# …And Justice for You: Metallica, Existentialism and the Crisis of Identity

**Tudor LIȚCANU**
littudor@gmail.com
Ştefan cel Mare University of Suceava (Romania)

**Résumé :** Le but de cet article est de mettre en relation deux sphères culturelles distinctes – la musique métal et la philosophie existentielle, afin de démontrer le fait que la musique extrême de Metallica, symbole culturel de la culture contemporaine américaine et de l'industrie de la musique, incarne, dans une certaine mesure, la pensée existentialiste, la retransformant pour les auditeurs, y compris des auditeurs amateurs et érudits.

**Mots-clés :** *musique, pensée existentialiste, symbole culturel, culture contemporaine américaine.*

The purpose of this article is to put in front two distinct cultural spheres – Metal music and the Existential philosophy, in order to demonstrate the fact that the Extreme music of Metallica, a cultural symbol of the American contemporary culture and of the music industry, embodies to a certain extent the Existentialist thought, retransforming it for the listeners, which includes people from amateur listeners to scholars.

"*The great truth is there isn't one"* (Mgła – Exercises in Futility I). This is what the Polish Black Metal Mgła says in its first track from the *Exercises in Futility* album. Of course, this too short writing is about Metallica, but we considered that is good to begin with a more contemporary quote that is related to existentialism and the human crisis of identity that humanity encounters today. And it is true. It is not about the fact that truth does not exist, but there is more than one, there is something for everyone in a world in which the darkness of lies and corruption knocks at every door, where one looks down from the edge of the cliffs to starvation, poverty, the push-of-a-button possibility of a nuclear war, a world in which we comfortably sit on couches, creating a romanticized war in our minds, but it is not a war with the world, it is a fight without weapons; fear pumps in like fuel; and everything becomes a war that is thought to be fought against everyone, while the truth is that it is a fight that needs to be warred out. However, there is still time

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until the point when we will fall into philosophy and, until then, a preliminary introduction concerning Metal music is required.

Chuck Schuldiner, singer and guitarist of Death Metal band Death, named Metal music as 'another musical expression', one that inspires anger, despair, sadness and all the horrible feelings that someone can imagine. Thus, contemporary critics, the public voice, and, in the end, culture itself, dismissed Metal and Rock music, and Metallica especially, for being just 'mindless noise', sounds that make you smash your head to the first wall you see. Nevertheless, one should consider feelings such as anger and suffering, not thinking that it might destroy his or her being, but considering its own whole complexity of existence, the fact that the human being functions on equilibrium between everything – love and hate, happiness and sadness, relief and despair, fulfillment and emptiness. Some grew up on this kind of music, as it came as an individual and personal "shrine of solace", a wave that starts from the ears and goes into the entire being and ended with enjoying the Aristotelian catharsis that led them back to their equilibrium. In my youth, people considered Metallica radical, deep, constantly allowing to explore something within them – "Fade to Black", a Metal ballad concerned with suicide, depression, the loss of the sense of purpose, "One", which is a song considered a masterpiece by many, that tells the story of a disfigured soldier and expression of the fragility of life and how humanity is barely able to cope with the fear of death, or worse, in the case, existing at the boundary between life and death, "Fuel" a surge of pure musical energy, but at the same time a song that raises awareness to the people who are adrenaline-seekers, warning them about the dangers they expose to, and it would be utterly futile to mention something in regard to "Nothing Else Matters". To me, and to other millions of people, this music is art, and to me, it is art in itself. No matter if you are a metal head or not, a song like "Master Of Puppets", let us say, will make one react and he or she will feel something from, maybe, disgust, to anger, to actually pleasure, but once one feels that, it is his or her duty in front of art to look inside and see why this feeling actually occurs - listen the streets, the radio or the space we call 'home'; see that music is everywhere and it has become, in this century, the most accessible form of art.

