

Madness as Prophecy in Dystopia: Shakespeare's
Hamlet, Nietzsche's Philosophy, and Heller's Satire
of Wartime Insanity

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Abstract

Madness has long been an object of fascination in the Western cultural, literary, medical, and philosophical consciousness, and rightfully so; the human mind is the incredibly powerful, profoundly dynamic lens through which we inevitably perceive reality, and when that lens is corrupted by a defect of health or experience, the results are astounding. Illnesses such as schizophrenia continue to confound scientists to this day, whereas the cause-and-effect designs of other disorders such as PTSD are easily understood.

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Our literary relationship to madness has been as inconsistent as the phenomenon of insanity itself. Though it is impossible to sufficiently generalize literary representations of madness

by any singular categorical imperative, for the purposes of this study it is helpful to focus on one central division in the Western literary experience of insanity. There is, on the one hand, the continued representation of *genuine*, clinical insanity as it realistically exists; a longstanding tradition that dates back to the literature of the fifteenth century.

On the other hand, we have the emergence of a newer, archetypal literary tradition that treats madness as a *trope*. This tradition—the roots of which are identifiable in Renaissance theatre—adheres more closely to mythical narrative than to realistic representation. It takes fiction and drama as its representative modes, and irony as its aim. This experience of madness in what I call the “prophetic strain” at once departs from the seriousness of traditional representations of madness whilst simultaneously taking on a dramatic seriousness of its own. As Michel Foucault writes of this newer literary relationship to madness in *Madness and Civilization*, “If madness is the truth of knowledge, it is because knowledge itself is absurd, and instead of addressing itself to the great book of experience, it loses its way in the dust of books and in idle debate; learning becomes madness through the very excess of false learning”¹⁸⁵ (This is the experience of sanity—or, synonymously, “madness”—in dystopia: it is an experience that is necessarily tragic or absurd.)

¹⁸⁵ Foucault, 25

Starting with William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, we see the birth of an enduring archetype the Western canon: the "madman" as a harbinger of truth to an environment permeated by lunacy and delusion. The scope of this literary tradition that emerges under the influence of *Hamlet* is, of course, enormous. Madness and prophetic knowledge become the codependent characteristics of that tradition, the archetypal narrative that takes as its internal fiction a dystopia revelatory of an external context that is chaotic or corrupt. For Harold Bloom, "our current preoccupations would have existed always and everywhere, under other names," and the tropes of great literature, "though immensely varied, undergo transmemberment and show up barely disguised in different contexts."¹⁸⁶ My aim is to triangulate, from the original archetype presented in *Hamlet*, a cross-textual topography broad enough to justify Hamlet's transcendent stature as the enduring literary model for representations of madness as the product of tragic insight. For the purpose of scope, I have chosen two modern "madmen" as exemplary recent renditions of Hamlet's original archetype, which amend Shakespeare's own contextual concerns to those of their epoch whilst maintaining the integrity of the literary model *Hamlet* provides: the "madman" of Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, and Yossarian of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.

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¹⁸⁶ Bloom, xi

truth of knowledge, it is because knowledge itself is absurd, and instead of addressing itself to the great book of experience, it loses its way in the dust of books and in idle debate; learning becomes madness through the very excess of false learning” (Foucault, 25). This is the experience of sanity—or, synonymously, “madness”—in dystopia: it is an experience that is necessarily tragic or absurd.

Hamlet’s symbolic predicament does, after all, speak poignantly to the thematic concerns of twentieth-century literature, particularly in its concern with madness at the societal level. Stripped of their circumstantial and historical contexts, these three figures in the Western literary canon share the same basic story: that of the sane man’s existence in a corrupt dystopian environment, catalyzed by his rare insight and enlightenment to an existence that is at once tragic, grotesque, and absurd. Hovering on the margin of a society with which he is irrevocably disillusioned, the madman’s struggle is to reconcile his own existence with the overbearing burden of an *increased*—and possibly maddening—knowledge of reality.

As an audience attempting to make sense of Hamlet’s opening act, we are given fragments of a fractured world as clues leading up to the ghost’s revelation, which deals an irreparable blow to our perception of reality as a unified, consensual truth. Shattering like mirrored glass, day-to-day reality in Elsinore refracts upon Hamlet in problematic and distressing ways as the Prince himself writhes on the periphery

of a world in pieces. Hamlet's belief in divinity and an ordered, theocentric universe ceases to exist; his belief in the people and institutions that once gave his life meaning ceases to exist. Layer by layer, Hamlet attempts to peel away modes of perception in pursuit of truth. When he begins to doubt himself and, in that, the ghost—the driver of all action in the play who is, of course, seldom present and barely apprehensible—Hamlet attempts to reconstruct reality on his own terms, and finds himself unable to believe in any available version of it.

Long before Hamlet imports madness into the text as a motif, however, Shakespeare signals its inevitability by depriving his audience of an exposition. The lack of this comforting theatrical custom is palpably felt: this is the process whereby the “theater develops its truth, which is illusion. Which is, in the strict sense, madness.”¹⁸⁷ In the play's opening scene, Shakespeare establishes an atmospheric madness of fear, chaos, and confusion that will continue to complicate as his plot unfolds. *Hamlet* opens with an anonymous outcry of uncertainty—“Who's there?”—a question of identity in the interrogative mode¹⁸⁸. Kermode takes note of the distancing effect achieved by the rampant aposiopesis, paranoia, and anonymity of the play's first few lines: “The medieval custom of using direct address for simple exposition, of treating the spectators as part of the show, rapidly disappears; only the soliloquy survives, and we see how far even that is in *Hamlet*

¹⁸⁷ Foucault, 35

¹⁸⁸ I.i.1

from the tradition of direct explanation.”¹⁸⁹ In other words, what Shakespeare’s audience might expect from *any* opening theatrical scene is for the playwright to communicate, “who’s there.” Yet instead of providing answers, *Hamlet* parries its own questions back at its audience in newly duplicitous, astoundingly complicated forms. A maddening double entendre, Shakespeare makes the false reality he projects onstage uncertain, adding yet another dimension of illusion to the theatre itself. *Hamlet* is relentlessly meta-theatrical and constantly undermines its own legitimacy with self-conscious, backward references to its own status as a fictional creation. It is a play peppered with plays within plays, widespread delusion, miscomprehension, eavesdropping, and in particular, the sense of so many characters that possess a “secret” of some sort, and thereby have access to some enhanced or advantageous reality that is exclusively their own.

What Shakespeare effectively establishes is an environment wherein the consensual perception as to what is real is, as we learn, a delusion. Which is, quintessentially, madness. *Hamlet*’s environment is not just rancid, an “unweeded garden,” Elsinore is definitively *insane*. All of its inhabitants operate under the misconception that Claudius is the rightful heir to the throne, and that King Hamlet’s untimely death was an unfortunate natural accident. The fact that Claudius initially succeeds in a tripartite violation of cosmic proportions—fratricide, regicide, and incest—is in itself insane; not to mention the sheer temporal length for which

¹⁸⁹ Kermode, 1187

he maintains that success. As is clear from the unanimous lack of suspicion surrounding Claudius's accelerated rise to the throne, intelligent intuition in Elsinore is less than widespread. We as an audience are more or less alone with Hamlet in sensing the outrageously inappropriate nature of Claudius's first speech, which is a fairly obvious exhortation that everyone in Denmark join him in relentless self-interest and "with wisest sorrow think on [King Hamlet]/ Together with remembrance of ourselves."¹⁹⁰ Claudius's hasty nod to his late brother's memory is sweepingly insincere—incriminatingly so, to Hamlet and the suspicious reader—as his admission of a twofold violation of marriage and grieving rites is outrageously candid: "With mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage/ In equal scale weighing delight and dole."¹⁹¹ The truncation of marriage *or* funeral and grieving rites in Shakespearean drama bears implications of ominous and otherworldly significance. The simultaneous combination of the two in this text—omitted from the play, one of many significant omissions—is an omen of apocalyptic proportions, and ominously forebodes the disastrous ending toward which *Hamlet* hurtles recklessly from its first lines to its last.

