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SPRING 1954

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## HAMLET

BY KARL POLANYI

**A** BRIEF reminiscence at the outset will serve a two-fold purpose. It should reduce to the vanishing point the literary claims of this piece of amateur writing, while adding a note of authenticity to the author's reasons for putting off publication for almost a lifetime.

Nearly forty years ago I was serving as an officer in the old Austro-Hungarian Army. The Russian winter and the blackish steppe made me feel sick at heart. It happened that at the time my personal life had taken a turn towards darkness; daylight seemed bounded in a narrowing disk that grew dimmer and dimmer. At one time, I remember, the cold was so intense that when my horse stumbled and fell I was too apathetic to get out of the saddle. Fortunately—though I may not have thought so then—the gaunt stiff creature, a yellow Cossack mare that we had picked up, jerked herself onto her long legs and I was saved, for had she rolled over I might have been crushed to death. For companionship I had nothing but a volume of Shakespeare's plays; in my desolation I found myself reading and rereading one: "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark." Altogether, I must have read it through well over a score of times. My soul was numbed and fell under the spell of a recurrent daydream. I read my "Hamlet," and every word, phrase, and intonation of the hero's ravings came through to me, simple and clear.

For many years the memory of those bleak months haunted me. I could not rid myself of the idea that by some weird chance I had possessed myself of Hamlet's secret. I knew why he did not kill the King. I knew what it was he feared. I knew why he so swiftly ran Polonius through the body when he mistook him for the King, pretending he was only after a rat. I knew

what his confused words to Ophelia meant. But even while I still felt I knew, I was already fast forgetting. My days were clearing up and, as light broke in, knowledge passed into shadowy recollection. This, in its turn, faded into a mere intellectual understanding. I was now happy again and could only faintly remember what once had formed part of my being: Hamlet's inhuman sufferings.

Yet something in me insisted that my theories on Hamlet's indecision and forced antics were not merely the morbid offspring of my late malady. I saw proof of this in my excessive reaction to the opinions of the great A. C. Bradley, whose insights into Hamlet's character, as I chanced to come across them, struck me by their resemblance to my own. But Bradley, who was on the right track, had stopped just short of the solution. By a slight inconsistency, he failed to recognize the obvious.

Hamlet's inaction, so he thought, was to be explained by the influence of a profound melancholy. **Hamlet is shocked by his mother's gross sensuality into utter disgust of life.** It is in this state that the revelation of his father's murder and the command of revenge reach him. His mind is poisoned and paralyzed, hence his endless procrastinations. The other inner obstacles to action—his moral sensibility, intellectual genius, temperamental instability—are either the causes or the effects of this pervasive melancholy. It alone accounts for the course of the play, together with the periods of normal behavior during which his "healthy impulses," remnants of a virile personality, break through.

In this picture I recognized my Hamlet. At the same time I knew that Bradley had not penetrated the twin secret of Hamlet the person and "Hamlet" the play. For the key, which I firmly believed I possessed, had to fit both locks. At the heart of the matter, to be sure, there is the inaction which the hero can neither justify nor account for; but there is also the enigma of how so exciting a show could ever have been staged about inaction. ~~However,~~ let me try to make myself clearer.

At first glance, Hamlet's melancholy explains both his dila-

tory behavior and his lack of comprehension of himself. In his utter dejection he is averse to any kind of action. He indulges in mechanical puns, in trivial backchat, repeating sometimes the speaker's words without irony or wit, like a man too benumbed to hear what he himself is saying. Yet, this selfsame emotionally shocked and mentally absent person, as the critic Edward Dowden remarked, "suddenly conceives of the possibility of unmasking the King's guilt on the accidental arrival of the players, and proceeds without delay to put the matter to the test, suddenly overwhelms Ophelia with his reproaches of womanhood, suddenly stabs the eavesdropper behind the arras, suddenly, as if under some irresistible inspiration, sends his companions on shipboard to their deaths, suddenly boards the pirates, suddenly grapples with Laertes in the grave, suddenly does execution on the guilty King, plucks the poison from Horatio's hands, and gives his dying voice to a successor to the throne." But why then do those "healthy impulses" arise so frequently as to make Hamlet into a person of almost terrible ruthlessness, yet prevent him from doing the deed which he has sworn to the spirit of his father to do? Having caused without remorse the deaths of at least four persons in the King's entourage, why does he still seem to have come no nearer to the performance of his supreme duty? Why does the "veil of melancholy" never lift when he has an opportunity to take his revenge on the King? The spectators must feel that this is no mere coincidence, otherwise they would lose interest. There must be some hidden cause for Hamlet's reluctance to perform the required act, a reason which Hamlet himself cannot fathom, and which, maybe, only his death will reveal. The audience remains expectant.

On looking closer, it struck me that Hamlet often does one thing instead of another. His spurts of action are not mere freaks of a temperament that alternates between feverish exploits and slothful lethargy. He not only refrains from slaughtering the King in the prayer scene, but immediately afterwards slays Polonius, mistaking him for the King and coldbloodedly shouting "a rat." Yet he cannot be too melancholy to make a

thrust at the King, but sufficiently healthy to stab Polonius; his "healthy impulses" cannot intervene too late to make him act rightly, yet in time to make him act wrongly. ~~For an~~ ebbing of will power should not prevent a man from pressing for action in one way, while leaving him uninhibited to act eagerly in another. Eventually, Hamlet, having made no preparations to destroy the King, kills him on the instant. He thus performs with zest a series of actions except the one required of him, and then unexpectedly does the deed without any sign of reluctance. The mysterious delay in killing the King still stares us in the face.

Bradley's solution missed the mark by a hair's breadth. He listed instances of Hamlet's proneness to action and added that he acts in these cases since it is not *the* one hateful action on which his morbid self-feeling had centered. Bradley meant, of course, the revenge on Claudius. Unfortunately, he did not follow up the clue.

