

The Horses of *Macbeth*

By Bert O. States

Where's the Thane of Cawdor?
We cours'd him at the heels, and had a purpose
To be his purveyor: but he rides well;
And his great love, sharp as his spur, hath holp him
To his home before us. Fair and noble hostess,
We are your guest tonight.

(1, 6,20-25)

THIS speech of Duncan's occurs some half-dozen lines before Macbeth's great "pity" soliloquy.¹ It is of negligible interest except for the word *spur* which is conspicuously repeated thirty-three lines later by Macbeth ("I have no spur . . .," etc.). It is impossible to say whether Shakespeare wrote the speech before or after the soliloquy, but the proximity of the two *spurs*

¹Since the soliloquy is a key text in my essay, I quote it in its entirety:

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if th'assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all—here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come.—But in these cases,
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th'inventor: this even-handed Justice
Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips. He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And Pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.—I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th'other— (1, 7,1-28)

suggests that one owes something to the other. But what? The simplest explanation is that Shakespeare already had the soliloquy in mind, or at least the equestrian motif in it, and was anticipating the appearance of Macbeth's metaphysical horses by planting his real horse as a vaunt-courier. Needing some sort of ironical underpinning for Duncan's fatal entrance into this "pleasant" castle, he fell upon the theme of Macbeth's speed in getting home to prepare his guest's welcome, and for good measure, *spur* offered a sharp means of condensing the hidden opposition between Macbeth's "false face" and his "false heart."

But it is just as possible that *spur* was in fact conceived as an innocent simile before the idea of the soliloquy had taken shape—that it somehow pricked Shakespeare's imagination and unconsciously led him to unfold his soliloquy around an act of horsemanship. In other words, the momentum of Macbeth's race home to plan the crime spills over into his second thoughts about it, vaulting him into the sky across the bank and shoal of time to the Day of Judgment itself.

Of course, if we look further into the Duncan scene we find other seeds for the soliloquy: *teach, heaven's breath, twice done, then done double, deep and broad*, and (earlier in the play) words like *wind, success, catch, o'erleap*, and *sightless*, all of which reappear prominently in Macbeth's vision and give it the extraordinary sense of being the ripe fruit of early plantings. But it is *spur*, I think, that gets Shakespeare off the ground and my preference for the second hypothesis—that the word inspired the form the soliloquy was to take—rests in a feeling that this is one of those curious places where we see an image breaking, by stages, out of what we might describe as a point of least resistance. Altogether, it has an effect a little like Empson's fifth-type ambiguity in which the poet seems to be discovering his idea in the act of writing, though I don't think we are dealing with an idea here as much as with a kind of energy or agitation that has been working in the play, in other forms, all along. The horses don't actually appear until the soliloquy is almost over, but we are potentially in horse country with "trammel up the consequence" (1, 3) and certainly with "jump" at line 7. Most editors read *jump* as meaning risk, and this is a valid interpretation. But *jump* also means jump, as in "jumping o'er times," in which case Macbeth is not simply risking the life to come but actively challenging it, as a horseman might challenge a hedge or (in this case) a body of water. I suspect that editors prefer *jump* as risk to *jump* as leap because it is difficult to make sense of a leap in this context (where, either in or out of time, would Macbeth land?). But perhaps we can admit the possibility that *jump* works like a pun in allowing Shakespeare to do two different *kinds* of things with the same sound: if it means risk it mimics motion; it is a kind of forked word, its meaning going in one direction and its gesture, as Blackmur would say, in another. There would be no reason to worry this question if nothing came of *jump* in the sense of leaping, but a great deal does. In fact, the explosive energy of the soliloquy, the sense of its blowing a whole cosmos of

retribution at us, arises from this subtextual gestation of the horses and their sudden birth in the sky, along with the naked babe, at line 22. We hear them long before they come into view. In fact, from the opening beat of the triple “done” everything is galloping apace and the French term *enjambement* takes on an almost graphic meaning as all of this tumbles from Macbeth’s mind. By the time we have multiplied the possibilities of *done*, *surcease*, *be-all and end-all*, *life to come*, *judgment*, *chalice*, *trumpet-tongu’d*, *angels*, *deep damnation*, *heaven’s cherubins*, *blast*, *sightless couriers*, and *wind*, and the fact that the vision is unfolding in the vault of heaven on the far side of time, we have good cause to see not only what Macbeth tells us was there—the cherubins and the figure of Pity—but what Macduff sees when the murder is discovered:

up, up, and see
The great doom’s image!
(II, 3, 76-77)

The winds are the winds of the last day and the horses are four in number.