The great irony of Hamlet's "madness" is that he is by far the sanest character in the play. Hamlet's madness is a façade that he develops to sustain survival in a lunatic world. In this ironic reversal, insanity becomes twofold, and, to use Foucault's terminology, the experiences of "Unreason"

¹⁹⁰ I.ii.1-7

¹⁹¹ I.ii.13-14

(genuine madness, in Ophelia's tragic strain) and "Reason-Madness" (knowledge-induced madness in the prophetic strain, of the archetypal tradition this play instigates) take distinctively separate paths in the development of the Western literary canon. The linkage between Hamlet's "madness" and his unique grasp of a higher truth marks a crucial split in the development of madness as a literary trope. With Ophelia as a critical foil and a gruesome reminder of what true madness or "Unreason" *is*, Hamlet becomes the archetypal madman-as-prophet, the sane exception to a lunatic majority, the Wise Fool. Hamlet, who has been called "the most intelligent figure ever represented in literature," is a young man mercilessly thrust into a world where he has no choice but to self-destruct. The Prince inherits the unfortunate role of the prophet in a fallen world of delusion and deceit.

Nonetheless, the terrible truth to which Hamlet is enlightened seems to be more or less inevitable: indeed it is unclear whether the ghost's revelation is in fact more of a *confirmation* for a young man who has already expressed the intuitions that his is a body politic as diseased as they come. In an introduction of the chilling theme that will shroud our protagonist from here on out, Horatio—who eventually becomes an archetype in his own right, that of the tragic hero's confidant—warns Hamlet the moment his father's apparition beckons the Prince to secrecy that it may very well "draw you into madness? Think of it."¹⁹² Hamlet, though he

¹⁹² Liv.82-86

will “think of it” obsessively for the rest of the play, cannot at this moment heed Horatio’s good-natured advice: the Prince knows something is amiss in his universe and senses that there are epic injustices beneath the surface of the rancid environment that his former kingdom has become. Marcellus and Horatio recognize the cataclysmic potential of the ghost’s demand to speak with Hamlet in private. Horatio dismisses the mysterious beckoning as an ominously “courteous action” which “waves [Hamlet] to a more removed ground.”¹⁹³ And, of course, it does. Hamlet attains access to the supernatural, merely in conversing with the ghost; he attains the burdensome secret that he feigns insanity to protect; and he accesses the closest thing to a higher metaphysical truth that Elsinore, in its current state, has to offer. Horatio and Marcellus forewarn the prince quite adequately:

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
That beetles o’er his base into the sea,
And there might assume some other horrible form
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason¹⁹⁴

The interruptive stress that falls upon the final syllable of “sovereignty” rightly stops a reader or listener in his place before comprehending its subject: reason. We assume that our capacity for reason operates more or less autonomously, and for most, it does. Hamlet, in accepting the ghost’s invitation

¹⁹³ I.IV.60-61

¹⁹⁴ I.IV.68-73

to separate from his fellow men and essentially wander into the realm of the metaphysical, lends his capacity for reason to a second authority. Yes, it compromises his “sovereignty” of reason in that it invites a secondary source to inform his worldview. Yet, is this not the process whereby, to borrow from Emily Dickinson, “much madness” becomes “divinest sense?”

Though his encounter with his father’s apparition certainly provides Hamlet with the motive and inescapable responsibility to murder his Uncle, it is difficult to say whether King Hamlet’s secret is truly a piece of “news” that Hamlet hasn’t intuitively sensed hitherto. Hamlet’s perception of Denmark as “an unweeded garden/ That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature/ Possess it merely” is vividly prophetic: we first perceive his Fallen-world rhetoric as an attempt to describe Denmark as a paradise lost, a former Eden irreparably tainted. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet begins the strain of Genesis imagery that his Father’s apparition will continue to employ in revealing to his son the circumstances and implications of his murder. Certainly, the two figures—one a mere mortal, the other a manifestation of the supernatural—possess an understanding of the event that is more or less akin. Preceded only by a few vague words, Hamlet’s immediate outburst, “O, my prophetic soul!” in response to his father’s apparition solidifies his intuitive sense of the cloaked regicide all along. Hamlet truly *is* a “prophetic soul,” and in unwittingly interrupting the ghost’s speech, he contributes to the continuation of the aposiopesis that has

characterized the fragmentary nature of the discourse in the play thus far. His self-revelatory outburst also aligns with his later prophecies—particularly his inability to sleep aboard the ship on which he is deported to England, contrived from his incredible intuition that something is amiss. Even after the ghost has disappeared from the play altogether, Shakespeare remains persistent in the characterization of a young man with a remarkable intellect—one that makes existence in a lunatic environment all the more excruciating, and the impossibility of the questions to which it gives rise all the more infuriatingly painful.

Certainly, it is clear even in this early stage of the play that Hamlet has been nothing short of “prophetic” in speaking of his early sense of Elsinore as a fallen world and as an “unweeded garden,” entrenched in deep-seated evils: it seems more or less fated that these will become Hamlet’s unfortunate responsibility to unearth. Within the familiar Biblical frame of reference that Shakespeare constructs with imagistic allusions to Genesis (one of the rare occasions in which *Hamlet*’s audience is granted the luxury of a familiar narrative), *knowledge* itself is wrought with negative connotations. Just as Eve interacts with the scheming serpent in the Garden of Eden, Hamlet succumbs to the subtle ushering of an ambiguous figure and traverses a boundary of understanding into an otherworldly realm of knowledge from which he will never return. The ghost’s rhetorical portrait of Claudius as the predatory serpent in the garden signifies a violation of Biblical proportions: “but know, thou noble

youth,/ The serpent that did sting thy father's life/ Now wears his crown."¹⁹⁵ Like a parasite, Hamlet's burdensome secret leeches upon his mental faculties and becomes ensnared in a torturous battle with an independent intellect.

Oddly at play with Shakespeare's use of this imagery is the profound metaphysical skepticism that pervades *Hamlet*. Take, for example, the speculative world-weariness that characterizes Hamlet's first soliloquy: "How [weary], stale, flat, and unprofitable/ Seem to *me* [emphasis mine] all the uses of this world."¹⁹⁶ Hamlet is careful to establish that *emotion*—not yet reason—dictates his wish that "the Everlasting had not fix'd/ His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!"¹⁹⁷ Yet he also reveals his viscerally prophetic sense that "It is not, nor it cannot come to good,/ But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue."¹⁹⁸ Later, Hamlet becomes bitterly skeptical, and alongside Laertes and Ophelia, he is one of several young figures in this play to call upon the divine in a plea for intervention in a world that seems devoid of divine intervention, justice, or mercy. As Harold Bloom sympathetically concludes in regard to the apparent godlessness of Elsinore in his comprehensive *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, the questions of metaphysical injustice that *Hamlet* brings to light are as open-ended as any of the other inquiries over which our thoughtful protagonist is by nature inclined to obsess: "Whoever Shakespeare's God

¹⁹⁵ I.V.38-39

¹⁹⁶ I.ii.133-134

¹⁹⁷ I.ii.131-132

¹⁹⁸ I.ii.158-159

may have been, Hamlet's appears to be a writer of farces. . . . Hamlet, certainly an ironist, does not crave an ironical God, but Shakespeare allows him no other."¹⁹⁹

Perhaps the most unwittingly insightful summation of madness in the play is in Polonius's befuddled aside: "Though this be madness,/ There is but method to't."²⁰⁰ Hamlet's "madness" is, of course, meticulously methodological. The Prince's immediate resolution to "put an antic disposition on" to hide his newfound secret is cogent and appropriate, if not brilliant. And Hamlet continues to utilize his madness, for the time that it remains convincing, to numerous ends.