The simple truth is that Hamlet does not kill his uncle because by force of circumstances and by reason of his character his aversion to living has become focused on this "one hateful action." He is unable to decide to live. He can exist only as long as he is not forced to resolve to do so. If challenged to choose between life and death, he would be undone, since he cannot deliberately choose life. This, in terms of human existence, is the purport of Hamlet's melancholy.

We should not take Hamlet's professions of wanting to die literally; they are no more than the rhetoric of an ambiguous mood. Oh no, he does not wish to die; he merely hates to live. A hero who stubbornly insisted on dying would be insupportable. There would be no conflict to follow, no play to watch, ~~for~~ there would be no one to obstruct him in having his way. Hamlet's elaborations on the theme "I wish I were dead" mean no more than that he would refuse to settle down to the job of living, should he perchance be forced to make such a choice. But why should he alone of all living creatures be compelled to do so? ~~Most of us never have to make a decision to live, and yet we go on living as long as we can. Hamlet, too, is~~

*The rest of us need not decide*

*AV*

*because*

*since*

prepared to defend his life, and maybe all the more bravely because he does not set it at a pin's fee.

Here, I felt, lay the roots of the delay.

Hamlet has turned away from life, but it is only the appearance of the Ghost that starts the tragedy. He merely wishes to withdraw from the Court and retire to Wittenberg, though at his mother's entreaties (and perhaps for Ophelia's sake) he has postponed his departure, when his father's disembodied spirit appears on the battlements of Elsinore and orders him to kill the King. Events themselves are pushing him towards a decision. To obey his father's behest would involve all that living involves. He is to become King, perhaps with Ophelia for his Queen, the princely ruler of the Court of Elsinore, a radiant sun amongst a host of Rosencrantzes and Guildensterns. *He* Hamlet knows in his bones that he will never comply. His refusal to set the world aright springs from his dread of becoming part of a world he has learned to detest with all his being. The Ghost has uttered his death sentence. He will perish before he fulfils that injunction and knows it. But in the humiliating interim he will be like the rest of us, stretching out the number of his days.

*tj* The killing of the King, O cursed spite, now stands for compulsion to live. He cannot perform this action on which his morbid self-feeling centers, not as a physical act of execution—that is indifferent—but as a deed of filial duty enjoined upon him by his father's fearful command, as a step involving him in a fatal sequence of obligations, as a gesture of obeisance that will plunge him into the maelstrom of life. Hamlet could instantly kill the King as it were by accident, off the record, under cover of mistaken identity, through a disowned thrust, by means of any emphatically unsymbolic act; or, at the opposite end, when he himself was doomed to die, solemnly assured of his impending departure. Never, never as a deliberate act that would commit him to live. This, in a sense, is Hamlet's most personal secret.

Actually, he attempts both: to do it, pretending it to be unintentional, and to do it, when this can no more affect his own

fate. He stabs Polonius in a trice, mistaking him for his better, while denying in the very act any real purpose. And, even more decisively at the end, when poisoned by Laertes' foil, he almost exultantly repeats his "I am dead," and the skeptical dreamer turns in a twinkling into Voltaire's butcher boy, whose slaughterings are no more than mechanical acts committing him to nothing, since he, Hamlet, is now securely dead.

I suspect that in my malady Hamlet's pretended madness was for me the vortex of attraction. I must have sensed that those antics would eventually prove the vehicle of his self-destruction.

However genuine at first, Hamlet's excited doings after the encounter with the Ghost soon turn into a mere feint of his melancholy. He is moving away with all his being from the Court, from convention, from all that *seems*, when fate arrests his flight and hurls him back into the center of damnation. The apparition all but makes him lose his senses. But as the fit wears off—and he recovers quickly—a definite concern overmasters him and henceforth determines the use he will make of the discovery of his bent for "seeming." That new anxiety springs from the fear of being pushed to action against his will. He turns secretive in order to remain free. This is no mere act of political caution. Of that there is no need; by confiding the secret of his "antic disposition" to his friends he proves that he trusts them implicitly. But should they as much as suspect what passed between him and the Ghost, the dread decision could not be deferred. Only as long as he alone—and later maybe Horatio, his alter ego—knows of the awful revelation is he, Hamlet, safe. In delaying the decision, Hamlet is fighting for his life. The feigned madness ~~is~~ his most personal response to an unexpected situation. Unhinged by horror and fear, Hamlet, the passionate lover of sincerity, has espoused insincerity as his weapon and armor. The mechanism of the plot and the rhythm of the tragedy is set by this fact.

It has been noted that towards the end of the play Hamlet's gloom lifts and the assumed derangement fades away. For some unaccountable reason—one would rather expect the op-



positic—he now appears ~~more~~ placid and composed. This anticlimax is one of the subtle beauties of the play. Yet, could it be otherwise? Hamlet, who imagined that he wished to die, is now ready for death. He makes no preparations to kill the King and yet appears certain that the hour of revenge is approaching. Again, how could it be otherwise? He now welcomes death, no longer from a confusion of moods, ~~which~~ <sup>that</sup> denies the meaning of life, but from a recognition of that meaning. When he strikes down the King, he proclaims himself "dead," and death comes to him when he is ripe for it. The apparent accidents that control the course of the play are revealed as no more than a semblance; its progress is as plain as Calvary. Indeed, the figure of Hamlet has been interpreted as that of a saint. No worse misunderstanding is possible. What we are witnessing is tragedy, the story of guilt and expiation. And it is his put-on madness, that self-elected device of hovering between just revenge and unjustifiable evasion, that involves him deeper and deeper in guilt.