I am not interested in defending the idea that there *is* a vision of apocalypse here, intentionally or otherwise. But I am curious about what it is in the passage, and in the play at large, that makes me (and other readers) yield to the suggestion that there is. It is not so much any actual image of apocalypse that concerns me as the subtextual drive that throws the play in this final direction. One manifestation of this drive is the horse imagery, and if *spur* helped in the creation of the horse motif in the “pity” soliloquy, it was itself a symptom of a fury in the text that brought on many other such images of speeding, outrunning and leaping both before and after the murder. It might be argued that such an emphasis is to be expected in a play about such an urgent subject, but I think these images belong to the play in a more special way. Apocalyptic imagery is not on Macbeth’s mind (or on Shakespeare’s) in the hyperbolic way that the hurricane is on Lear’s or death on Hamlet’s, or in the sense that Shakespeare’s people are always calling down the heavens. That is, it is not an *analogous* image that reflects the hero’s state of mind onto nature so that we can see its emotional size. It is rather the state of mind itself, a particular physiognomy of consciousness (to use Lukacs’ term) that belongs more properly to the sphere of motivation than to the sphere of metaphorical convention.

To come to my point in dwelling on the “pity” soliloquy, I wonder if, as the very pattern of Macbeth’s “leaping” sickness, we might treat the speech as a motive for committing the murder rather than as a motive for *not* committing it. In light of the facts, this seems absurd. Macbeth is clearly so terrified by his vision that he vows to “proceed no further in this business,” and it is only through the intervention of Lady Macbeth that he is brought back on course. But somehow it seems trivial to say that Macbeth was talked into the murder by his wife. If one reads the play pathologically, as a bonding of deed and doer, one is led to ask if Macbeth could have done otherwise without radically

modifying his nature. Did this rejection of the murder actually contain a rejection, or was it simply another oscillation in Macbeth's "restless ecstasy"? Could Macbeth, of all people, have *sustained* a state of conviction that the murder was inadvisable on moral and spiritual grounds? All of this opens onto the question of Macbeth's motive in killing Duncan and, more broadly, onto the question of motive itself as Shakespeare treats it in this and other tragic plays. I want to suggest, eventually, that the psychological complexity of Macbeth arises in great part from a peculiar relationship between the thing we call motive and the thing we call character. But first it is necessary to pursue the apocalyptic theme as it emerges in Macbeth's action and thought. To this end it would be useful to adopt a psychoanalytic approach since we are concerned primarily with the translation of symptoms into their determinants.

Let us look first at Macbeth as a successful warrior as viewed from the outside.² Here our best source is the report of the wounded captain which serves the function of an overture to Macbeth's character. Here we see Macbeth for the first time, at second hand and necessarily speechless, wading ("hors'd," I suggest) through a sea of mutilated men. Here is Macbeth, one might say, thinking with his sword—that is, not thinking at all but living the "single state" in which a man is perfectly at peace in the simplicity of war. Here, where head and hand come together in the warrior's trade, Macbeth is himself. Hence the emphasis on killing as work. There is nothing clever about the way Macbeth wages war. The enemy is an obstruction that stands in his way, and you can almost imagine one of those outrageous Homeric similes of the warrior, "like the farmer with brandished scythe," cutting a swath through a field of men. Above all, within this unperturbed killing machine we see the *thorough* man, carving out his passage:

Till he fac'd the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th'chops,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

(I, 2,20-23)

