By his act he transgressed the ethical altogether...For I would certainly like to know how Abraham's act can be related to the universal," and Kierkegaard continues (and this is key for a deep structural understanding of Hamlet's situatedness), "Therefore, while the tragic hero is great because of his moral virtue, Abraham is great because of a purely personal virtue. There is no higher expression for the ethical in Abraham's life than that the father shall love the son" (*Fear and Trembling* 59). To what duty is Hamlet bound? Or, one might ask, is Hamlet bound by anything at all? To say the least, Hamlet's plotting to murder the current king, Claudius; his behavior towards those in the Danish court; his killing of Polonius in cold blood; his treatment of Ophelia; and his own unstable conduct all suggest that Hamlet's own moral code of conduct isn't bound by any social convention. If anything, Hamlet appears to be going against the grain in everything that he does - he's literally making it up as he goes along, and utilizing his wit, intelligence, and personal sorrow as his moral compass points. But this isn't the kind of "moral virtue" or "personal virtue" (as embodied by Abraham) that Kierkegaard is talking about, rather he is referring to is the ability to act out of an absolute love and absolute duty to love, and for Kierkegaard of course that love is bound up in the love of God (*the* Father). As Kierkegaard notes, "Duty is simply the expression for God's will," and further that "The tragic hero does not enter into any private relationship to the divine" (*Fear and Trembling* 60), but there's more to be extrapolated from this idea than

duty to God. The dynamics of Kierkegaard's theory of moral conduct as it relates to the self is that there is an absolute duty to the self, which mediates itself through love (the spirit). It is from this that we find the first tendencies of existentialism to manifest itself, as both a meaningful philosophy and in Hamlet's psychodynamics: that the love of his (and *The*) father is fully realized in his duty to the divine, which is also recognized in the Ghost's demand.

"The person who denies himself and sacrifices himself because of duty gives up the finite in order to grasp the infinite and is adequately assured; the tragic hero gives up the certain for the even more certain, and the observer's eye views him with confidence" (*Fear and Trembling* 60), and in *Hamlet* we find that no observer views Hamlet "with confidence." Everyone (including Horatio) doubts him and the motives that are derived from his secretive purpose, as Hamlet continuously tries to attain the certain. But Hamlet's great effort is against death, against the "undiscovered country" which occupies his being, and makes itself apparent in his inability – until Act V – to deny and sacrifice himself, because in order for Hamlet to sacrifice himself he must first have a self to sacrifice. Thus when Kierkegaard writes of Abraham's own terrible suffering as he climbs Mount Moriah, where he is caught by his own ethical consciousness in the terrifying horror of what he is about to do, Kierkegaard refers to (none other than) Shakespeare. Kierkegaard says, "Thanks to you, great Shakespeare, you who can say everything, everything, everything just as it is – and yet, why did

you never articulate this [Abraham's] torment?" (*Fear and Trembling* 61). Kierkegaard is speaking of Abraham's inability to formulate words with which to describe his suffering and so Kierkegaard asks, why was Shakespeare – arguably the greatest tragedian and poet in Western literature– unable to articulate the absolute burden upon which Abraham bore on the strength of himself alone through the absurd. That figure which most speaks to the pain and trauma which Abraham (as a father) endures with respect to his son Isaac is to be found in *Hamlet*. It is in this one play that Shakespeare elevates the singularity of the individual above all others, and into which he thrusts the son into the role of the father, – with all the attendant responsibilities – in direct opposition with the laws. It was Shakespeare's genius to precede Kierkegaard's discussion of the ethical and the absolute (without using those terms) in a less structured – but no less penetrating – study of the individual character, that translates into individual consciousness, and coming-into-being.

Kierkegaard says of this single individual that, "He exists as the single individual in contrast to the universal" (*Fear and Trembling* 61-62). That singular individual is Hamlet, and that universal is his specific moment in time – his location, social position, familial relations, etc., all of which serve to represent the fundamental break that Hamlet as an individual must make a suspension of the ethical, in order to act out a duty required by *his* self (and his alone), for a higher purpose. This is a troubling position, because it speaks to the possibility of

anarchy, but that's the paradox, as Kierkegaard labels it. He writes, "How did Abraham exist? He had faith. This is the paradox by which he remains at the apex, the paradox that he cannot explain to anyone else, for the paradox is that he as the single individual places himself in an absolute relation to the absolute" (*Fear and Trembling* 62). Hamlet's endeavor and subsequent moral and spiritual journey is more problematic, because he doesn't begin *a priori* with the kind of faith that Abraham had, which was immediate and spontaneous – hence the criticism of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author in *Stages on Life's Way*. If anything, however, it is by Hamlet's doubts that he stakes for himself a position located within the modern dilemmas that we must confront: Hamlet is the modern consciousness searching for those modes of dialectical self-expression, in order to create and take ownership of a self. It is as magnificent a spiritual inquiry into the meaning of self as literature has produced, and it continues to echo the essentialism that foregrounds our own attempts to create a self.

Kierkegaard is also aware of the objections (after all, his theories often (purposefully) conflicted with Hegelian philosophy)[18] that one might have to his assessment of Abraham. Kierkegaard asks "Is he [Abraham] justified? Again, his

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[18] See *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel*, Princeton UP, 1980. More recently, Jon Stewart in *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel Reconsidered*, Cambridge UP, 2003, challenges the prevailing view that Kierkegaard was strictly anti-Hegelian, and argues that the relationship Kierkegaard had to Hegel's philosophy was more problematic, and exerted a positive critical influence on Kierkegaard's own thinking. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's criticism (even if directed towards contemporary Hegelians) strikes me also as a rejection of Hegel.

justification is the paradoxical, for if he is, then he is justified not by virtue of being something universal but by virtue of being the single individual" (*Fear and Trembling* 62); and that's Kierkegaard's justification. Abraham exists as that "single individual" who can neither be understood or judged by the universal, because his operative imperative, guided by his faith through an absurd universe, is the only criterion by which he can act. It is ultimately through that actualization of faith that Kierkegaard says separates Abraham from everybody else, and that makes the absolute often unattainable.

It should be no surprise then that we find Hamlet in Act IV slowly coming into a substantive ethical being, though not abruptly. It is a slow process to become a self, especially in modern times that so often conflict and contradict the individual's attempt to become more individual. So when we read *Hamlet* we should also be aware that the father-son issues give way to the more legalistic and political problems that Hamlet's actions demand, and so we see Hamlet as creating and rebelling against the centers of power in his own time and within his own mind, in order to act. Hamlet's conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (who are searching for the body of Polonius) is a case in point, where Rosencrantz says "My lord, you must tell us where the body is, and go with us to the King," to which Hamlet replies "The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is the thing" (4.2.23-26). "The King is the thing" – that forms the ontological center of the play, and dictates Hamlet's

thoughts, and struggles, and ultimately is what he breaks away from in order to go higher. There is more there, however, in Hamlet's response to Rosencrantz. It is a line that contaminates the essence of the play, and provides the psychological impetus that propels the drama. It is in that referentiality to the role of the father, where the absent "body" is with "the King" (who is, for Hamlet, also dead), but that nevertheless the father "is not with the body" – in other words, it still lives. Hamlet's interpersonal drama, his psychosocial relations with others (especially his mother) are heightened and corrupted by the absent father who's not entirely absent – who, indeed, drops by in order to chastise his son for mistreating his mother. In Jacques Lacan's *Seminar VII* he writes that:

> The world of our experience…assumes that it is this object, *das Ding*, as the absolute Other of the subject, that one is supposed to find again. It is to be found at the most as something missed. One doesn't find it, but only its pleasurable associations. It is in this state of wishing for it and waiting for it that, in the name of the pleasure principle, the optimum tension will be sought. (52)

"The King is the thing" for Hamlet; it is the reality upon which he builds his myriad sensations towards others, and in large part shapes his understanding of himself. Throughout much of the play we find Hamlet wishing for various things to happen, utilizing his faculty of words in order to create "pleasurable associations" that nevertheless "doesn't find *it* [my italics]." Hamlet creates a

world for himself out of the sensations that are dictated by that central, troubling, and unresolved relationship that preexisted the play, notably the dynamics between Hamlet and his father. And *Hamlet* is above all a play concerned with father-son relations, and the remnants of that relationship after the death of the hierarchical and structural figure that is the father. Hamlet's mother-son relations are also clouded by the loss of the "thing," and cause him to construct his own spatial architecture of relations towards his mother – in other words is he the son or the father? Again, Lacan's description of the sublimation of desire is a useful tool with which to further understand the complexities of Hamlet's indecision.

