Something about Hamlet…

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Abstract: Theatre, just like life, is not and could never be a purpose in itself. It is a part of living, of learning how to live. There is only one matter we can be dogmatic about in regard to any kind of theatre: it cannot exist in a state of boredom. Theatre has to be lively in order not to become unbearable. Far from being superficial, the dialectics of interest and boredom is very much active, and the question “What causes interest?” is definitely profound. One could easily give theoretical answers, stating “this should arouse their interest.” Unfortunately, most of the time this “should” does not match the reality of the stage, so we finally settle for “this should have aroused their interest, but…”

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The artist always represents both the world and himself. Shakespeare is the greatest magician of dramatic counterpoints; what he presents is not merely the simple rhythm of a single event, but the entirety of this event and its reflection, rendered at the same time, from different perspectives.

Schelling said that the world of planets is governed by rhythm, and that their movements are pure melody; in the world of comets, harmony rules.

Arthur Miller remarked that “A decisive factor in determining style is how one chooses and uses time in a play. The concentration of time destroys realism – its haste inevitably emphasizes an aspect of existence that is not perceivable in life, nor felt as an equivalent force.”

Hamlet’s hesitation in avenging his murdered father represents the Sphynx of modern drama.

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“Amidst all of the vulgar monstrosities that make English drama so absurd and barbaric up to this day and age, one can find, even more strangely, several sublime passages, worthy of the greatest genius.”

This statement was made by Voltaire. The play he referred to was Hamlet.

The audiences of the 17th century saw Hamlet as nothing more than a cruel wordsmith and a vengeful prince.

They never wondered about the reason of his hindering in murdering Claudius. As a matter of fact, there was no question on whether there was any hindrance at all.

Anyway, Hamlet was deemed a readymade character: the conventional Elizabethan “melancholic man”. Without a doubt, many of the first-time spectators of the new version of the old play believed that Shakespeare had managed to ruin a good tale of murders and vengeance by adding too many… words.

In the 18th century, when there was a growth in interest, Hamlet was still seen as an active prince who had to act according to his duty, which, when the time would come, was to be fulfilled.

The Elizabethan drama was built upon the vigour and beauty of words. We can assume that its simple uttering was a magnificent thing in itself, comparable to bel canto or to a pianist’s virtuosity in playing.

It was even believed that no actor, living or dead, could have been suitable for this part.

Shakespeare, of course, wanted to achieve “Art”; and he has several attempts in this regard: we can find something related to Hamlet in Romeo, or in Richard the Third, not to speak of “Melancholy” Jaques; and Hamlet wouldn’t be Hamlet were it not for his own “melancholy”.

Shakespeare specialists have begun to be aware of the hero’s complexity, assessing his indecisiveness and madness, be it taken upon or real.

The studies on the protagonist also become more and more subtle. Hamlet is seen as shy, or heedless and indolent, lonesome or misanthrope.

However, what started to become increasingly obvious was the fact that Hamlet hindered each and every action. This particular state would soon become the main focus of debates.
How important were the external factors impeding his acting on the Ghost’s orders? Why can Hamlet successfully play the part of the madman, the playwright and the actor, and still fail in doing the only thing that is asked of him?

Was he in any way held back by a moral code? Or was there an exceptional sensitivity, maybe even a neurosis? Or was it rather a reflexive and speculative mental disposition?

This type of questions were raised by more and more analysts. If there was someone drawing attention to the constancy in waiting for the right moment, another would interpret it as a sterile preoccupation with death and evil. If someone emphasized the virtues of a soldier fighting a war, another would see just a strange disposition stirred by a real or imagined madness. Oscar Wilde came to wonder whether Hamlet’s critics had truly gone mad or were simply acting that way?!

Hamlet is a name, an identity. His speeches are only words made up by a poet’s mind. Goethe wrote this regarding Hamlet: “A beautiful, pure and noble creature who lacks the strength of character to do that which is asked of a hero and crumbles under a burden he can neither carry, nor throw away. All of his duties are sacred to him, but the present one is far too great.” Should we question their reality? Or we might rather believe that they are as real as our own thoughts.

Who hasn’t felt “the proud man’s contumely”, “the whips and scorns of time”, “the spurns/ That patient merit of th'unworthy takes”, “the pangs of disprized love”? Hamlet’s thoughts and the images his fantasy produces are much more vivid than his real perceptions.

One can almost recognize the soul of a poet who was made to dream rather than to act, lost in the contemplation of the phantoms of his own creation, an artist who was made a prince by misfortune, who became vengeful because of bad luck, and who was destined by nature for genius and condemned by fate to madness and sorrow.