Insofar as *Macbeth* is the tragedy of a great warrior gone wrong, this is the basis of his success. We must note, of course, that Macbeth *is* attended by Banquo, "no less" deserving, who carves at his side, though one is inclined to overlook this detail in the heat of Macbeth's wake. In any case, for these "strange images of death" it is Macbeth who is promoted, and we are left with little doubt that Macbeth's behavior coincides perfectly with the ideals of this

²The word *success* occurs only four times in the play, twice in connection with Macbeth's victory over the Norwegians and twice in connection with the murder of Duncan, all four in Act I. So for a short time it becomes a relatively active word that attaches itself to both a public and a secret endeavor, both featuring Macbeth as a killer.

society—brave Macbeth, well he deserves that name! The only possibly problematic passage in the scene:

Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,
Or memorize another Golgotha,
I cannot tell—

(1, 20,40-42)

could easily be taken as a last, lavish hyperbole for the super warrior at his proper work. Its sense, a kind of praise by faint damnation, might be rendered: “So dedicated were they to our cause that an unknowing witness might think they had been unleashed out of Hell.”

But if we re-view the scene from an interior perspective, our picture changes radically. Reading psychoanalytically—that is, reading the play backwards—are we not entitled to see Macbeth’s success in the field, however “brave” in the description, as the locus of an *overdetermination* in behavior? Following Freud, one could argue that we have a symptom rising from two different psychical systems: killing on the field is good, killing off the field is bad; one is encouraged, the other is prohibited and consequently suppressed. And when this coincidence of motive occurs in a single situation, as Freud says, the suppression releases itself through the door of the legitimate cause, a little as the Greeks got through the gates of Troy in the belly of a peace offering. Thus Macbeth’s conduct on the field is “qualitatively justified but quantitatively excessive.”³ Of course we now have the problem of accounting for Banquo who, in these same terms, is just as excessive as Macbeth. But perhaps we can diminish the problem on two counts: first, there is no reason to assume that identical behavior implies identical determinants and Banquo is, in the end, proven innocent of serious excessiveness (there is no “inside” to Banquo’s “outside”); and second, it is possible that Shakespeare, given his murky handling of the whole issue of the murder’s origin, may have wanted to blur any clear picture of Macbeth at this early stage and seized upon Banquo as a way of concealing (and indirectly deepening) Macbeth’s motive by putting the wolf, so to speak, in the company of the sheep.

These opposed views, from the outside and the inside, represent possible extremes of interpretation; they should be thought of as a kind of parenthesis which encloses the site of a mystery that is no clearer than the mystery of whether Macbeth had even *thought* about murdering Duncan before his “day of success.” Neither is right or wrong, or *only* right or wrong. Their relationship is one of compatible contradiction within which we might locate any number of determinants or combinations of determinants. If one wishes to read *Macbeth* as a tragedy of vaulting ambition, this “overcharg’d” behavior could be thought of either as Macbeth’s last act of bravery or his first act of

³Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Vols. IV and V of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), V, 479. Hereafter, *SE*.

treachery; in the latter case it becomes an act of substitution and an unconscious rehearsal of the murder of Duncan. But it is just as possible that Macbeth's excessiveness in battle has nothing at all to do with the murder of Duncan but is, rather, the temperamental antecedent that will eventually supply the momentum for such a murder when the battle's won, Macbeth is promoted, impediments are again put in his "way," and the Witches' charm is "wound up." In other words, the slaughter of the Norwegians and the murder of Duncan are quantitatively interchangeable in that both are expressions of the same energy. Such a reading would not eliminate ambition as a cause, but it would complicate it: it would require that we see ambition as a drive without a single objective, or possibly even a drive *in search of* an objective. There is not an ounce of proof for such an idea but, as so often in *Macbeth*, there are odd resonances in the imagery that are never quite resolved as themes. For example, here and there, one gets glimpses of a "primitive" world,

i' th'olden time,
Ere humane statute purg'd the gentle weal,
(III, 4, 74-75)