But Metallica has become more than a Metal band that creates art, it became a cultural image of the entire Metal industry, a point of reference to any listener, most of the other bands, and an utterly good starting point for studying the contemporary culture, due to the fact that they innovated the entire Metal scene through its sound, gained a huge level of popularity in very short time, and confronted, through their lyrics, some of the most complex problems of our time and embodied in them some of the most popular philosophical trends that exist. In this article, I am going to approach the presence of Existentialism in the Metallica discourse and lyrics, while at the same time, confronting the idea of the human crisis of identity by looking at some of the most popular Metallica songs in a certain order that might create a process of healing through music. Nonetheless, the eternal gratitude to the bands – Manes, Leprous, Alcest, Gojira, Mgła and many other names, which become 'healing art' many other people that listen to them, and to Metal music in itself.

**The Holding Cell: "One" and Life Before Living**

Albert Camus (1913-60) famously claimed that the only real philosophical question was that whether life was worth living or not, especially in a world and universe that puts up the boundaries of absurdity for the human being who is determined by its own consciousness to grasp on a 'meaning in life'. "It is essential to know whether one can live with [the absurd] or whether, on the other hand, logic commands one to die of it." (Camus, 2004: 534) For many people, the fact that the universe and life itself is simply absurd and



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does not offer any meaning, and simply is there without something reasonable to offer is too much to cope up with, and human reason offers the solution that is similar to the one for a broken thing: throw it in the garbage, kill it. But the existentialist philosophy does not stop to the fact that life and its lack of meaning should automatically lead to a 'fade to black', as it *defies* the absurd, believing the idea that the meaning of life, or at least, the sense of meaning can be constructed by the individual only, as a pure subjective one, that exists just for itself.

Thus, the individual is blessed with the pure freedom of choice (or not?). In a world in which the rules and conventions, the words that set the necessary boundaries that are said to be necessary for a reasonable and peaceful way of living in a community, are piling up until they are perceived as constraints, most of the free individuals become "condemned to be free" (Sartre, 2003: 412) as Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80) claims, as you are not only limited by laws and duties, but you also have to confront the fact that you are always responsible for your own actions and commitments at any step.

Thus, people avoid this absolute responsibility and accept the absurdity of living not only by other's rules, but also by other's commands. But, what happens when living itself becomes the desire for death? The song from Metallica, "One", tells the story of a World War I soldier, named Joe Bonham, which is inspired from the novel *Johnny Got His Gun*, written by Dalton Trumbo, who is mutilated by a landmine, ending up limbless, faceless, deaf, mute and blind, and is able to live only by the aid of the "feeding tubes". Unable to remember anything from what happened, to communicate ("Deep down inside I feel the scream/ This terrible silence stops me"), he is left with the confusion between reality and dream, the only reality than he can physically experience is pain ("That there's not much left in me/ Nothing is real but pain now"). Thus, for the character, life becomes death, and death becomes solace. His entire condition is built upon incapability of choosing his only desire ("Back to the womb is much too real/ In pumps life that I must feel") and the only way of communication available for him is praying for the soonest death ("Now the world is gone, I'm just one/ Oh God, help me/ Hold my breath as I wish for death"). And everything is caused by a sudden explosion of a landmine.

Even though many would think that Metallica chose a most radical example, this song offers a complex meditation upon the human condition, the freedom of choice and the fragility of our existence and thus, the fragility of the meaning we are looking for. The mutilated soldier becomes a metaphor for a failed state of hesychasm, a medieval Christian way of living that promotes the idea of leaving the sensorial world and fall into permanent prayer for seeking redemption. But it is one and everyone's choice for picking a path of a meaningful life, while the soldier did not have the same opportunity and every individual finds itself in the same state at a certain point. The landmine may come as a symbol of an external, sudden factor that puts the individual in a state of unwillingness to action furtherly, leading to a life where nothing "is real but pain", life itself becoming controlled by the physical limitation of "the holding cell" and the consciousness that demands the "fade to black". Most of the time, the human limitation cannot confront the human complexity of being and acting, no matter the stability of the individual, and the constant demand of reason for anything might be at some point too much, which would eventually lead to a failure of existing, a fall into absurdity. "Cannot stand this hell I feel/ Emptiness is filling me/ To the point of agony" are probably the most appropriate Metallica lyrics to describe the feeling of despair that One feels in a state of loss into absurdity.