t/  
 "dumb scene"  
 Hamlet with a grim sense of humor stages his antics with precision. The "antic scene" sends the crying Ophelia straight into the arms of her father; he rushes with his discovery ~~post-~~ <sup>haste</sup> to the King, who on the spot decides to set a trap with Ophelia herself as the bait. Hamlet now excels in feats of romantic irony. He sets the "lawful espials" a riddle: what is the cause of his own supposed madness? He makes each guess true to character. Polonius, the pompous vacuity, displays all the self-assurance of his wordy cynicism: Hamlet thwarted in seducing Ophelia has gone mad. The Queen, nearer the truth, is made to feel the guilt of her overhasty marriage. Claudius alone is on a par with the challenger and refuses to be duped by his foiled lover's frenzies. He sends for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, arranges for the trap, orders Hamlet to be put under guard, dispatches him to England, sets Laertes on his trail, and concocts the murder plot. Except for Claudius, they are so many puppets in the hands of Hamlet. He enjoys his cruel superiority: the chastisement of those fawning gigglers,

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, even the anguish of the King caused by Hamlet's ominous conversational flashes. Eventually, Hamlet, playing the madman, stages a play within the play, the effects of which on the King send him into transports of delight. And yet, all the time his helpless self is more and more entangled in guilt. In spite of his glamorous antics he knows, in his most sensitive heart, that he has lost his way.

Hamlet's tragedy is enmeshed in his love for Ophelia, whom he has sacrificed. "I loved Ophelia," he cries at her grave when suddenly he is faced by the truth. It is the turning point of Hamlet's personal drama. Up to that time external events have failed to penetrate the shroud of his melancholy; in his isolation he has hardly known himself. Now Laertes' high-pitched sorrow strikes his ear. In a flash of inhuman pain light breaks through to him. This is his horrible awakening:

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? *This is I,*  
Hamlet the Dane.

His love for Ophelia is pure and ardent. Hamlet is driven to the point of platonic frenzy by his mother's sexual debasement, which has tarred Ophelia with the same brush. But not even his mother is beyond redemption, terribly though she has sinned; how much less so the innocent Ophelia who, he must feel, is merely a victim of his own delusions. His love for her lies like a chasm between him and the others. He knows the putrid atmosphere of the Court. He knows his Laertes, the youthful lecher, who is depraving his own sister's mind. He knows his smutty Polonius, who instills vile suspicions into her confiding soul. He knows his Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose horizon is bounded by lasciviousness. He knows his King and Queen, who set their hopes on Ophelia's physical charms to seduce him to become untrue to his mission. He abhors them for their calumny of all that is most truly noble. Not one but

has debased Ophelia's love for him and his love for her into a political counter, speculating on what there is of frailty in either.

He detests and despises them, yet of all men he, Hamlet, has the least right to do so. For who first conceived the idea of using Ophelia's pure feelings for political ends? Who fooled her in the garb of the distracted lover, so grossly conventional in his disordered attire, that the mere recounting of the scene called forth from the Prime Minister a hackneyed "Mad for thy love"? Who fed Polonius' suspicions, harping on his daughter at every turn of their ambiguous dialogue? Who confirmed these aspersions in the nunnery scene by his insults? Who indeed heaped these awful deeds on an innocent victim? Who but he, Hamlet the Dane!

At every turn of the screw Hamlet's sufferings feed on the effects of his own actions. Does he not slander Ophelia to her own father, tainting himself with the virus he loathes, dragging her through the mire of Court intrigue, prompting the King to make her a decoy in the eavesdropping scene, in which he takes unjust revenge on Ophelia for playing the very role he himself had devised for her? Yet it is in this scene that she is most true to him. Hamlet arraigns her for prostituting herself, a worthy ally of his debauched mother, while all the time he knows only too well that he alone is to blame; for even what seems to bear out his accusations is in truth of his own doing, and no better than a crime against this pure and beloved child against whom he is bearing false witness.

1 d  
Ophelia has been promised by the Queen that she shall marry Prince Hamlet if she restores him to his normal self. Beauty and honor, love and marriage, are for once in concord. She loves Hamlet and knows not of the danger that threatens him. He never confides his burden to her. Her task, she is told by his own mother, is to charm him back to life and happiness, to exorcise the demons that are darkening his spirit. What role could be more appropriate to her selfless devotion?

In the presence of her own father and of the King himself, the Queen says to Ophelia:

And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish  
 That your good beauties be the happy cause  
 Of Hamlet's wildness; so shall I hope your virtues  
 Will bring him to his wonted way again,  
 To both your honors.

To which Ophelia replies:

Madam, I wish it may.

And later, at Ophelia's grave, the Queen laments, ignorant of Hamlet's presence:

I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife;  
 I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,  
 And not have strew'd thy grave.

In the nunnery scene Ophelia, who knows nothing, is met by Hamlet, who knows everything. He winces at the thought that Ophelia has ~~thus~~ been "loosed" to tempt him from the allegiance to his dead father and sway him from the course of honor and honesty. His words are as much to the point as they are unjust to Ophelia:

*Hamlet:* Ha, ha! are you honest?

*Ophelia:* My lord?

*Hamlet:* Are you fair?

*Ophelia:* What means your lordship?

*Hamlet:* That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty.

*Ophelia:* Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?

*Hamlet:* Ay, truly; for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness: this was sometime a paradox, but now the time gives it proof.

Hamlet knows that his turning back from the path of duty for Ophelia's sake would dishonor them both. True, resentful at the role cast for Ophelia, and desirous of revenge for Polonius' and Laertes' innuendoes, he gives an insane twist to his words. On the matter itself, he is clear and concise. If Ophelia

(who is offering to return his tokens) were to try to make him marry her, she would be depraving him; yet should she attempt to follow him in the path of honor, she would have to divest herself of the power of beauty, instead of tempting him by her charms. She should go to a nunnery—also slang for brothel—that is where she belongs. Has she not given proof of it by offering herself in the treacherous presence of an adulterous murderer and a parental bawd?

Yet all that is of Hamlet's doing. Presently he will insult her in front of the Court and use her as a smoke screen in his hunt for the murderer. Eventually, he will kill her father, whom she adores. By the time Ophelia drowns herself, Hamlet has deserved more than one death. Within, he must have died a hundred.