Rarely, Hamlet's madness serves as a source of source of much-needed comic relief in an otherwise overbearing dark tragedy. Hamlet controls irony with a masterful hand throughout the play; the only possible ironist to whom he could be second is Bloom's hypothetical "God" of Elsinore, if such a God exists. In his prolonged façade and his secret knowledge, which he shares only with his audience, Hamlet is the chief source of dramatic irony in his play, and rarely ever its subject. Polonius's less-than-subtle approach to test Hamlet's alleged insanity—"Do you know me, my lord?"²⁰¹—catalyzes a one-sided repartee on the part of the "madman," who relentlessly lampoons his intellectual inferior: "Excellent well, you are a fishmonger."²⁰² Appearing

¹⁹⁹ Bloom, 386

²⁰⁰ II.ii.195

²⁰¹ II.iii.172

²⁰² II.iii.173-174

distracted and absorbed in a book, Hamlet explains to the inquiring Polonius that he is reading “Words, words, words.”²⁰³ When asked to elaborate, he invents a context that gives him the opportunity to lampoon his interrogator:

Slanders, sir; for the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plumtree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams; all of which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down, for yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am, if like a crab you could go backward.²⁰⁴

Polonius’s attempt to “test” Hamlet’s alleged insanity fails due to his clichéd and inadequate understanding of *what* insanity is: “How pregnant sometimes his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be deliver’d of.”²⁰⁵ Hamlet’s replies *are* pregnant with meaning, but not meaning that gives Polonius any genuine insight as to his mental state; nor is it a *happiness* “[his madness] hits on, which reason and sanity could not be so prosperously deliver’d of.”²⁰⁶ Under the guise of madness, Hamlet is free to satirize, criticize, mock, and lampoon his fellow characters, and Hamlet exercises this

²⁰³ II.ii.92

²⁰⁴ II.ii.196-204

²⁰⁵ II.ii.208-211

²⁰⁶ II.ii.209-211

liberty to the fullest extent. Just as we join Hamlet in his existential distress with each tormented soliloquy that he delivers, we also join him in his “playacting” as he befuddles his fellow characters and confounds their attempts to make sense of what is, to them, a radical and unprecedented shift in demeanor: we share with Hamlet (at least at this early stage) the “secret” of his mad demeanor, which is for the time being mildly enjoyable. Hamlet’s improvisational performance in this early exchange is as brilliant as Polonius’s is dimwitted; his effortless parry of insane responses are too clever for Polonius to dissect, and too ironic for his audience to doubt that the Prince is sharp, alert, and searingly sane. The proficiency with which he does so is a reminder that Hamlet, irrational and distressed as he may become, is still razor-sharp, and that his “Reason-madness” is unlike any other form of insanity Elizabethan theatre had seen to date.

Ophelia’s madness, on the other hand, is a grisly reminder that “Unreason” is a dangerous alternative response to existence in a rancid dystopia. There is nothing humorous or witty about Ophelia’s reappearance, in a state of full-blown psychosis, toward the play’s conclusion. Shakespeare purposefully renders Ophelia’s death a casualty in the cold psychological warfare that constitutes the dynamics of the play at large. She appears before and after the ghost’s revelation, an event of enormous importance to the play (and, of course, to Hamlet); she interrupts Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy and is verbally assaulted; she interprets this assault as evidence of Hamlet’s madness, and rather than

reacting with outrage, Ophelia places the blame for a “great mind o’erthrown” solely upon herself. This self-disparagement is the last we hear from Ophelia before she is wounded and slinks offstage. This, in turn, allows Shakespeare’s audience to shift their attention to Claudius and Polonius’s interpretation of what they have just witnessed: that Hamlet is obviously *not* mad for Ophelia’s love, which is in itself important because it propagates the King’s desperately defensive efforts to kill his nephew. In other words, Shakespeare lets us *forget* Ophelia, and he lets his characters forget her as well.

Thus Ophelia’s disturbing re-appearance in Act IV, stumbling back onstage in a lunatic state, is a brutal reminder that we are dealing with *human* lives and *human* minds here. If we ever for a moment doubted Hamlet’s sanity—some critics have gone so far as to contest that the Prince himself goes mad in prolonging his façade—Ophelia’s chilling psychosis is a bleak reminder that true madness is not, as it is to Hamlet, a game. Ophelia receives only fragments of Hamlet’s maddening insight through her emotional and textual connections to the Prince, as implied by the structural parallels in their respective subplots. Thus rather than growing nihilistic and numb in response to the universe she inhabits, as does Hamlet, Ophelia becomes increasingly aggravated. Her fatal flaw is action; as her world descends into tragic absurdity, Ophelia naively attempts to make sense of it. Yet Elsinore cannot be made sense of—sense, in the upside-down world of *Hamlet*, is a Catch-22.

On the contrary, Hamlet's outburst toward Ophelia, though excessively cruel, gives us a fleeting glimpse into the weighty psychological burden that he has carried with comparative grace throughout the play. That a mere offshoot of his own internal trauma sends Ophelia into a state of psychosis is a bitter reminder of Hamlet's relative psychological strength. Ophelia's death serves, in the damned world of Elsinore, as a bleak affirmation of the fact that Hamlet is indeed a great man. His madness serves to hide a "great mind" that is anything *but* "o'erthrown." In fact, while Ophelia is spewing songs of nonsense and tossing flowers in front of horrified bystanders in Elsinore, Hamlet, as we later learn, is on a voyage to England, intercepting invisible signals of treachery and quite literally re-writing his own fate.

In a revelation that is almost muted, we hear the incredible story of how Hamlet, sleepless, was stirred by a "kind of fighting [in his heart]" to find a letter from Claudius detailing arrangements for his murder: "Ah, royal knavery! . . . My head should be strook off."²⁰⁷ Hamlet's quick and tidy resolution is to rewrite his fate, quite literally "[devising] me a new commission, and wrote it fair." By what Hamlet purports to be "heaven ordainment," he switches out the commandments to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ordering his death with a renewed document in his own hand, endorsed with the official stamp of Denmark: Hamlet carries his "father's signet" in his purse. Hamlet's prophetic brilliance is massively

²⁰⁷ V.ii.13-24

underscored with the omission of this dramatization, told rather than shown, whilst the Prince's own humility and sound sense of justice are illuminated.

Harold Bloom aptly identifies Hamlet's shift in demeanor in the second half of Act V as an indication of his self-restored autonomy and renewed self-motivation to carry out his final task:

We can forget Hamlet's "indecision" and his "duty" to kill the usurping king-uncle. Hamlet himself takes a while to forget all that, but by the start of act V he no longer needs to remember: the Ghost is gone, the mental image of the father has no power, and we come to see that hesitation and consciousness are synonyms in this vast play.²⁰⁸

Hamlet no longer longs for death as an excuse for inaction, or as a refuge from the suffering that earthly existence entails. Hamlet predicted and averted his own death in England, but not out of fear of death itself; this is a man who would not, for all the suffering in the world, allow Claudius's tyranny and his father's murder to go unpunished. If we ever doubted this, we are adamantly corrected with Hamlet's return to Denmark, where further arrangements for his murder are inevitably underway. Hamlet's newly motivated approach to his looming demise—which he accepts, but only on his own terms—is reflected in his bold agreement to a duel with

²⁰⁸ Bloom, 405

Laertes, despite Horatio's pleas that he refuse. Unmoved, Hamlet voices a new and profoundly stoic worldview:

Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, is not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows what is't to leave betimes, let be.²⁰⁹

Indeed the view toward death expressed in this passage constitutes a radical shift from the nihilistic “longing for a world beyond death” expressed in Hamlet's famous “To be or not to be.” Hamlet is no longer lethargic or lachrymose; we know not the deity to whom he attributes the “special providence in the fall of a sparrow,” or if we are meant to believe that there is one, but Hamlet does believe that things are ready to unfold as they should. His ready agreement to the duel reflects an attitude toward death more in the spirit of “[taking] arms against a sea of troubles,” not to assuage his own pains, but to restore justice to his kingdom and avenge his father once and for all.

