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DEATH BECOMES HAMLET

Elsinore as a Black Hole

Introduction

A blood soaked stage. Corpses strewn everywhere in sight. A dying prince whispers his last will to a single survivor — and falls silent.

Strangers watch the scene with amazement and listen to the survivor's tale. Later, in a solemn ceremony and a formal eulogy, the prince's body is carried out to the sound of cannons.

Lights out. Curtain.

This is the final scene of *Hamlet*. Audiences sit silently in respect, as if attending a ritual, before exploding with applause. It seems that this ceremony serves a formal need to put a dot at the end of a sentence, or a final chord in a symphony.

All has already happened, been said, and heard. Listening and emoting have been exhausted. No loose ends remain. Everything proclaims what everybody knows: **this is The End**.

The question is: **The End to what?**

The Two Worlds

To answer that, let us watch the eulogizers: Horatio, the survivor, Hamlet's best friend, his Jonathan; Fortinbras, the Norwegian heir and army commander, and next to him — the English Ambassadors. But what is their real role in the eulogy?

Let's take Horatio first. Horatio's mission is unambiguously defined in Hamlet's last words. The prince, barely alive, takes the cup of poison from his friend — who wishes to commit suicide and follow him in death — and commands him:

...in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.
(V.ii.353-54)

Then he adds, commenting upon the choice of Fortinbras as the future ruler of Denmark:

He has my dying voice.
So tell him, with th' occurrences more and less
Which have solicited....
(V.ii.361-63)

Hamlet concludes with a pregnant, ambiguous phrase: **"The rest is silence"** (V.ii.363).

No doubt, Horatio's mission is thus to be **The Witness**. Like the five refugees of Masada, or even better, like Josephus Flavius — he is becoming the devoted **historian** of a lost world in the service of a "Brave New World."

But this is not a new world that emerges from nowhere. It has an ironic history. Fortinbras junior is the son of Fortinbras senior, who lost Norway to Hamlet's father in a duel. Now, in the final scene that has been turned upside down. The victor's son is losing Denmark to the loser's son — because of another fateful duel! The revengeful tone in 'Fortinbras' words is impossible to ignore:

I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,
Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me. "
(V.ii.394-95)

He precedes this claim with an ironic statement that we do not miss: "For me, with sorrow, I embrace my fortune" (V.ii.393), a notorious gesture of "self-sacrifice" used by politicians.

It appears that Horatio is a reliable witness, fulfilling Hamlet's will that he testify to the world about Hamlet's support for Fortinbras' claim to the throne. But what is his real opinion of Fortinbras? He clearly declares his disgust at the opening of the play:

Now, sir, young Fortinbras,
Of unimproved mettle hot and full,
Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
Shark'd up a list of lawless resolute
For food and diet to some enterprise
That has a stomach in't, which is no other,
As it doth well appear unto our state,
But to recover of us, by strong hand
And terms compulsative, those foresaid lands
So by his father lost;
(I.i.99-107)

Recalling Horatio's earlier words might not be fair; just as it might not be fair to remind Josephus Flavius, the zealot commander of the mutiny against the Romans in the Galilee, what he probably thought about Vespasianus before he had surrendered to him, becoming his devoted historian. Nonetheless, Horatio's early characterization of Fortinbras may color our view of Hamlet's final will: "He has my **dying** voice" [emphasis mine] (V.ii.361). That statement may acquire a new meaning: "My **living** voice - I would not have given him." From this perspective, the final scene acquires a harsh, undermining, political meaning.

The words of the English Ambassador add to the confusion:

To tell him his commandment is fulfill'd,
That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead
Where should we have our thanks?"
(V.ii 375-77)

Whose commandment?

It appears that Shakespeare's ambiguity creates a fascinating misunderstanding. Indeed, it was Hamlet who wrote the fake letter to England, yet in Claudius' name. So, does the ambassador expect Claudius' corpse, the villain, to thank him? And if he means Hamlet — who could have told him that the prince had forged the letter?