> Sublimation is represented as distinct from that economy of substitution in which the repressed drive is usually satisfied. A symptom is the return by means of signifying substitution of that which is at the end of the drive in the form of an aim. It is here that the function of the signifier takes on its full meaning, for it is impossible without reference to that function to distinguish the return of the repressed from sublimation as a potential mode of satisfaction of the drive. It is a paradoxical fact that the drive is able to find its aim elsewhere than that which is its aim. (110)

The paradoxes that are embedded in Hamlet's psychology make themselves apparent throughout the play, and as many delays as he creates there remain an

equivalent number of signifying thoughts and words to which he turns in order to repress and find the thing that dominates his consciousness. In this way Lacan is also elaborating on one of the great works of social psychology, Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, where Freud famously elaborates[19] on the dialectical (and often lyrical) tension that exists in the mind's two impulses: eros and thanatos, or the love and death impulses.

Instinctively man wishes to do what is good and right – just as Hamlet intends on achieving the good by restoring the social order through a certain kind of justice. However he is nevertheless also guided internally by an instinct to destroy others, to destroy the thing – his father – and in the process his uncle, mother, and the entire social order that exists in Denmark. It's through that tension between what is desired and what is good that much of Hamlet's internal drama is played out: the prohibition on becoming the father (literally) with his mother, or his abuse of Ophelia (with whom he could possibly have had a sexual affair). Certainly at times Hamlet's treatment of his mother and Ophelia borders on terrifying, with his misogyny being outweighed only by his tendency to sublimate his true death-impulse to destroy and hurt them, to cause them real physical pain such as he and the father endure throughout the play. Inasmuch as

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[19] Along with *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* stands as one of the fundamental works of psychological *and* cultural criticism. Much of *Hamlet*, Kierkegaard, and the issues of love, community, and the individual in relation to others, could be critically read through Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*.

Hamlet's behavior is dangerous, destructive, and self-interested during his search for that thing which is the King, it also reveals much of the struggle that Freud so powerfully formulated: namely the struggle of the self against the self. In the recognition of that other-thing which exists outside of ourselves there is a terrible realization that our 'I' is not within itself a unified being – that there is in fact something more, and the inherent and primal impulses to destroy (in order to possess) that other, govern much of our (and Hamlet's) immediate responses to those others that we encounter. Lacan's remarks on the idea of the Other are useful here, especially where he remarks:

> What does the emission, the articulation, the sudden emergence from out of our voice of that "You!" (*Toi!*) mean? A "You" that may appear on our lips at a moment of utter helplessness, distress or surprise in the presence of something that I will not right off call death, but that is certain for us an especially privileged other – one around which our principle concerns gravitate. (*Seminar VII* 56)

That Other for Hamlet is certainly his father as idea and memory, but it is not necessarily the Ghost. More than anything that "especially privileged other" is, for Hamlet, chiefly death. So much of Hamlet's thoughts center around that one thematic issue: what is it to live and to die? And what happens in that process of death? One can also see the relations that envelope Hamlet's thought processes as he attempts to discover that thing within himself that will free him from the

binds of his father (who is dead); the Ghost, whose presence serves to heighten Hamlet's existential anxiety; and the immediate and ethical relations he has with others. Kierkegaard's own biographical life speaks to the same form of internal existential dialectics. His other was also his father, who haunted him throughout his life (and who continued to do so even after his death), and reveals itself in his sublimation towards others, and his frequent mistreatment of them. His inability to come to terms and take ownership of his self, expressed itself in a narcissistic desire (not unlike Hamlet's) to hold up a mirror to everyone around him, in order to reveal their selves.

As Lacan remarks, however, "The mirror may on occasion imply the mechanisms of narcissism, and especially the diminution of destruction or aggression that we encounter subsequently. But it also fulfills another role, a role as limit. It is that which cannot be crossed. And the only organization in which it participates is that of the inaccessibility of the object" (*Seminar VII* 151). As with Hamlet, Kierkegaard too possessed the tremendous need to limit himself, to perpetually thwart his own secretive desires, whereby he might permanently free himself from the binds of his repressive other, towards which so much of his self gravitated, and which caused him such anxiety throughout his own life. And, Kierkegaard's psychosocial schism within himself, and his search for his self found its creative and formative moment early in life, at twenty-three. It was at this age that he visited relatives in Gilleleje, a coastal fishing town at the most

northern point of Zealand (the island on which Copenhagen is situated), that he wrote in his journal from Gilbjerg:

> This has always been one of my favorite spots. Often as I stood here on a quiet evening, the sea intoning its song with deep but calm solemnity, my eye catching not a single sail on the vast surface, and only the sea framed the sky and the sky the sea, while on the other hand the busy hum of life grew silent and the birds sang their vespers, then the few departed ones rose from the grave before it, or rather it seemed as though they were not dead. I felt so much at ease in their midst, I rested in their embrace, and I felt as though I were outside my body and floated about with them in a higher ether – until the seagull's harsh screech reminded me that I stood alone and it all vanished before my eyes, and with a heavy heart I turned back to mingle with the world's throng – yet without forgetting such blessed moments. (*Journal AA* 7).

It was also at this time that Kierkegaard said of his own life and calling that:

> What I really need is to be clear about *what I am to do*, not what I must know in the way knowledge must precede all action. It is a question of understanding my own destiny, of seeing what the Deity really wants *me* to do; the thing is to find a truth which is

truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*" (*Journal AA* 16).

That either/or from which all dialectical tension arises is found nowhere more clearly articulated for Kierkegaard *as himself*, than in this journal entry. Likewise, Hamlet's reckoning on "to be or not to be" seems to qualitatively merge with Kierkegaard's own questioning "of finding *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*," and from which those existentially meaningful (and anxiety) filled questions and signified positions come into creative existence.These (and Hamlet's) probing of internal meaning form the basis for the fractured self, to which Kierkegaard (and Hamlet) is trying to find that one meaningful and unifying whole. It is questionable whether Kierkegaard ever found it in his own lifetime, and his fictive enterprises (those pseudonymous works) and the playful – though often painful – parrying which he engaged in through the media of the time, speak to his own attempts to subvert the deepest point of his journal, the answer to that question, "what am I to be?" For Kierkegaard this entry is an especially beautiful and moving commentary on himself (something that we often don't find – at least without a touch of his typical irony), and speaks to the same types of authentic dialectical moves that Hamlet, while alone, makes in Act III.

Garff remarks in *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography* that "These breathless, rhetorical questions have subsequently assumed a permanent position in pretty

nearly every introduction to existentialism as a sort of manifesto of authenticity. And from a biographical point of view this entry is of the greatest interest because it resembles the great *breakthrough texts* one finds in Augustine or Luther, for example" (58); likewise for Hamlet's famous soliloquy. Garff also points out however, that often times "the last portion of the entry is not cited, and this might well be because people are not happy with what Kierkegaard has next to say," to which Kierkegaard's journal entry continues "I could wish to become *an actor* so that by putting myself in someone else's role I could obtain, so to speak, a surrogate for my own life" (58). That economy of being that demands that we filter our self through the mirror images of others, and thus impose self-limitations on those desires that we truly wish to possess, mark Hamlet's decline in his attitude and treatment of others, and certainly Kierkegaard's externally destructive treatment towards those he had previously expressed love for. That *thing* that we objectify and internalize within our self, which is the thing desired – be it truth, love, a particular material entity – becomes our greatest torment from which we must limit ourselves, because it so often comes close to death, and the great totality that is self actualized *being*.

