

De Quincey 1823 [Thomas De Quincey], 'On the knocking at the gate in Macbeth', *London Magazine*, Oct. 1823, 353--6.

353a

ON THE KNOCKING AT THE GATE IN MACBETH.

From my boyish days I had always felt a great perplexity on one point in Macbeth: it was this: the knocking at the gate, which succeeds to the murder of Duncan, produced to my feelings an effect for which I

353b

never could account: the effect was -- that it reflected back upon the murder a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity: yet, however obstinately I endeavoured with my understanding to comprehend this,

354a

for many years I never could see *why* it should produce such an effect. ----

Here I pause for one moment to exhort the reader never to pay any attention to his understanding when it stands in opposition to any other faculty of his mind. The mere understanding, however useful and indispensable, is the meanest faculty in the human mind and the most to be distrusted: and yet the great majority of people trust to nothing else; which may do for ordinary life, but not for philosophic purposes. Of this, out of ten thousand instances that I might produce, I will cite one. Ask of any person whatsoever, who is not previously prepared for the demand by a knowledge of perspective, to draw in the rudest way the commonest appearance which depends upon the laws of that science -- as for instance, to represent the ef-

fect of two walls standing at right angles to each other, or the appearance of the houses on each side of a street, as seen by a person looking down the street from one extremity. Now in all cases, unless the person has happened to observe in pictures how it is that artists produce these effects, he will be utterly unable to make the smallest approximation to it. Yet why? -- For he has actually seen the effect every day of his life. The reason is -- that he allows his understanding to overrule his eyes. His understanding, which includes no intuitive knowledge of the laws of vision, can furnish him with no reason why a line which is known and can be proved to be a horizontal line, should not *appear* a horizontal line; a line, that made any angle with the perpendicular less than a right angle, would seem to him to indicate that his houses were all tumbling down together. Accordingly, he makes the line of his houses a horizontal line, and fails of course to produce the effect demanded. Here then is one instance out of many, in which not only the understanding is allowed to overrule the eyes, but where the understanding is positively allowed to obliterate the eyes as it were: for not only does the man believe the evidence of his understanding in opposition to that of his eyes, but (which is monstrous!) the idiot is not aware that his eyes ever gave such evidence.

354b

He does not know that he has seen (and therefore *quoad* his consciousness has *not* seen) that which he *has* seen every day of his life. But, to return from this digression, -- my understanding could furnish no reason why the knocking at the gate in

Macbeth should produce any effect direct or reflected: in fact, my understanding said positively that it could not produce any effect. But I knew better: I felt that it did: and I waited and clung to the problem until further knowledge should enable me to solve it. -- At length, in 1812, Mr. Williams made his *début* on the stage of Ratcliffe Highway, and executed those unparalleled murders which have procured for him such a brilliant and undying reputation. On which murders, by the way, I must observe, that in one respect they have had an ill effect, by making the connoisseur in murder very fastidious in his taste, and dissatisfied with any thing that has been since done in that line. All other murders look pale by the deep crimson of his: and, as an amateur once said to me in a querulous tone, "There has been absolutely nothing *doing* since his time, or nothing that's worth speaking of." But this is wrong: for it is unreasonable to expect all men to be great artists, and born with the genius of Mr. Williams. -- Now it will be remembered that in the first of these murders (that of the Marrs) the same incident (of a knocking at the door soon after the work of extermination was complete) did actually occur which the genius of Shakspeare had invented: and all good judges and the most eminent dilettanti acknowledged the felicity of Shakspeare's suggestion as soon as it was actually realized. Here then was a fresh proof that I had been right in relying on my own feeling in opposition to my understanding; and again I set myself to study the problem: at length I solved it to my own satisfaction; and my solution is this. Murder in ordinary cases, where the sympathy is wholly directed to the case of the murdered

person, is an incident of coarse and vulgar horror; and for this reason -- that it flings the interest exclusively upon the natural but ignoble instinct by which we cleave to life; an instinct which, as being indispensable

355a

to the primal law of self-preservation, is the same in kind (though different in degree) amongst all living creatures; this instinct therefore, because it annihilates all distinctions, and degrades the greatest of men to the level of "the poor beetle that we tread on," exhibits human nature in its most abject and humiliating attitude. Such an attitude would little suit the purposes of the poet. What then must he do? He must throw the interest on the murderer: our sympathy must be with *him*; (of course I mean a sympathy of comprehension, a sympathy by which we enter into his feelings, and are made to understand them, -- not a sympathy/\* of pity or approbation:) in the murdered person all strife of thought, all flux and reflux of passion and of purpose, are crushed by one overwhelming panic: the fear of instant death smites him "with its petrific mace." But in the murderer, such a murderer as a poet will condescend to, there must be raging some great storm of passion, -- jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred, -- which will create a hell within him; and into this hell we are to look. In Macbeth, for the sake of gratifying his own enormous and teeming faculty of creation, Shakspeare has introduced two murderers: and, as usual in his hands, they are remarkably discriminated: but, though in Macbeth the strife of mind is greater than in his wife, the tiger spirit not so awake, and his