Hamlet enters the final duel with the courage of a warrior and the conduct of a gentleman. The presence of poison at the play's end represents yet another underhanded arrangement on Claudius's part to bend death to his own will; a right that no mere mortal deserves. Hamlet turns the king's devices

²⁰⁹ V.ii.219-224

against him as soon as he learns of the “villainy” and “Treachery!” that are here, too, present, and Shakespeare ensures that the experience of purgation at the end of this play is intense, confined, and complete. Hamlet’s realization that the long-permitted insanity of Elsinore is, at this very moment, confined to the room in which he stands, catalyzes his declaration that it be extinguished here and now, once and for all: “Ho, let the door be lock’d!” Gertrude is the first to fall, her fate arguably deserved. When Laertes then informs Hamlet “In thee there is not a half hour’s life,” Hamlet wastes no time philosophizing. To the contrary, the Prince seizes that “half hour’s life” to *ensure* the destruction of the tyrant.²¹⁰ Having done so, Hamlet bids Gertrude and Claudius a single, mutually damning farewell: “Here, thou incestuous, murd’rous, damned Dane,/ Drink off this potion! Is thy union here?/ Follow my mother!”²¹¹

Finally, after all other characters in the room have been slain, Hamlet bestows upon Horatio a dying wish of his own. Horatio is Hamlet’s only remaining confidant, and the only character that has remained loyal to the Prince over the course of the play. Hamlet at once takes on the commandeering air of the imperial authority he has earned; his final moments, though fleeting, will not go to waste. Hamlet forbids Horatio to end his life in suicide, prophesying the problematic misassumptions to which the discovery of the scene might lend itself. Like his father, Hamlet asks to be remembered:

²¹⁰ V.ii.315

²¹¹ V.ii.324-327

As th' art a man,
 Give me the cup. Let go! By heaven, I'll ha't!
 Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind
 me!
 If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
 Absent thee from felicity a while,
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
 To tell my story.²¹²

With this, Hamlet solidifies his father's legacy and his own; he prescribes an explanation for the grisly scene the oncoming Fortinbras and his army are soon to discover. Hamlet rewrites his own fate until the moment of his own death, and as Bloom convincingly argues, he continues to do so thereafter:

In Act V, he is barely still in the play; like Whitman's "real me" or "me myself" the final Hamlet is both in and out of the game while watching and wondering at it. . . . Elsinore's disease is anywhere's, anytime's. Something is rotten in every state, and if your sensibility is like Hamlet's, then finally you will not tolerate it. Hamlet's tragedy is at last the tragedy of personality.²¹³

That the restoration of justice to Denmark is necessarily apocalyptic is unsurprising; it is clear from Ophelia's death

²¹² V.ii.342-349

²¹³ Bloom, 431

onward that none of the play's central characters needs or deserves to survive. Hamlet ensures that the sacrifices we have witnessed will not go to waste, and that the reality whose aftermath Fortinbras is about to discover is, *this* time around, correctly understood. Unified by name and immortalized by their untimely deaths, King and Prince Hamlet are finally restored the dignity they deserve. Horatio meets Fortinbras and his army with their story:

And 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, purposes mistook
 Fall'n on th' inventors' heads: all this can I
 Truly deliver.²¹⁴

In response to Fortinbras's expression of his ambitions to inherit Denmark's empty throne, Horatio continues:

Of that I shall have also cause to speak,
 And from his mouth whose voice will draw on more
 But let this same be presently perform'd
 Even while men's minds are wild, lest more mischance
 On plots and errors happen.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ V.ii.378-380

²¹⁵ V.ii.391-394

This, as Nietzsche puts it in *The Birth of Tragedy*, “is the lesson of Hamlet.”²¹⁶ In the face of psychological suffering, men’s minds are inclined to become “wild,” their actions to result in “mischance.” But casualties and irrationalities aside, it is the actualization of the final cause which makes “plots and errors happen,” and which *should* solidify a great man’s legacy, no matter his missteps. Paired with Fortinbras’s likening of the scene to a battlefield—“Such a sight as this/ Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss”²¹⁷—Horatio’s emphasis upon Hamlet’s *mind* (like Ophelia’s) pays homage to the immense internal warfare the Prince endured.

In exerting control over his legacy and the discovery of his body post-mortem, Hamlet preserves his story from the easy categorization of a terrific tragedy, and instead insists that we internalize what Nietzsche would later coin as “the lesson of Hamlet.”²¹⁸ It is a lesson of Dionysiac insight into the “terrible truth of things,” conducive to a “gulf of oblivion that separates the worlds of everyday life and Dionysiac experience.”²¹⁹ Dionysiac wisdom is chaos, de-individuation, the evaporation of the illusion that individual life is anything more than a blip on the vast radar of oblivion that is truth, the universe, existence: “Once truth has been seen, the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence, wherever he looks.”²²⁰

²¹⁶ Nietzsche, 40

²¹⁷ V.ii.401-402

²¹⁸ *The Birth of Tragedy*, 40

²¹⁹ Nietzsche, 40

²²⁰ Nietzsche, 40

This is the Hamlet-archetype, and in characteristic fashion, the play is self-conscious even of the literary lessons and legacies it will import. Fortinbras's euphemistic substitution of the word *death* with "passage" is appropriate and fitting for the nature of Hamlet's fate:

Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
 For he was likely, had he been put on,
 To have prov'd most royal; and for his passage
 The soldiers' music and the rite of war
 Speak loudly for him.²²¹

Hamlet's inevitable demise is a worthy substitute for the possibility, "had he been put on, To have prov'd most royal." Hamlet's martyrdom is what elevates his tale from ordinary to extraordinary. His façade of "madness" is what makes his play magnificent, directly and indirectly, in the immediate sense as well as in contemporary consciousness. It makes us laugh; it separates motive and action, allowing Shakespeare to potentiate a simple revenge plot with poignant reflections on the human condition that remain relevant to this day; it allows Hamlet to transcend his rancid environment, and thereby survive the *true* madness that pervades Elsinore; and, of course, it gives Hamlet the opportunities to reflect on his own symbolic predicament in uttering forth the legendary soliloquies that ring in our ears to this day. For representation of madness in the Western canon henceforth, *The Tragedy of*

²²¹ V.ii.396-400

Hamlet marks the beginning of an archetypal narrative wherein the “madman” functions as a much-needed source of clarity, and “madness” emerges in the prophetic strain as a redemptive source of much-needed enlightenment. *That* is the lesson of Hamlet, and it is a lesson that literature will never forget.

The tale of the madman as the harbinger of truth to an environment of delusion did not die with Hamlet. Immortalized as a near-deity in the literary realm, Hamlet continues to resonate in the contemporary psyche, a man whose irresistibly symbolic predicament provided a model for writers of all ages to emulate in crafting the new, equally unconventional heroes of their own respective epochs. Hamlet’s “madness” proved too masterfully ironic and thematically rich *not* to develop into the archetype it has definitively become. The inherent insanity of the tragic hero’s environment is, of course, crucial to the chiasmic reversal of *madness* that occurs therein: its rancid conditions and affirmation of the absurd, chaotic cruelty of human life reflect a world that seems to refute the possibility of meaning or redemption. It is a world in which knowledge *is* madness, because knowledge in itself is insane. Ignorance is the only available outlet for reprieve, and while it suits Hamlet’s elders quite well, those who have attained the maddening knowledge of their own dystopias cannot return to a state of ignorance—and, with that, to a state of innocence.

There is a momentary gap in the continuation of the new literary conception of madness *Hamlet* unleashed during the 18th century, which Michel Foucault attributes to the establishment of the Hospital Generale in Paris, which would serve as a popular model for the establishment of similar asylums worldwide. By a “strange act of force,” Foucault writes, “the classical age [reduced] to silence the madness whose voices the Renaissance had just liberated, but whose violence it had already tamed.”²²² The power exercised in these wards was arbitrary, measures for imprisonment were often sweeping and unjustified, and eventually, society would recoil at the discovery of what were revealed to be the horrific conditions under which the prisoners of these structures were kept.