Finding the meaning, the truth that comes as something pleasing for one individual is at least hard, and once found, maintaining it alive and still pleasing for one is a task that probably describes the only state in which you can encounter a happy Sisyphus,



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but losing the grip of the rolling boulder and watching it crumble down the hill is almost unbearable. Yet, humanity is condemned to lose, but blessed to construct. Even though "One" or "Fade to Black" are songs of the human inner feeling of flowing alive downward Styx, we are lust listeners, and we get affected through art and end up empathizing with the characters, seeing ourselves in a similar state and believing that we are not alone in such a state and ending up with a pure Existential thought, one of freedom – "life is for my own to live my own way", and one finds itself in a state of total redemption and freedom of action and thought… but there is something else to be warred out.

**2. Masters and Sanitariums: "Master of Puppets", "Welcome Home (Sanitarium)" and the Individual Crisis of Identity and Authenticity**

You simply walk on the street, or go to work, you are trying to hurry as much as possible, because you woke up late and it is impossible not to be watched by the others. Everyone encountered this event, in which one is feel watched and 'labelled'. But, is this an issue regarding who is one and what is one willing to do with his or her life?

Humanity lives in a place in which the opinion of the others is important for the individual. We are observed, analyzed and judged, and if needed, disciplined in one way or another and, of course, this builds up a wall against our own sense of meaning and purpose in life. One must be aware from the beginning that society creates a system of rules and conventions that can be applied to as many people as possible, which are based on morality, ethics and basic processes of human reason and it is the individual who reacts to them, and not the rules that react to the individual. But, anyway, more or less, the individual is constrained by this set of rules, as the human being is condemned to be free, and moreover, is condemned to look after his freedom, purpose, while at the same time having to cope with the basic human desire of doing what one wants. So, it is up to the individual to choose between working with the rules, thus, going with the 'herd', or going in another direction, thus, refusing a code and attempting to build one of its own. Who can actually do that?

"Welcome to a place where time stands still/ No one leaves and no one will" is the beginning of Welcome Home (Sanitarium), and, firstly, it may sound as Hetfield wanted to sing about the issues of insanity and mental disorders, but it goes beyond. A sanitarium with 'no locked doors', 'no windows barred', with nothing that can 'make [the] brain seem scarred' is easily interpreted as a space that is not contained by any boundaries, but contained in itself, in which people are confined first, in themselves and their own thoughts that they cannot bring out, then contained one by the other, all 'labelled mentally deranged'.

In order to set some things up, we must check Michel Foucault (1926-84), and I am going to address his idea of Panopticon – a social construction in which, essentially, the individual is constantly observed, analysed, and punished, thus educated, not for the his greater good, but for the greater good of the social construction in itself, the processes of controlling coming from an entity (in Foucault's construction of the Panopticon, this entity is a tower in the middle of a penitentiary that the convicts are able to perceive, but they cannot be aware of what is happening inside) that only controls, but cannot be controlled by anyone but itself. In the case of society, the "front lines extend like there's no tomorrow", until they do not exist anymore and the space that should have been confined becomes confinement in itself. Many people accept this idea, unconscious of the existence of a Panopticon around them, or at least of something similar, more or less complex. Yet society is the most complex, cannot be analyzed, most of the times, not even in terms of convention, as it is always changing, cannot live too much on continuity, or at least, it is just a sense of change that is caused by a constant spin in a circle. But what about the ones who are conscious or