feelings caught chiefly by contagion from her, -- yet, as both were finally involved in the guilt of murder, the murderous mind of necessity is finally to be presumed in both. This was to be expressed; and on its own account, as well as to make it a more proportionable antagonist to the unoffending nature of their victim, "the gracious Duncan," and adequately to expound "the deep damnation of his taking off," this was to be expressed with peculiar

/\* It seems almost ludicrous to guard and explain my use of a word in a situation where it should naturally explain itself. But it has become necessary to do so, in consequence of the unscholarlike use of the word sympathy, at present so general, by which, instead of taking it in its proper sense, as the act of reproducing in our minds the feelings of another, whether for hatred, indignation, love, pity, or approbation, it is made a mere synonyme of the word *pity*; and hence, instead of saying "sympathy with another," many writers adopt the monstrous barbarism of "sympathy for another."

355b

energy. We were to be made to feel that the human nature, i. e. the divine nature of love and mercy, spread through the hearts of all creatures, and seldom utterly withdrawn from man, -- was gone, vanished, extinct; and that the fiendish nature had taken its place. And, as this effect is marvellously accomplished in the dialogues and soliloquies themselves, so it is finally consummated by the expedient under consideration; and it is to this that I now solicit the reader's attention. If the reader has ever witnessed a wife, daughter, or sister, in a fainting fit, he may chance to have observed that the most affecting moment in such a spectacle, is *that* in which a sigh and a stirring announce the commencement of suspended life. Or, if the reader has ever been present in a vast metropolis on the day when some great national idol was carried in funeral pomp to his grave, and chancing to walk near to the course through which it passed, has

felt powerfully, in the silence and desertion of the streets and in the stagnation of ordinary business, the deep interest which at that moment was possessing the heart of man, -- if all at once he should hear the death-like stillness broken up by the sound of wheels rattling away from the scene, and making known that the transitory vision was dissolved, he will be aware that at no moment was his sense of the complete suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns so full and affecting as at that moment when the suspension ceases, and the goings-on of human life are suddenly resumed. All action in any direction is best expounded, measured, and made apprehensible, by reaction. Now apply this to the case in Macbeth. Here, as I have said, the retiring of the human heart and the entrance of the fiendish heart was to be expressed and made sensible. Another world has stepped in; and the murderers are taken out

356a

of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is "unsexed;" Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman; both are conformed to the image of devils; and the world of devils is suddenly revealed. But how shall this be conveyed and made palpable? In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers, and the murder, must be insulated -- cut off by an immeasurable gulph from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs -- locked up and sequestered in some deep recess: we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested -- laid asleep -- tranced -- racked into a dread

armistice: time must be annihilated;  
relation to things without abolished;  
and all must pass self-withdrawn  
into a deep syncope and suspension of  
earthly passion. Hence it is that when  
the deed is done -- when the work of  
darkness is perfect, then the world  
of darkness passes away like a pa-  
geantry in the clouds: the knocking  
at the gate is heard; and it makes  
known audibly that the reaction has  
commenced: the human has made  
its reflux upon the fiendish: the  
pulses of life are beginning to beat  
again: and the re-establishment of  
the goings-on of the world in which

356b

we live, first makes us profoundly  
sensible of the awful parenthesis that  
had suspended them.

Oh! mighty poet! -- Thy works  
are not as those of other men, simply  
and merely great works of art; but  
are also like the phenomena of na-  
ture, like the sun and the sea, the  
stars and the flowers, -- like frost and  
snow, rain and dew, hail-storm and  
thunder, which are to be studied  
with entire submission of our own  
faculties, and in the perfect faith  
that in them there can be no too  
much or too little, nothing useless  
or inert -- but that, the further we  
press in our discoveries, the more we  
shall see proofs of design and self-  
supporting arrangement where the  
careless eye had seen nothing but  
accident!

N.B. In the above specimen of  
psychological criticism, I have pur-  
posely omitted to notice another use  
of the knocking at the gate, viz. the  
opposition and contrast which it pro-  
duces in the porter's comments to  
the scenes immediately preceding;  
because this use is tolerably obvious  
to all who are accustomed to reflect

on what they read. A third use also, subservient to the scenical illusion, has been lately noticed by a critic in the **London Magazine**: I fully agree with him; but it did not fall in my way to insist on this.

X. Y. Z.