Regardless, Hamlet’s archetypal flame could not be extinguished, and with the dawn of the 19th century came the revival of the skepticism and interest in human psychology that would eventually lend itself to the reincarnation of the *Hamlet* archetype. Traditional European epistemology was beginning to show signs of weakness in the face of scientific advancement, which averted society’s gaze from the comfortable lens of Christianity, through which life had long been understood. *Knowledge* was now known to produce psychological distress on both the individual and cultural levels. Foucault offers a brief genealogy that summates the conditions under which Hamlet’s archetype made its triumphant return:

²²² Foucault, 38

In nineteenth-century evolutionism, madness is indeed a return, but along a chronological path; it is not the absolute collapse of time. It is a question of time turned back, not of repetition in the strict sense. Psychoanalysis, which has tried to confront madness and unreason again, has found itself faced with the problem of time; fixation, death-wish, collective unconscious, *archetype* define more or less happily this heterogeneity of two temporal structures: that which is proper to the experience of Unreason and the knowledge it envelops; [and] that which is proper to the knowledge of madness.²²³

This “heterogeneity” marks a definitive split in the experience of madness in the prophetic strain, as opposed to, say, the experience of madness in the unfortunate case of Ophelia. This is essential to the continuation of the recurrent archetype of the madman-as-prophet. Trauma and unreason neatly coagulate and lend themselves to psychoanalysis: these representations aspire to realism, in literature. Madness in the prophetic strain is necessarily intertwined with knowledge or higher insight: this literary narrative is of a strain closer to myth, a trope of surrealism, preeminent in fictional dystopia.

Hamlet’s archetypal flame could not be extinguished, particularly as the external contexts of literary production became as chaotic and confusing as the internal fiction of

²²³ Foucault, 297, n.9

Hamlet itself. “To be or not to be”—*that was the question* of nineteenth-century European nihilism and twentieth-century global disillusion, and it was also the question that plagued Shakespeare’s great tragic hero at the dawn of the seventeenth century. Tragic insight into the realities of a lunatic environment lead Hamlet not only to question himself, but to question God; though Shakespeare does not make any decisively anti-Christian statements in *Hamlet*; he creates a character who addresses the cleavages between Christian dogma and the harsh realities of everyday life.

And thus, in *Hamlet* we find the original questioner to whom philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche answered, two centuries later, “God is dead.”²²⁴ Nietzsche’s famous declaration became one of the defining statements of 19th century European nihilism. And in Nietzsche’s characteristically parabolic style, the groundbreaking statement emulates in *The Gay Science* not only from the pen of the philosopher himself, but also from the mouth of “The Madman.” The character runs up and down Nietzsche’s carefully paved allegorical streets in a frenzied state of existential vertigo:

The madman.—Haven’t you heard of that madman who in the bright morning lit a lantern and ran around the marketplace crying incessantly, “I’m looking for God! I’m looking for God!” Since many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then, he caused great laughter.

²²⁴ *The Gay Science*, 120

Has he been lost, then? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone to sea? Emigrated?—Thus they shouted and laughed, one interrupting the other.²²⁵

Within the cultural confines of his century, Hamlet cannot answer his own questions so boldly as Nietzsche's madman: "Where is God?" he cried; 'I'll tell you! *We have killed him*—you and I! . . . God is dead! God remains dead!"²²⁶ Hamlet's questions may never be answered—his existence spans a mere five acts, and suspends in utter and astounding neutrality his masterful manipulation of language and illimitable capacity for existential thought. And like Nietzsche's madman, Hamlet arrives too early:

Finally he threw his lantern on the ground so that it broke to pieces and went out. 'I come too early', he then said; 'my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder need time; the light of the stars needs time; deeds need time even after they are done, in order to be seen and heard. This deed is still more remote to them than the remotest stars—and yet they have done it themselves!²²⁷

²²⁵ Nietzsche, 119

²²⁶ Nietzsche, 120

²²⁷ Nietzsche, 120

Hamlet, then, preceded generations of questioners who were unsatisfied with the answers (or lack thereof) to which their questions gave rise. Hamlet is “the madman” of Elsinore. Which means, of course, that he is no madman—like Nietzsche’s, he is far from it. Both are prophetic souls in their own right, individuals disillusioned with a truth approaching like a tidal wave on the horizon, soon to disillusion a continent and then a globe. The madman’s prophecy sounds into Nietzsche’s allegorical abyss to reflect a culture in denial of its own psychological state: nihilism.

Nietzsche was one of many pre-modern thinkers who dealt, in varying ways, with the problematic psychological product of objective knowledge: nihilism. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche theorized an entirely new way of understanding the strain of madness Hamlet’s archetype represented. In this early example of Nietzsche’s work, published in 1872, the philosopher utilized the classical deity Dionysus to symbolize the chaotic, tragic truth that lends itself to madness in the prophetic strain. In that, Nietzsche also used Dionysus—and the more familiar example of *Hamlet*—to represent the psychological plight of the enlightened modern man. Nietzsche utilized the deity as a symbol to represent the sublime underlying truths of existence that had just barely begun to glimmer beneath the surface of 19th century European consciousness. Dionysus was merely a name, a symbol representative of a worldview distorted by truth—and unfamiliar as that name may now seem, the symbolism of the

Dionysian worldview remained very much intact into the century that followed.

Raymond Geuss, in an introduction to a 20th century edition of the now-canonized text, reflects retrospectively that “the idea specifically derived from *The Birth of Tragedy* which has become perhaps most influential in the twentieth century is the conception of the ‘Dionysiac’ and its role in human life, i.e. the view that destructive, primitively anarchic forces are a part of us,” and that “the pleasure we take in them is not to be denied.”²²⁸ Nietzsche himself, an outspoken admirer of Shakespeare and a studied classicist, immediately identified, in his first publication, the link between erratic or “mad” behavior and *truth* as the “lesson of *Hamlet*”:

In this sense Dionysiac man is similar to Hamlet: both have gazed into the true essence of things, they have acquired knowledge and they find action repulsive, for their actions can do nothing to change the eternal essence of things; they regard it as laughable or shameful that they should be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint. Knowledge kills action; action requires one to be shrouded in a veil of illusion—this is the lesson of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom about Jack the Dreamer who does not get around to acting because he reflects too much, out of an excess of possibilities. No, it is not reflection, it is true knowledge, insight into the terrible truth, which

²²⁸ Geuss, *The Birth of Tragedy*, xxx

outweighs every motive for action, both in the case of Hamlet and in that of Dionysac man. . . . Once truth has been seen, the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks; now he understands the symbolism of Ophelia's fate, [now he feels] revulsion.²²⁹

That same crucial link that Nietzsche draws between knowledge and paralysis ("madness," as it applies to Hamlet) perfectly summates the anti-heroism that Hamlet definitively exhibits throughout the first half of the play. As to the heroism Hamlet exhibits in Act V, we will see a later amendment of Nietzsche's views as to other possible byproducts of insight into the "terrible truth of things"—but we should freeze with this analysis in understanding Hamlet's proclivity to idleness and avert our gaze to the great, disillusioned, inactive anti-hero of the twentieth-century: Yossarian of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.

Largely unread during his own lifetime, Nietzsche is considered a characteristically twentieth-century philosopher. It was not until his death, at the turn of the century, that Nietzsche's work gained popular traction. Thus it is largely in the literature and philosophy of the 20th century that his hermeneutics are appreciated and his influence is felt. And Nietzsche's influence was transcontinental: M.H. Abrams, in his general introduction to the Modernist era in *The Norton*

²²⁹ *The Birth of Tragedy*, 40

Anthology of American Literature, readily cites Nietzsche as both an influence and an adversary to the authors who apprehended his striking proclamations in reverential vertigo:

For both anthropologists and modern writers, Western religion was now decentered. . . . Furthering this challenge to religious doctrine were the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, the nineteenth-century German philosopher who declared the death of God, repudiated Christianity, and offered instead a harshly tragic conception of life: people look ‘deeply into the true nature of things’ and realize ‘that no action of theirs can work any chance,’ but they nevertheless laugh and stoically affirm their faith.²³⁰

Though Abrams doesn’t acknowledge the context of his quotations—they do, after all, apply generally to the 20th century literary spirit with or without contextualization—they are in fact verbatim selections from Nietzsche’s description of Hamlet in *The Birth of Tragedy*: the plight of the psychologically modern man who knew too much, and knew too well. Thus we have both an obvious continuity as well as an affirmation of the archetype with which 20th century writers worked to create meaningful fiction that spoke to the predicaments of their age.