Horatio is, of course, the only one who knows the truth that Hamlet was the one who sentenced his schoolmates to death. But he fumbles twice when answering the ambassador. Horatio's first fumble occurs when he indirectly tells the truth about Hamlet's substitute commandment, as Horatio responds, in the first two lines, to the ambassador's desire to be thanked by **Claudius**:

Not from his mouth,
Had it the ability of life to thank you.
He never gave commandment for their death.
(V.ii.377-79)

But his second fumble is in his blunt lie in the third line: "He never gave commandment for their death," this time equivocally referring to **Hamlet**.

Hamlet had confessed to Horatio, early in this scene, his verdict on his friends. He spoke in a most cynical and sarcastic tone, quoting his forged letter:

As England was his faithful tributary,
As love between them like the palm tree might flourish,
As peace should still her wheaten garland wear
And stand a comma 'tween their amities,
And many such-like 'as's of great charge,

That on the view and knowing of these contents,
Without debatement further more or less,
He should those bearers put to sudden death,
Not shriving time allow'd.
(V.ii.39-46)

If any doubt remains that this forgery is not for vengeance, Hamlet adds:

They are not near my conscience, their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow.
'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites.
(V.ii.58-62)

This is an elitist declaration, almost sociopathic, similar to Hamlet's reaction to the murder of Polonius: "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!" (III.iv.31). After such bitter words, it is impossible to consider Hamlet either an innocent and tragic figure or an ethical and conscience-panged prince. Moreover, having heard that testimony earlier, Horatio's honorable status — as **the witness** — is wiped out when he fumbles!

Hamlet's will, "Report me and my cause aright, " (V.ii.344) is also contradictory. Horatio sacrifices the **truth** about Hamlet ("report me...aright") for the sake of **commemorating** his hero (the other sense of reporting Hamlet aright). For that goal, he lies without a blink. He is a historian in the biased service of his past and future masters. Suddenly the meaning of Hamlet's final words, "the rest silence" (V.ii.363) is heard not just as a humble acceptance of death, but also as a personal and political instruction: to silence what lurks behind the masks.

If, indeed, this kind of cover-up is part of the meaning of the final scene, it cannot strike a formal ceremonial chord. Rather our awareness of such "silence" shatters any naïve illusion of the ritual quality of **The End**. The parade of lies and hypocrisy in this scene is more appropriate for a Mafia funeral than a respectable royal memorial, but it can be a beginning for a new fascinating play, creating a "Fortinbras world" in which Hamlet's phrase in his letter to Ophelia: "Doubt truth to be a liar" (II.ii.117) can omit the "doubt"... In this world truth *is* a deception.

If so, which world really comes to an end in the final scene?

Horatio suggests to Fortinbras plenty of options:

... let me speak to th' yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,

Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,
And in this upshot, purpose mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads. All this can I
Truly deliver.
(V.ii.384-91)

Although "**Truly** deliver" [my emphasis] is a "chutzpa" from our exposed liar — all of Horatio's suggestions are valid. They describe, although partially, what has happened, and they predict what will probably be revived in Fortinbras' world. But they do not define the unique world of Elsinore, the world that collapses at the end of the play.

The Inescapable First World

What are the laws of this world? Is it sufficient to say: "The laws of tragedy"?

Interpreters of *Hamlet* have proposed a thousand and one worlds, each with their own "laws," some of them self-contradictory. But this is the nature of great literature. Culture can treat it as a crystal ball because, through it, every individual can create his own world.

For that to happen, such interpretative worlds must be full of contradictions. In this case, that is so partially because *Hamlet* was written by a human being. Even a genius cannot escape making mistakes. The contradictions in understanding *Hamlet* also arise partially because interpreters try to define such a complex world and its dynamics with a single concept or theory (politics, melancholy, Oedipus complex etc.) Perhaps just as incompletely, I would like to propose a theory for a strange additional world. It is not "The best of all worlds." Perhaps it is the worst — but it *is* a possible world.

In Jewish philosophy there is a famous maxim that uses a paradox to define one dilemma of religious belief: "Hakol tzafuy – veharshut netuna" — which may be interpreted: "All is forecast – yet free choice is yours."

