PAPERS PENYEACH

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"To be or not to be" and "Cogito, ergo sum": Thinking and Being in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* against a Cartesian Background

> Just as comedians are counselled not to let shame appear on their foreheads, and so put on a mask: so likewise, now that I am to mount the stage of the world, where I have so far been a spectator, I come forward in a mask.

- Descartes wrote down in a notebook he began on the 1st of January, 1619[1]. In the same year, on the 10th of November, in a "stove-heated room" in a village near Ulm or Neuberg, "where" he "was completely free to converse with" himself "about" his "own thoughts",[2] he had his famous three dreams which "revealed to him ... a destiny to create a *scientia mirabilis*."[3]

In Denmark, on "the platform of the battlement castle"[4] where "the air bites shrewdly" and "it is very cold" (I,4;1)[5], young Prince Hamlet, having met his "father's spirit" (I,5;9), the "poor ghost" (I,5;4), reminds his friend that "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (I,5;174-75), and announces to him and to Marcellus that "perchance hereafter" he

[1] Descartes (1966) 3

[2] Descartes (1988) 25. Descartes gives a detailed account of his "wonderful discovery" in Part Two in the *Discourse on the Method* (Descartes (1988) 25-31). Throughout this paper, when quoting from Descartes' writings, I will use the Cottingham-translation: Descartes (1988). For the autobiographical details not mentioned by Descartes see the footnote on page 25 in Descartes (1988) and Keeling 10-12.

[3] Williams 16

[4] Jenkins 165

[5] I quote from *Hamlet* according to the Arden edition, (Jenkins).

will "think meet / To put an antic disposition on" (I,5;179-80), i.e. that he is contemplating wearing the grotesque mask of madness.

The disguises of my two heroes may well prove impenetrable, Descartes' presentation of his endeavour sounds theatrical enough, and Hamlet, the single intellectual tragic hero in Shakespeare's oeuvre, will undoubtedly turn out to be exceptionally philosophical. They will both amply dream in and even "against" their respective meditations, as will be discussed below. Still, I am fully aware of the distance between Descartes' overheated chamber and the bitter cold of Hamlet's castle and hasten to acknowledge the perhaps even maddening dangers of putting the mask of literature on philosophy and masking literature with philosophy[6]. Encouraging and impressive the efforts of a philosophical tradition in our century may be, starting perhaps with Heidegger's lectures on Hölderlin's poems, in trying to perform something we might call the animation, the vivification, even the enactment or the narration of certain object-like, defined and delimited (dead?) philosophical concepts in and through the discourse of literature[7], I do not think that philosophy and literature - for me two equally valid, significant and fond ways of letting truth happen - have settled their affair. Consequently, it is by no means self-evident to put Shakespeare and Descartes side by side. It is so not only because, after all, Descartes was a 'real' philosopher and Hamlet is the product of Shakespeare's imagination, and not only because the playwright and the philosopher were working in remote genres, but also because of the considerable time-gap between them: Shakespeare wrote his tragedy around 1600 whereas the first significant - though unfinished, and in his life unpublished - document of Descartes' rationalist doctrines, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, was written in 1628,[8] twelve years after Shakespeare's death, and the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the text I will chiefly be concerned with here, was published much later, in 1641.

[6] It is somewhat ironic that Jaako Hintikka in his famous article entitled "*Cogito ergo sum*: Inference or Performance?" uses the case of Hamlet to illustrate the problematic nature of inferring to existence from thinking: "Hamlet did think a great many things; does it follow that he existed?" (Hintikka 114). The problem cannot be discussed here but for convincing arguments against Hintikka's position see Kenny 61 and Feldman 355 and *passim*.

[7] An aphoristic way of summing up this turn in philosophical interest (featuring such eminent thinkers from both the Anglo-Saxon and the Continental tradition as Stanley Cavell, Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur, Paul de Man, Arthur C. Danto or Richard Rorty) may be to say that the fundamental category (in a certain kind) of philosophy has become the *verb* instead of the *noun*.

[8] Walting 170

Yet the time-gap might turn out to be less 'dramatic' than one would think at first sight. As Richard Popkin, one of the most important authorities on Renaissance philosophy, argues in his *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, Descartes' unflinching quest for absolute certainty and his often rather militant attitude can only be understood with respect to the immense popularity of scepticism in his time, undoubtedly with one of its most influential and celebrated masters, Montaigne, whom, in turn, Shakespeare almost certainly knew and read.[9] Thus, without suggesting in the least that Shakespeare may have been a 'sceptical philosopher' (or that Descartes was, for that matter, a playwright), the idea of arranging a dialogue between them via the silent 'mediation' of Montaigne may sound, even 'historically', not too far-fetched.

However, a by far more important link than the above one has been discovered between Shakespeare and Descartes by Stanley Cavell, a link being a foundational topic in his *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*[10] and a significant step forward in his work on the nature of scepticism as a whole. Here a paragraph from Cavell's book is worth quoting in full:

> My intuition is that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes's *Mediations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare, from the time of the great tragedies in the first years of the seventeenth century, in the generation preceding that of Descartes. However strong the presence of Montaigne and Montaigne's skepticism is in various of Shakespeare's plays, the skeptical problematic I have in mind is given its philosophical refinement in Descartes's way of raising the questions of God's existence and of the immortality of the soul (I assume as, among other things, preparations for, or against, the credibility of the new science of the external world). The issue posed is no longer, or not alone, as with earlier skepticism, how to conduct oneself best in an uncertain world; the issue suggested is how to live at all in a groundless world. Our skepticism is a function of our now illimitable desire. In Descartes's thinking, the ground, one gathers, still exists, in the assurance of God. But Descartes's very clarity about the necessity of God's assurance in establishing a rough adequation or collaboration between everyday judgements and the world

[9] Cf. Popkin , especially 159-198 and Kermode xxiv-xxxvi and 145-147
[10] Cavell (1987)

> (however the matter may stand in natural science) means that if assurance in God will be shaken, the ground of the everyday is thereby shaken.[11]