Madness takes on a new integrity, a symbolism of sorts, in the fiction of the twentieth century. And rightfully so: with onset

²³⁰ Abrams, 1889

of two World Wars came the mind-blowing realities of human death, destruction, and violence on massive and unprecedented scales. A collective psyche already damaged by “the Great War” was jarred once more by the horrific implications of World War II, and in post-modernist writing there is a palpable revulsion at the discovery of the atrocity of which mankind had proven himself capable. Existence itself came into question, and indeed many dismissed the possibility of meaning or redemption in viewing the state of mankind in the aftermath of grotesque and terrifying revelations. Universal feelings of alienation, detachment, and a sense of lost innocence were as pervasive as anger and blame: people turned against their own governments and others, with fears of communist and socialist regimes growing and the Cold War looming ominously overhead as an ever-present reminder of our newfound ability to turn the world into dust.

Had the world we lived in gone mad? Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* couldn’t have posed the question more powerfully. His quintessentially antiheroic protagonist Yossarian tries time and again to feign insanity, seeing madness—as does Hamlet—as a reasonable human reaction to life in a lunatic environment permeated by devastating circumstances. Indeed, warfare, like Elsinore, makes madness reasonable. Unfortunately, the infuriatingly tyrannical bureaucracy to which Yossarian is by his own rare sanity inextricably bound, is slightly more savvy than, say, Polonius or Gertrude. American warfare bureaucracy outmaneuvers English

patriarchy in terms of devising loathsome precautionary measures to block all outlets for reprieve. For Yossarian's greatest enemy—greater than the Germans (who hardly appear over the course of the novel), greater than his lunatic comrades, greater than Colonel Cathcart, even—is a bureaucratic rule:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and he could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause and let out a respectful whistle.²³¹

What has now become a colloquialism in American dialect was originally Heller's rendering of the context for a mad world that was *too* real to any longer be tragic—perhaps a phrase like this was precisely what the world had been looking for to describe its present predicament. In one of the first prominent essays published on *Catch-22*, "The Logic of Survival in a Lunatic World," critic Robert Brustein points

²³¹ Heller, 46

out that “like all superlative works of comedy—and I am ready to argue that this is one of the most bitterly funny works in the language—*Catch-22* is based on an unconventional but utterly convincing internal logic.”²³²

Rather than follow the paths of so many World War II veterans who developed nonfictional, realistic renderings of their own warfare experiences, Heller broke with this tradition entirely. He turned not only to fiction, but also to black humor, satire, and the grotesque to render an absurd piece of literature that accurately reflected the insane logic of warfare itself. And, on a more general platitude, to reflect the predicament of modern man in a mad world—eerily similar to that of Hamlet. In another essay, “The Story of *Catch-22*,” Heller wrote in regard to the true, transcendent environmental madness that inspired his novel: “The book dealt instead with conflicts existing between a man and his own superiors, between him and his own institutions. The really difficult struggle happens when one does not even know who it is that’s threatening him, grinding him down—and yet one does know that there is a tension, an antagonist, a conflict with no conceivable end to it.”²³³ Thus we have the incubus of the madness that pervades *Catch-22*.

Nearly all of *Catch-22*’s commenting critics agree upon the fact that, as Anthony Burgess suggests, Heller’s ready inclination to satire as a potentially unexpected response to

²³²Brustein, 487

²³³ Heller, 474

the Second World War was in fact entirely appropriate to his retrospective subject, as well as to the novel's contemporary context. Burgess commends Heller for taking a bold and much-needed step to "accept wild comedy as the only possible literary response to a stupid and coldblooded military machine."²³⁴ Whereas we watch Hamlet work through existentialist questions as they arise, the majority of our exposure to Yossarian is to a man who has seen the madness and godlessness of his increasingly claustrophobic world and who wants to see no more of it. Yossarian is the "dangerously nihilistic" Hamlet who, in the wake of the ghost's revelation, fools with Polonius, frightens Ophelia, and can barely retain a moment's seriousness with Yorick's skull in his hand before guffawing at its smell and tossing it to the ground. The Yossarian we meet in the book's opening chapter—feigning "a liver pain just short of jaundice" and having "made up his mind to spend the rest of the war in the hospital"—is the great ironist who bides his time lampooning the absurdity of environment to which he is confined:

All the officer patients in the ward were forced to censor letters written by all the enlisted-men patients, who were kept in residence in wards of their own. It was a monotonous job, and Yossarian was disappointed to learn that the lives of enlisted men were only slightly more interesting than the lives of officers. After the first day he had no curiosity at all. To break the monotony he invented games. Death to

²³⁴ Burgess, 518

all modifiers, he declared one day, and out of every letter that passed through his hands went every adverb and every adjective. The next day he made war on articles. He reached a much higher plane of creativity the following day when he blacked out everything in the letters but a, an, and the.²³⁵

Thus we have an educated man who finds language as malleable as Hamlet but doesn't use it quite to the right purposes; whereas the letter-writing Hamlet is a hero rewriting his own fate, the Yossarian we meet here is a distinctive anti-hero toying with language as yet another blatant and useless inadequacy of human communicative ability during wartime. Free indirect discourse reigns in *Catch-22* as Yossarian's acidulous, dark narrative catches us by surprise time and time again—deeply bitter as he may be, he never fails to make us laugh: “When he had exhausted all possibilities in the letters, he began attacking the names and addresses on the envelopes, obliterating whole homes and streets, annihilating entire metropolises with careless flicks of his wrist as though he were God.”²³⁶

Perhaps no diagnosis better fits Yossarian's strain of madness than Dr. Sanderson's: “You think people are trying to harm you.’ ‘People are trying to harm me.’ ‘You see? You have no respect for excessive authority or obsolete traditions.’”²³⁷

²³⁵ Heller, 8

²³⁶ Heller, 8

²³⁷ Heller, 299

“You have a morbid aversion to dying. You probably resent the fact that you’re at war and might get your head blown off any second.”²³⁸ The “catch,” of course, to yet another spot-on diagnosis by Major Sanderson, is that these very rational conclusions function as diagnoses of insanity in Yossarian’s world. Yossarian’s fellow bombers are less eloquent, but respond to his emphatic concern for self-preservation and survival with a sweeping generalization that functions much to the same effect: “You’re crazy!”

Like Polonius, Sanderson has unwittingly identified the “method” to Yossarian’s “madness.” Of course, there is no method to Sanderson’s own, and the emphatic rage with which this intentionally diminutive diagnosis is proclaimed speaks adequately to the rationale of the higher authorities to whom Yossarian and his men are subject. Heller, of course, undermines the backward-correctness of this assumption with a lunatic solution to a nonexistent problem: “You’re dangerous and depraved and you ought to be taken outside and shot!”²³⁹

The sane enemy to a lunatic establishment, Yossarian clings to existence as a hovering commentator on the periphery of the mad world to which he is inextricably bound. Sanderson is an underappreciated battlefield psychologist; for Heller, he is an unwitting instrument of scathing satire, an exemplum of the inadequacy of wartime psychology and rationale. In a

²³⁸ Heller, 303

²³⁹ Heller, 299

painfully clichéd attempt at Freudian dream interpretation, the staff psychiatrist attempts to delve into Yossarian’s mind, which is of course so sound that it refracts Sanderson’s inquiries back upon him in a humiliating manner of which he is blithely unaware. Hilarity ensues in a modern-day rendering of Polonius’s dim-witted attempt to coax an admission of insanity out of the razor-sharp Hamlet. Left with a lingering sense of who is *really* in need of psychological treatment between the two, we watch Major Sanderson maneuver his way into a much-anticipated Freudian trap, Yossarian bemusedly dangling the bait:

“My fish dream is a sex dream.”