But why does the mere delaying of revenge, <sup>or, maybe,</sup> the quest for certainty, for a public proof of the King's guilt, involve him in such monstrous deeds? The answer is clear (and the producer should convey it to the audience): the use to which he puts his antic disposition is the accursed root of all the evils that befall. Born of hatred of life and a wish to put off the doing of his filial duty, it breeds guilt. It tempts him into employing not only his enemies but even his friends as unconscious tools; it traps him into evasions and elevates insincerity to a noble obligation. Inevitably, it confuses him and makes him a riddle unto himself.

But after that public confession of his love for Ophelia, he plays the fool no more. He is preparing for the end. There is but a short "interim" before the King must learn of the death of his agents in England. Hamlet's composure in this last part of the play is of supreme beauty. Reconciled to his own death he need no longer hesitate to kill the King. He now utters no wish to die; this shows the difference between the Hamlet of the first and the last act. Then he only imagined that he longed for death and made it his favorite theme; now he is longing to die and keeps silent. The readiness is all. It is the King whose hours are numbered.

9  
or maybe

This

Thus far the play seems to have no other subject than the refusal to live. But that precisely is why its theatrical success is an enigma. Longing for death is the only passion that is undramatic. And yet "Hamlet," if anything, is a good play. Where should we look for an answer?

Everybody knows the history of the purloined letter which was left in the rack in full view where one would least think of searching for it. So it is here. The very words and the scene that resolve the puzzle are almost too patent to hold a secret. I still remember the day, I was then a young man, when it first struck me:

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. . . .

Much has been written about this monologue. Some of it is amazing. "In this soliloquy," Bradley said, "Hamlet is not thinking of the duty laid upon him at all. He is debating the question of suicide." Hamlet, he thought, had by this time forgotten his sacred promise. "What can be more significant than the fact that he is sunk in these reflections [on suicide] on the very day which is to determine for him the truthfulness of the Ghost?" Bradley, like some others before him, had come to the conclusion that the great soliloquy was of no dramatic importance.

Millions of people have listened to those lines and have not felt so. Nor have the hosts of actors who have spoken them. They have been convinced that the very heart of the play is throbbing there.

They have not been mistaken. Piece the parallelism together, and those five lines give away the mechanism of "Hamlet," the play. "To be or not to be; that is the question." A clear-cut alternative stated by the hero at a moment of high dramatic tension. Consequently, the hero must be weighing

the alternative on which the play hinges: whether to kill the King or not?

Yet nothing could seem more paradoxical than the way in which Hamlet rephrases the question. What is nobler in the mind, "to be" and "suffer," or "not to be" and "take arms"? Clearly, it ought to run the other way. Yet the implications of the paradox are plain. Hamlet can think of life only in terms of passivity, even if the suffering of life and its duties happens to involve a number of so-called actions, such as killing the King, marrying Ophelia, ruling the country, and so on. For the one and only true action falls under the heading "not to be." One could perform it with a bare bodkin, were it not that

. . . 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 pith and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry  
And lose the name of action.

With the thought of action the soliloquy opens and ends. Yet it deals solely with suicide. In this apparent confusion we have the dramatic truth of the play. The alternative is killing the King or killing himself.

All through the play the inner and the outer scene of action run parallel and are coördinated by Hamlet's visionary gifts. He sees his father's figure "in his mind's eye" even before he is told of the appearance of the Ghost; he doubts "some foul play" before the Ghost reveals it to him; his prophetic soul suspects his uncle's guilt; he foresees Ophelia's report to her father; he is conscious of the eavesdroppers in the nunnery scene; he is on the track of the spying courtiers; he guesses their mission; he justly appraises the purpose of the fencing match; he correctly instructs the players, and with the sole exception of Polonius behind the arras, whom he mistakes for the King, he is as a person endowed with second sight.

Until the very end his premonitions are translated into actuality:

*Hamlet:* . . . I shall win at the odds. But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter.

*Horatio:* Nay, good my lord,—

*Hamlet:* It is but foolery; but it is such a kind of gain giving as would perhaps trouble a woman.

*Horatio:* If your mind dislike anything, obey it; I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit.

*Hamlet:* Not a whit, we defy augury; there's a 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 knows aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?

Hamlet parts willingly from life; he commits suicide, not in despair, but in fulfilment. His readiness to die is readiness to accept life in its true meaning. He is murdered and the certainty of his own death releases him to do his duty. The inner <sup>ward</sup> stage and the outward stage reflect each other to the end.

As in "Lear," "Othello," or "Macbeth," by the end of the first act the tragedy is set. Lear in his vanity and folly has thrown himself on the generosity of his heartless daughters; in the rest of the play he fulfils his fate. The Moor's conquest of Desdemona is a triumph of spirit over disparity of age and race, which will never stand the test of brute passion; Othello goes to his doom. In "Macbeth" the witches draw the circle of tragedy around the hero and his uxorious ambitions; the end follows as by geometrical necessity. So in "Hamlet": the opening act contains the tragedy *in nuce*. When his father's command reaches him, Hamlet's fate is sealed. Before the curtain rises on the second act, it has been decreed that Hamlet, playing the madman, will lose his life while delaying action.

We need not go far to understand why "Hamlet" is popular. The hero's innermost conflict, his self-defeating shadow play on the confines of life and death, is translated into external events, into sharply accentuated drama. The play is about suicide in terms of killing an enemy; it is about endless delay in terms of incessant action.

The plot is extremely clever. But for his simulated madness,



Hamlet could never have put off his decision without a clash with his friends and supporters. His own inner conflict thus dragged to light would have been artistically fatal. A Hamlet who refused to obey the behest of the Ghost or hesitated to act when pressed by devoted friends would lose our sympathy, just as he would jeopardize our admiration if he were defeated in his quest for revenge by external obstacles. Throughout, Hamlet himself is the only obstacle both to the decision to take revenge and to the carrying out of that decision. Thus is utmost universality reached in terms of inner life, while the event is spelt out on the stage in blood, fire, and brimstone.