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who become as such? Metallica makes a genius distinction between the unconscious individual and the conscious one. The first is the one who sees no boundaries, no doors or bars, and the labels offered by society to him are accepted as such. In the case of 'a more cerebral' individual, especially one who perceives the rules as constraints and oppressions will probably yell his own mind as such: "They keep me locked up in this cage/ Can't they see it's why my brain says: RAGE!" It is in the basic psychological principles of the "outlaw" to feel anger and marginalisation for and from society, yet it is their duty to find a new path, that can stray away entirely from the conventional rules, or would follow the direction of 'the herd', but not walking on an already-beat highway, but through the thorns of a trace that is yet to be revealed by the "outlaw" himself. Yet, these two main traits cannot simply be confined within society, as they are not accepted by convention.

As much as the master must look after the hound, the leash, and his own hand not to be bitten, it is up to the hound to choose between the leash, the bite, and the master, but both the hound and the master will look after their own beings. Is society a construction that injects madness or labels? Or does inject both, one after the other, or both at the same time? Foucault claims that one of the main causes for insanity among the people is not simply caused just by the internal factors of an individual, but the interaction between a set of internal features that interact with the actions of the society. Foucault famously asked: "What desire can be contrary to nature since it was given to man by nature itself?" – what is nature right now? The rage that the "outlaw" feels is partially caused by the paradox between the human nature in itself and the human nature in the Panopticon. And once the paradox occurs, the feelings of the "outlaw" can be found in "Welcome Home (Sanitarium)": "No more can they keep us in/ Listen, damn it, we will win/ […] Fear of living on/ Mutiny in the air/ Got some death to do/ Mirror stares back hard/ Kill, it's such a friendly word". Murder, revolution, the attempt to oppress the oppressor… not even the "outlaw" can cope up with that, as he automatically becomes the modern stance of the primordial warrior, and embodiment of his virtues - endurance, strength, free will and free desire, but what happens when it comes to the weaker one? It does not matter, because there is always a solution: "needlework your way" or, if you want some energy that would keep you alive throughout the day, you can have a "breakfast on a mirror".

It is up to the human to follow the Occam's Razor, and a world of distress and of "no golden thrones to follow/ No shrines of solace to follow" (lyrics extracted from Mgła – With Hearts Toward None I). The best solution is to find some hours, or days of relaxation, and for too many, the most accessible ones are addictions, drugs and alcohol. "Obey your master" is what calls everyone at a certain point, something that summarizes the idea that everything in one's life can be solved with a "hit", but when the "hit" comes a daily basis thing, it's the "end of passion play", it is you that "are crumbling away" and holding one hand with yourself and the other with the dose you feel that you need, and it "becomes the source of self-destruction".

"Master of Puppets" is a song about the abuse of drugs and alcohol, an easiest path to an illusionary pleasure, which at the same time destroys everything that one has struggled to gather around as a proof of "meaning for life" for itself, and thus, to create a personal universe, a circle of peace and solace. From my point of view, there are two good definitions of the mentality of the addict, one that stands in "Master of Puppets", and one that stands in the Irvine Welsh's masterpiece novel, *Trainspotting*. The one from the track is "Taste me you will see/ More is all you need/ Dedicated to/ How I'm killing you" and the one from the novel comes from the voice of Mark 'Rents' Renton in the moment of an attempt to quit heroine: "I need one more fuckin' hit!" Rents, after many attempts to quit heroine and to



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escape the vicious circle of the addicts and 'so-called mates', falls into a state of psychological distress when he confronts the total confinement from his parents – he is locked up in his room by them, so he can cure himself out of addiction. The scene in the novel can be easily called as the 'junkie limbo' – a path that begins from distress, to anger, to confusion, leading step by step to a slight and fragile return back into human reason. It is simply amazing, for me, and I hope that for the reader as well, how well the dots connect between the mentality of the distressed junkie – in this case, I chose Rents, as one can meet similarities between the lack of identity and authenticity of this character and the idea of the songs mentioned above, and the meaning of "Master of Puppets'. The main similarity that we can find in this complex character and the meaning of the song is the mentality of the addict.