“No, I mean real sex dreams—the kind where you grab some naked bitch by the neck and pinch her and punch her in the face until she’s all bloody and then throw yourself down to ravish her and burst into tears because you love her and hate her so much you don’t know what else to do. That’s the kind of sex dreams I like to talk about. Don’t you ever have sex dreams like that?”

Yossarian reflected a moment with a wise look.

“That’s a fish dream,” he decided.²⁴⁰

When Yossarian isn’t fearing for his life, he’s devising methods to cure his boredom: freed under the pretense of insanity, he, too, finds his “fishmonger.” But Yossarian isn’t the only character in the novel who invents games to bide the

²⁴⁰ Heller, 296

time—Chief White Halfoat also entertains himself quite adeptly between missions:

Captain Flume was obsessed with the idea that Chief White Halfoat would tiptoe up to his cot one night when he was sound asleep and slit his throat open for him from ear to ear. Captain Flume had obtained this idea from Chief White Halfoat himself, who did tiptoe up to his cot one night as he was dozing off, to hiss portentously that one night when he, Captain Flume, was sound asleep he, Chief White Halfoat, was going to slit his throat open for him from ear to ear. Captain Flume turned to ice, his eyes, flung open wide, staring directly up into Chief White Halfoat's, glinting drunkenly only inches away. 'Why?' Captain Flume managed to croak finally. 'Why not?' was Chief White Halfoat's answer.²⁴¹

Every time Yossarian's very reasonable concerns for self-preservation are met with allegations of insanity, Heller inserts an episode of this nature, as if to offer his readers a gentle and less-than-subtle reminder: *This is crazy*. In a semblance of the most bizarre, disturbing picaresque ever made, Heller strings together episodes of utter insanity that are on their surface entertaining and carry undertones of the assurance that *yes*, PTSD is real, and *no*, men who are exposed to the kind of violence these troops are made to bear cannot retain their composure during their off-hours. They either

²⁴¹ Heller, 56

become afraid and antiheroic, like Yossarian, become capital-hungry immoralists, like Milo, or go absolutely insane, like Chief White Halfoat and almost every other combat-seasoned member of the crew.

Another of Yossarian's fellow bombers—perhaps the most severely affected, though it's hard to say—is Hungry Joe. Early in the novel, Yossarian advises Hungry Joe to seek treatment for the dreams that cause him to scream in his sleep every night without fail. Hungry Joe sees nothing wrong with his present predicament, and phrases it so poignantly that we, amazingly enough, can't see anything wrong with it either—neither can Yossarian:

“There's nothing wrong with nightmares,” Hungry Joe answered. “Everybody has nightmares.” Yossarian thought he had him. “Every night?” he asked.

“Why not every night?” Hungry Joe demanded. And suddenly it all made sense. Why not every night, indeed? It made sense to cry out in pain every night. It made more sense than Appleby, who was a stickler for regulations and had ordered Kraft to order Yossarian to take his Atabrine tablets after Yossarian and Appleby had stopped talking to each other.²⁴²

And thus we receive Heller's first hint toward what will slowly unravel and reveal itself as the Snowden episode: the episode

²⁴² Heller, 55

that unraveled Yossarian. Utilizing his anachronistic narrative to show the effects of trauma and memory on the human psyche, Heller gradually reveals that the anti-hero we meet in *Catch-22*'s opening chapter "was brave once." Heller's revelation that there is a knowledge or memory of some sort behind Yossarian's rampant concern for self-preservation is perfectly timed. Indeed, having delved into the absurdity of the lunatic manslaughtering machine Heller has created, even we begin to wonder: *is* this attitude of Yossarian's crazy? Why is he so vehemently preoccupied with self-preservation during wartime—is this not a bit of an oxymoron?

As it turns out, Yossarian's intrepid concern for self-preservation—that very quality which makes him the "madman" of his novel—is, as in Hamlet, tied to knowledge and tragic insight. The serious moments of *Catch-22* are outnumbered by the ridiculous, but when they do occur, they are grave and intense, and, as Heller reminds us, there is *nothing* humorous about these aspects of warfare. In a deliberately backward narrative fashion, Heller defies linearity and rearranges each episodic chapter to eventually build suspense, with increasing intensity and confusion, to the revelation of the Snowden episode. As it turns out, "[Avignon] was the mission on which Yossarian lost his nerve. Yossarian lost his nerve on the mission to Avignon because Snowden lost his guts, and Snowden lost his guts because the pilot that day was Huple, who was only fifteen years old."²⁴³

²⁴³ Heller, 225

And thus we have the recipe for disaster that unfolds in the novel's grotesque and disturbing climax:

“There, there,” said Yossarian, with growing doubt and trepidation. “There, there. In a little while we’ll be back on the ground and Doc Daneeka will take care of you.” But Snowden kept shaking his head and pointed at last, with just the barest movement of his chin, down toward his armpit. Yossarian bent forward to peer and saw a strangely colored stain seeping through the coveralls just above the armhole of Snowden’s flak suit. Yossarian felt his heart stop, then pound so violently he found it difficult to breathe. Snowden was wounded inside his flak suit. Yossarian ripped open the snaps of Snowden’s flak suit and heard himself scream wildly as Snowden’s insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping out. . . . Here was God’s plenty, all right, he thought bitterly as he stared – liver, lungs, kidneys, ribs, stomach and bits of the stewed tomatoes Snowden had eaten that day for lunch.²⁴⁴

In effect, the Snowden episode is a far grislier rendering of Hamlet’s ephemeral realization, holding Yorick’s skull, of death’s visceral reality. In this novel, however, the implications of that realization are far more serious. Whereas *Hamlet* participates in the myth of death as an apotheosis of

²⁴⁴ Heller, 439 - 440

sorts, a “passage,” *Catch-22*’s sole (serious) objective is to debunk the war-myth, the selling-point of recruitment:

“Man was matter, that was Snowden’s secret. Drop him out a window and he’ll fall. Set fire to him and he’ll burn. Bury him and he’ll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden’s secret.”²⁴⁵

Dying, as it turns out, is man’s reduction to a pile of base matter, horrifyingly material and palpable. This is what Yossarian attempts (and fails) to communicate to his fellow men thereafter—that you *don’t* go down in history as a “hero” if you die in warfare, that your reduction to a pile of entrails is anything *but* glorious and heroic, and that your memory resonates not with your country or your superiors but with whoever had the good fortune of cleaning you up bit-by-bit. Is there any knowledge more dehumanizing than this?

The product of this unspeakably revolting incident is the vivid Biblical image of Yossarian, nude, perch the lowest branch of a tree. To reconcile the Bible and any of its claims to “forbidden knowledge” with the event that, chronologically, preceded this one, seems outrageous: where is *God* in all of this? In this profoundly vivid imagistic climax to an absurd and caustically satiric rendering of World War II, Heller utilizes the Genesis imagery we see implemented in *Hamlet* to write about one of the most Godless endeavors

²⁴⁵ Heller, 440

known to mankind. Here, forbidden knowledge exists not as the obscure, mythical knowledge Eve accrues when she eats the “forbidden fruit,” but in the visceral, corporal knowledge of manslaughter. In a final act of heroism shrouded by the horror of its circumstance, Yossarian carries his disemboweled comrade from the jet in a state of shock, bathed in Snowden’s entrails. He is immediately and repetitively sedated. When he awakens, and an inquiring hospital staff member attempts to determine his identity by asking Yossarian where he was born, he answers, “In a state of innocence.”