Personally, in the blind alley of a mood that almost lost me my life, I may or may not have glimpsed a facet of that which moved the poet. ~~As to his finished work, the artist~~ needs no interpreter; the audience comprehends.

"Hamlet" is about the human condition. We all live, insofar as we refuse to die. But we are not resolved to live in all the essential respects in which life invites us. We are postponing happiness, because we hesitate to commit ourselves to live. This is what makes Hamlet's delay so symbolic. Life is man's missed opportunity. Yet in the end our beloved hero retrieves some of life's fulfilment. The curtain leaves us not only reconciled, but with an unaccountable sense of gratitude towards him, as if his sufferings had not been quite in vain.

⑧      *Polanyi*      *RR#3*      *Reviewing*  
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what his confused words to Ophelia meant. But even while I still felt I knew, I was already fast forgetting. My days were clearing up and, as light broke in, knowledge passed into shadowy recollection. This, in its turn, faded into a mere intellectual understanding. I was now happy again and could only faintly remember what once had formed part of my being: Hamlet's inhuman sufferings.

Yet something in me insisted that my theories on Hamlet's indecision and forced antics were not merely the morbid offspring of my late malady. I saw proof of this in my excessive reaction to the opinions of the great A. C. Bradley, whose insights into Hamlet's character, as I chanced to come across them, struck me by their resemblance to my own. But Bradley, who was on the right track, had stopped just short of the solution. By a slight inconsistency, he failed to recognize the obvious.

Hamlet's inaction, so he thought, was to be explained by the influence of a profound melancholy. Hamlet is shocked by his mother's gross sensuality into utter disgust of life. It is in this state that the revelation of his father's murder and the command of revenge reach him. His mind is poisoned and paralyzed, hence his endless procrastinations. The other inner obstacles to action—his moral sensibility, intellectual genius, temperamental instability—are either the causes or the effects of this pervasive melancholy. It alone accounts for the course of the play, together with the periods of normal behavior during which his "healthy impulses," remnants of a virile personality, break through.

In this picture I recognized my Hamlet. At the same time I knew that Bradley had not penetrated the twin secret of Hamlet the person and "Hamlet" the play. For the key, which I firmly believed I possessed, had to fit both locks. At the heart of the matter, to be sure, there is the inaction which the hero can neither justify nor account for; but there is also the enigma of how so exciting a show could ever have been staged about inaction. However, let me try to make myself clearer.

At first glance, Hamlet's melancholy explains both his dila-

tory behavior and his lack of comprehension of himself. In his utter dejection he is averse to any kind of action. He indulges in mechanical puns, in trivial backchat, repeating sometimes the speaker's words without irony or wit, like a man too benumbed to hear what he himself is saying. Yet, this selfsame emotionally shocked and mentally absent person, as the critic Edward Dowden remarked, "suddenly conceives of the possibility of unmasking the King's guilt on the accidental arrival of the players, and proceeds without delay to put the matter to the test, suddenly overwhelms Ophelia with his reproaches of womanhood, suddenly stabs the eavesdropper behind the arras, suddenly, as if under some irresistible inspiration, sends his companions on shipboard to their deaths, suddenly boards the pirates, suddenly grapples with Laertes in the grave, suddenly does execution on the guilty King, plucks the poison from Horatio's hands, and gives his dying voice to a successor to the throne." But why then do those "healthy impulses" arise so frequently as to make Hamlet into a person of almost terrible ruthlessness, yet prevent him from doing the deed which he has sworn to the spirit of his father to do? Having caused without remorse the deaths of at least four persons in the King's entourage, why does he still seem to have come no nearer to the performance of his supreme duty? Why does the "veil of melancholy" never lift when he has an opportunity to take his revenge on the King? The spectators must feel that this is no mere coincidence, otherwise they would lose interest. There must be some hidden cause for Hamlet's reluctance to perform the required act, a reason which Hamlet himself cannot fathom, and which, maybe, only his death will reveal. The audience remains expectant.

On looking closer, it struck me that Hamlet often does one thing instead of another. His spurts of action are not mere freaks of a temperament that alternates between feverish exploits and slothful lethargy. He not only refrains from slaughtering the King in the prayer scene, but immediately afterwards slays Polonius, mistaking him for the King and coldbloodedly shouting "a rat." Yet he cannot be too melancholy to make a

thrust at the King, but sufficiently healthy to stab Polonius; his "healthy impulses" cannot intervene too late to make him act rightly, yet in time to make him act wrongly. For an ebbing of will power should not prevent a man from pressing for action in one way, while leaving him uninhibited to act eagerly in another. Eventually, Hamlet, having made no preparations to destroy the King, kills him on the instant. He thus performs with zest a series of actions except the one required of him, and then unexpectedly does the deed without any sign of reluctance. The mysterious delay in killing the King still stares us in the face.

Bradley's solution missed the mark by a hair's breadth. He listed instances of Hamlet's proneness to action and added that he acts in these cases since it is not *the* one hateful action on which his morbid self-feeling had centered. Bradley meant, of course, the revenge on Claudius. Unfortunately, he did not follow up the clue.

The simple truth is that Hamlet does not kill his uncle because by force of circumstances and by reason of his character his aversion to living has become focused on this "one hateful action." He is unable to decide to live. He can exist only as long as he is not forced to resolve to do so. If challenged to choose between life and death, he would be undone, since he cannot deliberately choose life. This, in terms of human existence, is the purport of Hamlet's melancholy.