Shakespeare articulates this relativity towards death that one approaches in the actualization of self and purpose, pitting Hamlet against Claudius, to which the latter has acknowledged that Hamlet poses a threat, and so at Claudius' behest is sent to England to be killed. When Hamlet remarks "Good"

to Claudius' telling him that he is being sent to England, Claudius replies "So is it if thou knewst our purposes" – which of course is to have Hamlet murdered, to which Hamlet replies "I see a cherub that sees them. But come, for England. Farewell, dear mother" (4.3.45-47). What's interesting in this exchange is that Hamlet's mother isn't present, and so Hamlet is either addressing his mother as an absent-present, or is directing the comment to Claudius, which makes more sense, given Claudius' reply of "Thy loving father, Hamlet" (4.3.48). Again we find the eternally recurring psychodynamics of the father, where Hamlet replies to Claudius' remark: "My mother. Father and mother is man and wife. Man and wife is one flesh. So – my mother. Come, for England!" (4.3.49-51). Hamlet is certainly referencing the Biblical book of Genesis,[20] by combining his mother and father into one entity, and it seems a striking reversal considering the abuse he had previously heaped upon Gertrude. It's also a defiant line to the death that Claudius is sending Hamlet to, and clearly says that Claudius will never be the father, because Hamlet has situated his biological father within the mother. Through this Hamlet is attempting to reconcile his own fractured ideological constructs within himself – those conflicts that have deterred him from achieving his purpose, and so begin the work of accepting the finality of his own outcome; the outcome which is also becoming intertwined with his purpose, thus enabling

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[20] "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh," Genesis 2:24

his movement towards the internal dialectic necessary for action. Much like Hamlet, Kierkegaard too was forced to reconcile his own conflicting ideologies and narcissistic sublimations in order to act authentically, in order to recognize that Other – which for him was spiritual in nature – within himself, not as viewing himself within the other, but as merging himself into one with the causality of his being.

In the process of his development, Hamlet also comes to a recognition of the institutions to which he is diametrically opposed – after all, to murder the King pits him against the entire political institution of which he is a part (to say nothing of the act of murder itself). In his conversation with the Captain of the ship that is to take him to England, Hamlet inquires who the soldiers are that are marching into Denmark, to which the Captain says "They are of Norway, sir," and Hamlet continues "How purposed, sir, I pray you?" to which the Captain informs him that they are marching – in a rather roundabout way – to Poland (4.4.9-10). Hamlet is struck by the number of soldiers he sees, and by the knowledge that they go to fight for – as the Captain says – "to gain a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name" (4.4.17-18). Hamlet is not what comes to mind when we think of a revolutionary fighter (or even, to an extent, thinker), but his soliloquy addresses the sociopolitics of war and death, and his own individual life to which he knows he must give to his own cause. In circumventing, and directly contradicting the conventional teachings of his social

upbringing, the status to which he is both born into and expected to uphold, and by adhering to his deep search for individual meaning, Hamlet places himself in direct (and revolutionary) contrast to the social sphere that he occupies. Desmond in *Philosophy and its Others* says that:

> …the "hero" lets us see philosophy and its others as bound together in the middle by the eros of dynamic humanness, the original energy of being that erupts in us and that diversifies itself into a plurality of configurations. This original energy of being is figured forth in all, but the "hero" may serve as a metaphor for a singular instantiation or exemplification of human possibility in its richest embodiments. (49)

Hamlet becomes a metaphor for the viewer of the kind of revolutionary thought that existentialism demands. He is beginning to see the very topical surface (but he'll go deeper) of the powerful organizations that control the sociopolitics of his time. If Hamlet is to be a hero or go beyond that figuring, he has to recognize the inherent suffering of the common individual, and the tragic binds that all humans endure, so that within himself he can overcome and act against the conventional power structures that are founded upon domination and subordination of the individual will. Indeed, it is an understanding, recognition and love of this particular world and its suffering others that forms a precondition for going further. Kierkegaard notes this with respect to Abraham

when he says, "Abraham had faith, and had faith for this life. In fact if his faith had been only for a life to come, he certainly would have more readily discarded everything in order to rush out of a world to which he did not belong" (*Fear and Trembling* 20). It is tempting throughout the course of human existence to say 'I was not meant for this time' or 'I can have no discernible impact upon my moment,' and we must realize that we are nevertheless locked, whether we like it or not, within our own particular moment, and so must recognize the otherness of our being and be able to see that while our particular actions have material meaning, they are nothing unless united in a social existence with others. If Hamlet is to go beyond a conceptualization of the heroic, then he must see the larger dynamics of which he is a part, and upon recognizing the institutional hierarchies, go against them, and destroy them for the purpose that dictates to his conscience alone.

> HAMLET. How all occasions do inform against me
> And spur my dull revenge. 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. (4.4.31-38)

Hamlet is (in a self-pitying way) lamenting the "occasions" that "do inform against me," and tempers this remark with "spur my dull revenge." And that's

the key, the consistency with which Hamlet seeks to sublimate, pause, and by indirection find direction; he's going through the full course of his own internal psychodynamics in order to grasp the meaning necessary for him to act. In this way he's also criticizing those individuals (including, in a limited way, the mentality of those who simply kill for the sake of killing) with "What is a man / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed?" – and Kierkegaard also lamented the poorness of the market, which had no secure place for an individual such as himself. It is a criticism of the "market," with its mediocrity and profaneness of spirit, and directly indicts all its pretentious and windless conventions. That's one of the reasons that Kierkegaard admires Abraham: he was still in that state of natural being (without the fetters of convention) because of his absolute faith in God, in the spiritual sphere which the day-to-day ethical moralities of society never reach. Hamlet also recognizes that there's something about the spiritual side of man that he hasn't fully addressed – and that most never get around to – remarking that "Sure he that made us with such large discourse, / Looking before and after," and it's again important to again stress the functional importance that memory, that "looking before and after," has for the play and Hamlet's being, because the Father, "gave us not / That capability and godlike reason / To fust in us unused." If humans have such potential, such capacity for "large discourse" then why does it sit and "fust" so often, is Hamlet's rhetorical thought. He's trying to find the way to

mediate within that "large discourse" (for which Hamlet's character is an amplification of our intellectual capabilities), in order to make his thoughts become real through purposeful action. However, Hamlet recognizes this psychological impediment he possesses, particularly where it contrasts to the reality of the politics in his situation.

> HAMLET. Rightly to be great
> Is not to stir without great argument…
> How stand I then
> That have a father killed, a mother stained,
> Excitements of my reason and my blood,
> And let all sleep; while to my shame I see
> The imminent death of twenty thousand men
> That for a fantasy and trick of fame
> Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
> Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
> Which is not tomb enough and continent
> To hide the slain? O, from this time forth
> My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth. (4.4.52-53; 55-65)

It is through Hamlet's self-reckoning with what it means to be – in the classical sense – "great," which forces one to take account of their motivations, allowing Hamlet to recognize that classical belief that great action requires "great argument." Hamlet then proceeds to briefly recollect the wrongs for which he must atone, and directly recognizes that his father is dead, indeed has been "killed." There is a calm and rational deliberation occurring in Hamlet's speech that possesses a tone unlike his earlier speeches, and seems especially apt when he comes to the comparison of his inaction and the shame he has of it, with that

of the Norwegian soldiers who in their colossal magnitude go to their "imminent death," in the range of "twenty thousand men," for nothing more than "a fantasy and trick of fame." It is in the method that Hamlet connects, in a very deeply personal way, the intellectual discourse he's (largely) had with himself in order to find the singular authority of his being to act, and to synthesize it with the suffering of others, who "Go to their graves like beds" and "fight for a plot…Which is not tomb enough and continent / To hide the slain?" It's Hamlet's most sober deliberation in the play, and when he concludes that "from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth" we don't doubt that he'll finally act. However, it's the wrong dialectic: "bloody" balanced against "nothing worth," because it lacks the moral authority that Hamlet has sought so strenuously throughout the play, and is of the sort that makes Abraham the religious figure that he is. The psychosocial development of Hamlet is still incomplete, and so he's on the way to attaining that internalization of suffering within himself, and as such he's still not ready for the radical confrontation with death that will deliver him from his ethical stance, and cause him to make the leap and infinite resignation required to do what he set out to do in Act I. One might at this point justifiably ask "When will he ever finally possess his existential being in order to act?" – And it's a valid point, and question, but that's what makes good literature, and is also what occupies the majority of the course of life. Much as I utilized the conclusion of Hemingway's greatest novel *The Sun*

Also Rises to illuminate the long course towards individual ownership of oneself, so too is Shakespeare trying to reveal in *Hamlet* that long and uncertain road to truly find what makes an individual self, and moreover, how one deals with the illusions, dreams, realities, and tragedies that are a formative part of individual life. *Hamlet* as a work in this respect, explicitly reveals – scene after scene – that that road to becoming a self is never easy, direct or straightforward. Indeed, even after one feels they've come to a sense of their own being it often remains impractical to realize the actualization of it. *Hamlet* is a highly realistic work of art, much as Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, or Kierkegaard's Aesthete in *Either/Or* who is on the way to becoming ethical, and the ethical who (if he is to truly attain the highest point of existence for an individual) is striving towards the religious. And all great literature is about that individual development, it is about recognizing the political, social, psychological, and familial bonds that chain us to situations we hate, or that prevent our individual will from actualizing itself. As a model for this existential development Hamlet is aptly equipped – however longwinded he may be at times – to be a representative force for the thrust that allows the individual to achieve something beyond the confines of his own physical and material existence.