Further, in his essay on *Othello*[12], Cavell takes the tragedy of jealousy to be a paradigmatic enactment of the tragic dynamism inhering in the initial Cartesian despair at the possibility of being finite and all alone in the universe[13] and he claims that in Othello's case it is Desdemona on whom the Moor dares to stake the whole of his existence, it is she who plays the role of Descartes' God. Thus, the connection between Shakespearean tragedy and Descartes' almost literally stupefying doubt is established through the insight that not only tragedy is "obedient to a skeptical structure but contrariwise, that skepticism already" bears "its own marks of a tragic structure", that "tragedy is an interpretation of what skepticism is itself an interpretation of".[14]

Finally, and now specifically with respect to my present topic, Cavell explicitly connects *Hamlet* and the *Meditations* in one of the closing paragraphs of his essay "Being Odd, Getting Even":

> Hamlet studies the impulse to take revenge, usurping thought as a response to being asked to assume the burden of another's existence, as if that were the burden, or price, of assuming one's own, a burden that denies one's own. Hamlet is asked to make a father's life work out successfully, to come out even, by taking his revenge for him. The emphasis in the question "to be or not" seems not on whether to die but on whether to be born, on whether to affirm or deny the fact of natality, as a way of enacting, or not, one's existence. To accept birth is to participate in a world of revenge, of mutual victimization, of shifting and substitution. But to refuse to partake in it is to poison everyone who touches you, as if taking your own revenge. This is why if the choice is unacceptable the cause is not metaphysics but history - say a posture toward the discovery

[11] Cavell (1987) 3

[12] "Othello and the Stake of the Other", Cavell (1987) 125-142

[13] Cf. this "universal" loneliness with Descartes' physical or "autobiographical" solitude he likes to emphasise so much. For example, in the *Discourse on the Method* he says: "But, like a man who walks alone in the dark, I am resolved to proceed so slowly [...] that even if I made but little progress, I should at least be sure not to fall" (Descartes (1988) 28), and: "I stayed all day shut up in a stove-heated room" (Descartes, 1988, 25) and in the *Meditations* we read: "So today I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone. and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of my opinions." (Descartes (1988) 76)

[14] Cavell (1987) 5-6

> that there is no getting even for the oddity of being born, hence of being and becoming the poor creature it is given to you to be. The alternative to affirming this condition is, as Descartes's *Meditations* shows, word-consuming doubt, which is hence a standing threat to, or say condition of, human existence.[15]

I consider this connection of *Hamlet* - as the tragedy of being born - with Descartes' *Meditations* - as the philosophical reckoning with the ultimate condition of human existence - to be highly significant; and it is on this note that I wish to begin. I will juxtapose some aspects of a dramatised, metaphorical display and a systematically argued, conceptualised presentation of the question as to the relationship between thinking and being, while drawing on Cavell's insightful dramatisation of Descartes' universal doubt on the one hand, and on the widely-known (though of course by no means exclusive) conception of Hamlet as the tragic philosopher on the other. I will of course primarily focus on points we may notice when we view one piece with constantly an eye on the other and, my overall preoccupation being more with literature than with philosophy, Descartes will be slightly more in the background.

By way of a starting point, I wish to return to the mask of Hamlet, i.e. to his feigning madness. This stance will prove to be just as strategic as Descartes' universal doubt. In the constitution of the latter, madness is one of the arguments (already connected with the even more famous dream-argument):

> As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake – indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just familiar events – that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed![16]

In Hamlet's case, in turn, doubt serves first as a step towards strategic madness: "All is not well / I doubt some foul play" (I,2;255-56) - he says when he is informed about the appearance of the Ghost. Here *doubt* of course means 'to fear, to suspect' rather than 'to feel uncertain' or 'not to believe or accept'[17]. Fear gives voice more

[15] Cavell (1988) 128. On the burden of existence, birth and proof see further Cavell's "Hamlet's Burden of Proof" in Cavell (1987) 179-191.
[16] Descartes (1988) 77
[17] Cf. Jenkins 197

to the side-effects of the Cartesian disposition[18] than to its content, which is to call all previous sensations, beliefs and opinions into question and to risk that "perhaps just one fact remains true: that nothing is certain"[19].

This radical erasure of all previous knowledge is not alien to Hamlet, either:

> Yea, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
> That youth and observation copied there.
> (I,5;98-101)

and the only thing that remains is his father's "commandment" (I,5;102) to "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (I,5;25). But Hamlet - as it is clear from the quotation - craves for a "tabula rasa" to answer something which, at least at the beginning, sounds as a filial obligation and a moral call: he has to take up his father's cause (which is the duty of the son), and he must free the "royal bed of Denmark" of "damned incest" (I,5;82-3). However, the Ghost at the same time is also demanding that Hamlet's mother, now wife to Claudius, should not even be touched by thought[20] but "left to heaven" (I,5;86). This latter proviso renders Hamlet's task practically impossible. The young Prince would have to separate man and wife (Claudius and Gertrude, two bodies obviously happy in the same bed of "incest"), while the private and the public (the Son and the Prince), the tribal and the Christian (the vendetta and Heaven), the Protestant and the Catholic (Hamlet's Wittenberg and the Ghost's purgatory) and illusion and reality (the Ghost's very appearance and Claudius' very real ability to "smile, and smile, and be a villain" (I,5;108)) are hopelessly entangled.

Let us compare Hamlet's resolution and task now with that of Descartes':

> I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundation if I wanted

[18] Descartes sums up the experiences of his first step towards universal doubt at the beginning of his "Second Meditation" in the following way: "It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim to the top." (Descartes (1988) 80)

[19] Descartes (1988) 80

[20] Cf.: "But howsomever thou pursuest this act, / Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught, Leave her to heaven, / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her" (I,5;84-85).