His contempt for life and all it brings, including himself, varied in intensity and leading at times to dreams of death, or a strange apathy – this is a state that inevitably opposes to any decisive action. The body is
motionless, the mind careless, or worse, and the answer can only be: *it isn’t worth it, it doesn’t matter, it isn’t right!*

And the action that is expected of Hamlet is an exceptional one!

It is dangerous, violent, hardly possible without implying risks.

We can see that Hamlet has an enormous reflexive activity and an equal aversion to deeds. His power to act is lost in the energy of thought. Maybe Hamlet was musing for us all.

Hamlet was an intellectual more than anything else. If we look at his destiny using the terms of reflexivity, we can see that we are in front of a defeated conscience, rather than an excessive sensibility. “… *Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.*”

A vivid imagination defeats energy through the great intensity it is absorbed by. Hamlet is not the master of his deeds – events are his masters. He cannot plan a murder; therefore, he will have to improvise one!

Shakespeare definitely did not want us to see Hamlet as a madman.

There are so many who live today in an unhappy, frustrated and haunted by uselessness… neurosis… According to Freud: “*a state in which the person is wrongfully and often painfully led, opposed or even defeated by the ‘unconscious’ of their mind – that part of the mind that had once belonged to the child and that still coexists with the adult’s mentality, out of which the latter emerged, and which raises to the surface.*” The result is an inner, mental conflict.

B. Brecht remarked that “*Young Hamlet has most inefficiently used his ability to reason. Confronted with the irrational, his reasoning becomes impractical. He tragically falls victim to the discrepancy between this type of reason and this type of action – leaving Denmark to the Normans.*” It is possible that Polonius, whom Hamlet considers to be a senile, rambling old man, was right in diagnosing Hamlet’s psychological disorder as a consequence of his disprized love for Ophelia, anyway a sexual-related reason.

But what if this *paralysis* of Hamlet’s isn’t due to physical or moral cowardice, but to a turmoil of reason, which can leave him more hesitating in searching the depths of his soul? An idea that also comes across as Hamlet’s:
“Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
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 turn awry
And lose the name of action.”

Hamlet’s world lives in an interrogative density. It is a world filled with tormenting, alarming questions that seem innocent at first, but that go beyond their context and toward the unfathomable mystery of the world.

It is better to have three quarters cowardice and a quarter of wisdom, than all four quarters of bravado and buffoonery. But when and where will Hamlet get rid of this cowardice? This is the problem; and it is not just his alone, but also ours: “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.”

William Butler Yeats wondered: “Why should we honour those who die on the battlefield? Can a man also have enormous courage by entering his own abyss?”

“... for to define true madness,/ What is't but to be nothing else but mad?”, as so naturally Polonius puts it.

We would rather believe Hamlet to be sick with thought than sick in the head. Perhaps he is himself the one who comes closest to the truth of this situation: “I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.”

And his sickness would go unnoticed in England – as the First Gravedigger says, “There the men are as mad as he.”

At a court he cannot be king of, Hamlet must be the Fool.

Hamlet’s madness is a riddle. How much of it is real and how much is made up? And what does it mean to be healthy or sick?

The fact that it is not as easy to play upon him as one would play upon a pipe further increases the impression of the reality of his mystery: “Why look you now how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass - and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?
Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.”

“Given the fact that our sleeping time is equal to our waking hours, our soul struggles, in each period, to show that the impressions of that moment are as true as possible. So that the period of time we say certain things exist is equal to that in which we say other things exist, and each and every time our affirmation is just as tempestuous. As such, isn’t it the same when we talk about sickness or madness – except for the fact that the period of time is not equal?” – Plato, in Parmenides.

Hamlet is a being whose conscience is focused on death.

It is interesting that many of the events in this play, maybe the majority of them, are only haphazard occurrences… The actors arrive and this makes the play possible – by chance! It is by chance that the only occasion Hamlet has to kill Claudius is when he is praying…

The death of Polonius also occurs incidentally, just as Hamlet meeting the pirates at sea and his return to Denmark. All of this leading to the duel, the greatest and deadliest of all these events.

Here is the first moment we are shown what Hamlet’s mind is like:

“O that this too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.”

It is surprising that he, the one who’s torn apart by so many questions, begins his part with an answer that leaves no place for doubt:

“GERTRUDE: If it be,
Why seems it so particular with thee?
HAMLET: Seems madam? nay it is, I know not seems.”

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were quickly called for.