An addict, no matter the product that she enjoys, encounters a paradox at a certain point that proves our point. Basically, to begin with, the addict is irrational. Looking at one's basic needs in a contemporary society, the biological and physiological needs are solved by society already. All that he needs is shelter, financial stability, and psychological and emotional support. In order to achieve these levels of fulfillment, one must achieve certain social functions that apply to the accomplishment of its intrinsic needs. This is the case of an individual without the need of consuming a drug, but in the opposite case, the reason itself puts the addiction above every need, as the body and mind commands to the individual the fact that once he mends down its desire for a "hit", he can feel the fulfillment. At the same time, the individual acknowledges, sooner or later, that addiction comes as a factor of destruction for his or her entire life, but it "obeys to the master". Psychologically, at the moment when the individual is aware of his addiction and wants to simply get rid of it, still tries to satisfy the addiction, reason is blown up. Logically, the first one simply negates the other, and vice-versa. Much as Rents does not find relief in addiction, and not only in *Trainspotting*, but throughout the entire saga, such is the discourse of the addicted in "Master of Puppets": "Master, Master, where's the dreams that I've been after?/ Master, Master, you promised only lies/ Laughter, Laughter, all I hear and see is laughter/ Laughter, Laughter, laughing at my cries" In both cases, for Rents and the character from the song, the answer can be summarized in the same way: "I will occupy/ I will help you die/ I will run through you/ Now I rule you too" Thus, the crisis of identity is determined by both the label of an "addict", and the fact that the "addict" identifies the "drug".

Ernest Hemingway said that 'there is nothing to write. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed'. But life is first to be lived, then to be written. Should one fall in the despair of living just for the sake of it, as time passes in a "convulsionary system" of physical constants and feel and just ask himself questions that do not have an answer in the outer world, and then, simply bleed for the sake of begging for compassion? Anyone can question the idea of having a meaning in life or not, and distress comes as soon as the answer does not come as fast as the question, falling down into addiction and vicious circles is for many unconsciously a short path. Do we defy absurdity or does absurdity defy us? And a better question for a human being is whether he lives for the sake of living or lives for himself, especially in a world of labels, rules and constraints, in which he feels the divine immorality of not receiving what he deserves. "Listen, damn it, we will win", or one can fall in Thoreau, and say to himself that one should not become "tools for our own tools".

### 3. Escape in Trust: 'Nothing Else Matters", "Wherever I May Roam" and the Light of Individualism

If everything is "as if the gods were bored with the peace of our hearts" (Mgla – Exercises in Futility VI), one would say that everything is hopeless, but Alcest puts the idea



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of the human being in an utterly enlightened way: "This reality surrounding us/ Is the one you chose." I have chosen this quote from the French Blackgaze band mainly because it seems to be the best introduction for the topic of individualism. The idea of I and We in the World and the songs I have chosen from Metallica will come as the the most appropriate approach of this topic.

The song called "Wherever I May Roam" is, no matter how one puts things up, the perfect image of the individualist human being, perceived by the society as the "nomad" or the "outlaw". "…the road becomes my bride" who represents the embrace of life as a path that satisfies the needs of one or another. And it is a truism to say life is a path of suffering and pain, with things that "gather dust in throat", but the individualist is aware of the I, and is aware of a set of values that circle around the idea of anthropocentrism: wisdom – "Only knowledge will I save"; superiority – "To the game you stay a slave": patience – "But I'll take my time anywhere", power of speech and action – "Free to speak my mind anywhere/ And I'll redefine anywhere", and the labels that are set by society on him are simply empty words – "Rover, wanderer/ Nomad, vagabond/ Call me what you will" This image comes as one of the warrior, as talked a little bit earlier, but is the warrior that does not fight society, but fights for himself, the one who does not uses his virtues to destroy, but to create and improve("I adapt to the unknown/ […]/ The less I have the more I gain/ Off the beaten path I reign") Moreover, what completes the image of the individualist modern warrior is his ability to limit his universe, with the purpose of creating an adapted space for his being: "But I'll take my time anywhere" and "Where I lay my head is home".