> to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.[21]

At first sight the project Descartes is undertaking seems to be purely scientific (after all, Descartes was a mathematician and a scientist - a "natural philosopher" - and one of the best of his age), but his predicament soon becomes no less complex than Hamlet's. First of all because in Descartes' time "there existed no clear sense either of the size of the scientific task, or, on the other hand, of its possibility"[22]. Secondly, because Descartes wanted to crush all scepticism, from Sextus Empiricus to Montaigne[23] once and for all. His task was even further complicated because he had always hoped that his works would be approved by the Church and would replace the Aristotelian texts in the schools.[24] Yet the ultimate source of all complexities seems to be that Descartes was in quest of a *universal* method, which could be applied to the discovery of truth in any field of human knowledge, that he was not "simply" after truth (an ambition we more or less all subscribe to), but he wanted it to be indubitable, to be absolutely and *metaphysically* certain. Indeed, Descartes not only wished to have true knowledge but was interested in the foundations of the very *possibility* of knowledge.[25]

However, rather paradoxically and very significantly, the quest for universal knowledge in Descartes' texts is frequently anchored into the first person singular from the beginning: it is embedded into a passionate confession-like narrative in the *Discourse on the Method*, into - as Bernard Williams observes - a kind of "soliloquy"[26], while in the *Meditations* it rather takes the form of a "dialogue", a dialogue of a man in conversation with himself (say, René Descartes with Cartesius[27]).

[21] Descartes (1988) 76
[22] Williams 25
[23] See further Alexander Koyré's excellent "Introduction" in Descartes (1966) ix-xvii, and Gábor Boros's note in Descartes (1992) 40.
[24] Cf. Gábor Boros' note in Descartes (1992) 25.
[25] Cf. Williams 35, and *passim* and Altrichter 155, and *passim*.
[26] Williams 68
[27] Cf. Jaako Hintikka's interesting footnote: "...Descartes arrives at his first and foremost insight by playing for a moment a double role: he appears as his own audience. It is interesting and significant that Baltz, who for his own purposes represents Descartes's quest as a dialogue between 'Cartesius, who voices Reason itself', and 'René Descartes the Everyman', finds that they both 'conspire in effecting this renowned utterance', the cogito ergo sum, wherefore 'in some sense its meaning is referable both to Cartesius and René Descartes'." (Hintikka (1967) 119)

This personal trait has recently been emphasised by the philosopher W. T. Jones in an article called "Somnio ergo sum", especially with respect to Descartes' dream-argument.[28] This argument is an important move in generalising doubt: Descartes' first examples to illustrate the possibility of error are in fact instances of sense-perception (e.g. the case when I mistake the shape of a distant tower), yet such instances can hardly be generalised to convince me that I may always be mistaken because I can easily claim that my error applies only to this particular occasion under these particular circumstances. Dreaming, on the other hand, totally takes me in: given that I may dream anything that I perceive, any situation can be a dream-situation and since in dreams I can be absolutely certain about my perceptions, including even the fact *that I am not dreaming*, it is impossible for me to tell when I am subject to an illusion and when I am not. Consequently, I can *never* be certain.[29]

Here the validity of the argument[30] is less important than Jones' highly enticing suggestion that we connect it with the famous three dreams Descartes had in his stove-heated chamber on the 10th of November, 1619. Jones claims that even the *malus spiritus*, the "deceiver of supreme power and cunning",[31] who will be responsible for the climax of radical doubt, originates in Descartes' dreams,[32] corresponding perhaps to the man the philosopher met in the "whirlwind".[33] As Jones relates, Descartes' original Latin record of his dreams has not survived,[34] but a late 17th century paraphrase of a portion of his text runs as follows:

> He [Descartes] informs us that on November 10, 1619, after going to bed full of inspiration and completely absorbed by the thought of having that very day discovered the foundations of marvellous knowledge [*scientia mirabilis*], he had in a single night three consecutive dreams, which he believed could only have come from on high. After going to sleep, his imagination was struck by the appearance of some phantoms who appeared to him and who frightened him so much that, thinking he was walking through the streets, he was forced to turn over on his left side in

[28] Jones

[29] Here I am heavily indebted to Williams' extremely lucid presentation of the dream-argument (Williams, especially 51-53).

[30] This problem has been widely debated, see especially Malcolm, and the third Appendix in Williams, especially 303-311.

[31] Descartes (1988) 80

[32] Cf. Jones 157, and *passim*.

[33] Jones 163

[34] Jones 145

> order to get to the place where he wanted to go, because he felt a great weakness on his right side, on which he could not support himself. Ashamed of proceeding in this fashion, he made an effort to stand up, but he felt a windstorm which, carrying him along in a sort of whirlwind, made him make three or four turns on his left foot. So far this did not frighten him. The difficulty he had in dragging himself along made him expect to fall at each step, until he saw along his route an open college and went into it to find shelter and a remedy for his problem. He tried to reach the college chapel, where he first thought he would go to pray, but realizing that he had passed a man of his acquaintance without greeting him, he wished to retrace his steps to address him properly and was violently hurled back by the wind which blew against the church. At the same time he saw in the middle of the college courtyard someone else, who in a respectful and polite fashion called him by name and said to him that if he was willing to go find Monsieur N., he had something to give him. M. Descartes fancied that it was a melon which had been imported from some foreign country. But what surprised him more was to see that the people who joined this man in gathering around to converse with him were erect and steady on their feet, while he, standing in the same place, remained bent and staggering, and that the wind which he had thought several times would blow him over, had greatly diminished. With this fancy in mind, he woke up, and at that moment he felt a sharp pain, which made him fear lest this be the working of some evil spirit which wished to captivate him. Immediately he turned on his right side, for he had gone to sleep and had the dream on his left side. He prayed to God to ask protection against the evil spirit of his dream and to be preserved from all the misfortunes which could threaten him as a damnation for his sins, which he realized were serious enough to draw anathema on his head, although until then he had led a life which men found irreproachable.[35]

Jones is, I think, completely right in calling attention to the "existential" nature of Descartes doubt-stricken predicament and in emphasising that Descartes did not introduce these reasons for uncertainty only for the sake of a philosophical debate. Rather, he was in a deep personal crisis, terrified by the possibility that he might indeed 'lose himself' by becoming the captive of an evil spirit, perhaps, as Jones suggests,[36] as a result of his having dabbled in black magic.

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[35] Jones 162-163. The translation of the text is by John F. Benton.
[36] Cf. Jones 158, and *passim*.