Nevertheless, Act IV of *Hamlet* seems to prolong the actualizing of Hamlet's realization, partially because he's not around (he's on a ship bound for England), and also, because so much of *Hamlet* has been spent on Hamlet; the

other characters lack any identity of their own, outside of their discussions with and reactions towards Hamlet. For dramatic purposes however two central issues take place in Act IV, that have affective influence on Hamlet's psychological self and his individual situation: the death of Ophelia, which he discovers in Act V, and Claudius' use of Laertes' anger at Hamlet's murder of Polonius, and Ophelia's subsequent suicide. Significantly, Shakespeare gives us the figure of Laertes, an individual who like Hamlet has lost his father, and as an indirect result of this his sister. Where Hamlet's sorrow compels him to take action over the course of five acts, Laertes' suffering compels him instantaneously to seek revenge, and so we are able to see within these two remarkable figures the differences that serve to make Hamlet the existential figure. Through comparative reactions and psychological personalities we understand the depth of Hamlet's interpersonal development, versus the immediacy and ethicality of Laertes. Derrida remarks in *Specters of Marx* that "As in *Hamlet*, the Prince of a rotten State, everything begins by the apparition of a specter. More precisely by the *waiting* for this apparition" (4), and that's true – there is an anticipatory necessity bound up in Hamlet's psychology, that Laertes doesn't have. Laertes stands diametrically opposed to Hamlet's methodology: he does not wait, rather he intends to take up the act of revenge immediately. Laertes (with followers) breaks down the King's door, strides in, and speaks directly (and without fear) to the source of power and hierarchy, Claudius.

LAERTES. Where is my father?
CLAUDIUS. Dead.
GERTRUDE. But not by him.
CLAUDIUS. Let him demand his fill.
LAERTES. How came he dead? I'll not be juggled with.
To hell allegiance, vows to the blackest devil,
Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit.
I dare damnation. To this point I stand –
That both the worlds I give to negligence.
Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father. (4.5.127-134)

Laertes' declaration that "I'll not be juggled with. / To hell allegiance, vows to the blackest devil / Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit" is the dramatic elegance and resistance we've been waiting for, and which, ultimately, Hamlet doesn't deliver. That Laertes says this to a King is also noteworthy, and reveals both his profound suffering and the individual resistance of which he is capable. "I'll only be revenged" says Laertes, and in continuing one of the predominant themes of the play he qualifies "Most thoroughly for my father." That Shakespeare seems to have given us an identical twin to Hamlet (in the sense of the circumstances being dealt with) seems obvious, though we're not supposed to choose between them. Both Hamlet and Laertes are suffering, and both have justifiable reasons for their suffering (and in their own particular way they're both trying to connect themselves with that idea of the particular and universal Father). Where Hamlet's intellectual development precludes overt action, Laertes' overriding sense of his physical self and of the ethical demands he

possesses gives him an unparalleled advantage (for action) over Hamlet. It's as though Shakespeare is trying to balance our desires for (immediate and ethical) action with the character of Laertes, while denying it in Hamlet, who represents that impulse towards the epic in the life of an individual, that aspiration towards attaining the Father, and most importantly the Father in-ourselves. However, everything about *Hamlet* and Hamlet is found in the waiting; in the sublimations and self-limiting discourses of the self in relation to the self; in the distractions and questions and the search, and so Laertes serves powerfully to formulate a symbolic figure who can *not* wait, who is the antithesis of waiting, and who clearly delineates his difference with Hamlet; indeed, it takes all of Claudius' guile and speech to restrain Laertes' thirst for revenge until the end of the play.

> CLAUDIUS. Who will stay you?
> LAERTES. My will, not all the world's.
> And for my means I'll husband them so well
> They shall go far with little.
> CLAUDIUS. Good Laertes,
> If you desire to know the certainty
> Of your dear father, is't writ in your revenge
> That swoopstake you will draw both friend and foe,
> Winner and loser?
> LAERTES. None but his enemies. (4.5.135-141)

We're seeing the unfolding of the ethical figure who has been wronged, who is in control of his faculties, and who demands that ethical justice be done. "Who will stay you?" Claudius asks, to which Laertes powerfully replies "My will, not all

the world's." We're in the presence of a figure who means business, and he is a powerful representative force to which we must contend – and we like it. We enjoy the sureness of Laertes' ways, the command he has of his language and the methods he employs, by which he so subtly conveys the full capacity of his destructive force, which he is willing to direct even at a King. "I'll husband" my desire for revenge, says Laertes, "so well / They shall go far with little." It is the individual rebelling against the state apparatus, when Laertes openly defies the King. Laertes' identity is not, however, simplistic because of his directness of speech, rather he is a complex character whose psychology and the role he has been thrust into by the murder of his father (and suicide of his sister), mirrors Hamlet's situation. Both are in rebellion against the State, and inadvertently – though Laertes doesn't discover it until later in the play – an individual, Claudius; In their own ways both characters are trying to restore justice, to resurrect the (true) Father who has been lost in the cesspool of Denmark; after all, if the King is the symbolic embodiment of the people and land, then Denmark is an image and reality of murder, injustice, and (as Hamlet constantly reminds us) incest. Unlike Horatio's surefooted political sensibilities and careful maneuvering, Hamlet and Laertes are both individuals in the truest sense: their way is not the way of the social structure, rather their individual conceptualizations of higher powers, and right and wrong, is a direct contradiction to the hierarchy that Claudius' authority rests upon, and their

loyalty – if rendered – is contingent upon that hierarchy being justifiably right. If the image of the f/Father is the representative image of order, logic, knowingness, and authority, then both Laertes and Hamlet must assume the true desires to be the father-within-themselves and act. Claudius, who is the figure of the state, cautions Laertes and asks "is't writ in your revenge / That swoopstake you will draw both friend and foe, / Winner and loser?" We see in Claudius' language the politics of his position, and the fear he has for the destructive force that Laertes exudes, especially when he replies "None but his enemies," indicating that whatever their rank, position, or relation, they will nevertheless be drawn into his will, which is revenge.

The unifying character in the play for Hamlet and Laertes' disparate claims that emerges is Ophelia. It is in the complete breakdown of her psyche that we encounter the most fragile and naturally genuine character in *Hamlet*, and it is by Ophelia's death – the death of one who represents innocence and love – that Hamlet is finally able to make the leap. She enters the room during Laertes' confrontation with Claudius, where she sings and proceeds to give out flowers.

> OPHELIA. There's rosemary: that's for remembrance.
> Pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies that's
> for thoughts.
> LAERTES. A document in madness – thoughts and remembrance fitted!
> OPHELIA. There's fennel for you, and columbines.
> There's rue for you, and here's some for me. We may

call it herb of grace o'Sundays. You may wear your rue
with a difference. There's a daisy. I would give you
some violets, but they withered all when my father
died. They say 'a made a good end.
Sings.
For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy.

LAERTES. Thought and afflictions, passion, hell itself
She turns to favour and to prettiness. (4.5.169-181)

It is a heart-wrenching moment in the play, and for the first time we see Ophelia as a mature character, wounded by the death of her father, and unrequited love. Moreover, as the audience we know the motivations (as she and the others do not) that have unwittingly placed her in this position, and so our sympathy for the externalized tragedy presented before Claudius and Laertes is increased. Echoing the major thrusts of Hamlet's own dilemma and search for authenticity are Ophelia's remarks to Laertes concerning thoughts and remembrance. The Arden Shakespeare edition of *Hamlet* notes that each of these flowers has a particular symbolism associated with it[21], thus doubling the impact that Ophelia's statements have, while also being able to symbolically present each of the individuals in the room with the flower that corresponds to their particular psychological structure and moral position. "There's rosemary: that's for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies that's for thoughts" says Ophelia to Laertes, and suddenly we're (re)presented and

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[21] See pp. 387-388, Third Series of the Arden Shakespeare *Hamlet*, 2006; Eds. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor.

situated into the sphere of Hamlet, that remembrance and thoughts must go in tandem with each other is the work of love, mourning, and is a fundamental premise in order to come into being. Remembrance, however, especially when connected with thoughts often results in deep pain, and Laertes notes this with "Thought and afflictions, passion, hell itself / She turns to favour and to prettiness." When the mind is no longer able to cope with deep trauma – as Laertes powerfully articulates it "hell itself" – then we are often reduced to states such as that of Ophelia. It is also here, through Ophelia, that we have a moral schematic from which to see the play, in the sense of the ethical, because while Ophelia essentially speaks of similar issues that are pertinent to Hamlet's own psychosocial being and moral center, they are nevertheless of a different quality. Ophelia continues saying "There's fennel for you, and columbines," – fennel for flattery and columbines for infidelity – "There's rue for you, and here's some for me" – rue as a flower for repentance, and Ophelia with significant emotional power subtly notes that "We may call it herb of grace o'Sundays," and now through indirect indictment with "You may wear your rue with a difference." We can all partake in our terrible flatteries and infidelities – but when we wear our rue we don't have to necessarily wear it only on Sunday, the traditional Christian day of prayer and repentance, instead we may wear our "rue with a difference," signifying the myriad moral crimes we each commit in our own particular way.

