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On Hamlet

Mikhail Bakunin

1837

If each of the works of Shakespeare testifies in a particular fashion to the genius of the great master, *Hamlet* has long passed as the most perfect among them, and has always been the object of the most lively sympathy and the most impassioned amazement. We can only judge otherwise regarding the truth of that opinion by submitting it to an attentive overview and a detailed comparison with all the works of Shakespeare. But we need only study Hamlet itself in order to convince ourselves that this drama is a great creation, issued from the deepest depths of human sentiment, permeated and illuminated by the eternal flame of Right and Morals, a creation which we can rank with the most accomplished works of Art. And when all the fullness of the heart and soul, when our Spirit, carried away by the magical force which is present there, is conveyed into the domain of blessed and sacred veneration, then moved to the innermost depths of our existence and plunged into the contemplation of the beautiful, we feel a sacred quiver, of joy and suffering mixed, and under the influence of mysterious internal affinities which render us indissolubly kin to that marvelous creation, we are transported into an ideal world and go from this transitory homeland to our eternal homeland; we lose

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the consciousness and memory of self, and at that moment our Spirit returns to itself to establish its free autonomy. We contemplate ourselves, our enchantment becomes the object of our thought, and reason demands that our personality give an account of the individual delight that it has felt. It wants to know why we are so devoted to this feeling of joy, and the heart does not oppose this demand. It is not sparing with its delight; it wishes to extend its happiness to all, and wants to explain it in order to communicate it to others with an equal luminousness. In that way, it relies on contemplative reason and what it sees, the understanding determining what to include in the words with the aid of which the ardent heart tells other hearts, or other individualities, what it feels.

And in contrast with the soul which delights in a work of art in its integrity and its fullness, the autonomous Spirit which expresses its intuitions must break down that fullness into fragment, in order to recreate at the end of its path, passing gradually from one part to another, the creation that it analyses, in its original, organic connections; it must begin by isolating its own *Spirit* from the *incarnation* of that Spirit, or by isolating itself, by its internal organization, from the external image. And as its beautiful Soul is the unique source of its beautiful body, it must be the first object of our study.

If we consider the principal *content* of *Hamlet*, we find from the beginning a general question: what is it that justifies its principal, fundamental traits?

A brother has been murdered by his own brother, to satisfy a criminal passion: a horrible crime which calls out to the heavens, like the first fratricide!

The crime has not yet been uncovered; it has been perpetrated by the King, who concentrates between his hands both justice and the exercise of justice. And though it remains to be unveiled, the murder once proven must be punished and the outraged Grandeur of the law much be revenged and regain its inviolable sanctity. In truth, the will of the Lord much be exe-

cuted as much in heaven *as on Earth*. For sentiments, and for intentions, the internal judge exists. It is at the moment when intentions become a culpable action, and that this penetrates the consciousness of another, that the harmony of the universal symphony which resounds eternally is broken, that dissonance appears; this must be eliminated, and humanity waits then to avenge its legitimate and eternal right: it wants to *contemplate its right in its non-transitory sanctity*. A single sun must shine eternally, and if it is impossible to prevent some dark clouds from rising above the earth, we must prevent them from settling between it and the sun. And just as it is true that God is present on the earth and that humanity finds itself before him forever, it is also true that every crime must be judged and punished. There must also not exist any revealed crime which is not made the object of public justice, and whoever hinders the sacred right of the inviolability of persons ceases themselves to be inviolable. But when the law is still not applied in all of its extent, when its external existence does not correspond entirely to its internal content, it reigns in the imperfect image of a universal *Nemesis*, or of a singular Vengeance, and when in similar circumstances a crime is perpetrated which escapes public justice, we ask who *has the right* to avenge it; because Vengeance, in its form, is always unjust, we ask who by natural necessity *must* exercise vengeance and *will* exercise it. The response is easy, and it rises straight from the heart. *Blood* calls for vengeance and its terrible cry must resound in the throbbing heart of the being closest by blood. He is a living member of the outraged family, and he is bound to restore the inviolability of that higher Individual, an inviolability which has been violated and would have disappeared as long as the crime has not destroyed its author, and will not be destroyed in its own annihilation. The father killed, the son becomes the head of the family, bound to preserve the saintly memory of his father in his noble heart, as he is also bound to restore the sanctity of the Family by the punishment of the guilty. As the King is exempt

from the power of the laws, it is Hamlet who is called to be the Avenger of his Father.