I suggest that it is indeed this personal trait which is primarily responsible for the uniquely dramatic quality of Descartes' quest. It not only invites me to "identify myself" with him (as "I-narratives" usually do). It also helps Descartes, the speaker to "split himself"[37] and to point with his doubt concerning *existence* first at the world, but then, immediately, at himself:

> I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.[38]

The dramatic, and, I claim, even absurdly dramatic force of the argumentation is that while listening to Descartes one can hear, "clearly and distinctly", the utterances: "Does it now follow that I too do not exist?" and: "he will never bring it about that I am nothing" while one can also hear, equally "clearly and distinctly" a voice saying certain things, for example "I". If, for a moment, one only hears "I do not exist" or "I am nothing", then one might *reasonably* ask who this "I" in the sentences between quotation marks is. Who (on earth) is speaking? The conclusion I am apt to draw is not that the philosopher is talking nonsense (which was reason enough for some positivist circles to discard the argument as it is)[39] but rather that if he risks this piece of nonsense then he really is in a desperate situation with respect to his own existence. Descartes' quest is, indeed, a conditionally "first person" and, in all senses of the word, "singular" undertaking, in which one may hear not only the striving for 'metaphysical certainty' but the audacious and forlorn attempt at proving one's own existence as well, and it is precisely the soliloquy, the first person singular position which enables Descartes to present the problem of

[37] Jones extensively elaborates on Descartes' "split personality", even in a psychological sense, e. g.: "Below that smooth rationalist surface is a deeply divided self." (Jones (1980) 160)
[38] Descartes (1988) 80, emphasis original.
[39] Cf. Altrichter 120-123

metaphysical certainty and the question of his ("my") existence as one and the same matter.[40]

As the quotation from the *Meditations* already indicates, metaphysical certainty is finally found, in the very act of putting forward, "within" thinking the sentence "I am, I exist". The *Discourse*, in a slightly different manner, finds this certainty in the proposition: *Cogito ergo sum*, originally: *Je pense donc je suis*.[41] The enormous literature on these theses, especially on their validity, clearly indicates how difficult it was for other thinkers, including Descartes' contemporaries, to find it as certain and self-evident as Descartes did. One of the reasons might be that Descartes was trying to first separate, and then to connect, two things which are too closely related even to make an attempt at driving them apart: we might simply be lacking human words to "get between" *thinking* and *being*.[42] But neither this question, nor that of the validity of the *Cogito*-thesis can be our concern here. Rather, with an eye already on *Hamlet*, and without the slightest intention to be exhaustive, I will ask what happens when *thinking* is the place where, "of all places", one feels able to regain one's *being*.

I take the Cartesian way of connecting thinking and being as the moment of the self regaining itself from the fear of non-existence as the realisation that his being is given in his very quest, i.e. in doubting, asking etc. as forms of thinking, so precisely within the process itself with which he was trying to find himself. Yet it cannot be emphasised enough that it is by no means clear what the "alternative" to being, i.e. "nothingness", means or would involve. Should we interpret it as a metaphor of something we cannot articulate in human words, as in tragedy, too, where the visible and compulsory death of the hero is "only" a metaphor of an "unsayable" loss? We must further notice that the identification of existence with thinking requires the thinker to give his whole identity in thinking; this is the move Descartes, of course by no means unproblematically, was willing to make:

> But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.[43]

[40] Here I am particularly indebted to Cavell (1988) 105-130.
[41] On the difference between the two formulations see especially Williams 72-73, and *passim*.
[42] At least this is what the debate on the *Cogito*-thesis, as being an inference or not, seems to imply. Cf. especially Williams, Altrichter, Hintikka, and Frankfurt.
[43] Descartes (1988) 83

However broadly Descartes conceives of thinking, what he enlists are still cognitive processes. He is still "given only to himself," he still has only himself as company. Descartes provides us with perhaps the most extreme formulation of the so familiar and so (in)famous loneliness of the philosopher. Descartes' extremity becomes immediately apparent if we compare this loneliness for a moment with Hamlet's plight, a theme awaiting a more elaborate treatment below. In a sense, of course, Hamlet is the prototype of the solitary hero, yet solitude to him is assigned *with respect to* a family and a Court, where relationships (and dis-relationships) were established well before he even entered the scene. Descartes, on the other hand, is still and literally *totally* alone. But if there is nobody or nothing else he could distinguish himself from, then we must ask once again, whom does Descartes' "I" refer to?[44]

Thus it seems that *being as thinking* is only half of the battle Descartes has to fight in order to regain his existence. The other half is fought by making the absolute certainty of the existence of the self constitutive as to the proof of the existence of God. And it is God who will, ultimately, and, in a sense, retrospectively, guarantee that we may "achieve full and certain knowledge of countless matters"[45] including God, pure mathematics and, finally, material things, i.e. full and certain knowledge of the *whole* world.[46] Thus the existence of the world is staked upon the existence of God and the existence of God is staked upon the existence of the self, so the act of finding oneself (regaining oneself from the "bourn" of doubt) is ultimately, and in a peculiar sense, the *self*-same act as regaining the world with absolute certainty.

"Within" the "volume" of Hamlet's brain, what remains, after the radical erasure, is only his father's commandment; and it is on this "tablet" that, as a first observation worthy of note, he puts down a remark concerning Claudius: "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (I,5;108). The iteration may simply be a sign of Hamlet's annoyance, or a reference to Claudius' exceptional ability to dissemble. But this in itself would not make it "meet" to set it down as a starting point. Rather, I take it to be giving voice to Hamlet's penetrating insight that Claudius' smile is no longer a mask covering up a monstrous deed, but that it is an inward smile, shining somehow from the King's "very depth", from his genuine "inside"[47]. This smile,

[44] Here, once again I am indebted to Cavell (1988), especially 107.
[45] Descartes (1988) 110
[46] Cf. Descartes (1988) 110-112
[47] I owe this observation to my wife, Katalin G. Kállay.

engulfing and absorbing Claudius means that he is not only *pretending* to be content and happy but he *really* is. And the first sentence Hamlet finds worth recording, as a kind of "indubitable certainty" on which one may build further, points in more than one direction.