Finally, "There's a daisy" – for disprized love, and she tragically concludes "I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died." In other words, all of Ophelia's fidelity (or her ability to maintain her psychological composure) dissipated after the death of so many things: her father, Hamlet's love, and her own ability to find the will to live. Again we see the powerful contrasts of *wills*, between Laertes' straightforward grasp of the world and his ability to utilize his will to actualize his desires; Hamlet's use of his intellect to continuously question his own will (and thus remain in semi-permanent indecision); and Ophelia, whose will is broken by the selfishness, hypocrisy, aestheticism, and crimes of the Danish court. Ophelia's moral demarcations however, do not approach the spiritual component or supernatural direction that Hamlet endures, that are the formative forces of his purpose and character. This is not to negate the suffering Ophelia experiences, or to diminish her statements concerning remembrance and thoughts. Rather it serves to illuminate the structural differences inherent in each character's individual psychosocial development. Hamlet doesn't break down because he's acting outside of the ethical; Laertes doesn't break down because he's firmly within the ethical; Ophelia breaks down because she is the innocence that the ethical strives to preserve, and is unable to endure the terrible tragedies she experiences singly or existentially. For these reasons Ophelia is the only tragic figure of *Hamlet*, and her wounds have given her profound insight (as suffering and wounds often do)

which she is, tragically, unable to actualize – except in an innocent way: through the giving of flowers. Ophelia leaves the scene singing:

> OPHELIA. (*Sings.*)
> And will 'not come again?
> And will 'not come again?
> No, no, he is dead,
> Go to thy deathbed.
> He never will come again.
>
> His beard was as white as snow,
> Flaxen was his poll.
> He is gone, he is gone,
> And we cast away moan.
> God a' mercy on his soul.
> And of all Christians' souls. God buy you. (4.5.182-192)

Losing and the impermanence of material being are never easy issues to confront, and Ophelia's suffering reaches dramatically tragic heights with her exit, where she sings "And will 'not come again? / And will 'not come again? / No, no, he is dead." Her father is dead, and so Ophelia looks to God, and in a harbinger that alludes to her own death, "Go to thy deathbed. / He will never come again"; only after death we are united again with the father. In becoming the innocent-other Ophelia also becomes representative of the tragic trope of the innocent individual who cannot confront dramatic loss, and so foresees death as the only option to reunite with that which we have lost. Similarly, the father figure is continually utilized throughout the play as a qualitative essence that is inextricably bound to notions of order and life, as though with the father intact

somehow everything would be alright. But, as Ophelia tells us, "he is gone, he is gone, / And we cast away moan" – and so our mourning is cast off because of his absence, and our own sense of unknowingness, and so in the end "God a' mercy on" the soul.

Ophelia's comments prefigure Hamlet's own existential leap into resignation of the finite, and to his fate and purpose through faith. In the more immediate sense however, it also serves to heighten Laertes' despair, and causes him to seek revenge with greater momentum, which offers Claudius the opportunity to exploit Laertes' anger. Claudius remarks "Go but apart / Make choice of whom your wisest friends you will, / And they shall hear and judge 'twixt you and me" (4.5.195-197); Claudius sees an opportunity, and continues to represent everything metonymically that is wrong with the State, and subsequently with the lives led by individuals within the State. Laertes' anger is not, however, sufficient to cloud his rational judgment, and we see this in his questioning of Claudius: "But tell me / Why you proceed not against these feats / So criminal and so capital in nature" (4.7.5-7), to which Claudius replies that "The Queen his mother / Lives almost by his looks" (4.7.12-13) and that he is further prevented from acting openly against him because of "the great love the general gender bear him" (4.7.19). Of course Claudius also thinks that Hamlet is bound for death in England (he doesn't know that Hamlet read the letter written by Claudius to sentence him to death, whereupon he altered it, using *his father's*

royal seal), and so Claudius' attempts to comfort Laertes are carried out in a circuitous way. Laertes doesn't care, however, saying to Claudius "And so I have a noble father lost, / A sister driven into desperate terms" (4.7.26-27), and concludes by saying "my revenge will come" (4.7.30). Claudius' response to Laertes is broken however by the entrance of a messenger who bears a letter from Hamlet, whose contents notify (the now confused) Claudius that "Tomorrow shall I beg leave to see your / kingly eyes. When I shall (first asking you pardon) thererunto recount the occasion of my sudden return" (4.7.44-46) – not bad work for an individual sent on a ship by the King to his death. (Claudius is also unaware [and Hamlet doesn't tell him as he did in a letter to Horatio] that his return has been aided by pirates attacking the ship, allowing him to escape and [presumably] pay a ransom for his return to Denmark.) Unlike Claudius, Laertes takes great pleasure in the prospect of Hamlet's return noting "I am lost in it, my lord, but let him come. / It warms the very sickness in my heart" (4.7.52-53), and we know when Laertes utters these words that, unlike Hamlet, he means them in a very active way – he intends to kill Hamlet. Claudius however dissuades him from this course of direct action, arguing instead for a method that will conceal Hamlet's murder as an accident, saying "To thine own peace" (4.7.59) because "I [Claudius] will work him / To an exploit, now ripe in my device, / Under the which he shall not choose but fall" (4.7.61-63). To this end Claudius employs a significant amount of cunning, extolling to Laertes his

knowledge of Laertes' great abilities with a sword, and in the process (unsurprisingly) reveals himself to be a highly clever manipulator. Ultimately Laertes agrees to engage Hamlet in a duel, noting that he'll poison the tip of his sword beforehand. Claudius remarks however "Let's further think of this" (4.7.146), because "If this should fail / And that our drift look through our bad performance / 'Twere better not essayed" (4.7.148-150), and "Therefore this project / Should have a back or second that might hold" (4.7.150-151); the back-up plan is of course the poisoned cup of wine, which Gertrude ultimately drinks. What stands out however throughout is Claudius' deft ability to murder – and to continue to do so. His position as the villain of *Hamlet* is both deserved and unapproached by any actions of the other characters in the play, and serve the purpose of revealing to the audience – not unlike *Macbeth* – the disarray and disorder caused by these terrible crimes, to which Denmark, and the innocent Ophelia are victims.

After the method with which to dispose of Hamlet is decided, the Queen enters and informs them that Ophelia has drowned, to which Laertes declares "Drowned! O, where?" (4.7.163). What follows is a moving description by Gertrude of how Ophelia died, describing her as floating in "fantastic garlands" that she made "Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies and long purples" (4.7.166-167), and the description is moving particularly when she relates how Ophelia floated: "Her clothes spread wide / And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up, / Which

time she chanted snatches of old lauds / As one incapable of her own distress" (4.7.173-176), evoking a romantic and sensitive image of one who has chosen to die. Ophelia, unable to cope with the terrifying tragedies around her, kills herself by floating down the river draped in garlands of flowers, singing "old lauds," and keeps true to her invocation to Laertes to connect remembrance with thoughts. That *Hamlet* is a play whose essence is the restoration of fathers remains true, but if anything it is also a play centered around the dialectically-oriented individual who alone must create and take ownership of a self, *and* the suffering of the innocent, those who are subject to the whims of selfish aesthetic and ethical choices. It as much a play about the self-journeying of Hamlet, as it is the terrible implications for others who through our own personal search for purpose endure horrifying consequences. It is something to which we can all relate: that in our own search for self meaning, and those greater purposes that we believe we are called to, often those around us suffer terrible consequences as a direct result of our inability to internalize others. That the Queen notes "But long it could not be / Till that her garments, heavy with their drink, Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay / To muddy death" (4.7.177-181); indirectly she is referring to the moral culpability shared by everyone in *Hamlet*; no one is spared, in the religious sense, from having played a part (especially by doing nothing) in dragging the innocent to an allegorical "muddy death."