But as judge, as avenger, he must be assured of the crime, so that the vengeance is not a second crime; the guilty must be unmasked and the judge must arrive at a complete certainty before initiating his punishment. It is in the precise, attentive and conscientious character of the inquest and the unveiling of the criminal that resides the degree of evolution of the social life, the *subtlety of the sentiments* and the morals of the Judge or Avenger. Each senses that right exists in general and that it must be applied, and even poorly educated individuals are conscious of it; because right is the unique and universal element which corrects and preserves all. However, the most educated being often has difficulty knowing precisely what is right in all particular cases. Right, the same as any idea, becomes effective only when its application fits entirely with the cases; those cases become the domain of right only when they find themselves applied and universally recognized. Each knows that the fratricide must be punished; Hamlet has been convinced from the beginning that in the absence of public justice, it was up to him to execute the secret Verdict of the supreme law, on which silence is never imposed, because he is the only son of the murdered brother, and that certainty becomes the occult source of all his feelings and actions. But he still does not know if the crime has truly been perpetrated, if the brother has really been killed *by his brother*, and his great and luminous Soul must doubt it until the moment when the crime will become as clear as day.

Now the crime is deeply concealed and to reveal his suspicions or to enter into public inquiries would be repugnant, as much to the uncertain sides of Hamlet's moral Sentiment as to outward reason. That is why the Judge and Avenger must be assisted by the all-powerful *Justice*, from which no criminal can escape. Every criminal who offer themselves involuntarily and unconsciously to its unlimited power, puts itself into

But, look, amazement on thy mother sits:
O, step between her and her fighting soul:
Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works:
Speak to her, Hamlet.

And Hamlet speaks to her, he rises with a full and burning indignation against her crime, but at the same time says to her as a loving son:

“I must be cruel only to be kind.”

With the death of *the queen*—apparently accidental—but which is in reality the fruit of the secret, and bloodthirsty designs of the king, the crime falls back on his head.

the hands of that justice; the one, hearing the verdict of his conscience, relieves itself of the crime by recognizing it freely; the other, vanquished by a passing or belated fear, does not hear the voice of that internal judge who pronounces his punishment and strives to stifle, to conceal forever and from all the crime that he has perpetrated. But it is this desire to hide an unknown act that gives rise to suspicion, and the suspicion gives rise to the necessity of warding off the investigations, and of insuring his impunity by killing the one who conceived it. In short, the criminal always betrays himself. The poorest tree bears the worst fruits and it is by the fruits that one recognized the tree. Such was the case of Claudius, king of Denmark.

Thus, the affection that Hamlet nurtured in his childhood for his unfortunate father, a sentiment which drives him to avenge the death and the outrage suffered by him, the conscientious prudence with which he convinces himself of the crime, on the one hand, and on the other the way in which the murderer un-masks himself, little by little and unwittingly, are the principal Springs of the great Judgment that Shakespeare holds out to us as the Organ of the supreme history. And now the universal content of the drama is legitimated by its necessity; however, that does not exclude the *Feeling of Melancholy* which plunges its deep root into the fact that in order to reestablish the closest blood kinship it is absolutely necessary to cut another natural link just as close. And as strong and just as the sentiment is which drives Hamlet to avenge his father, the assassin is the brother of his Father; for that reason, the more profound the sentiment of right is within him, the less it must be based only on the *presentiment* and on the appeal to Vengeance proclaimed by the Ghost of his father, because an evil demon wrapped in the image, spectacle of the night, could try to fool him. No more can it be based on the confusion which betrays

the powerful criminal Uncle at witnessing the Pantomime representing his crime, because that confusion could have different causes, nor even on the embarrassment of the Queen herself, because two testimonies are required to establish the truth. And we see that the ghost of the father appears in vain several times to Hamlet, that in vain move the deep feelings which the Actor exploits when he recites before him the story of the murder of Priam. He never makes up his mind. And it is only reading the treacherous letter of the King who has sent him to his death, only the sending of twenty thousand men to Poland to conquer a *patch of earth* which can incite him to make a decision (but not to act):

Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep...
O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

But here again he always tarries, until the moment when wounded Laertes reveals to him that the king has poisoned the foil which has wounded them, him and Hamlet, and that the poison destined only for the latter has turned around against himself and his vengeance.

Now the measure of the crime is achieved and *now just barely*, because all the subsequent crimes of the king will be the consequences of the first, the fatal consequences of the fratricide. Now the King succumbs, in a manner as unexpected as his brother, killed by the blade that he himself poisoned. Hamlet's premonition has become reality.

Let it work;
For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
Hoist with his own petard
And Horatio pronounces the same thing at the end
of the drama:
"So shall you hear... of deaths put on by cunning
and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads."

To this disaster is also directly linked the destiny of the guilty Queen. But if Hamlet had the right to exercise vengeance on his Uncle, why is it not extended to his mother, who, obeying a criminal passion, betrayed her first Husband and unwittingly participated in the crimes of his brother? Because nothing can destroy its hypothesis (*Voraussetzung*), its root, without destroying itself; Self-destruction is thus a meaningless word (*Ungedanke*), because the Mother has carried her son in her heart and brought him into the world in sufferings, and because nothing can or should break the sanctity of those links.

The Ghost of the unfortunate and intransigent Father himself pronounces these words:

But, howsoever 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...

And when Hamlet, revealing to his Mother the picture of her crimes, loses his senses to the point of frenzy, then the Ghost reappears to his son a second in order to "...whet thy almost blunted purpose," but at the same time to soothe him: