# QUESTIONING THE SKULL: *ZHUANGZI* AND *HAMLET* ON DEATH

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**Abstract**: This article aims to explore some aspects of our shared human experience of death through a parallel reading of *Hamlet* and *Zhuangzi*. These two classics belong to radically different cultural contexts, and both have traditionally been interpreted as texts in between philosophy and literature. As such, I hope this article will be of some interest for both students of world literature and transcultural philosophy, disciplines that, despite the contemporary academic distinctions, share much in common. Section 1 highlights some differences and similarities between *Hamlet* and *Zhuangzi*. Section 2 proceeds by elucidating three aspects of the problem of death approached by both texts (uncertainty; the death of others; *my* death). Section 3 examines two predominant perspectives in Chinese and European cultural backgrounds (the "individual" and the "cosmic" perspectives). Sections 4 analyzes how *Hamlet* approaches uncertainty, the death of others and *my* death from the individual perspective, while section 5 does the same for the cosmic perspective in *Zhuangzi*. In section 6, the two mirroring passages of the dialogues with the skull are compared, showing how the individual and the cosmic perspectives mutually implicate each other as two sides of the same coin.

**Keywords:** Zhuangzi, Hamlet, Death, Comparative Philosophy.

## 1. An unexpected comparison

*Zhuangzi*[2] and *Hamlet*[3] might seem, and indeed are, two extremely different works. The first is one of the key texts of Daoism, composed in China between the 5th and 3rd centuries B.C.E. during the Warring States period; the second is the Shakespearian play written in England at the turn of the 17th century. Around two thousand years and nine thousand kilometers separate them. Despite the fact that contacts between the Chinese and European cultures date back to the early Han dynasty (starting from the 1st century B.C.E., along the Silk Road), the first English translation of *Zhuangzi* appeared more than two centuries after Shakespeare's time[4]. It is reasonably safe, therefore, to consider these two texts as independent products of two cultural contexts developed autonomously from each other. Moreover, the differences between these two contexts (Pre-Qin China and



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[2] Throughout the essay, I will use italics to refer to *Zhuangzi* the book, thereby distinguishing it from the homonymous hypothetical author (Zhuang Zhou 庄周 or Zhuangzi 庄子). *Zhuangzi* is a varied collection of short stories, reflections, arguments, and parables written by different hands and later compiled by Guo Xiang 郭象 (252-312 CE). The English edition used for quotation will be Brook Ziporyn's *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings* (Ziporyn, 2020).

[3] Edition of reference: *Hamlet*, The Arden Shakespeare Third series (Shakespeare 2006).

[4] Frederic Henry Balfour's *The Divine Classic of Nan-hua: Being the Works of Chuang Tsze, Taoist Philosopher*, printed in Shanghai by Kelley & Walsh in 1881. For a comparison, the first translation of Confucius' *Lunyu* in a European language appeared much earlier, in Paris, in 1687 (the *Confucius sinarum philosophus*). A plausible explanation for such a delay in the translation of Daoist texts points to the strategy of Christian missionaries, who considered Confucianism more suitable than Daoism as an evangelic gateway to China (Harper, 2019).

Elizabethan England) are obvious and numerous, spanning from the languages used to the belief systems, political frameworks and more.

Nonetheless, while engaging with the mystery of death, *Zhuangzi* and *Hamlet* present some striking similarities: the skull, the dream, the fear of the unknown, the decomposition of the body and the eternal turning of the wheel of time are all common themes that suggest an unexpected comparison between the two. Despite the cultural differences, they sometimes employ the same images and metaphors, posing similar questions that bridge the boundaries between literature and philosophy.

Shakespeare has always attracted the attention of philosophers, not only as a representative of the intellectual atmosphere of his time but also as a fine thinker engaging with metaphysical, ethical, and existential issues in an original way (Joughin, 2000, Stewart, 2010). Similarly, *Zhuangzi*, often considered a philosophical text, has had and continues to have an undeniable impact on Chinese literature up to modern times (Liu 2016), not only for the ideas expressed in it, but also for its literary style. Victor H. Mair views *Zhuangzi* "primarily as a work of literature rather than as a work of philosophy" (Mair 1994: xi) and Arthur Waley affirms that "Chuang Tzu's appeal is to the imagination; [it] can be understood by anyone who knows how to read poetry" (Waley, 1939 ii).



In the present article, given my personal background, I will approach both texts from a philosophical rather than a literary perspective. Matters of style and composition will not be discussed, as they would exceed my knowledge of that field. However, I hope this article will be of some interest to those involved in literary as well as philosophical inquiries – for it concerns something as ungraspable, puzzling, and shapeshifting as our shared human experience of death.

## 2. Puzzles of mortality

Given its disruptive potential for both the individual and society, the diverse ways in which death has been historically experienced and interpreted often elude the conscious efforts of rationalization, emerging more vividly, instead, in artistic and literary forms. As Watson suggests,

> Modern Western cultures, like most others, have found it necessary to decorate, contextualize, and mythologize death, presumably to prevent a devastating loss of orientation and morale. Death is a kind of Medusa we can watch only as a reflection in our defensive shields, only in the secondary distortions it produces in the cultural field around it. […Such distortions] found expression primarily in the mythmaking functions of literature (Watson, 1994, p. 2-9).

Decorate, contextualize, mythologize: societies have always needed to give a plausible explanation of the mystery of death, a way to make sense of it, to incorporate it into an existential narrative, accommodate it and mitigate its disruptive power. Cultures clothe the naked rawness of death with myths and ideologies, making it socially acceptable. But just as clothes wear out with time and need to be replaced, similarly, whenever social conditions change and the role of humans has to be rethought, the old narratives of death come to be perceived as inadequate and have to be replaced, leaving us for a moment in the grip of the ancestral, uncomfortable anxiety of death. An old narrative is now recognized as a *mere narrative*, while a new one has to be affirmed as *the truth* in order to renew the illusion. This process mainly takes place in a subconscious way:

> The imaginative arts allow a human group to re-examine its definitions of morality and even of reality, without acknowledging the nature of the task. Otherwise the group would be obliged to acknowledge its morality and reality as arbitrary choices—which would destroy precisely the illusion it strives (at some collective preconscious level) to preserve (Watson, 1994, p. 1).

Both the Warring States and the English Renaissance were such periods of profound change in the understanding of humanity and its role in the cosmos. During *Zhuangzi*'s time, the decline of the Zhou dynasty challenged both social and natural orders, undermining the unity of the hierarchical structure in which everyone had a role, shaking the certainties about Heaven's will and opening the doors to a re-thinking of the existential perspective of the individual [5]. The fragmentation of the political scene and the constant wars between States provoked a remarkable social instability and proximity to death, evident in the often-debated topic of the function of funeral rites. Likewise, the conception of the human in 16th century England was changing profoundly due to the impact of the Scientific Revolution, the new geographical explorations, the Protestant Reformation, and the endemic recurrence of the plague[6]. Neill describes it as "a culture that was in throes of a peculiar crisis in the accommodation of death – one that reflected the strain of adjusting the psychic economy of an increasingly individualistic society to the stubborn facts of



[5] On the role of the individual in *Zhuangzi*, see Xu 2011, Huang 2010 and Slingerland 2004.
[6] In the space of less than a century, Columbus' discovery of the American continent in 1492 challenged the conception of humans and their place in the world; Copernicus' *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, published in 1543, relocated the Earth at the margins of the cosmos; the protestant rejection of the doctrine of purgatory in the mid-16th century disconnected the spirits of the dead from the world of the living, while the phenomenon of the *Danse Macabre* spread an enhanced awareness of human transience through Europe.

mortality" (Neill, 1997, p. 30). In Hamlet's meditation on death, continues Neill, we see "the shaping of a distinctively modern subject"[7].

It is by looking at these periods of change, of re-accommodation of death from old narratives into new mythologies, that a philosophical investigation of humans' encounter with death can be best conducted. Since an ideologic re-elaboration is in the making, some of the most fundamental existential puzzles re-emerge with all their disruptive urgency, demanding to be faced again. And if the same existential questions periodically emerge in such moments of "undressing and re-dressing" of death in different times and different cultures, this might be a sign that they derive from our shared experience of death *as humans*, or, at least, from the way in which death affects any *culture* as such.

In *Zhuangzi* and *Hamlet*, as culturally different as they are, at least three of these shared existential puzzles can be seen emerging in strikingly similar ways:

a) The first concerns the problem of uncertainty. The only thing we can be sure of is that, sooner or later, we will die; but, at the same time, we have no way to know what will happen after that event. We are aware that we are inevitably heading towards something unknown and unknowable.

b) The second puzzle regards the death of others. When someone else dies, the world keeps going on. I can observe it happen every day, see how death touches everyone, how it is the most universal thing. To some extent, I can even accept this as an inevitable fact that already happened innumerable times – and yet, the grief that I feel when I lose someone dear to me can hardly be accommodated by this. What I am forced to recognize as an inevitable law of nature, my emotions cannot tolerate.

c) The third relates to *my* death. Since I am a human being like the "others", I am aware that I will eventually share their same fate. But *my own* death still appears to me as completely different from the death of others: when I die, the world will end for me. I cannot observe *my* death as I can do with the others (in some sense, *my* death refuses to be imagined). Only I can die *my* death: it is the most individual thing. In other words, as Mark Johnston puts it:

> I (and here I use the mere indexical), that is, the human being Johnston, will die. A particular human being, one of the teeming horde, the one who has just used the first-person to pick himself out, will die. His mental and bodily life will cease to exist. When I think of this outcome in that way, my special concern for myself

[7] On the emergence of the modern individual and its connection with death, see also Ariès, 1981.

> need not be engaged. […] But in thus holding Johnston at such a distance, I am forgetting something. That human being is *me*, the one at the center of this arena of presence and action. When that human being dies this arena of presence and action will come to an end. That is my subjective death, my *ownmost* death, and it does jog my intense self-concern. My *ownmost* death is terrifying[8] (Johnston 2010, p. 158-159).

Both *Hamlet* and *Zhuangzi*, as we have said, face these three existential puzzles (the uncertainty of the afterlife, the death of others and *my* death), which will be the subject of sections 4 and 5. However, they deal with them starting from their own cultural backgrounds and mainstream narratives about life and death. The following section will thus discuss some aspects of these conceptual contexts, limited to what is relevant for the problem of death as we have framed it above.

### 3. To be or to transform: two cultural tendencies.

As already mentioned, Ancient Chinese and Elizabethan English cultures had many differences, which can only be pointed out concisely at the cost of considerable oversimplification[9]. For the purpose of this article, it will suffice to highlight how English (or any Indo-European) and Chinese languages tend to talk differently about existence – and therefore also about death – and how these differences emerge also in their respective philosophical elaborations.



We can find a trace of the linguistic differences in the difficulties faced by the Chinese translators of Hamlet, especially when it comes to the crucial line: "to be or not to be." Since there is no single term in the Chinese language that corresponds exactly to the verb "to be" in English (while an equivalent is usually present in other Indo-European languages), translators have to decide which aspects of the Hamletic question to preserve. Tian Han 田汉, author of the very first complete translation of *Hamlet* in Chinese in 1921, emphasized the question mark and the prince's uncertainty: "is it better to be alive or not to live?" (还是活着的好呢，还不活的好呢？, Tian 1922, p. 73). Shao Ting 邵挺, who in 1930 chose Classical Chinese for his version, reads it in the most practical way: "Do I kill myself? Or do I not?" (吾将自戕乎。抑不自戕乎, Shao, 1930, p. 66). In

[8] Johnston borrows the expression "my ownmost death" from Heidegger, to refer to what he calls the end of "this arena of presence and action". His efforts are aimed at elucidating the difference between the way in which I think of myself as one of the many human beings (that abstract person that happens to have my name and my biography) and the way in which I think of myself as the center of my perceptual environment and the source of my willed acts. On the relevance of this distinction for the problem of death, see the second lecture of his *Surviving Death* (Johnston 2010), in particular pages 136-161.

[9] See note 14.

the 1936 edition by Liang Shiqiu 梁实秋, the first to single-handedly translate the complete works of Shakespeare over the span of 38 years, this line is rendered as: "does the afterlife exist or not?" (死后还是存在，还是不存在, Liang, 2001, p. 135). Liang's translation can also be interpreted as "is the afterlife still existence or is it non-existence?", underlining the religious doubts Hamlet is facing while meditating suicide. Zhu Shenghao's 朱生豪 translation, by far the most influential and widespread in China since its appearance in 1947, reads: "to survive or to perish" (生存还是毁灭, Zhu, 1997, p. 123). In 1956, Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 tried to preserve both meaning and form of the original by translating: "keeping on living, or not living" (活下去还是不活, Bian, 2001, p. 71). More recently, Fang Ping 方平 suggested yet another version: "is it better to stay alive, or to quit living?" (活着好，还是别活下去了, Fang, 2014, p. 250). As Fang comments, this line is so difficult to render vividly that the translator must stop, as if there was almost no way to put it down on paper. He attempts an expanded translation in a footnote: "is it better to still have one breath left, or to be done with this life?" (一息尚存好，还是了却此生好, Fang, 2014, p. 250).

All these translations brilliantly capture distinct aspects of the Hamletic question. They manage to grasp the existential dread of a living person pondering whether life is worth living or not, while, at the same time, being blind in front of that absolute threshold that is the mystery of death. But in doing so, these translations have to sacrifice, to varying extents, the logical structure of the original English: "to be or not be", A or non-A, *tertium non datur*. "To be" becomes "to live" in Chinese, and "not to be" becomes "to perish, to kill oneself, to quit living"; The logical relation between one thing (A) and its opposite (non-A) becomes a contrast of dynamics, of processes: keeping-on-A versus ending-of-A[10]. Far from being untranslatable, this crucial line nonetheless compels Chinese translators to bend their language and play with it, creatively finding the resources available in order to express, refracted like a prism, the implicit multilayered meaning of the original.



Similar differences also appear in more general conceptual elaborations. In Aristotle (as in *Hamlet*), existence and non-existence are clearly distinguished: substances can only come-to-be (*generatio*) or cease-to-be (*corruptio*), like an on-off switch, with no intermediate state between

[10] It is worth noting that another common (even though less authoritative) translation is "to do or not to do" (做还是不做), which keeps the logical structure at the expenses of the literal meaning. Somewhat similarly, the Italian translator Cesare Garboli was tempted to render "to be or not to be" as "to act or not to act" (*agire o non agire*) to maintain the iambic rhythm, but eventually resigned to the more literal *essere o non essere* (Garboli, 2009, p. 209).

the two. All the possible changes concern only their attributes[11]. Such a notion of substance (so foundational in Western philosophy) plays little role in early Chinese thought and especially in Daoism, where the most constitutive aspect of reality is change: existence and non-existence are integral parts of the same transformation. "According to Chinese folk belief," suggest Peng and Nisbett, "existence is not static but dynamic and changeable. At the deepest level of Chinese philosophical thinking, 'to be or not to be' is not the question because life is a constant passing from one stage of being to another, so that to be is not to be, and not to be is to be" (Peng and Nisbett,1999, p. 743).

These linguistic and conceptual differences point towards two perspectives on life and death, that we could call the "individual" and "cosmic" perspectives. According to the individual perspective, life is seen from within: life is *my* life, death is *my* death, and therefore they are *unica* for me. The end of my life is the end of my entire world. On the other hand, the cosmic perspective sees life from without, as part of a wider transformational context of which my personal existence is nothing but a step among many others, a leg of the journey. The world will go on after my death. We can visualize these two perspectives (and have a glimpse of how they emerge throughout the history of the European and Chinese traditions) by comparing these two paintings:



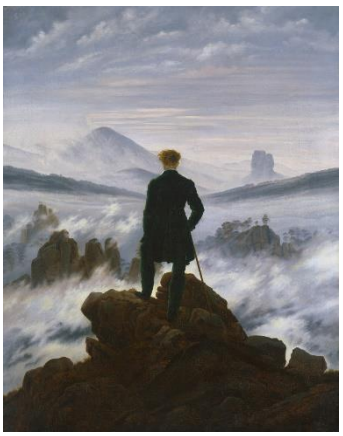

Fig. 1 – Caspar David Friedrich. *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*.
1817. Oil on canvas, 94.8 × 74.8 cm.
Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg (Germany).
*www.online-sammlung.hamburger-kunsthalle.de*

Fig. 2 – Shitao 石涛. *Illustrations to the Poems of Huang Yanlü* (first leaf) 黄砚旅诗意图 之一. 1701-1702. Ink and color on paper, 20.8 × 34.5 cm. Collection of the Palace Museum 北京故宫博物院藏, Beijing (China).
*www.dpm.org.cn*

[11] On the difference between substantial change and accidental change, see Aristotle's *Physics* V.1-2.

In Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Mist* we are aligned with the point of view of the main figure who is standing upright, proudly in the middle of the vertical central axis of the painting. The spatial composition has sometimes been described as a geometric ordering of an orderless phenomenon, that unfathomable sea of mist from which rocky peaks emerge, whose ultimate meaning goes beyond our power of judgement.[12] Shitao's 石涛 wanderer is also "gazing at the sea of fog" (*kan hai qi* 看海气), but here the man is not the main focus. On the contrary, he is a little figure, on a side, just a part of the indistinct and dynamic wholeness of the landscape, incorporated in the cosmic fabric[13]. The mist here is not primarily a veil that conceals from sight and blocks our knowledge, but rather that which connects, blurring the boundaries between the mountains, the shrubs, and the human figures.

These two perspectives on existence, the individual and the cosmic, emerge as conceptual tendencies in the Western and the Chinese traditions, respectively[14]. When considered in connection with the problem of death, they seem to mirror the considerations made about *my* death and the death of others, both incorporating the element of uncertainty in the picture. It is worth noting, however, that the emphasis each perspective places on one side of the problem of death does not eliminate the intrinsic tension it generates: the individual and the cosmic perspectives are not *solutions* to the existential puzzles, but rather *frameworks* in which these puzzles have been historically approached and discussed. While facing the same questions about death, in fact, Hamlet uses Western concepts such as substance, identity and the courage to choose; Zhuangzi, on the other hand, has to elaborate on the Chinese cosmic ideas of transformation, fate and detachment.



[12] It has been suggested that the man in the picture might be Colonel von Brincken, a friend of Friedrich who fought in the Saxon army and died few years before during the Napoleonic Wars (Haladyn, 2016). This picture, therefore, might depict a dead man looking at that unfathomable mist of life and death.

[13] The poem, written by Huang Yanlü 黄砚旅 (1661 – 1725), reads: 挠首青天起紫虛，凌高四顧意何如。漢家城闕朱垣在，何氏園林碧艸餘。吐納成虹看海氣，迢遙無鴈寄鄉書。拖藍曳翠山千疊，斷江南使者車. Very roughly: "I scratch my head as the blue sky turns purple, climb high to look around how it is like. The red watchtowers of Han's city palace are still there, the He family's garden over-grown with grass. I breathe into the rainbow and gaze at the sea of fog: in such a vast distance there is not a wild goose [it might refer to Buddhist pagodas] to send a letter home. Blue-dragging, green-stretching mountains endlessly repeat, cutting off the envoys' carriages from the south of the Yangtze."

[14] I use the term "tendency" in order to avoid any reference to a supposed Chinese or Western "identity". The concept of "culture" is here used (just as "Western", "European" or "Chinese") as an interpretative tool necessary to discuss general tendencies that not only admit but *take for granted* the existence of exceptions and nuances. These generalizations can be made only at the expenses of their universal applicability. When we say that a culture is so and so, this should be taken as when we say that the surface of a lake is flat: i.e., we are looking at it from afar, on the background of the mountains that surround it, and purposefully ignoring that, if looked closely, a myriad waves appear. For a thorough discussion of this and similar issues in transcultural philosophy, see Rošker, 2021.

From our point of view, none of these analyses is irrelevant: we can take the advantage of viewing the puzzles from both sides, learning from philosophical elaborations whose inspiring depth could only be reached within specific cultural tendencies.

In the next sections, I will analyze how the puzzles of uncertainty, the death of others and *my* death are tackled in *Hamlet* (imbued by the individual perspective) and *Zhuangzi* (by the cosmic one). The closing section will directly compare the two encounters with the skull – passages in which, for a moment, the two perspectives seem to switch places.

## 4. The individual perspective in *Hamlet*

Shakespeare's soliloquies have often been considered key steps in the dramatization of the changes and doubts the existential consciousness was experiencing at the turn of the modern age[15]. In the "to be or not to be" monologue of act 3 of *Hamlet*, uncertainty plays a pivotal role: the afterlife is looked at as that "undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns", setting an irreversible threshold from life to eternal death. While meditating suicide or revenge against his uncle, in fact, Hamlet ponders the suffering, injustice and misfortunes of life, wondering what prevents humans from taking actions against this "sea of troubles" to put an end to it. This, reflects Hamlet, is in the first place the fear that death might not be a real end, but just a dream:



> …to die: to sleep –
> To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there'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.
> […] Who would fardels bear
> To grunt and sweat under a weary life
> But that the dread of something after death
> (The undiscovered country from whose bourn
> No traveller returns) puzzles the will
> And makes us rather bear those ills we have

[15] On the role of soliloquies and for a critique of the clear demarcation between the medieval and the modern consciousnesses, see Shakespeare, 2006, p. 18-25.

Than fly to others that we know not of.

Thus conscience does make cowards – (*Hamlet* 3.1.63-82, p. 285-287)[16].

Hamlet's dilemma, as Thompson and Taylor comment, concerns the "fear of punishment after death" (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 287): with the Protestant Reform and the abolition of the doctrine of the purgatory, the doubts about the afterlife are for Hamlet especially concerning. The uncertainty about the fate of his soul after death is metaphorically portrayed as a dream that could turn into a nightmare and from which it is impossible to wake back up. This uncertainty will end only at the moment of his death, when his destiny of eternal peace or damnation will be revealed. As Neill has pointed out,

> Death has two guises in *Hamlet*: it is both dreaded and longed for; it is that which renders life senseless, and that which completes and makes sense of life; it is at once end-as-termination and end-as-purpose, *finis* and *telos*. To Hamlet, in his most celebrated soliloquy, it is the desired point of rest, offering an 'end' to all the sufferings of the restless and tormented self – 'a consummation devoutly to be wished'. Hamlet's nightmare here is 'the dread of something *after* death' – the fear that it may prove only a false ending (Neill, 1997, p. 217).



Hamlet's dilemma thus oscillates between the fear of death as the unfathomable enigma, and the desire of death as the revealing moment in which all uncertainties and anxieties will vanish. This paradox traps Hamlet in a life of suffering and injustice, but, at the same time, gives him full power to act in this specific lifespan that death has allotted him, providing meaning, purpose, and uniqueness. A power to act, however, as we will see, that Hamlet fails to exercise, at least until the concluding event of the duel.

But the meaning, purpose and uniqueness of each human life are primarily challenged by the death of others. In the troubled times of the late medieval plagues in Europe, transience was an often-experienced element of social and existential anxiety:

> Vermiculation is an occasion less of physical disgust than of social outrage, because it is the process that renders the royal indistinguishable from the vile, the rich from the poor, the human from the inhuman, the animate from the inanimate. It is [...] the violation and confusion of the most fundamental of all natural boundaries. […] Since the rites of funeral represent a traditional society's last line of defence against mortality, the horror of mass death is always most painfully felt in the breakdown of burial custom (Neill, 1997, p. 12-18).

[16] Section numbering for *Hamlet* follows the indication of act, scene and line, with further reference to the respective page in the Arden edition (Shakespeare, 2006). For example: (*Hamlet* act.scene.line; pages-in-Arden).

The relevance of funerals as a way to preserve social order against the leveling force of death can be seen in the fifth act, when the two gravediggers discuss the legitimacy of giving Ophelia a Christian burial, given the suspicion that she committed suicide. Has she gone to Heaven? Has she gone to Hell? The uncertainty has disappeared *for her*, but not *for us*. "If this had not been a gentlewoman," comments one of them, "she should have been buried out o'Christian burial" (*Hamlet* 5.1.23-25, p. 411). This is confirmed by the reluctant words the priest speaks a bit later: "Her obsequies have been as far enlarged as we have warranty. Her death was doubtful; and but that great command o'ersways the order she should in ground unsanctified been lodged till the last trumpet"[17] (*Hamlet* 5.1.215-219, p. 426). Ophelia is ultimately buried as a fair lady, but only due to the existence of social distinctions that would have otherwise been threatened.

The funeral, nonetheless, fails to follow the proper course. The priest's speech and the doubts raised on Ophelia's immaculateness, in fact, trigger Laertes' over-emphatic reaction:

> I tell thee, churlish priest,
> A ministering angel shall my sister be
> When thou liest howling[18].
> […] Hold off the earth awhile,
> Till I have caught her once more in mine arms.
> *Leaps in the grave.*
> Now pile your dust upon the quick[19] and dead
> Till of this flat a mountain you have made
> T'o'ertop old Pelion[20] or the skyish head
> Of blue Olympus. (*Hamlet* 5.1.229-243, p. 427-428).



Laertes' reaction shows his attachment to Ophelia, the impetuous refusal to let her go and acknowledge her disappearance. The overwhelming emotions arising from loss seem to instinctively challenge the leveling force of death. Laertes symbolically jumps in the grave and asks to be buried together with the sister, as if the only way to give justice to her death and make it

[17] *...but that great command o'ersways the order*: only because of the command of powerful people (the king) the normal proceeding of burying her in unsanctified land has been overruled.
[18] *...howling*: in hell.
[19] *...the quick*: the living.
[20] *Pelion*: mount in Greece. According to the myth, the Titans piled up mount Pelion on top of mount Ossa in an attempt to reach the height of Mount Olympus and conquer it.

meaningful were to end with her, to extinguish *his* world together with hers. Isn't there – seems to suggest Laertes – a specific, deep type of guilt in keeping on living when someone dear perishes? Wouldn't that show that we can go on without them, after all? Will each of us be annihilated and forgotten, eventually? Hamlet himself, at this point of the play, cannot bear such a conclusion:

> This is I, Hamlet the Dane.
>
> *Hamlet leapes in after Leartes.*[21]
>
> […] I loved Ophelia — forty thousand brothers
> Could not with all their quantity of love
> Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?
> […] Woul't weep, woul't fight, woul't fast, woul't tear thyself,
> Woul't drink up eisel, eat a crocodile?
> ll do't. Dost come here to whine,
> To outface me with leaping in her grave?
> Be buried quick with her, and so will I (*Hamlet* 5.1.244-268, p. 428-431).



The pain of Hamlet and Laertes seems impossible to bear, the trivial truth that "all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity"[22] has somehow to be rejected. But if the grief does not allow them to accept her death and keep on living peacefully, dying with her is not an option either: both Hamlet and Laertes jump in the grave, but none of them complete the act.

The only solution is found in holding on to their sorrow to keep her alive in memory. The hyperbolic dimensions of the imagined mound (compared to mythical mountains such as the Olympus), the weeping, fighting, fasting, tearing oneself – these expressions of pain serve as a manifestation of the strength and depth of the emotional distress: the more insurmountable the pain, the longer they will hang on to her memory. This is also why, terrified and shivering in the first act, Hamlet deplores so much how fast his mother has forgotten the old king: "But two months dead — nay not so much, not two — […] Must I remember? […] And yet within a month – Let me not think on't" (*Hamlet* 1.2.138-146, p. 177).

[21] The indication of Hamlet leaping into the grave to join Laertes appears only in the *First Quarto*, while other versions of *Hamlet* have Laertes jumping out of the grave to attack the prince. However, this is how this scene has often been played in theatres given the symbolic strength of this image. (see Shakespeare 2006: 428-429, note 247).
[22] With these words the Queen tries to console Hamlet after the death of his father in act 1 (*Hamlet* 1.2.72, p. 171).

When the moment of his *own* death comes, Hamlet himself spends his last breaths to make sure that his memory will go on:

> I am dead, Horatio. Wretched Queen, adieu.
> You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
> That are but mutes or audience to this act,
> Had I but time (as this fell sergeant Death
> Is strict in his arrest) — O, I could tell you —
> But let it be. Horatio, I am dead.
> Thou livest: report me and my cause aright
> To the unsatisfied.
> […] If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart
> Absent thee from felicity awhile
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
> - To tell my story (*Hamlet* 5.2.317-333, p. 457-459).

Just like the ghost of his father, whose last words to him in act 1 are "Remember me!" (*Hamlet* 1.5.91, p. 218), Hamlet begs Horatio (the only witness to the whole series of events) to tell his story accurately, so that his actions, intentions, and words can be properly transmitted to posterity. Hamlet the Dane overcomes his annihilation, literally and literarily, by means of narrated memories – but *for him*, for his *own* individual perspective, "the rest is silence" (*Hamlet* 5.2.343, p. 460).



The appeal to memory, as well as Hamlet's last deeds (where he finally exercises his power to act by fulfilling the revenge promised to the ghost), constitutes an act of rebellion against Death the Leveller: a total affirmation of *my* life, *my* will and *my* individuality to challenge the "strict sergeant" that erases every distinction into oblivion. In *Hamlet*, the individual perspective throws down the gauntlet to the cosmic perspective, reaffirming that *my* existence, this specific arena of presence and action, cannot be taken out of the equation as irrelevant.

## 5. The cosmic perspective in *Zhuangzi*

Uncertainty plays an undeniable role in *Zhuangzi* as well, but while Hamlet fears the possibility that the afterlife might turn out to be worse than life, Zhuangzi flips the perspective and sees in this uncertainty a reason to dissolve existential anxiety:

> How do I know that in hating death I am not like an orphan who left home in youth and no longer knows the way back? Lady Li was a daughter of the border guard of Ai. When she was first captured and brought to Qin, she wept until tears drenched her collar. But when she got to the palace, sharing the king's luxurious

> bed, and feasting on the finest meats, she regretted her tears. How do I know that the dead don't regret the way they used to cling to life? (*Zhuangzi* 2.12, p. 20)[23].

The argument, here, is not simply a reversal from a pessimist to an optimistic view on what might wait for us in the afterlife. Zhuangzi frames this story between two instances of the question "how do I know?" (*yu wuhu zhi* 予惡乎知), neither affirming that the afterlife will be better nor denying it. Guo Xiang 郭象 (252-312 CE), the first collector of *Zhuangzi*, makes this point explicitly in his comment:

> As one takes pleasure in life when alive, so might one take pleasure in death when dead. […] Looking at it from this point of view, when one is dead, one also might not be aware that he is dead but still feel that everything is going just right for him[24] (Lynn, 2022, p. 48).

If Hamlet is certain about being alive, awake, and therefore terrified by what nightmares might come in his sleep of death, Zhuangzi drifts in much greater doubt. The certainty of knowing what being alive means is precisely the object of his criticism:

> While dreaming you don't know it's a dream. You might even interpret a dream in your dream – and then you wake up and realize it was all a dream. Perhaps a great awakening would reveal all of this to be a vast dream. And yet the foolish imagine they are already awake […] Confucius and you are both dreaming! And when I say you're dreaming, I'm dreaming too (*Zhuangzi* 2.12, p. 20).



For Zhuangzi, the living person has no way to tell whether she is already in a dream or not, and this doubt is there to stay: even if, at the end of our life, we awaken and realize it was nothing but a dream, we will still have no way to tell whether *at that point* we are truly awake or have just fallen into a new dream. As Zhang Binglin 章炳麟 explains:

> The metaphor of dreaming and waking does not mean that life is a dream and death is an awakening[25]. The great awakening from the great dream means that one knows life to be a dream, and thus one does not seek long life, but equally one knows that both life and death are dreams, and so one does not seek the quiescence of death either (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 159).

Death should not be feared nor longed for, because it is not revealing: we cannot be certain that at the moment of our death our uncertainties will disappear. For this very reason, on the other hand, death cannot work, in *Zhuangzi*, as the source of meaning and purpose for life: it is neither

[23] Section numbering for *Zhuangzi* follows: *ctext.org/zhuangzi* (accessed on 20 March 2024), with further reference to the respective page in Ziporyn 2020. For example: (*Zhuangzi* chapter.paragraph; pages-in-Ziporyn). The Chinese edition of reference is Guo 1961.
[24] 故生時樂生，則死時樂死矣 […] 由此觀之，當死之時，亦不知其死而自適其志也。 (Guo, 1961, p. 105).
[25] This would be a mere reversal of Hamlet's metaphor.

*finis* nor *telos*, nothing to be worried about but also nothing we can rely on for salvation. Death is just a passage of consciousness from dream to dream, and uncertainty, thus, is an essential and inescapable aspect of experience that will never vanish.

In fact, uncertainty is omnipresent precisely because transformation itself is omnipresent – a crucial factor in the elaboration of the death of others, as the story of Mengsun 孟孫 in chapter 6 reveals:

> Yan Hui went to question Confucius. "When his mother died, Mengsun the Prodigy wailed but shed no tears, unsaddened in the depths of his heart, observing the mourning but without real sorrow. Lacking tears, inner sadness, and real grief, he nonetheless gained a reputation as an exemplary mourner. […] I find the whole thing very strange."
>
> Confucius said, "[…] This Mr. Mengsun doesn't know why he lives nor why he dies[26]. His non-knowing applies equally to what went before and what is yet to come. Having already transformed into some particular being, he takes it as no more than a waiting for the next unknown transformation, nothing more. For indeed, how could someone still in the midst of a transformation know anything about what he will be when done with this transformation, about what he has not yet transformed into? And how could someone who has undergone a transformation know anything about what has already transformed away, what is over and gone? Even to think I am being specifically here right now with specifically you; is it just that we have not yet begun to awaken from this dream? As for him, […] what he experiences are morning wakings to ever new homes rather than the death of any previous realities. This Mr. Mengsun alone awakens. Others cry, so he cries too. And that is of course the only reason he does so" (*Zhuangzi* 6.7; p. 61).



The complete acceptance of constant uncertainty leads to "waiting for the next unknown transformation, nothing more", never expecting that what was before will still be there the next morning. This absolute detachment from the past as well as from the future is what prevents Mengsun from experiencing bothering emotions such as anxiety and grief. As Lü Huiqing 呂惠卿 (1032–1111) comments, by "going after neither what went before nor what was to come, he had no reason to delight in death or sigh over life" (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 203). For the same reason, emphasizes Guo Xiang, he "makes no resistance to wherever he may go, so when others cry, he cries too" (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 202). Paradoxically, the absence of sorrow is what allows Mengsun

[26] To avoid misunderstanding caused by the extrapolation of the quotation, I have changed slightly the translation of this line, that in Ziporyn's version reads: "[he] understands nothing about why he lives or why he dies". The point is not that Mengsun's behavior lacks wisdom, but, on the contrary, that he deeply understands how transformation works and thus does not bother his mind with considerations about life and death. Legge tries to express this meaning by translating: "[he] does not know either what purposes life serves, or what death serves".

to follow the funeral rites exactly as conventionally prescribed, gaining a reputation as an exemplary mourner: it is precisely by accepting the impermanence of humans that we can preserve the social function of funerals.

Mengsun's figure has to be considered an ideal model, the way in which a sage behaves once he has fully identified with transformation itself. A more realistic case takes place in chapter 18 of *Zhuangzi*, where Zhuangzi's wife has just died and his friend Huizi goes to his house to console him, only to find him playing music and singing:

> Huizi said, "You live with someone, raise children with her, grow old with her—not crying over her death is enough already, isn't it? But to go so far as to pound on a washtub and sing, isn't that going too far?"
> Zhuangzi said, "No, it's not. When she first died, how could I not feel grief just like anyone else? But then I considered closely how it had all begun: previously, before she was born, there was no life there. Not only no life: no physical form. Not only no physical form: not even energy[27]. Then in the course of some heedless mingling mishmash a change occurred and there was energy, and then this energy changed and there was a physical form, and then this form changed and there was life. Now there has been another change and she is dead. This is how she participates in the making of the spring and the autumn, of the winter and the summer. For the moment a human lies stiffened here, slumbering in this enormous house. And yet there I was getting all weepy, even going on to wail over her. Even to myself I looked like someone without any understanding of fate. So I stopped" (*Zhuangzi* 18.2; p. 145-146).



Zhuangzi exorcises the dread of annihilation by considering life and death as parts of a wider transformational context, steps in the cyclic, never-ending folding and unfolding of reality. But in this passage, he does not deny grief. The pain deriving from the loss of his wife is the very first, spontaneous reaction to the event. Making no resistance to whatever comes includes accepting the emergence of sorrow as well as her demise. The acknowledgement of change as the fundamental aspect of reality can then exert a therapeutic effect: there is no specific guilt in keeping on living while someone dear perishes, because life and death are not as clearly distinguished as in *Hamlet*, but simply different segments of the same transformation – the sorrow of loss, as real as it is, is a part of transformation too.

In order to achieve this therapeutic effect, however, fixed and conventional rules of mourning are generally not helpful. Zhuangzi's singing and playing on a washtub is his specific

[27] "Energy" here renders the Chinese *qi* 氣, literally "(vital) breath" or "life force, the absence of which constitutes a living creature's death […]. It has no one fixed form and is composed of no fundamental building blocks such as atoms or particles; rather, it is constantly in a process of transformation, congealing and dispersing" (Ziporyn, 2020, p. 282).

way of mourning his wife, accepting his grief and slowly letting it dissolve, a way that does not align with the conventional practice of mourning; Mengsun's wailing, on the other hand, since he is already devoid of any pain, can follow the social custom to the letter.

This tension that sorrow of loss causes in the cosmic perspective – at least apart from ideal cases such as Mengsun's – does not find a definitive solution. It can be seen at work at the end of chapter 32, when Zhuangzi himself is about to undergo his *own* death:

> When Zhuangzi was dying, his disciples wanted to prepare a lavish funeral for him.
> Zhuangzi said to them, "I will have Heaven and Earth for my coffin and crypt, the sun and moon for my paired jades, the stars and constellations for my round and oblong gems, all creatures for my tomb gifts and pallbearers. My funeral accoutrements are already fully prepared! What could possibly be added?"
> "But we fear the crows and vultures will eat you, Master," said they.
> Zhuangzi said, "Above ground I'll be eaten by crows and vultures, below ground by ants and crickets. Now you want to rob the one to feed the other. What brazen favoritism!" (*Zhuangzi,* 32.16, p. 264).



Zhuangzi, at the verge of *his* death, seems perfectly ready to accept the transformation that is about to overwhelm him. What remains problematic for him is not that his disciples feel sorrow for their master's departure, but the fact that they wish to manifest that grief with a lavish funeral, complete with all the conventionally prescribed elements: internal and external coffins, *bi* 璧 (a circular disk of jade with a round hole in the center, placed in the grave of a person of high social or moral status to symbolize his connection with the sky), jewels and so on. This type of funeral serves to worship and preserve the memory of the dead in the social world, but this memory is precisely what Zhuangzi, in order to completely accept his inevitable transformation, must reject. Attachment to one's identity and to the "traces" left behind among the living (especially if in the form of the respected memory of a teacher) are for Zhuangzi a danger, as Guo Xiang remarks in his annotations:

> Fundamental in Guo's commentary is his concept of "footprints" [*ji* 跡] – that is, the recollections in legends and accounts of sagely thought, action, behavior, and pronouncement that, since these always fall short of the realities involved, falsely establish standards for people to follow, which then corrupt natural inclinations to the good and damage original personal nature (Lynn, 2022, p. lxx).

In his last lesson to his disciples, Zhuangzi admonishes them against the fixedness of memory and advises against taking even his own teachings as traces to be followed slavishly: "The

traces should be discarded when their time has passed; otherwise they become a clog in the works of unceasing change, a stagnant impediment to the ever-new self-so." (Ziporyn, 1993, p. 522).

In response to the challenge posed by *Hamlet* from the individual perspective, *Zhuangzi* replies by affirming the unshakeable truth of the cosmic perspective as a way to dissolve the horror of absolute annihilation: it is not that substances *are* and change – substances are *phases of* change, and this specific arena of presence and action from which *my own* death seems so terrifying is nothing but a dream.

## 6. Questioning the skull

So far, we have shown how the individual perspective dominates *Hamlet*'s reasoning, while the cosmic perspective works as a foundation for *Zhuangzi*'s philosophy. However, the last comparison between the two will reveal how these two points of view are interrelated, like two sides of the same coin. During their encounters with a skull, in fact, both Zhuangzi and Hamlet are induced to flip their perspectives, catching a glimpse of the opposite attitude towards mortality.



For *Hamlet*, this happens in the first act of the fifth scene, right before Ophelia's funeral. The prince, still unaware of his lady's death, is walking with Horatio when they stumble upon a singing gravedigger:

> GRAVEDIGGER (*Sings*): But age with his stealing steps
> Hath clawed me in his clutch
> And hath shipped me into the land
> As if I had never been such.
>
> *Throws up a skull.*
>
> HAMLET: That skull had a tongue in it and could sing once. […] This might be the pate of a politician […] — one that would circumvent God, might it not? […] Or of a courtier which could say, 'Good morrow, sweet lord, how dost thou, sweet lord?' This might be my Lord Such-a-One, that praised my Lord Such-a-One's horse when 'a went to beg it, might it not? […] There's another! Why, may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now — his quillets, his cases, his tenures and his tricks? […] This fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. To have his fine pate full of fine dirt! (*Hamlet* 5.1.67-101, p. 415-417).

The first thought triggered by the view of skulls revolves around the leveling force of death: nothing in those bare bones can indicate anything about the wealth, power, erudition, or social status of the humans they once were. This leveling force, which obliterates memories and destroys

identities, is not only felt as repulsive, but also as absurd and puzzling: "Here's fine revolution an we had the trick to see't"[28] (*Hamlet* 5.1.85, p. 416).

This first thought goes a step further when the gravedigger unearths the skull of Yorick, the old king's jester, and the imagination of the skulls' possible past lives is replaced by the actual memory of a specific person:

> Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your jibes now — your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning, quite chapfallen. Now get you to my lady's table and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that (*Hamlet* 5.1.174-184, p. 422-423).

Hamlet's bitter-sweet last words mark the turning point of his perspective. Initially suggested as a provocation – not even Yorick, who used to make people laugh for a living, can make the living laugh at *this* –, this line subtly opens a window for the ironic, even comic aspect of such a "fine revolution". Continues Hamlet:



> Dost thou think Alexander looked o'this fashion i'th' earth? […] Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bung-hole? […] Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel? (*Hamlet* 5.1.187-201, p. 423-424).

The cosmic perspective that sees life and death as nothing but changes in an infinite, never-ending transformational context, appears here to cross the boundaries of absurd and comic. "Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay, might stop a hole to keep the wind away." (*Hamlet* 5.1.202-203; 424) The ironic tension that emerges at this point is not only a product of the contrast between the majesty of Alexander the Great or Ceasar and the irrelevance of the cork they turn into, but also between the existential gravity of this transformation and the merry detached tone with which it is described.

This very type of existential irony is a key-feature of *Zhuangzi*. The four friends of chapter six constitute an emblematic example: when Zilai 子來 fell ill and was on the verge of death, his friend Zili 子犁 went to visit and commented: "How great is the Process of Creation-Transformation! What will it make you become, where will it send you? Will it make you into a

[28] "This would be an admirable alteration [or reversal, especially of social hierarchy], if we had the ability to understand it."

mouse's liver? Or perhaps an insect's arm?" (*Zhuangzi* 6.5, p. 59) Similarly, when Ziyu 子輿 was in the process of dying, his friend Zisi 子祀 went to visit him:

> "Wow!" said Ziyu, "The Creator of Things has really gone and tangled me up!".
> Zisi said, "Do you dislike it?"
> Ziyu said, "No, what is there to dislike in such a demise? Perhaps he will transform my left arm into a rooster; thereby I'll be announcing the dawn. Perhaps he will transform my right arm into a crossbow pellet; thereby I'll be hunting down an owl to roast. Perhaps he will transform my backside into a pair of wheels and my spirit into a horse; thereby I'll keep on riding along" (*Zhuangzi*, 6.5, p. 58).

The reverse movement takes place in chapter 18 of *Zhuangzi*, where, this time, is the Chinese philosopher who stumbles on a skull:

> Zhuangzi traveled to Chu, where he came upon an empty skull, all whitened and brittle but still retaining its shape. He poked it with his riding crop and then asked it, "Did you come to this because your greed for life made you do something out of order, sir? Or did you come to this in the service of some failing state, meeting with the punishment of an ax or hatchet? Or did you come to this because of some evil behavior that brought disgrace to your parents and wife and children? Or did you come to this because cold and hunger overtook you? Or did you come to this simply because your springs and autumns brought you to it?" When he had finished with his questions, Zhuangzi hugged the skull toward him as his pillow and went to sleep on it (*Zhuangzi* 18.4, p. 146).



The questions initially posed are remarkably similar to Hamlet's, in that they too wonder about what life this person had lived before turning into a skull. Zhuangzi's attitude seems, at first, merrily detached from the gravity of the existential issue, so much that he uses the skull as a pillow. But, like a voice from the subconscious, the skull comes to undermine the solidity of his sentiment:

> In the middle of the night, the skull appeared to him in a dream, and said, "Your words sound like those of a skilled debater. But considered closely, all I see in them are the burdens that are always tying down the living. When you are dead, all such things are gone. […] When you're dead, you have no ruler above you, no subjects below you, none of the tasks of the four seasons. Floating untethered and with nothing to do, heaven and earth are to you as spring and autumn. Even the happiness of a king on his throne cannot surpass that."
> Zhuangzi did not believe him. "If I could make the controller of fate[29] restore your body to life, fashioning again your bones and flesh and skin, and return you

[29] As Erker already observed, "The idea of a personified Death, as it occurs in Europe […], seems always to have been foreign to the Chinese" (Erkes, 1939, p. 194). The closest figure in Chinese mythology might be *Siming* 司命, the Controller of Fate or Manager of Allotments: "Neither an 'Angel of Death' nor exactly a 'Grim Reaper,' the early Chinese Manager of Allotments was a bureaucratic entity that was integrated into multiple pantheons of deities responsible for personal wellbeing. His particular function was to keep track of aging and death" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2011, p. 180). The only occurrence of *Siming* in the whole *Zhuangzi* is in this dialogue with the skull.

> to your parents and your wife and your children, to your old home and all your friends, wouldn't you want that?" (*Zhuangzi* 18.4; 146).

Zhuangzi himself, here, seems to struggle to let go the importance of life and identity (one's own body: bones, flesh, and skin; one's individual relations: your parents, wife, children, and friends). But the skull quickly marks this attitude as unreasonable:

> The skull knitted its brows, glaring at him intensely, and said, "Why in the world would I sacrifice the happiness of a king on his throne to return to the toils of being a living person?"[30] (*Zhuangzi* 18.4, p. 146).

The skull's answer has nothing to do with a detached acceptance of transformation. Its expression is severe, its eyes fierce, and its affirmation of death over life irrevocable. For the skull, death is happiness *precisely because* life is toil and suffering, worries and obligations. Far from the ironic friends of chapter six, for whom "what makes my life good is what makes my death good" (*Zhuangzi* 6.5; 59), the skull declares life as a "sea of troubles" and death as a "consummation devoutly to be wished". Zhuangzi has no reply, and the dialogue is thus interrupted, leaving the reader in the paradoxical impasse between to be or not to be.[31]



**Conclusive remarks**

We have seen how *Hamlet* and *Zhuangzi*, operating in radically different cultural contexts, try to make sense of death from almost opposite perspectives. Hamlet curbs the doubts about the afterlife by considering death as a uniquely revealing event, whereas Zhuangzi accepts uncertainty as a constitutive element of life in order to alleviate the anxiety of not-knowing. Hamlet holds into the sorrow he feels from the loss of Ophelia to keep her alive in memory, while Zhuangzi embraces the inevitability of transformation as a therapeutic way to assuage his grief after his wife's death. With their last breaths, Hamlet asks to be remembered, Zhuangzi to be forgotten. Although these perspectives – the individual and the cosmic – can be identified as two cultural tendencies within, respectively, the European and the Chinese (especially Daoist) traditions, they represent two ways

[30] We could note the mirroring opposition of the only two voices that talk from the afterlife: the ghost of Hamlet's father, condemned to "sulphurous and tormenting flames" in what he describes as a "prison-house" (*Hamlet* 1.5.1-22, p. 211-212) and the skull in *Zhuangzi*'s story, happier than a "king on his throne." (*Zhuangzi* 18.4, p. 146).

[31] David Chai's article on Heidegger and Zhuangzi touches most of the points and themes which have been the focus of this study, identifying, I believe, differences between the German and the Chinese philosophers compatible with the scheme above delineated. However, his interpretation of the skull story differs from mine significantly. According to Chai, "The skull is not arguing that death is preferable to life." (Chai, 2016, p. 489).

of looking at death that we all, as humans, can relate to. The two dialogues with the skull show that the cosmic perspective also finds a place in Hamlet's meditations, just like the individual perspective is not foreign to Zhuangzi's reflections. As humans, we are always in this paradoxical state of considering our death from both the individual perspective – for what *my* death means to *me* – and the cosmic one – for what it means in the constant universal process of transformation. This tension manifests as tragic when seen from within, ironic when seen from without. The skull, both in *Hamlet* and in *Zhuangzi*, serves as a pivotal symbol of this paradoxicality; at the same time, the skull of someone else that can be ruthlessly observed and testifies the inevitability of transformation, and a double of *my* skull, which I can never hold directly in my hand, tangible *memento* of the inaccessibility of *my ownmost* death. A riddle of bones that we, the living, across cultures and languages, cannot but keep questioning.

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