First, it points to a keynote of Act I, Scene 2, where we encounter Hamlet for the first time, well before his own exchange with the Ghost, and where the first words we hear are Claudius' "inaugural" speech to the Court. The keynote, at least on Hamlet's part, is *seeming*. "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'" (I,2;76) – Hamlet informs his mother rather dryly when she urges him to "cast" his "nighted colour" (i.e. his mourning suit) "off" (I,2;68). Hamlet insists that mourning, which he has "within", "passes show" (I,2;85), that his "solemn black" (I,2;78) *seems* only in the sense that it is 'visible', while its traditional meaning ('mourning') is precisely an obstacle to "denote" him "truly" (I,2;83). If Claudius' beginning is an outward smile which later on absorbs him, Hamlet starts with an inward grief, the outward demonstration of which is only a conventional act of remembrance, whose chief duty, in turn, is to remind the Court of a too early forgotten death which "a beast that wants discourse of reason / Would have mourn's longer" (I,2;150-151). It is this inward and outward "inky cloak"(I,2;77) which marks Hamlet off from the rest of the Court but which - as we have seen with respect to Descartes' position - also ties him to them, to the Family, where something terrible has happened which nobody else wishes to acknowledge, and where his roles as "chiefest courtier, cousin" and their "son" (I,2;117) are totally mixed up. (And why not King after his father? This is one of the things Claudius' swift inaugural speech fails to touch upon.) No wonder that instead of "sitting by the fire", "holding a piece of paper in his hands"[48] *à la* Descartes, Hamlet will be mostly *standing*, holding a table and a book, but later also a skull and a rapier in his hands.

What is left for Hamlet to do in this equivocal situation? To adapt to it, but also to hold it apart, to incorporate the equivocality of the space in which he might be able to act, to conceptualise it, to reflect on its ambiguity in ambiguous terms: "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (I,2;65), is the first sentence Hamlet utters in the play, as a retort to Claudius': "But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son -" (I,2;64). The historical sameness of the root of kin and kind emphasises the identity of Hamlet's and Claudius' ancestors, while the ambiguity of the two words

[48] Descartes (1988) 77

communicates that Hamlet is neither a distant relative, nor is he a member of the "Claudius-species" and, therefore, he does not *really* like his uncle-stepfather.

Hamlet creates one pun after the other ("I am too much in the sun" (I,2;67),[49] and the ambiguities strike another note in the significance of "smile, and smile, and be a villain": the double repetition of smile and Hamlet's having two (or more) meanings in one word (or the same meaning in two words) find a resonance in fact in the whole play. To mention just a few: there are two kings and two husbands, and, in a sense, two fathers (Old Hamlet and Claudius) and when, in Act III, Hamlet juxtaposes them, the Queen claims that he has "cleft" her "heart in twain" (III,4;158); Polonius blesses Leartes twice because a "double blessing is a double grace" (I,3;53); Claudius, in his prayer, describes himself as a man who is "to double business bound" (III,3;41) and wishes to rely on the "twofold force" of "prayer" (III,3;48); there are the two gravediggers; there is Rosencrantz-and-Guildenstern, a double "zero"; there is the Mouse-trap scene, enacting Claudius' murder twice (once in the dumb-show and once "dubbed", when the King rises at the end); and there is also the King himself, whom Hamlet kills twice (once with the poisoned rapier and once with the poisoned cup).

In the play, there are various attitudes to these different kinds of duality: Claudius, for example, tries to reconcile some of them in his oxymorons: "with mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage" (I,2;12) he has taken Gertrude to be his "imperial *jointress*" (I,2;9, my emphasis), most probably meaning that they are going to rule together, whereas Hamlet, always in opposition to Claudius, will later claim that "time is *out* of *joint*" (I,5;169, my emphasis). Polonius, another example, wishes to scurry between two extremes, trying to find the "golden mean" with his "Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar...", or "Neither a borrower, nor a lender be" (I,3;61, 75).

By contrast, then, Hamlet's attitude to ambiguity throughout the play is to sustain it, to intensify it, to make it even more complicated. A test-case could be – now also with an eye on the Cartesian *dubito* - the examination of the word *doubt*, which occurs - as it has already been noted - not only in Hamlet's response to the news of the Ghost's appearance ("I doubt some foul play" (I,3;256)), but in another significant context as well: in the letter Hamlet wrote to Ophelia, as another

[49] „In "I am too much in the sun" there is a fair retort to Claudius' "How is that the clouds still hang on you?" (I,2;66), and – with a pun on the homophonous son – to his "But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son–" (I,2;64). Hamlet seems to suggest that he is too much in the centre of public interest and that Claudius is "making him more his 'son' than he really is." (Jenkins 435-436)

instance of the Prince's famous inscriptions. This is the letter which Polonius took away from his daughter and reads out to Claudius and Gertrude:

Doubt thou the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love.
(II,2;115-118)

The little poem, (metrically not a masterpiece, as Hamlet himself admits[50]) is built on the contrast between the first three lines and the last one. In the first two lines the clauses complementing *doubt* cunningly contain propositions which Shakespeare's age had just started to doubt[51]: the Copernican hypothesis put huge question marks after the Ptolemaic certainty of the stars being fire or the sun being on the move. Thus the first two lines significantly imply that if somebody (Ophelia) obeys the imperative, her doubt is not totally unreasonable. So it is after having done a little bit of 'real' doubting that we reach the third and the fourth line: "Doubt truth to be a liar, / But never doubt I love". There seem to be at least three ways to interpret the two clauses.