“CLAUDIUS: Moreover that we much did long to see you,
The need we have to use you did provoke
Our hasty sending. Something have you heard
Of Hamlet's transformation - so call it,
Sith nor th'exterior nor the inward man
Resembles that it was.”

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The king suddenly has a gloomy premonition. We become the witnesses of a genuine spiritual insurrection.

But what if we let Hamlet’s problems aside, what type of man would he then be? The action shows him in three different stances: in the sorrow of grieving, under the sign of madness, and, after his return from England, decided to settle things with the king. States that are highly conflictual.

For a while, the actors come in handy. The imaginative prince finds comfort in their unreal world and in Aeneas’ noble music for Dido. Every time he thinks or talks, he is shown as a clairvoyant, a visionary and a prophet, for whom the outside world symbolizes thought.

Shakespeare unconditionally speaks to our inner sense; through this, the imagistic world of fantasy swiftly comes to life, and this creates an impression we do not know how to explain, as this is the cause for the illusion that everything takes place in front of our very eyes. However, if we look at Shakespeare’s plays closer, we can find that they have not as much action that can be recorded through our senses, but rather through our reason and spirituality.

The imaginative man prefers the unreal to reality. Hamlet always looks at him through the mirror of his conscience. It is not by chance that he tells the actors: "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 own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."

When he tells his mother: "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”, it is only his own disposition that calls for the image. It is not that Hamlet is self-conscious, but rather that he attempts to look at himself through different eyes, through his mind’s eyes, just as he is never satisfied with the truth of what he sees. Of course this kind of glass can hardly keep one from distorting their own truth.

This type of morbidly introspective characters cannot be honest with themselves even in the utmost solitude, and it is unlikely that they can find joy in the intimacy of love, as their egoism can be overly satisfied, if they are
loved, or deprived – if they love. They can find some comfort in the generosity of friendship. Their friends help them become confident, they can be themselves around them.

Although the play seems a long opportunity for Hamlet to express himself, the truth about him is only learnt from his friends…

Hamlet is a continuous story of disappointments, both with others and himself.

Ophelia talks about his qualities:

“Oh what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword.”

And, indeed, Hamlet had knowledge on the antiquity, on Greek mythology, laws, theatre, acting, music, hunting, the breeding of hawks, military strategy and the courtier’s life…

Misfortune does not change a character, it just shows its weaknesses or its strength. “The greatest torments man faces are born from the inevitable mismatches between ‘having to’ and ‘wanting to’, then between ‘wanting to’ and ‘doing’. ‘Having to’ is forever unsettling; the inability to do is terrible; permanently ‘wanting to’ is blissful, and, when one has a strong will, they can even come to terms with the inability to do. In Shakespeare’s plays – and for this he is unique – the idea of ‘wanting to’ and ‘having to’ strive for balance; they are both violently set against each other, but always in such a way that ‘wanting’ falls second. From the point of view of his character, man ‘has to’ act; he is confined to it, as he is meant for something great; as a human being, however, he ‘wants’ beyond any limits.” – A Collection of Critical Essays, Goethe.

It is true that man is also ridiculous when he tries to be something which he really isn’t, and Hamlet is in this way, if not tragically so.

When he takes Yorick’s skull in his hand, he sees more to it than anyone else, for whom it can only be a lifeless object. And having that he is so moved by the reality and the meaning of these earthly remains, his fantasy can roam freely: “… the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?”

Hamlet is a suffering soul, fallen prey to time’s wrath. All the wisdom his lively, lonely, torn apart mind can grasp is that Denmark is a prison, just
like all the world, the bright sky nothing but a terrible twirl filled with infectious stenches, earth is but a hollow rock, and man – the essence of dirt, no better than an animal if he doesn’t use his reason, and by using it he could only find the same thing. Nothing…

World and life are deceiving, various combinations of elements, or, more precisely, of a single element: earth, in the circuit of which there are the minerals and plants, the animals and people, in pantheist brotherhood.

When Rosencrantz wants to find out where Polonius’ corpse is, Hamlet replies: “Compounded it with dust whereto 'tis kin.”

Hamlet is the representative character of Weltenschmerz. Had he been able to understand himself, there would have been no spiritual tragedy, as it would have been lost in the tragedy of the action, and if he had been explained by anyone else, he would’ve only been a “case”.

Near the end of his life, Shakespeare came to believe in the uselessness of what men achieve on earth, in his and the earth’s perishability, and he considered that people are similar to the “stuff that dreams are made on.” In Hamlet’s words, “There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.”