The return of Hamlet is marked by a propitious meeting with Horatio in a graveyard, where two gravediggers are carrying on with their work, digging graves. As they work the gravediggers discuss the issue of Ophelia's (though they don't know that's who they're digging a grave for) death:

> GRAVEDIGGER. Is she to be buried in Christian burial,
> when she willfully seeks her own salvation?
> 2 MAN. I tell thee she is. Therefore make her grave
> straight. The crowner hath sat on her and finds it
> Christian burial. (5.1.1-5)

In discussing the merits as to whether or not Ophelia is to receive a Christian burial, they engage in legalistic discourse, as well as riddles with one gravedigger asking the other "What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright or the carpenter?" (5.1.37-38), to which the (apparently) appropriate answer is "when you are asked this question next, say a grave-maker. The houses he makes lasts till doomsday. Go get thee in and fetch me a stoup of liquor" (5.1.54-56). While the incident at which the gravediggers are working is a very serious one – it involves the burial of Ophelia, and the question as to whether or not she'll receive a Christian burial (suicide is forbidden by Canon law) – the discrepancy is plain: the gravediggers have been made practical and unaffected by their trade. Hamlet is taken aback by their lack of respect for the dead, asking Horatio "Has this fellow no feeling of his business? 'A sings in grave-making" to which Horatio replies, "Custom hath made it in him a

property of easiness" (5.1.61-64). The contrasting effect here is to emphasize Hamlet's hold on the material world – he's shocked and, perhaps not in a small way, offended by the treatment of the dead – after all, the gravediggers are making light of the ethical issues associated with death, while they dig graves, drinking, singing, and tossing up skulls. Moreover the legalism with which the gravediggers address Ophelia's death: "I tell thee she is. Therefore make her grave straight. The crowner hath sat on her and finds it Christian burial" underpins the insensitivity with which the subject is addressed. To love this life however is to let it go, otherwise one cannot attain the greatest heights to which the human spirit is capable. Hamlet is not entirely ready to make that move, however, because he is still attached to the world. Hamlet remarks "And now my Lady Worm's – chapless and knocked about the mazard with a sexton's spade" (5.1.83-85), where he gives a rather appreciable and common reaction to one witnessing the desecration of burial grounds – and yet, Hamlet's still missing the point: the body dies, the soul does not. The gravedigger in a riddle-like way alludes to this when Hamlet queries "What man doest thou dig it for?" and the gravedigger replies "For no man, sir"; Hamlet persists, "What woman, then?" to which the gravedigger replies "For none, neither." Exasperated, Hamlet demands "Who is to be buried in't?," to which the gravedigger replies "One that was a woman, sir, but rest her soul she's dead" (5.1.121-128). The gravedigger may go about his work with a careless attitude, but there's also something

appreciative and practical about what he says to Hamlet – that the body becomes just that, a body, and it is only the soul that requires rest. Hamlet doesn't seem to get what the gravedigger alludes to, saying to Horatio "How absolute this knave is!" (5.1.129). It is more than the acceptance of death that is at stake here, it is the necessity that resignation demands with respect to the familiar, the known, the day-to-day world that makes up a life. If one is to attempt to do something greater than himself, then he must be prepared to recognize that the cause is greater than his particular being (and this material life) – only then, can he truly act. Hamlet begins to move towards this when he asks Horatio – after lamenting the loss of the court jester Yorick, whom Hamlet knew as a child – "Dost thou think Alexander looked o'this fashion i'th' earth?," to which Horatio says "E'en so" (5.1.187-189). By referencing a famous historical figure Hamlet is also referring to an archetype, namely those who are great, whose reputations and exploits are known over the world. How is it possible, Hamlet asks, that even those who are great – and Hamlet aspires to do something great – are nevertheless reduced to the grave. He remarks "To what base uses we may return, Horatio! / Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of / Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bung-hole?" (5.1.192-194). In other words, how is it that we become nothing more than food for the worms, and that even one of the greatest military leaders and conquerors nevertheless became nothing more than (ordinary) "noble dust," who ceases to be anything great as he was in life.

Hamlet's deep intrigue with what comes after death continues to be omnipresent, and that separates him from Laertes who regards life and death as fairly dividable things. It also serves to reveal why Laertes makes a much better military commander in the order of noble dust than Hamlet. Nevertheless, it remains Hamlet who speaks to our own particular condition of being, who addresses that problematic question of whether or not we're truly prepared to sacrifice this known world, the air we breathe and the life we live, to act for a particular cause – even one that we've been called for; time and again, however, Hamlet seems to be searching for that higher spiritual meaning which makes that sacrifice palatable. His fascination concerning death continues where he again alludes to the Biblical book of Genesis,[22] saying "Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander / returneth to dust" (5.1.198-199) – a simple enough equation to deduce, but a far more difficult one to live.

Lacan speaks to this tension that we walk in our lives, and without directly intending it also comments upon one of the major conditions for authenticity. Lacan remarks "Doing things in the name of the good, and even more in the name of the good of the other, is something that is far from protecting us not only from guilt but also from all kinds of inner catastrophes…desire is nothing other than that which supports an unconscious

[22] "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return," Genesis 3:19

theme" (*Seminar VII* 319). There's a home-truth articulated by Lacan about the egoistic impulses that drive our efforts towards 'good' – especially when it's done in the name of others, namely that we are displacing our own secretive (and often selfish) impulses into the thought that we are in fact *not* doing it for ourselves, but rather are acting on the behalf of others. That's why taking ownership of oneself is so critical – it's the imperative to which everything else must fall: there can be no displacement of one's secret desire into others, it has to be taken up fully on the strength of the individual alone (no matter how absurd) and relegated into a true self that can communicate with others. Only by sacrificing the notion of an 'I' can one enter into the community of others, and that's why for Kierkegaard the stage of the religious is both the key and the highly difficult position that we ought to occupy. It is the space that resigns the here and now for the infinite, that which infinitely loves others and acts for the restoration of justice (which is love). It is only by making that choice to resign oneself (which is eternal) to the infinite that such a leap into faith and otherness can occur. Kierkegaard writes in *Either/Or*:

> Therefore it needs courage to choose oneself, for just when he seems to be becoming most isolated, he is entering more deeply than ever into the roots through which he is linked with the whole. It alarms him, and yet that is how it has to be, for when he awakens to the passion of freedom – and that has been awakened in the

> choice, just as the choice presupposes it – he chooses himself and fights to possess it as though for his blessedness, and it is his blessedness. He can let go of none of this, not the most painful things, not the most grievous, and yet the expression of this fight, of this acquiring, is – repentance....And if the sins of the father were inherited by the son, this too he repents, for only in this way can he choose himself, choose himself absolutely. (518-519)

Hamlet's effort has been the slow progress towards that point where he can "choose himself absolutely," however, before Hamlet can do that he has to find the will to "repentance," which translates into forgiveness. But to be able to find forgiveness, to have the will to repent ultimately means taking ownership for one's actions – and more profoundly, for one's being. As Kierkegaard says "He can let go of none of this, not the most painful things, not the most grievous" because the point of becoming a self, of *choosing* to become a self, is in the end going back to one's beginning and from there to begin again. It also means, for Kierkegaard (who had troubled relations with his own father), taking ownership for the errors of judgment and crimes of the father. If the father becomes the ontological center from which to understand the social structure, as seems so evidently the case in *Hamlet*, then that too means seeing that we can never be free to become our self, so long as we are caught by and tainted with the effects of the past. It is Ophelia's suicide, however, that forcibly makes real in Hamlet's mind

the effects of actions, issues of ethics and otherness, and is the point where death truly begins to take shape and meaning for him, and causes him to make an infinite resignation of the finite.