First there is a "communicative"[52] or "rhetorical" meaning, suggested especially by the contrastive conjunction *but* and by the genre of the love-letter where the use of hyperboles is anything but uncommon. Under this rhetorical interpretation, the last two lines might be paraphrased as follows: "you may even call the validity of truth into question, still never be uncertain about my affections". The implicit, yet rhetorically by no means absurd claim is, of course, that truth has ceased to exist because it has turned liar. This reading also requires doubt to mean 'suspect' or 'fear'(as in Hamlet's "I doubt some foul play"), in contrast to the first two lines, where, against the backdrop of astronomical debates, *doubt* is most probably in the sense of 'to be uncertain about'.[53]

Yet another reading is also possible, in which *doubt* still means 'suspect' or 'fear' but then we must set our rhetorical considerations aside and take the above-

[50] Cf. with the words right after the poem: "O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers, I have no art to reckon my groans" (II,2;119-120).
[51] Cf. Jenkins 242, and Salingar 25-27.
[52] The communicative meaning of a sentence comprises not only its literal (compositional) meaning but the meaning which gets generated by the particular situation in which the sentence is uttered as well. Cf. Levinson 14.
[53] Cf. Jenkins 242

mentioned absurd possibility seriously, reading the sentence as a call to count with the *real* likelihood of truth being a liar, i.e. as an imperative telling Ophelia not to be sure that truth is true. This interpretation of course undermines the truth of any statement made from now on, so the truth of "never doubt I love", too.

But if, as a further alternative, we take *doubt* in the modern sense of 'to be uncertain' or 'not to accept', as the syntactic parallelism established by the first two lines also suggests, then we arrive at a third possible interpretation, namely: "don't accept truth to be a liar" i.e. "don't believe that truth is a liar", or "allow for the possibility that truth is true" (and, therefore, that "I am true", too). Thus truth may equally be identical with itself and with its direct opposite, depending on the two meanings of *doubt*. In Hamlet's letter the double meaning of *doubt* enacts the very meaning and the very mechanism of doubt itself, while the dualities extending over the whole play dramatise not only the duplexity of meanings in the Hamletian usage, but the hesitation (the two ways) inhering to any kind of doubt as well. This is how, in the play called *Hamlet*, *doubt* and *double* rejoice over their etymological kinship.

Hamlet's letter pointedly expresses how much his conception of doubt differs from that of the Cartesian one: Descartes introduces methodical doubt, Hamlet's puns verge perhaps even on real madness, still - in Polonius' words - "though this be madness, yet there is method [a "discourse on the method"?] in't" (II,2;205-206). However, the significance of the difference carries us even beyond my own puns. Descartes' doubt, as we have seen, is the most radical one possible:

> Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt.[54]

For Descartes, the slightest doubt concerning the truth of a proposition is reason enough to discard it *as if it were false*, so to reject it as something totally useless. For Hamlet, doubting the truth of a proposition is sufficient reason for keeping it, treasuring it, even for playing with it, because for him *uncertainty* does not imply *falsity* but - and this is the important difference - *possibility.* Since Descartes wants his system to be completely error-proof, what he cannot tolerate is

[54] Descartes (1988) 76

precisely Hamletian indeterminacy. For him what (only) might be true might equally also be false and what might (even) be false should not be given any chances but should be rejected right away. For Hamlet, what might be false might equally be true and for this reason both should be given equal chances, without deciding on the matter, because there is simply no ground on which we could make the decision. According to Hamlet, one should stop at the point where something and its opposite are equally possible: this is what we may call Hamlet's *principle of possibility*.

This is the principle with which Hamlet approaches everything around him. While for Descartes the "catharsis"[55] of doubt concerning even his own existence ultimately serves the purpose of establishing a firm foundation for "clear and distinct" *thoughts*, Hamlet has to apply his principle of possibility working in his mind to the question whether to act or not to act because the crime and the family drama would require *immediate action*.

With the question of "thinking versus action", we have arrived at one of the most famous cruxes of the play, known as Hamlet's "hesitation". Why doesn't he kill Claudius right away? But *where* is Claudius' crime? In the testimony of the Ghost. It is possible that what he is saying is true but, as Hamlet observes, the Ghost "May be a devil" (II,2;595), too, playing the role of Descartes' *malus spiritus*, the "deceiver of supreme power and cunning"[56]. Hamlet will never decide whether the Ghost was really telling the truth or not. The famous "Mouse-trap", the play Hamlet directs - and partly writes - to catch "the conscience of the King" (II,2;601) serves this purpose, yet Hamlet cannot separate the victim from the murderer there, either, and, in his running commentary on the play, he identifies the assassin with himself, saying "nephew" instead of, as we would expect, "brother": "This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King" (III,2;239). Thus, it is difficult to tell why Claudius runs out in the middle of the performance: because the play has struck home and he feels more than implicated, or because he believes that this is Hamlet's rather impolite way of communicating to him his death-sentence. One might claim that killing Claudius at the end of the play is a convincing enough sign to indicate that Hamlet finally believes the Ghost; yet then Hamlet already has the poison in his blood and, in a sense, he is a Ghost, too.

So, while the game of "who will catch whom first" is still going on between Hamlet and Claudius, Hamlet does know that there is at least one "place" where the

[55] Alexandre Koyré's apt expression in the footnote of Descartes (1966) xxv.
[56] Descartes (1988) 80

crime has left a trace behind: it must also be in the insides of Claudius, as the "inward" smile in the double repetition of "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain", pointing towards the "depth" of Claudius, has already suggested. Hamlet, like a good detective, should start to think as the murderer does: it is more than ironic that Claudius dismisses Hamlet after their first encounter in the initial court-scene with: "Be as ourself in Denmark" (I,2;122). Hamlet has to *become* Claudius - a task he perhaps performs too well, as the famous "slip of the tongue" in "nephew" instead of "brother" may really indicate. His identification with Claudius, however, involves at least two unresolvable paradoxes.

First of all, he should, according to the Ghost's commandment, act, but in order to act he must think, using Claudius' head, yet while he is thinking, it is precisely acting which he cannot perform. No wonder that for Hamlet thinking not only interrogates the possibilities of action but becomes a form of action itself. Yet the scrutiny of Claudius' mind, which is identical with contemplating the possibilities of action, i.e. revenge, leads Hamlet into a further paradox. If he succeeds in making his mind work as the mind of the murderer does, is he any better than Claudius, i.e. is he not a murderer himself? Descartes' "provisional moral code", which he advances in the *Discourse on the Method* "lest [he] should remain indecisive in [his] actions while reason obliges [him] to be so in [his] judgements"[57] is respectable indeed, and it may very well be true - as the excellent Descartes-scholar, Gábor Boros has recently argued[58] - that the philosopher ultimately wished to lay the foundations of an ethics with his metaphysical and epistemological works, yet Hamlet has no time to call, as a first step, the bare existence of the world into question by the fireside, because he is to perform his duty right away in a world which first and foremost turns towards him with its moral side. Hamlet has no chance to doubt the bare existence of the world or of himself. And for Hamlet, his identity cannot be given, as for Descartes, in *thinking*, in the very medium of his quest, because Hamlet is faced with *two* identities, one of them "ghastly", the other very real, and he, as the paradox shows, should identify himself *both* with his father *and* with Claudius, and *at the same time*.