But this instance of the warrior cannot function in this world without a meaning. A warrior will never roam his path without believing that the path has a point of ending that will send him in a stance of pure satisfaction, as for him it is the path, the journey in itself and the ending point that are important. He looks at any step that he takes, while at the same time, gazing at the end of the path and thinking how they will both come in the end to him. "Trust I seek and I find you/ Every day for us is something new" are, to me at least, the best way to describe a sense of purpose in the life of a warrior, as the words "trust" and "you" are utterly symbolical and metaphorical. It is easy to believe that one seeks trust in itself in this world. The human being embraces the idea that the only things that have value are the ones that prove their trust to him. It is not only finding someone you can trust, as the first being you need to trust is actually the I, but it is about the things that someone can trust and find solace within. I can make a clear distinction between good values and the things in the world that are harmful for the being: "Never cared for things they say/ Never cared for games they play/ Never cared for what they do/ Never cared for what they know".

Now is the moment when we can build up a strong image of the existentialist individual. In the beginning, the individual becomes aware of the maddening absurdity that surrounds him and he chooses to defy it, and this is the moment when one is aware of the I. The I returns back within the "holding cell", looking in his own mirror, and slowly becomes aware of the Sanitarium, the society and what stands between I and You as toxic for him. Moreover, he becomes aware of the Masters within him, proofs of the absurdity and irrationality that he has to confront and defy. He builds a new set of values that become the satchel that he carries along the path, seeking new trust to have and gaining confidence in his being and existence and building, in the end, an anthropocentric universe, in which I does not have a perfect control over it, but is able to constantly "adapt to the unknown". It is the confinement that the I chooses to build and gathers the values, thus forming the We. Of course, one is aware of the ignorance that the warrior has in accordance to the world that he exists in, but the path is not only one of walking, but also one of choosing. Each human



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being is obliged by his own reason to judge and choose for his own good. Thus, the warrior chooses the I for his own good, being aware all the time of the values that he has and the path of light that he paces. To him, life in itself is a process of constant enfolding and developing, defying the myth of Sisyphus, as he comes in the form of an happy instance of it, as to him, it is not the hill that gets easier, nor the boulder, but it is the being that becomes stronger at any step – "life is for my own to live my own way".

**4. Leaving the Stage**

If we were to gather in one place all the books that have ever been written and all the discussions that have ever regarded the topic of the individual, it would be impossible to check them all and, more than that, to reach a conclusion in this direction. It is mainly because life is to be lived by each and every one in his or her way, considering the best for the I. Life in itself might be considered as being controlled by universal rules that offer the sense of absurdity, which lead to suffering, and the easy way for the individual is to simply fall into the human conventions of labelling and addictions, not solving the issue of authenticity, but jumping into an illusionary solace. But the life of the individual and his capacity of reason, morality and ethics are the main tools that he or she owns to gain order and control, for as much as he or she can, by confronting the universal absurdity, and resuming to its own being, thus creating the I.

It is peculiar that there are people who believe that philosophy and art provide final and clear-cut answers, when the fact is that they only offer possible solutions for one's catharsis in the world. What Metallica does, as we have seen along these too short pages, is talk and discus major issues of our contemporary world regarding the problems of the individual in relationship with the problems of the society. It speaks about a core of power that stands in any human being, and even though the core is more or less powerful from an individual to another, the main point is that it exists and it exists for as much as it can be enforced by the individual. Looking at the influence that this band had on the entire contemporary culture, there is no need for any extra words to set the idea that Hetfield and the guys managed to touch and communicate to and with an entire generation, changing the entire face of Metal culture and this due to two factors: a unique manifestation of freedom and individual thought and, then, a complexity and ambiguity in their musicality that was able to empower millions of people to war out the fight towards a path of light for themselves.

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