What emerges in the Priest's remarks during Ophelia's burial service, where he says that "Her obsequies have been as far enlarged / As we have warranty. Her death was doubtful; / And but that great command o'ersways the order / She should in ground unsanctified been lodged" (5.1.215-218), is that the Priest insists that Ophelia's suicide precludes her being buried in consecrated ground, which is in itself infuriating - but that it was only by "great commands" (i.e. Claudius) that forced through a semi-Christian burial speaks to the deep hypocrisy which permeates the state, and now, the Church. Laertes asks the Priest "Must there no more be done?," to which the Priest replies "No more be done. / We should profane the service of the dead / To sing a requiem and such rest to her / As to peace-parted souls" (5.1.223-227). That Ophelia is certainly the most sympathetic of the figures in *Hamlet* is difficult to counter, and that she should be deprived "a requiem" for her soul allows the play to reveal the absurdity of the situation, heightened especially by intercession for the burial to take place. (One would also do well to note the parallels between the presumed unrest that awaits her soul, and Hamlet's concern for his dead father's soul.) When Kierkegaard railed against the Church it was for reasons such as this, the hypocrisy and absurdity that guided traditions. Indeed, in the last weeks of

Kierkegaard's life he refused – shocking for one of the last great Christian philosophers – services with the Clergy, and even one of his nephew's staged a protest during his burial service, revealing the deep schism that had slowly developed in Kierkegaard's later life with the Church. Garff notes in *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, regarding the funeral arrangements for Kierkegaard's death that:

> On November 15 [1855] a family council was held at the home of Henrik Ferdinand Lund, where they discussed the practical problems connected with the funeral and attempted to find a way out of the dilemma that everyone seated around the oval table was aware of: If the funeral were to take place in the quietest, most private manner possible, it would indirectly dishonor the deceased by appearing to consign him to historical oblivion, while if the funeral were permitted to take place in the usual manner, it could be viewed as a provocation. What in all the world should they do with that little corpse? (796)

And Kierkegaard hadn't even committed suicide! Yet throughout his life, and especially in his final years, he came to resent the falseness that he felt pervaded the Danish State Church – the willingness to say and make pretensions at believing one thing, while in the next unceasingly failing to practice any of the moral teachings the Church so proudly proclaimed. The funeral scene for

Ophelia's ceremony powerfully reveals through the structural differences between the Priest and Laertes (and eventually Hamlet) the hypocrisy pervading both the ceremony, and the situation in which it takes place. That's why Hamlet's effort is an attempt to create a genuine social community (and this could successfully be said of much of Kierkegaard's work) of others, where works and faith would truly be united *and* would be carried out authentically.

Laertes' comments to the Priest explicitly respond to the absurdity and false-morality occurring at the ceremony, saying "Lay her i'th' earth, / And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring. I tell thee, churlish priest, / A ministering angel shall my sister be / When thou liest howling" (5.1.227-230). It is a moving scene which, at one point, involves Laertes leaping into the grave to be with his dead sister, whereupon he says "Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead / Till of this flat a mountain you have made / T'o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head / Of blue Olympus" (5.1.240-242). And now we begin to bear witness to the change occurring slowly in Hamlet as he watches from the shadows, concealed beneath a cloak, the deeply moving emotion emanating from Laertes as he mourns the loss of his sister. Hamlet comes out from his place of hiding and says "What is he whose grief / Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow / Conjures the wandering stars and makes them stand / Like wonder-wounded hearers?" – it is a statement wrought with emotion by Hamlet, who has himself been moved and who asks whose grief bears so much that it

stops even the stars in their movement; he concludes by announcing himself as "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.246). Notice how these remarks by Hamlet alternate between two critical points: a recognition of the deep suffering being endured by Laertes, and the announcement (and self-positioning 'I') that marks Hamlet's ownership of his identity, and his role as the embodiment of '*the* Dane.' And Hamlet further asserts to Laertes, Gertrude and Claudius that: "I loved Ophelia – forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum" (5.1.258-260), and we're hearing from Hamlet a direct change in his previous demeanor. After being attacked by an enraged Laertes, Hamlet proceeds to reply that "Dost come here to whine, / To outface me with leaping in her grave? / Be buried quick with her, and so will I" (5.1.266-268), where despite the implied criticism of Laertes' actions, Hamlet's really daring them to question his honesty of feeling, and furthermore says 'Be buried quick with her, and so will I'; in other words, I will be joined with you in suffering, and with her, in spirit and death.

As Hamlet leaves the graveyard he's still not compelled to wholly act, but the final conversion to the religious hasn't quite occurred. Hamlet's not fully prepared to accept the deepest meaning of death, and the undiscovered country that may (or may not) come to him, after the killing of Claudius. Bielmeier notes similarly in *Shakespeare, Kierkegaard, and Existential Tragedy* that "Only by suspending the ethical and embracing the absurd can Hamlet truly leap to the

religious. Sometime after the burial of Ophelia and before his final private conversation with Horatio, Hamlet make the leap" (58). I'd argue, however, that it is within his conversation with Horatio, and right into the battle with Laertes that Hamlet unfolds the fullness of his movement to the religious. One thing remains certain at this point, that Hamlet is prepared to resign finitude in his leap of faith to the infinite. He says to Horatio regarding his discovery of the letter while on the ship that Claudius wrote, instructing the English to put him to death that, "in my heart there was a kind of fighting / That would not let me sleep" (5.2.4-5), as though the spiritual unsettledness he was experiencing (that "fighting") demanded something of him that he needed to settle, and he concludes that "When our deep plots do fall - and that should learn us / There's a divinity that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.9-11). No matter how roughly we may disrupt the fabric of what is to be, Hamlet says, we must understand that there's something beyond us that shapes our fate.

Considering Hamlet's circumstance, being bound on a ship for England (and death), he's remarkably fortunate that he was on a ship attacked by pirates (we might very well be tempted to overlook the dramatic necessity of these events for the play to exist), the point is nevertheless made that irrespective of our failings and the falling through of plans we make, our individual lives are bound up in something far greater than our mere particular existence. Hamlet goes further, however, completing his resignation after being informed of

Laertes' intention to challenge him to a duel. Horatio says to Hamlet that in the duel "You will lose, my lord" to which Hamlet says "I do not think so," because Hamlet feels that his "continual practice" (5.2.187-189) will be sufficient to thwart Laertes. Still Horatio beseeches Hamlet to not proceed with his course of action, and offers to "forsestall their repair hither and say you are not fit" (5.2.196). Here Hamlet delivers one of his most moving remarks, about going to the duel, and is a foreshadowing of his death:

> HAMLET. Not a whit. We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be, '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 know what is't to leave betimes. Let be. (5.2.197-201)

It is Hamlet's eulogy for his material being where "we defy augury," and it is an allusion to the Biblical book of Matthew with, "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow." The full text from the Biblical book of Matthew echoes (and elaborates) the full thrust of Hamlet's comments, where the specific section alluded to by Hamlet reads:

> There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in

> hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. (Matthew 10.26-29)

It is the essential quality of the self relating back to the self, of the recurring deontology to self that the particular individual must commit themselves to in order to be free, and to resign themselves to "the will of your Father." One could do a very thorough reading of Hamlet from this one quotation of the Bible, as it refers to much that Hamlet questions in his journey to becoming a self (and references many of the practical issues that dominate the play), and comments on the process he engages in towards the fulfillment of his purpose. And it answers one of the central questions that underlies much of Hamlet's psychosocial uncertainty, that we should "not be afraid of those who kill the body," because they can never "kill the soul." We also have the return of the Father, and within the context of Hamlet's resignation to his physical death along with the comments made earlier about the lives we lead ("There's a divinity that shapes our ends"), suggests Hamlet's movement to faith and the recognition of the order and meaning (the "father") within himself. Nowhere else in the play do we find his comments so powerfully articulating the depth of his belief or commitment to the unknown than here, particularly where he responds to Horatio's fears of Laertes killing him in battle with "If it be, 'tis not to / come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not / now, yet it will come." In short, whether death comes

in the immediate or in the unknown future, it will nevertheless come, and so "the readiness is all"; the preparation within the self that makes it able to resign completely the attachment to the particular and universal moment, and finally merge with the infinite.