Moreover, the problem, as we have seen, also gets entangled with the problem of the non-identities of the two husbands in the Queen's bed, in the bed from which

[57] Descartes (1988) 31

[58] Cf. Descartes (1992) 22. This provisional moral code includes that he was to obey the laws and customs of his country, that he should follow even the most doubtful opinions with constancy once he had adopted them, that he should try to be a master of himself rather than of fortune and that he was to choose the best occupation in life man can have, cf. Descartes (1988) 31-34.

Hamlet originates. For Hamlet the principal question is not "do I exist?" or "am I nothing?" but "who am I?", both in the sense of 'how did I come about?' and 'what will I become?'.[59] "This is I / Hamlet the Dane" (i.e. the ruler of Denmark; V,1;250-251), shouted before jumping into Ophelia's grave, is a fair and straightforward answer, but even earning this title, obviously only a fragment of his programme anyway, will demand his life (i.e. at least one "form" of one's "bare existence").

Thus I read the famous line "To be, or not to be" (III,1;56), roughly in the geometrical middle of the play, as giving the conceptually most crystallised version of all the questions Hamlet has to face, including action versus non-action just as much as identification versus non-identification. I take "to be, or not to be" as presenting, on the highest level of abstraction and generality, Hamlet's principle of possibility, the principle that *two opposites should be given equal chances*. The generality and impersonality with which Hamlet introduces us to the great questions of human existence stand in striking contrast to the passion radiating from Descartes' narrative in the first person singular. Let us hear Hamlet's monologue in full:

> To be, or not to be, that is the question
> Whether'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them. To die – to sleep,
> No more; and by a sleep to say we end
> The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
> Perchance to dream – ay, ther's the rub:
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause – there's the respect
> That makes calamity of so long life.
> For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
> The' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
> The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,
> The insolence of office, and the spurns
> That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
> When he himself might his quietus make

[59] Cf. Cavell (1987) 187

With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovere'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to other we know not of?
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 movement
With regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

(III,1;56-88)

The soliloquy, at least at first sight, suggests the direct opposite of the principle of possibility (i.e. the strategy of giving two alternatives equal chances): the question of being and non-being is formulated in two co-ordinated clauses connected by the exclusive co-ordinator *or*,[60] so, rather, as a matter of *choice*. The next four lines give the *content* of the choice, as the syntactic opposition,[61] constructed through the parallel between the *or* of "to be *or* not to be" and the *or* of the following two clauses, indicates. But from the second line on - with the "slings and arrows" - we leave the level of generality and enter the realm of metaphor. This is of high significance because, from now on, Hamlet's train of thoughts will be conducted not so much by abstract concepts as by well-elaborated images: the argument will follow less the rules of logical induction or deduction than the "rule of metaphor,"[62] where it is some components of an image that bring about the next step in the process, implying another image of a different, yet in many ways similar constellation. Another way of putting this is to say that Hamlet's thinking in the

[60] "Usually *or* is exclusive, expressing the idea that only one of the possibilities can be realized: 'You can sleep on the couch, or you can go to a hotel, or you can go back to London tonight'. [...] Sometimes *or* is understood as inclusive, allowing the realization of a combination of the alternatives, and we can explicitly include the third possibility by a third clause: 'You can boil an egg, or you can make some cheese sandwiches, or you can do both" (Quirk 258).

[61] Jenkins' interpretation, Jenkins 490 and *passim*. I am indebted to his understanding of the soliloquy on many points and he also gives an excellent summary of the enormous literature on the subject, cf. Jenkins 484-493.

[62] My phrasing of course recalls the title of Paul Ricoeur's famous book in the English translation, *The Rule of Metaphor* , Ricoeur.

great soliloquy takes place more "in front of the eye" than "on the level of reason." Thus Hamlet's metaphors are by no means mere embellishments, external to his thinking, but organise the very body of his thoughts from the inside.

The metaphors reformulate "to be" as: "in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and "not to be" as: "to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them". *Being* is shown as "suffering", as something passive, and, since it takes place in the mind, as akin to *thinking*, while the metaphorical paraphrase of "not to be" helps Hamlet to view non-being in terms of its direct opposite, i.e. as *action*. However, action does lead ultimately to non-being, because the "sea of troubles" puts an end to "the arms" with which these troubles were supposed to be defeated. So far the choice between being and non-being has been interpreted as a choice between a contemplative life without action and an active and pugnacious one, necessarily ending in death.

The important thing to notice here is that the very terms in which the juxtaposition takes place help Hamlet to view being and non-being as having more in common than the initial brute confrontation seemed to suggest. Hamlet's very rhetoric seems to contain the insight that absolute oppositions exist only on the level of *concepts*. The very meaning of *action*, relegated by Hamlet to non-being, bears the marks of being, while *thinking*, given as "suffering in the mind", devoid of all deeds and activities other than thinking itself, rather seems to be a form of non-being.