Yossarian has been effectively numbed by the time we encounter him nude on the low limb of a tree, “a small distance in the back of the quaint little military cemetery at which Snowden was being buried.”²⁴⁶ If we hadn’t grown accustomed enough to Heller’s caustic drawl, at this point, to understand that a word like “quaint” is fraught with diminutive irony in this novel, we might think this the ideal setting for some odd, dystopian pastoral elegy. Rather than a pensive poet gloomily reflecting on the universality of death, however, we receive an image of man reduced to a near-primitive state by trauma and disillusion:

Yossarian went about his business with no clothes on all the rest of that day and was still naked late the next morning when Milo, after hunting everywhere else, finally found him sitting up a tree a small distance in the back of the quaint little military cemetery at

²⁴⁶ Heller, 261

which Snowden was being buried. Milo was dressed in his customary business attire—olive-drab trousers, a fresh olive-drab shirt and tie, with one silver first lieutenant's bar gleaming on the collar, and a regulation dress cap with a stiff leather bill. "I've been looking all over for you," Milo called up to Yossarian from the ground reproachfully. . . "Come on down and tell me if it's good. It's very important."²⁴⁷

Milo, the comic rendering of the serpent in this postmodern recreation of the Fall, is largely harmless in this scene (though his capitalist corporation, M & M Enterprises, resulted in the fatal bombing of his own squadron—"But everyone has a share!" Milo contests). The stark contrast between the nude Yossarian and the uniformed Milo freights the ironic dichotomy that Heller presents. Milo Minderbinder has utilized his own time between serving the American Army to network an enormous capitalist enterprise, having effectively created a transnational black market for his own benefit: he makes transactions with the enemy and sees no right or wrong in the continuation of his enterprise—the only thing that Milo can *see* at this point is capital profit, loss or gain.

Yossarian, desperately clinging to that last shred of human dignity indicated by his emotional reaction to human disembowelment—*that* is how low Heller sets the standards for human dignity in this novel—refuses to "Come down," and Milo is forced to climb up the tree instead:

²⁴⁷ Heller, 261

He sat nude on the lowest limb of the tree and balanced himself with both hands grasping the bough directly above. He refused to budge, and Milo had no choice but to stretch his arms about the trunk in a distasteful hug and start climbing. . . . Yossarian watched him impassively. Cautiously Milo worked himself around in a half circle so that he could face Yossarian.²⁴⁸

After quite literally slithering up the tree under Yossarian's "impassive" eye, Milo attempts again to offer his friend a piece of the chocolate-covered cotton and is rejected. Now that Milo is at his level of altitude, Yossarian attempts to elevate his friend to his own newfound spiritual and prophetic heights, and reconcile what are, at present, two inherently oppositional worldviews: "Come on out here," Yossarian invited him. "You'll be much safer, and you can see everything."²⁴⁹

For a fleeting moment, we get the impression that perhaps Milo's ascension to Yossarian's limb of the tree of knowledge will have a mythical effect of the enlightening sort, and that Milo will, as Yossarian hopes, be able to "see everything": "This is a pretty good tree," [Milo] observed admiringly with proprietary gratitude. "It's the tree of life," Yossarian answered,

²⁴⁸ Heller, 261

²⁴⁹ Heller, 262

waggling his toes, ‘and of knowledge of good and evil, too.’”²⁵⁰

For Milo, “It’s a chestnut tree. I ought to know. I sell chestnuts.”²⁵¹ Constantly undermining the gravity of his own fiction, Heller rarely leaves an episode of truth or enlightenment standing without interweaving the inevitable undertones of absurd irony we’ve come to expect from the narrative as a whole. Yossarian is no longer naïve, and realizes that his friend—far gone in the throes of loss and profit, a soldier entrenched in a failing business enterprise—is irreconcilable: “Have it your way,” Yossarian blithely responds. Milo is interested in two things: first and foremost, whether he can convince Yossarian that his chocolate covered cotton is edible, which would provide Milo with a much needed impetus and boost in spirit in the self-delusion that he is not, in fact, on the brink of a massive material failure. Secondly, in spirit of eavesdropping that pervades *Hamlet*, Milo is curious as to whether Yossarian has, as people have said, “gone crazy”: ““You don’t have any clothes on. I don’t want to butt in or anything, but I just want to know. Why aren’t you wearing your uniform?’ ‘I don’t want to.’” As we’ve seen, subtlety is not Milo’s greatest strength, and “[nodding] rapidly like a sparrow pecking,” Yossarian’s friend pretends to understand what he absolutely cannot: “I understand

²⁵⁰ Heller, 262

²⁵¹ Heller, 262

perfectly. I heard Appleby and Captain Black say you had gone crazy, and I just wanted to find out.”²⁵²

As Yossarian tells Milo dismissively in refuting his desperate hopes that his absurd bunk-delicacy is the solution to his financial problems, “They’ll never be able to swallow it.”²⁵³ Just as the synthetic substance under the thin chocolate coating of Milo’s newest invention is humanly impossible to digest, Milo will “never be able to swallow” or intuitively understand, in full meaning, what Yossarian has just witnessed. Yossarian at present is attempting to digest a truth as unpalatable as Milo’s chocolate covered cotton, as indigestible as the very fabric of the symbolic, homogenizing uniform Yossarian has emphatically decided to renounce. To echo Nietzsche, writing of Hamlet, “he feels revulsion.” In this modern day re-rendering of the narrative myth, nothing seems justified: Yossarian is the portrait of a man whose sense of human integrity—integrity of the body, integrity of death, integrity of the soul—has been effectively undermined by the splitting open of a corpse wounded *under* its flak suit: not only is the human body destructible and material, but the artificial shells of protection with which combat fighters are provided have proven fallible as well. The war-myth coats horror with the promise of glory, disguises the threat of death with the notion of falling in honor: Milo disguises the threat of choking his friend to death with cotton with a thin layer of chocolate. All facades are deconstructed. All integrity is

²⁵² Heller, 262

²⁵³ Heller, 262

compromised: man is garbage. Yossarian won't be able to digest any of this: and thus we have the background for the disgusted nihilistic anti-hero we meet in the first chapter of the novel.

Certainly there is no end to madness—"Unreason," or *real* insanity, remains the baffling foe of psychoanalysis and contemporary psychotherapy. "Reason-Madness," or madness in the prophetic strain, meets its end only with the conclusion of the artistic venue to which it is confined: "There is no madness except as the final instant of the work of art—the work endlessly drives madness to its limits; *where there is a work of art, there is no madness*. . . . The moment when, together, the work of art and madness are born and fulfilled is the beginning of the time when the world finds itself arraigned by that work of art and responsible before it for what it is."²⁵⁴ In the recurrence of the Hamlet archetype, we see that prophetic madness has no end in the Western literary tradition; what it does have is a *method*, and those methods remain crucial to the perpetuation of archetypal madness in the prophetic strain.

One thing is certain—Western literature has continued to *need* its madmen, for better or for worse. To the legacy of *Hamlet*, the original drama of the human consciousness, we now have *five centuries* of unwavering and sustained fascination to attribute. According to Bloom, we are also indebted to *Hamlet* for embodying one of Shakespeare's

²⁵⁴ Foucault, 281

greatest inventions—the internalization of the self—the vast, illimitable, inwardly conscious self of Hamlet: “There is no ‘real’ Hamlet just as there is no ‘real’ Shakespeare: the character, like the writer, is a reflecting pool, a spacious mirror in which we needs must see ourselves.”²⁵⁵

Hamlet’s transcendent legacy has no foreseeable conclusion, nor does our complex and amorphous literary relationship with madness in the prophetic strain. For the purposes of this study, we can rest with what we’ve seen hitherto. From Shakespeare onward, to Nietzsche, Heller, and Foucault, devoted authors of the *consciousness* perpetuate a fascination with insanity as a trope. Disciples of the psyche and preachers of methods to madness in individuals bearing the burden of sanity in dystopia, these authors boldly continue the mission of their predecessors to preserve the longstanding literary symbolism of madness as a rare and sacred locus of truth.

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²⁵⁵ *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 401

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