In his moving discourse *The Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air* Kierkegaard writes:

> What is joy? Or what is it to be joyful? It is to be present to oneself; but to be truly present to oneself is this thing of 'today', that is, this thing of *being* today, of truly *being today*. And in the same degree that it is more true that *thou* art today, in the same degree that thou art quite present to thyself in being today, in that very same degree is the baleful tomorrow non-existent for thee. Joy is in the present tense, with the whole emphasis upon the *present*. Therefore it is that God is blessed, who eternally says Today. (349-350)

It is in the act of being *present* with oneself, in the here and now but not *in* the here and now, that Kierkegaard makes reference to, and is embodied in Hamlet's counsel to Horatio with respect to Horatio's fears. Hamlet is prepared to die, noting that "since no man / of aught he leaves know what is't to leave betimes" – that is, none of us has any real ability to control our physical existence to the point of knowing when we'll die, and so he concludes (with a finality that suggests an altogether different Hamlet), "Let be." The duty we owe to our self is

to become that self fully, and to reach the point of departure from our particular presence into a state of true *presence* that "eternally says Today." When that moment of today comes for Hamlet and he finally is able to murder Claudius, it isn't a particularly exciting or moving moment – its been so long in coming that we're simply relieved to see it finally happen. What is more significant, however, is the exchange that Hamlet and Laertes have when Laertes informs Hamlet that he will die from the poisoned rapier tip. "Hamlet, thou art slain. / No medicine in the world can do thee good: / In thee there is not half an hour's life" (5.2.298-300), prompting Hamlet to murder the King. It is also interesting to note that even at this point he doesn't publicly expound upon Claudius' murder of his father, instead choosing to focus his remarks with a public condemnation of Claudius' relationship with Gertrude, declaring "Here, thou incestuous, damned Dane / Drink of this potion" (5.2.309-310). While it seems strange that Hamlet doesn't mention the original imperative that set the course of actions of the play in motion, it isn't altogether an entirely surprising omission. After all, one has to be able to repent and forgive actions in order to truly choose a self. This contention is also supported by the final verbal exchange by Hamlet to Laertes, and Horatio.

> LAERTES. He is justly served.
> It is a poison tempered by himself.
> Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet,
> Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,

Nor thine on me. [*Dies.*]
HAMLET. Heaven make thee free of it. I follow thee.
I am dead, Horatio Wretched Queen, adieu.
You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time (as this fell sergeant Death
Is strict in his arrest) – O, I could tell you –
But let it be. Horatio, I am dead.
Thou livest: report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied. (5.2.312-324)

It is Laertes who at the end of the play gets the remarks we expect Hamlet to deliver, saying that Claudius "is justly served" by "a poison tempered by himself," and who also asks for forgiveness between himself and Hamlet, noting that "Mine and my father's death come not upon thee, Nor thine on mine." In the end the father theme is finally satisfied, and neither Laertes or Hamlet bears the true tragedy of the absent father, because they are both set free. Instead Hamlet seems concerned about how his actions will be perceived, a characteristically human worry to not want to be thought ill of for the actions (or lack thereof) one commits in life. He says of Laertes "Heaven make thee free of it," because it's only there that true absolution in the spiritual sense occurs, and then he looks out to the audience who cannot reply "to this act." Hamlet says "Had I but time" – but he doesn't, because death has come to him – "I could tell you," but we're not entirely certain as to what he intends to tell. The movement that Hamlet has made through his infinite resignation isn't appreciable by us, and Hamlet hasn't

the time to explain it, and so resigns it to "let it be." It falls to Horatio to ensure that "me and my cause" are reported correctly. Kierkegaard notes in *Fear and Trembling* of Abraham that, "a final word by Abraham has been preserved," in that "first and foremost, he does not say anything, and in that form he says what he has to say" (118-119). Hamlet does say something (but in fact he really doesn't say anything), noting "O, I could tell you"; Kierkegaard notes of Abraham that if he had spoken that "he would have spoken an untruth. He cannot say anything, for what he knows he cannot say" (*Fear and Trembling* 119). It is left to the ethical figure Horatio to make sense of what no one else can understand, to make that unspoken movement by the singular individual who transcends into a different space familiar.

In *Poetry, Language, Thought* Heidegger says that "dwelling…is *the basic character* of Being" (158) – those spaces that we occupy, and more importantly the ways in which we occupy them determine the very nature of our *being*. Hamlet's final space is occupied by silence as to what he knows, and a request to one individual (and in asking Horatio to do this, Hamlet alludes to the unique possibility that only Horatio can convey ethical understanding to bring others to that space of dwelling), where silence gives way to silent understanding. Heidegger continues this in *Poetry, Language, Thought* with:

> The real plight of dwelling lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell.*

> What if man's homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the *real* plight of dwelling as *the* plight? Yet as soon as man *gives thought* to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer. Rightly considered and kept well in mind, it is the sole summons that *calls* mortals into their dwelling. (159)

That we're all searching for a home – a self – seems evident enough, and that we "learn to dwell" is a necessity that goes without saying. But the real connection with this segment of Heidegger and *Hamlet* is that idea that "as soon as man *gives thought* to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer." The declaration by Ophelia to Laertes to give oneself over to remembrance and *thoughts* – and the whole of Hamlet's being that is taken over by thoughts – suggests something about this building up out of homelessness and false dwellings; that through the development gone through by Hamlet he comes to fully understand that "sole summons that *calls* mortals into their dwelling." It is Hamlet's final act *not* to wish to leave others hurt by his actions, where he acknowledges "O God, Horatio, what a wounded name, / Things standing thus known, shall I leave behind / me!" (5.2.329-330) and so begs Horatio "To tell my story" (5.2.333). It's one of Hamlet's most humane requests, that his "wounded name" be rehabilitated by his friend, and elevates him in our sympathy – though not as a tragic figure, because Hamlet's death hasn't been tragic, as it was foregrounded by his resignation to his end. If anything, the act of Horatio's retelling Hamlet's

story to others who might have been directly or indirectly wounded by Hamlet's actions would free others from Hamlet's actions; it is Hamlet's last attempt at repentance and forgiveness. Hamlet's last lines concern the State of Denmark, which hitherto had been controlled by the ruthless and corrupt Claudius, where Hamlet says "I do prophesy th'election lights / on Fortinbras: he has my dying voice. / So tell him with th'occurents more and less / Which have solicited. – The rest is silence" (5.2.339-342). It is the one true political act committed by Hamlet, and reveals him to have assumed the role of the father – if only in one instance – where he ensures (to the best of his ability – though Fortinbras' case for becoming the next King is strengthened by his army being encamped upon the castle steps) that there will be an orderly succession of the Danish throne, and moreover that it goes to the one individual (aside from Horatio) who can truly rule Denmark. And like Kierkegaard's Abraham, "The rest is silence."

And yet there's room for one more thought of Kierkegaard's, whose concluding remarks on Abraham have something to offer us, especially as they relate to Hamlet's own silent end, when Kierkegaard says in *Fear and Trembling*:

> …life has tasks enough also for the person who does not come to faith, and if he loves these honestly, his life will not be wasted, even if it is never comparable to the lives of those who perceived and grasped the highest. But the person who has come to faith (whether he is extraordinarily gifted or plain and simple does not matter)

> does not come to a standstill in faith. Indeed, he would be indignant if anyone said this to him, just as the lover would resent it if someone said that he came to a standstill in love; for, he would answer, I am by no means standing still. I have my whole life in it. (122-123)

Hamlet is by no means the perfect model for either the leap of faith or coming-to-be in a relationship with the absolute, and he shouldn't be. The kind of faith exemplified by Abraham isn't ours, because none of us, Kierkegaard says, are Abrahams. And that's the point. There's a divinity that shapes us all, and we're all a part of it, and to have that recognition of being connected with and to others, and of possessing such remarkable spiritual awareness is sufficient to merge our particular moment with something infinite and beyond ourselves.

That Richard Kearney says of Hamlet "So it would seem that, for Kierkegaard, Hamlet is neither a religious hero nor an esthetic (tragic) hero but something in between. Neither fish nor fowl. A hybrid creature. In short an esthetic-religious mess. Perhaps not unlike Kierkegaard himself" (*The New Kierkegaard* 230). There's certainly truth in that, because despite Kierkegaard's life-long commitment to God, and the beliefs that he put into practice during his life, he wasn't perfect, and he certainly was not Abraham. Kierkegaard, *Hamlet* as a play, and Hamlet as a psychological character each offer us a compelling portrait of what the ordinary can achieve, and of what is accessible to each of us

in our own unique and individual ways. That Kierkegaard scholars have (it seems) endlessly tried to reconcile the myriad – and often disjointed and contradictory – philosophic positions that Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous figures offer seems to miss the point. The effort should never be to model oneself after that one figure, that one central thematic point from which imperfect copies are derived – rather it's about seeing what we're capable of, especially as it relates to the upbuilding of our own *being*. That neither Kierkegaard nor Hamlet were quite able to exist entirely in faith, or through the absurdity of life, does not detract from the quality or importance of their being and acting. To the contrary, as Kierkegaard says of the lover who "would resent it if someone said that he came to a standstill in love," it is never sufficient that the individual rest on their laurels of being. And Kierkegaard and Hamlet – in whatever they did – were never standing still. If anything, the power of their individual narratives continues to exemplify what it means to "have my whole life in it," and triumphs as magnificently as any other conceptualization of faith that either history or literature offers. It merely remains for us to decide what that *it* will be, and then, to live it.

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