We should not take Hamlet's professions of wanting to die literally; they are no more than the rhetoric of an ambiguous mood. Oh no, he does not wish to die; he merely hates to live. A hero who stubbornly insisted on dying would be insupportable. There would be no conflict to follow, no play to watch, for there would be no one to obstruct him in having his way. Hamlet's elaborations on the theme "I wish I were dead" mean no more than that he would refuse to settle down to the job of living, should he perchance be forced to make such a choice. But why should he alone of all living creatures be compelled to do so? Most of us never have to make a decision to live, and yet we go on living as long as we can. Hamlet, too, is

prepared to defend his life, and maybe all the more bravely because he does not set it at a pin's fee.

Here, I felt, lay the roots of the delay.

Hamlet has turned away from life, but it is only the appearance of the Ghost that starts the tragedy. He merely wishes to withdraw from the Court and retire to Wittenberg, though at his mother's entreaties (and perhaps for Ophelia's sake) he has postponed his departure, when his father's disembodied spirit appears on the battlements of Elsinore and orders him to kill the King. Events themselves are pushing him towards a decision. To obey his father's behest would involve all that living involves. He is to become King, perhaps with Ophelia for his Queen, the princely ruler of the Court of Elsinore, a radiant sun amongst a host of Rosencranzes and Guildensterns. Hamlet knows in his bones that he will never comply. His refusal to set the world aright springs from his dread of becoming part of a world he has learned to detest with all his being. The Ghost has uttered his death sentence. He will perish before he fulfils that injunction and knows it. But in the humiliating interim he will be like the rest of us, stretching out the number of his days.

The killing of the King, O cursed spite, now stands for compulsion to live. He cannot perform this action on which his morbid self-feeling centers, not as a physical act of execution—that is indifferent—but as a deed of filial duty enjoined upon him by his father's fearful command, as a step involving him in a fatal sequence of obligations, as a gesture of obeisance that will plunge him into the maelstrom of life. Hamlet could instantly kill the King as it were by accident, off the record, under cover of mistaken identity, through a disowned thrust, by means of any emphatically unsymbolic act; or, at the opposite end, when he himself was doomed to die, solemnly assured of his impending departure. Never, never as a deliberate act that would commit him to live. This, in a sense, is Hamlet's most personal secret.

Actually, he attempts both: to do it, pretending it to be unintentional, and to do it, when this can no more affect his own

fate. He stabs Polonius in a trice, mistaking him for his better, while denying in the very act any real purpose. And, even more decisively at the end, when poisoned by Laertes' foil, he almost exultantly repeats his "I am dead," and the skeptical dreamer turns in a twinkling into Voltaire's butcher boy, whose slaughterings are no more than mechanical acts committing him to nothing, since he, Hamlet, is now securely dead.

I suspect that in my malady Hamlet's pretended madness was for me the vortex of attraction. I must have sensed that those antics would eventually prove the vehicle of his self-destruction.

However genuine at first, Hamlet's excited doings after the encounter with the Ghost soon turn into a mere feint of his melancholy. He is moving away with all his being from the Court, from convention, from all that *seems*, when fate arrests his flight and hurls him back into the center of damnation. The apparition all but makes him lose his senses. But as the fit wears off—and he recovers quickly—a definite concern overmasters him and henceforth determines the use he will make of the discovery of his bent for "seeming." That new anxiety springs from the fear of being pushed to action against his will. He turns secretive in order to remain free. This is no mere act of political caution. Of that there is no need; by confiding the secret of his "antic disposition" to his friends he proves that he trusts them implicitly. But should they as much as suspect what passed between him and the Ghost, the dread decision could not be deferred. Only as long as he alone—and later maybe Horatio, his alter ego—knows of the awful revelation is he, Hamlet, safe. In delaying the decision, Hamlet is fighting for his life. The feigned madness is his most personal response to an unexpected situation. Unhinged by horror and fear, Hamlet, the passionate lover of sincerity, has espoused insincerity as his weapon and armor. The mechanism of the plot and the rhythm of the tragedy is set by this fact.

It has been noted that towards the end of the play Hamlet's gloom lifts and the assumed derangement fades away. For some unaccountable reason—one would rather expect the op-

posite—he now appears more placid and composed. This anticlimax is one of the subtle beauties of the play. Yet, could it be otherwise? Hamlet, who imagined that he wished to die, is now ready for death. He makes no preparations to kill the King and yet appears certain that the hour of revenge is approaching. Again, how could it be otherwise? He now welcomes death, no longer from a confusion of moods which denies the meaning of life, but from a recognition of that meaning. When he strikes down the King, he proclaims himself “dead,” and death comes to him when he is ripe for it. The apparent accidents that control the course of the play are revealed as no more than a semblance; its progress is as plain as Calvary. Indeed, the figure of Hamlet has been interpreted as that of a saint. No worse misunderstanding is possible. What we are witnessing is tragedy, the story of guilt and expiation. And it is his put-on madness, that self-elected device of hovering between just revenge and unjustifiable evasion, that involves him deeper and deeper in guilt.

t Hamlet with a grim sense of humor stages his antics with precision. The “antic scene” sends the crying Ophelia straight into the arms of her father; he rushes with his discovery post-haste to the King, who on the spot decides to set a trap with Ophelia herself as the bait. Hamlet now excels in feats of romantic irony. He sets the “lawful espials” a riddle: what is the cause of his own supposed madness? He makes each guess true to character. Polonius, the pompous vacuity, displays all the self-assurance of his wordy cynicism: Hamlet thwarted in seducing Ophelia has gone mad. The Queen, nearer the truth, is made to feel the guilt of her overhasty marriage. Claudius alone is on a par with the challenger and refuses to be duped by his foiled lover’s frenzies. He sends for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, arranges for the trap, orders Hamlet to be put under guard, dispatches him to England, sets Laertes on his trail, and concocts the murder plot. Except for Claudius, they are so many puppets in the hands of Hamlet. He enjoys his cruel superiority: the chastisement of those fawning gigglers,



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, even the anguish of the King caused by Hamlet's ominous conversational flashes. Eventually, Hamlet, playing the madman, stages a play within the play, the effects of which on the King send him into transports of delight. And yet, all the time his helpless self is more and more entangled in guilt. In spite of his glamorous antics he knows, in his most sensitive heart, that he has lost his way.