As Nietzsche pointed out in The Birth of Tragedy, Hamlet is not a man who thinks too much, but one who thinks too well. Nietzsche’s most Shakespearean observation is made in pure Hamlet fashion: “That for which we find words is something already dead in our hearts. There is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking.” The rest is silence; speaking is disturbing, betraying, tormenting oneself or another.

Hamlet’s only rival in terms of vibration and comprehension might be Sir John Falstaff. Of course, Falstaff has also truly looked at the essence of things. Hamlet and Falstaff are, perhaps, the most charismatic of people; they could even embody the living personality, or “the invention of the human” (Harold Bloom, Shakespeare).

If Hamlet is, most likely, his own Falstaff, then he is a Falstaff who does not need a Prince Hal, just as he does not need Ophelia anymore, or even Horatio, as anything other than a survivor who can tell his story. Falstaff got
rid of Shakespeare, but we dare say that Shakespeare couldn’t get rid of Hamlet.

It is possible that Shakespeare was fonder of Falstaff, but it is certain that Hamlet was a more personal problem for the playwright. Oscar Wilde once said that Hamlet was to blame for the sadness of the world. Generally, speaking of Hamlet means that one has to accept the fact that every remark is as true as its opposite. We are genuinely stunned by this character whose every utterance changes him, and, yet, whose consistency of identity remains intact.

While Racine needed no more than 2000 words for writing his plays, Shakespeare needed 21000.

Death, embodied by a Ghost, causes a death inside Hamlet’s soul; his father’s life had brought him to this world, his father’s ghost conceives him once more in death. Life is just that, Yorick’s skull, sign and symbol for human destiny.

A mismatch between reality and Hamlet’s ideal about life seems to be a synthetic portrait of the humanists of Shakespeare’s time. They had seen the lie surrounding them, which stirred their rebellion, but they were not capable of making things right. Just like Hamlet, they were dreamers.

We should remember that it was that very age in which social utopias depicting ideal, justice-based societies, were developed.

This divorce between dream and reality caused their profound “Hamletian sadness”.

It is good that life does not last forever. It is good that everything passes. It is good that there is death. It is good that there is an ending. This is the only way one can play their part on this theatre’s stage.

No other mastermind of universal culture has so attentively observed the apparition of reason in the world, the apparition of intellect, of intelligence, therefore, that of the triumphant, unchained mind. Shakespeare has a genuine cult of the intellect. His heroes’ most significant trait is their total freedom of thought, of feeling, and of action.

Every human is encouraged to think of the immensity of this world, to try to envision the vast horizons of life, and to feel their strong kinship to all the people in the world.
We might even state that Hamlet is Shakespeare’s only character who could have written himself the play he acts in; moreover, we might dare say that Hamlet could’ve also written *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.

Therefore: the creation usurps the creator.

It is very likely that Shakespeare read Montaigne’s works, and nothing seems more Shakespearean than Montaigne’s wonderful essay, *On Experience*, which he wrote in 1588, when Shakespeare was finishing his first *Hamlet*.

In this essay, Montaigne wrote that we are all wind, but that the wind is wiser than us, because it makes noise and then leaves, without yearning for stability or durability, which are different from its nature.

As wise as the wind, Montaigne looks positively at our individuality, our dynamic self, which is at the same time changeable and surprisingly free.

Through the reading of this text, Montaigne becomes the precursor to Hamlet’s representation of reality, in itself and on himself.

Nietzsche, however, is the one who achieves the splendid quintessential Hamletian statement: that which we can speak of is already dead in our souls and there is always contempt in the act of speaking.

Having no more faith in language or in himself, Hamlet becomes a playwright of the self, greater than Saint Augustine, Dante, and even Montaigne – and this is the greatest of Shakespeare’s creations: our not only constantly changing, but also constantly creating self.

Shakespeare has allowed for something that is almost a fusion between Hamlet and himself – at least, from the actors’ arrival in act II-2, up to the “Mousetrap” in act III-3.

Determining the past, Hamlet’s history, could teach us about a great paradox: long before his father’s murder and his mother’s wedding, Hamlet had already proved himself a brilliant actor and director for himself – which he had arrived at because of his contempt for words, for what was already dead for him. The apocalyptic self-consciousness of this unique character could have led to dangerous actions worthy of a Macbeth – were it not for this vocation for the theatre.

Hamlet is only secondarily a courtier, a soldier and a learned man – he is primarily a royal playwright (which he is aware of)...
Perhaps, his mystery resides in this: “The play’s the thing.”

Hamlet came to this world to help it survive its own restlessness.

We can look for, and even find Shakespeare’s meanings, but never the meaning… the meaning of life.

But, of course, life is one thing and Shakespeare… another.