When we watch *Hamlet*, we experience a similar paradox: on one hand, all is known to us, right through to the inevitable end, and so we experience the distress of a forecasted plot: where is our freedom? But in a more profound and mysterious process — we still maintain our innocence. We turn off our knowledge of inevitability, moved by the illusion of free choice in a yet undecided future, even though the plot is predestined.

As we submit to this illusion, we willingly ignore the way *Hamlet* could provide its characters many possible escapes from their tragedy. If we had the "chutzpa" to rewrite Shakespeare, however, treating those escapes as free choices at particular crossroads (ignoring the cynical comments that such escapes will turn

a four hours long tragedy into a four minutes comedy) — we shall feel much stronger the tragedy that occurs because we will see more clearly how characters miss the exit points. Directors and actors could enrich these scenes by bringing out more evidently our sensations of "almost" or "it could have been."

First – take Horatio, the student from Wittenberg, a rational person of whom Marcellus says in the opening scene: "Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,/ And will not let belief take hold of him" (I.i.26-27) — such a scholar could have rejected with a sneer the invitation to face the ghost, just as a scientist would probably react today. Yet Horatio is lured into the session by a self-contradicting request from Marcellus: "Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio" (I.i.45).

Second — Hamlet himself could have escaped the ghost's snare, being a student and a super intellectual, analyzing the abyss between "seems" and "real" in apparitions. After all, he did that deeply when differentiating that which only "seems" from the grief "within that passeth show" (I.ii.85) in mourning his father. His mother's hasty marriage disgusts him, and he craves to return to Wittenberg — yet a few words from his frivolous mother, and much more surprising — from his hated uncle: "And we beseech you bend you to remain/ Here in the cheer and comfort of my eye,/ Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son" (I.ii.115-17) — what words may be more disgusting and even threatening — yet Hamlet stays in Elsinore, a realm he knows is rotten, where he is drawn into a world of ghosts and murder. Then, when facing the apparition — he tries to remain an intellectual, sorting out the options: "Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd" (I.iv.40). Later, with his companions, he uses derogatory epithets for the ghost: "boy," (I.v.157), "truepenny" (I.v.158), "fellow" (I.v.159) and "old mole" (I.v.170). But he finally chooses the one interpretation, that the ghost's injunction must be followed, the interpretation that dooms any escape — sealed by the awesome: "swear" (I.v.168).

This ghost is the supposed spirit of a man described by his son as "A combination and a form indeed/ Where every god did seem to set his seal/ To give the world assurance of a man" (III.iv.60-63). Yet that saint is actually a prisoner in Elsinore's underworld because he is a far cry from his son's fantasy: "I am.../ Doomed.../ Confin'd to fast in fires,/ Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/ Are burnt and purged away" (I.v.10-13). Had he been the perfect father that he is in his son's fantasy, he would be, by then, a two-months veteran in paradise, sitting by Jesus in glory, far away from Danish politics. If Hamlet had recognized the nature of that ghost, Hamlet would have never experienced the horror of a later scene, when he, just fresh from murdering Polonius, talks to a ghost whom his mother can't see. He would have avoided Claudius' final verdict that he is a dangerous lunatic that must be sent to England for a final solution. All that could have been prevented!

A third, very crucial opportunity to stop the fatal course of events belongs to Claudius. This poker-faced genius — whose dark secrets lie deep and safe in

his perfectly controlled ambitious psyche, who has elevated the Shakespearian concept of "seems" to a virtuoso art – watches Hamlet's staged pantomime, which insinuates his treacherous crime – and does not interrupt immediately. Were he, however, to hold on for even a few *more* minutes, this champion of "seems" — Hamlet would be left without a rational proof of the crime, would remain lost in the limbo of an unsolvable dilemma, so characteristic of his character. In character, Claudius permits a short additional scene but then even his poker face collapses, and the dilemma turns into tragedy. **Why?**

A typical tyrant, in classical, renaissance, and Shakespearean worlds, a proficient mass killer, would not even budge at all. Watching "The Murder of Gonzago" such a tyrant might have even enjoyed seeing his "secret artistic biography." It is intriguing to imagine a *Hamlet* where such a Claudius and Hamlet are thus manipulating each other, searching for mutual breaking points, but in vain!