Hamlet's tragedy is enmeshed in his love for Ophelia, whom he has sacrificed. "I loved Ophelia," he cries at her grave when suddenly he is faced by the truth. It is the turning point of Hamlet's personal drama. Up to that time external events have failed to penetrate the shroud of his melancholy; in his isolation he has hardly known himself. Now Laertes' high-pitched sorrow strikes his ear. In a flash of inhuman pain light breaks through to him. This is his horrible awakening:

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? *This is I,*  
Hamlet the Dane.

His love for Ophelia is pure and ardent. Hamlet is driven to the point of platonic frenzy by his mother's sexual debasement, which has tarred Ophelia with the same brush. But not even his mother is beyond redemption, terribly though she has sinned; how much less so the innocent Ophelia who, he must feel, is merely a victim of his own delusions. His love for her lies like a chasm between him and the others. He knows the putrid atmosphere of the Court. He knows his Laertes, the youthful lecher, who is depraving his own sister's mind. He knows his smutty Polonius, who instills vile suspicions into her confiding soul. He knows his Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose horizon is bounded by lasciviousness. He knows his King and Queen, who set their hopes on Ophelia's physical charms to seduce him to become untrue to his mission. He abhors them for their calumny of all that is most truly noble. Not one but

has debased Ophelia's love for him and his love for her into a political counter, speculating on what there is of frailty in either.

He detests and despises them, yet of all men he, Hamlet, has the least right to do so. For who first conceived the idea of using Ophelia's pure feelings for political ends? Who fooled her in the garb of the distracted lover, so grossly conventional in his disordered attire, that the mere recounting of the scene called forth from the Prime Minister a hackneyed "Mad for thy love"? Who fed Polonius' suspicions, harping on his daughter at every turn of their ambiguous dialogue? Who confirmed these aspersions in the nunnery scene by his insults? Who indeed heaped these awful deeds on an innocent victim? Who but he, Hamlet the Dane?

At every turn of the screw Hamlet's sufferings feed on the effects of his own actions. Does he not slander Ophelia to her own father, tainting himself with the virus he loathes, dragging her through the mire of Court intrigue, prompting the King to make her a decoy in the eavesdropping scene, in which he takes unjust revenge on Ophelia for playing the very role he himself had devised for her? Yet it is in this scene that she is most true to him. Hamlet arraigns her for prostituting herself, a worthy ally of his debauched mother, while all the time he knows only too well that he alone is to blame; for even what seems to bear out his accusations is in truth of his own doing, and no better than a crime against this pure and beloved child against whom he is bearing false witness.

Ophelia has been promised by the Queen that she shall marry Prince Hamlet if she restores him to his normal self. Beauty and honor, love and marriage, are for once in concord. She loves Hamlet and knows not of the danger that threatens him. He never confides his burden to her. Her task, she is told by his own mother, is to charm him back to life and happiness, to exorcise the demons that are darkening his spirit. What role could be more appropriate to her selfless devotion?

In the presence of her own father and of the King himself, the Queen says to Ophelia:

And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish  
That your good beauties be the happy cause  
Of Hamlet's wildness; so shall I hope your virtues  
Will bring him to his wonted way again,  
To both your honors.

To which Ophelia replies:

Madam, I wish it may.

And later, at Ophelia's grave, the Queen laments, ignorant of Hamlet's presence:

I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife;  
I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,  
And not have strew'd thy grave.

In the nunnery scene Ophelia, who knows nothing, is met by Hamlet, who knows everything. He winces at the thought that Ophelia has thus been "loosed" to tempt him from the allegiance to his dead father and sway him from the course of honor and honesty. His words are as much to the point as they are unjust to Ophelia:

*Hamlet:* Ha, ha! are you honest?

*Ophelia:* My lord?

*Hamlet:* Are you fair?

*Ophelia:* What means your lordship?

*Hamlet:* That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty.

*Ophelia:* Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?

*Hamlet:* Ay, truly; for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness: this was sometime a paradox, but now the time gives it proof.

Hamlet knows that his turning back from the path of duty for Ophelia's sake would dishonor them both. True, resentful at the role cast for Ophelia, and desirous of revenge for Polonius' and Laertes' innuendoes, he gives an insane twist to his words. On the matter itself, he is clear and concise. If Ophelia

(who is offering to return his tokens) were to try to make him marry her, she would be depraving him; yet should she attempt to follow him in the path of honor, she would have to divest herself of the power of beauty, instead of tempting him by her charms. She should go to a nunnery—also slang for brothel—that is where she belongs. Has she not given proof of it by offering herself in the treacherous presence of an adulterous murderer and a parental bawd?

Yet all that is of Hamlet's doing. Presently he will insult her in front of the Court and use her as a smoke screen in his hunt for the murderer. Eventually, he will kill her father, whom she adores. By the time Ophelia drowns herself, Hamlet has deserved more than one death. Within, he must have died a hundred.

But why does the mere delaying of revenge, the quest for certainty, for a public proof of the King's guilt, involve him in such monstrous deeds? The answer is clear (and the producer should convey it to the audience): the use to which he puts his antic disposition is the accursed root of all the evils that befall. Born of hatred of life and a wish to put off the doing of his filial duty, it breeds guilt. It tempts him into employing not only his enemies but even his friends as unconscious tools; it traps him into evasions and elevates insincerity to a noble obligation. Inevitably, it confuses him and makes him a riddle unto himself.