Hamlet's mind gets now anchored in the problem of death, presented so far as a result of *activity* and as the interpretation of non-being. And it is here that the "rub", the decisive turn in the soliloquy, occurs[63]. If we were really free to interpret death as completely coinciding with the concept of non-being – Hamlet suggests – then for someone, amidst "a sea of troubles", including tormenting thoughts, death would be a welcome and, most importantly, an *absolute* alternative. Yet, as the argumentation implies, there is no compelling reason which would force us to identify non-being solely with death in the first place, or not to conceive of death metaphorically, in the second. And if, in line with the Renaissance commonplace,[64] we think of death as a sleep, then, by the implication of the metaphor, it is also *possible* that we dream in it. We should also notice that Hamlet does not say that we

[63] For an interesting and detailed treatment of the monologue, especially from the perspective of theological debates in Shakespeare's age, see László Kéry's scholarly essay „Talán álmodni: ez a bökkenő" ["Perchance to dream - ay, there's the rub"], in Kéry 11-46.
[64] Cf. Jenkins 489

necessarily dream in death but that "to sleep" "perchance" implies "to dream", and he further says that we do not know "what dreams *may* come", and it is *this* which "*must* give us pause" (my emphasis). Hamlet puts forward a "dream-argument", too, but whereas for Descartes it serves the purpose of intensifying and universalising doubt by providing him with a fair amount of *uncertainty*, for Hamlet the uncertainty of the *fact* of dreaming is immediately interpreted as the *possibility* of dreaming, which is a factor one *must* take into consideration.

Consequently, it is significant enough that Hamlet's "reasoning" (II,2;265) on dreaming with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, well before the "to be, or not to be"-monologue, takes place in the context of the Prince's famous aphorism: "for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (II,2;249-250). Here Hamlet, pressed by Rosencrantz on the topic of ambition and complaining of "bad dreams" (II,2;256), calls a dream a "shadow" (II,2;260). Yet the principle of possibility is in operation at that instance, too. Ambition, as Rosencrantz claims, might indeed be "of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow's shadow" (II,2;261-262); yet Hamlet immediately finds the metaphorical pattern to communicate that kings and heroes (undoubtedly including Claudius as well) are, if "thinking makes them so", the real shadows while beggars, devoid of ambition, are the only *real* beings, given that at the same time beggars count as the shadows of kings and ambition as the shadow of dreams: "Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and outstretched heroes the beggars' shadows" (II,2;261-262). The reasoning is complex, yet by no means 'illogical' or 'irrational', and it precisely turns on the metaphorical exploitation of the ambiguity of the word outstretched: elongated shadows stretch out as ambitious people "reach over". It is thus that metaphors themselves "stretch out" and, if "thinking makes them so", take the discussion from Hamlet's own ambition - which he neither confirms nor denies - to the "shadowiness" and "nothingness" of Claudius. In thinking everything is possible, even that "The King is a thing - [...] Of nothing" (IV, 3;27-28), however - and this is the moral of Hamlet's little banter - "shadows", "dreams" and "nothings" might, as the principle of possibility allows it again, be more 'substantial' and 'real' than reality 'itself'.

So in the "to be, or not to be"-monologue, too, the principle of possibility does lead Hamlet to something definitive or substantial, perhaps even with the force of necessity, depending on the interpretation of *must*. Yet here this definitive conclusion is the ability to see *to be* (i.e. dreaming, the presence of consciousness, thinking) in *not to be* (i.e. in death) and, in turn, to see *not to be* in *to be*. *Not to be* is

seen in *to be* in some of the concluding lines of the soliloquy: "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". Here all the images of illness and of 'ghastly' paleness and of death (i.e. of 'non-being') are given to thinking, to "conscience", i. e. , to 'being'. And what lies in the personification of thought here as death and in the implied personification of interpreting death as a human being's sleep in which dreams may come, is, I think, the acknowledgement that the presentation of the problem of existence as "to be, or not to be" is doomed to failure from the start. It is doomed to failure from the start because it could be made a real alternative only if we had, again, some basis of comparison, if it was not thinking which makes things good or bad. But since we are unable to take a journey in the "undiscover'd country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns", we can only pose the problem from *this* side, i.e. from the side of thinking ("being"), so we can hardly expect to see non-existence in any other terms than human. The human trait in the metaphors warns us that it is our very stance (be it sitting or standing) which deprives us from being able to see *to be* or *not to be* as real alternatives. All we may do is to retain both with equal force and to acknowledge that the *or* expresses not an exclusive but an inclusive alternative. Thus we reach the "credo" of the hero of tragedy again, whose failure is always his success and whose success is always his failure: to be *is* not to be.[65]

To sum up: for Descartes thinking ensures the fact of his existence, and, further, the existence of God, who will, in turn, ensure the existence of the Universe. Hamlet uses thinking not so much to settle the question of "what exists and what does not", but to give its extent, to mark out its "bourn", the frontier dividing being and non-being, only to see one always in terms of the other. The major reason for Descartes' and Hamlet's different approaches is, of course, that in Hamlet's world there is no final and absolute guarantee: in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* God seems to interfere neither with thinking, nor with being.

But then where should we put Hamlet's assuring (though not necessarily *ensuring*) words to Horatio, spoken towards the end of the play: "There is a divinity that shapes our end" (V,2;10) and "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (V,2;215-216)? Are these words the ones that give Hamlet strength to enter the fatal duel? Or do they express the further irony that one is unprotected

[65] Here I am especially obliged to István Géher's brilliant interpretation of *Hamlet*, Géher 200 and *passim*.

precisely when one is able to give voice to such convictions, protection always coming when one is *not* aware of it?

First it is of great significance that these words are heard at the end of the play. Hamlet seems to be saying that if we disregard the moment *for a moment* then it is also *possible* to see everything that has previously happened as an integral and meaningful part of a larger and longer narrative or plot, whose Author is somebody else than us. We might exist because we think, yet it is equally possible that we exist because we are *thought*. Hence I take the above words of Hamlet as signs of his principle of possibility in full operation, paraphrasable as follows: 'It is indeed doubtful to count with God as an absolute guarantee. But this uncertainty should not make us discard the *possibility*. It *might* be the case that he is even willing to ensure and assure us through his bare existence or otherwise, so we *must* give both alternatives equal chances.' "The readiness is all" (V,2;218) and readiness is more than standing, it is precisely to *exist* "between earth and heaven" (III,1;128-129), to *be the* constant *thinking* of this impossible tension, to participate in the unbearable *force of the alternatives*, the duality of "mighty opposites" (V,2;62) that inhere in each moment.

Is this, in the 20th century, enough to "*think* our *being*"? Or, even in the century of Samuel Beckett, might we wait for more?

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