Finally – Hamlet's final return to Elsinore and his consent to the duel — seem unexplainable, almost a blunder of Shakespeare's: Hamlet knows that the king is determined to kill him! History overflows with banished princes who have mobilized armies and regained their throne from usurpers. Why does Hamlet cooperate with his executioner? Has Shakespeare failed, depicting Hamlet as an autistic, oblivious to reality?

Far from it. Hamlet tells Horatio, before the duel: "I shall win the odds. But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart" (V.ii.207-8). Hamlet knows that winning is futile in a lose-lose situation, but he plays his cynical chord: "It is but foolery,...as would perhaps trouble a woman" (V.ii.211-12). Then he tears off his mask, and total fatalism takes over: "...if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to leave betimes? " (V.i.217-20).

The Death of a Star

What is the source of this extreme fatalism? Is it Hamlet's personality or is it the reality that surrounds him? I want to suggest it is the reality that surrounds him as well as his personality. I hereby offer a description of an alternative world, derived from cosmology and epidemiology: **The Death of a plagued star.**

In a quasi-scientific poetic description, a massive collapsing star is an arena where the forces of "sons of light" and "sons of darkness" fight to death. The armies of nuclear fusion energy burst into space as a manifestation of the star's vitality as they resist the choking grip of the unseen power lines of gravitation.

Energy is **final** and consumed in the process.
Gravitation is **infinite** and **eternal**.

In its desperate struggle to survive, Energy sometimes succeeds in blowing up the envelope of the star, in a cataclysmic cosmic phenomenon called **supernova**. Shining like myriads of suns, this phenomenon decreases the mass and gravitation of the star. Yet even this self-sacrifice of the star's flesh and energy just postpones an inevitable process. Eventually, the star collapses into itself, the super power forces of gravitation gradually distort every mass and wave around, locking all bursts of energy in its ever shrinking space. Light is incarcerated in its cage; nothing comes out, and a **black hole** is born: an invisible entity that swallows and decimates everything that penetrates the perimeter of its gravitation, like a cosmic spider.

Now, imagine the collapsing star, doomed to become a black hole, traveling the universe like a lost space ship, and among her condemned prisoners – an invisible entity is born, pure evil, an "eighth passenger" as in the famous science-fiction movie, a source of defilement, a cancerous plague that spreads by touch and atmosphere, poisoning its victims, irrelevant to justice or morals. Their only sin is: being citizens of the doomed planet of Elsinore! As in Einstein's famous equation $E=mc^2$ — Claudius' energy — lust for power and sex — is transformed into an oppressive mass of guilt and repentance, choking all remnants of free energy.

In this cosmos of "Elsinore's all-consuming gravitation" it is immanent that Hamlet and Horatio can't free themselves to return to Wittenberg, that Laertes and Hamlet are drawn back to Elsinore, from Paris and the pirates, that the ghost is chained to the cellar. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern — from the moment they have been sucked into Elsinore's maelstrom of gravitational lines of power, whether coming to help a friend in distress or to spy for his enemy — will never escape. Sailing as far as England is like the fabled escape from death to Samara: they have already been contaminated by the plague!

The early deaths of Polonius and Ophelia are supernovas. The tragedy tries to unload the superfluous weights of the old manipulator, with his ridiculous, entangling machinations, and of his daughter, trapped and doomed in an extra tragedy of love, an impossibility in a plagued star. Yet these sacrificial lambs, these scapegoats, are sacrificed in vain. Their deaths, instead of rebalancing energy and gravitation, only enhance the tragedy: the survivors experience loss of energies, loss of the ability to take and implement tough decisions!

This process is castrating for not only Hamlet but also Claudius, who is considered by many as representing the energy of life's passion — *vis a vis* Hamlet, who gravitates towards death. Any normal tyrant would have served Hamlet the kiss of death at the second act, but the murderer of Hamlet's father and seducer of his mother has turned into an impotent executioner: Elsinore's gravitation chokes his energy!

This model for Elsinore as a dying plagued star besides being, at least partially, coherent — is supported by at least two very powerful quotations: “**Denmark is a prison**” (II.ii.243) and “**Something is rotten in the state of Denmark**” (I.iv.90) [emphasis mine]. These phrases provide guiding principles for productions of *Hamlet as a collapsing star*.