But after that public confession of his love for Ophelia, he plays the fool no more. He is preparing for the end. There is but a short "interim" before the King must learn of the death of his agents in England. Hamlet's composure in this last part of the play is of supreme beauty. Reconciled to his own death he need no longer hesitate to kill the King. He now utters no wish to die; this shows the difference between the Hamlet of the first and the last act. Then he only imagined that he longed for death and made it his favorite theme; now he is longing to die and keeps silent. The readiness is all. It is the King whose hours are numbered.

Thus far the play seems to have no other subject than the refusal to live. But that precisely is why its theatrical success is an enigma. Longing for death is the only passion that is undramatic. And yet "Hamlet," if anything, is a good play. Where should we look for an answer?

Everybody knows the history of the purloined letter which was left in the rack in full view where one would least think of searching for it. So it is here. The very words and the scene that resolve the puzzle are almost too patent to hold a secret. I still remember the day, I was then a young man, when it first struck me:

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. . . .

Much has been written about this monologue. Some of it is amazing. "In this soliloquy," Bradley said, "Hamlet is not thinking of the duty laid upon him at all. He is debating the question of suicide." Hamlet, he thought, had by this time forgotten his sacred promise. "What can be more significant than the fact that he is sunk in these reflections [on suicide] on the very day which is to determine for him the truthfulness of the Ghost?" Bradley, like some others before him, had come to the conclusion that the great soliloquy was of no dramatic importance.

Millions of people have listened to those lines and have not felt so. Nor have the hosts of actors who have spoken them. They have been convinced that the very heart of the play is throbbing there.

They have not been mistaken. Piece the parallelism together, and those five lines give away the mechanism of "Hamlet," the play. "To be or not to be; that is the question." A clear-cut alternative stated by the hero at a moment of high dramatic tension. Consequently, the hero must be weighing

the alternative on which the play hinges: whether to kill the King or not?

Yet nothing could seem more paradoxical than the way in which Hamlet rephrases the question. What is nobler in the mind, "to be" and "suffer," or "not to be" and "take arms"? Clearly, it ought to run the other way. Yet the implications of the paradox are plain. Hamlet can think of life only in terms of passivity, even if the suffering of life and its duties happens to involve a number of so-called actions, such as killing the King, marrying Ophelia, ruling the country, and so on. For the one and only true action falls under the heading "not to be." One could perform it with a bare bodkin, were it not that

. . . conscience does make cowards of us all;  
And thus the native huc of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pith and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry  
And lose the name of action.

With the thought of action the soliloquy opens and ends. Yet it deals solely with suicide. In this apparent confusion we have the dramatic truth of the play. The alternative is killing the King or killing himself.

All through the play the inner and the outer scene of action run parallel and are coördinated by Hamlet's visionary gifts. He sees his father's figure "in his mind's eye" even before he is told of the appearance of the Ghost; he doubts "some foul play" before the Ghost reveals it to him; his prophetic soul suspects his uncle's guilt; he foresees Ophelia's report to her father; he is conscious of the eavesdroppers in the nunnery scene; he is on the track of the spying courtiers; he guesses their mission; he justly appraises the purpose of the fencing match; he correctly instructs the players, and with the sole exception of Polonius behind the arras, whom he mistakes for the King, he is as a person endowed with second sight.

Until the very end his premonitions are translated into actuality:

*Hamlet:* . . . I shall win at the odds. But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter.

*Horatio:* Nay, good my lord,—

*Hamlet:* It is but foolery; but it is such a kind of gain-giving as would perhaps trouble a woman.

*Horatio:* If your mind dislike anything, obey it; I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit.

*Hamlet:* Not a whit, we defy augury; there's a 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 knows aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?

Hamlet parts willingly from life; he commits suicide, not in despair, but in fulfilment. His readiness to die is readiness to accept life in its true meaning. He is murdered and the certainty of his own death releases him to do his duty. The inner stage and the outward stage reflect each other to the end.

As in "Lear," "Othello," or "Macbeth," by the end of the first act the tragedy is set. Lear in his vanity and folly has thrown himself on the generosity of his heartless daughters; in the rest of the play he fulfils his fate. The Moor's conquest of Desdemona is a triumph of spirit over disparity of age and race, which will never stand the test of brute passion; Othello goes to his doom. In "Macbeth" the witches draw the circle of tragedy around the hero and his uxorious ambitions; the end follows as by geometrical necessity. So in "Hamlet": the opening act contains the tragedy *in nuce*. When his father's command reaches him, Hamlet's fate is sealed. Before the curtain rises on the second act, it has been decreed that Hamlet, playing the madman, will lose his life while delaying action.

We need not go far to understand why "Hamlet" is popular. The hero's innermost conflict, his self-defeating shadow play on the confines of life and death, is translated into external events, into sharply accentuated drama. The play is about suicide in terms of killing an enemy; it is about endless delay in terms of incessant action.

The plot is extremely clever. But for his simulated madness,

Hamlet could never have put off his decision, without a clash with his friends and supporters. His own inner conflict thus dragged to light would have been artistically fatal. A Hamlet who refused to obey the behest of the Ghost or hesitated to act when pressed by devoted friends would lose our sympathy, just as he would jeopardize our admiration if he were defeated in his quest for revenge by external obstacles. Throughout, Hamlet himself is the only obstacle both to the decision to take revenge and to the carrying out of that decision. Thus is utmost universality reached in terms of inner life, while the event is spelt out on the stage in blood, fire, and brimstone.

Personally, in the blind alley of a mood that almost lost me my life, I may or may not have glimpsed a facet of that which moved the poet. As to his finished work, the artist needs no interpreter; the audience comprehends.

"Hamlet" is about the human condition. We all live, insofar as we refuse to die. But we are not resolved to live in all the essential respects in which life invites us. We are postponing happiness, because we hesitate to commit ourselves to live. This is what makes Hamlet's delay so symbolic. Life is man's missed opportunity. Yet in the end our beloved hero retrieves some of life's fulfilment. The curtain leaves us not only reconciled, but with an unaccountable sense of gratitude towards him, as if his sufferings had not been quite in vain.