A central question for the actors and director is: how do the characters perceive this world? Are they cognizant of its true nature, or are they celebrating “The last days of Pompeii” — not realizing that Vesuvius is not a scenery — but a verdict!

In my opinion, Hamlet should be played as the only one who gradually perceives Elsinore’s fateful course. This explains not only his profound fatalism, but also behavior that seems puzzling and that has often led to a sharp criticism of *Hamlet*, so much so that the play was dismissed by some of the great writers. For example: Hamlet’s madness and macabre cynicism, which his critics have considered a sign of arbitrariness and rudeness.

But in Hamlet’s world, as in our world, there are two human types that do not bear responsibility for their actions: the **insane** and the **clown**.

Hamlet is a convict, who faces an inescapable sentence, even as he senses, as the singular knowing person, that his responsibility as a human being is to inform, to act, and to try to save his world. Yet he is aware that none will believe him, that there is no salvation, no escape from the Kastnerian dilemma. (Kastner was a leader of Hungarian Jewry who was accused of saving the elite, not informing the rest, enabling the Nazis to take them to the extermination camps.) Hamlet chooses to avoid responsibility and the dilemma — by putting on the mask of clowning insanity, like the prophet Jonah escaping from God’s mission into the belly of the whale. But both of them are vomited back into reality. Yet Jonah chose optimism, and saved his Elsinore – Ninve!

From this perspective, Hamlet’s clowning insanity is not that of a melancholic but of a **desperado**! He is hopeless because, in his mind, all are lost. The extreme lack of empathy that he expresses towards the murders of Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is explainable by this fatalism that leads him to stoically accept his own death in a duel — because he realizes all are condemned to death anyhow.

And so, like Ecclesiastes, Hamlet reacts grotesquely in the famous cemetery scene, facing, with jokes, the skeletons and skulls that life has already executed: he sees they mirror himself, especially Yorick, the king’s jester!

This is why all escape routes out of the tragedy are missed. The blind do not see — and the open-eyed do not want to escape because they know they can’t.

The concept of ***Hamlet as a collapsed star*** has a clear application for design and lighting. Gradually dimming bright halls can convey a world that is closing, shrinking and darkening, in which the blinding lights of sacrificial supernovas will accompany the murder of Polonius and the death of Ophelia. But this is an irrational and deceptive light, extinguished in its short-lived intensity. Gradually, the decorations can transform into prison bars, and a strange "leprosy" can spread through people, clothing, property and walls. This is a leprosy of "people and homes", the inspiration for which the stage designer may derive from the Biblical chapters, "Thou shalt seed" and "leper," in Leviticus.

The blindness of the rest of the figures facing the negative omens and the abdication of responsibility by the open-eyed Hamlet will become the core of the tragedy. The King's blindness to Hamlet, till the last minute, is demonstrated by his plans to kill Hamlet in a duel: "He, being remiss,/Most generous, and free from all contriving" (IV.vii. 146-48). The once- proficient murderer does not realize that his victim is very suspicious and harbors many plots. Yet even the open-eyed Hamlet also wishes to close his eyes off in order to abdicate his responsibility. In my opinion this is the real meaning of the famous soliloquy: "to be or not to be.../ to die, - to sleep, - no more" (III.i.66-71). Not only the clown and the insane are free from responsibility, but also the **sleeping** and the **dead**.

Hamlet's escaping from death in England is not a case of choosing life, but of choosing death within the collapsing star. He is like Samson, who said: "May I die with the Philistines."

As I said above, this is only one of the possible interpretations of *Hamlet*. Perhaps this is the most horrible of them, but horror never eliminated the possibility of existence of any world. We have only to ask: will Elsinore be buried, like the cursed Chernobyl in the sarcophagi of the black hole? Will the black hole, that once was Elsinore — join the Fortinbras' galaxy, or suck it in, contaminating it by its curse, so that not even a beam of light will remain?

The director's decision will determine the color of the last scene and his choice of future — as the curtain falls.