a world of raw instinct, "secret'st" blood and "bare-faced power" that has been interiorized," as Nietzsche says in *The Genealogy of Morals*, or "cooped up" within the polity—until it bursts forth (again, if we consult Holinshed) in the coming of Macbeth. In fact, in the context of *The Genealogy*, *Macbeth* could be read as the re-emergence of Nietzsche's "beast of action" in the company of guilt and bad conscience brought on by "that most brilliant stroke of Christianity: God's sacrifice of himself for man."⁴ Of course this is a heresy no one would wish on Shakespeare; but the hellhound and the crucified savior draw strangely close in *Macbeth*. Once we grant that the excesses of the later Macbeth are prefigured in the imagery of the battle scene—that bravery and blackness are but a "statute" apart—it is not so easy to explain the line:

bathe in reeking wounds,
Or memorize another Golgotha,
(I, 2, 39-40)

as a flattering hyperbole. It is hard to know what, or how much, to make of this passage. Editors tend either to ignore *Golgotha* or to gloss it as "the hill of skulls," which is etymologically correct but rather like glossing Buchenwald as a forest of beech trees. And "bathe in reeking wounds" (which belongs to a whole subsystem of images having to do with water, oceans and seas, swallowing up navigation, and crossing over, or through a body of water whose element is alternately conflated with blood and time) implies, in the light of all that follows, an act of pure will—not the will to power but the will, as Nietzsche puts it, to "poison the very foundation of things." It is the egg of Malcolm's

⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 225.

hatched beast at the other end of the play who would, if he had the power,

Pour the sweet milk of concord into Hell,
Uproar the universal peace, confound
All unity on earth. . . .

(IV, 3, 98-100)

and this, of course, is only Macbeth carried to his hypothetical absolute.

My suggestion is that “bathe in reeking wounds, / Or memorize another Golgotha” is best conceived as a symbolic *terminus ad quem* of the Macbeth energy. We are not meant to insist on the letter of the images but on their spirit and extremity. “I cannot tell,” the Captain concludes; it may have been one or the other—that is, it was *both* and *more*, if words could piece it out, for there is a sense in which extreme images are always unsuccessful attempts to reach extremes. The point would be that both are *unearthly* motives; they have nothing to do with practical killing or with killing in anger or killing for a cause. Both belong to the category I am calling apocalyptic, partly because the holocaust was somehow on Shakespeare’s mind as an extension of Duncan’s murder, but mainly because as the agent of this theme he drew the portrait of an apocalyptic personality: a man obsessed by finality, by absolutes, and by his bondage to time. And it remains now to see how Macbeth’s battlefield conduct and his career in blood are a prolongation of his mind’s way of conceiving the world.

The distinctive quality of Macbeth’s mind is the rapidity with which he leaps from extreme to extreme, leaving out, so to speak, the middle of thought. Even when he seems to be thinking in analytical stages—as in the “pity” soliloquy—one has the impression that he is catching up with something his imagination already knows and has planted in the form of a premature image (as, for example, when “trammel” matures into “sightless couriers”). One might almost describe Macbeth’s mind as bicameral in the sense that he seems to be taking directions from another self or listening to his own nether-thought, as if in amazement that such things could have come out of him. In fact, my sense of the importance of the horse imagery, as a symbol of Macbeth’s passional drive, is precisely consistent with Freud’s idea that the relation of the ego to the id is like that of a man on horseback who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse. Often, however, the horse takes the bit and carries the rider where it wants to go, in which case the ego has no choice but to transform “the id’s will into action as if it were its own.”⁵ This sense of a struggle between two parts of the mind is especially apparent in the “Two truths are told” soliloquy (I, 3, 127-142) in which Macbeth’s “ego” debates the extremes—“This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill; cannot be

⁵S. Freud, “The Ego and The Id,” *SE*, XIX, 25. Freud uses this same figure elsewhere in his work, for example, in “The Anatomy of the Mental Personality” in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, *SE*, XXII, 77.

good:”—while his “id” is already committing the murder. But the basic structure of the speech is that of a set of escalating antitheses in which one term swallows the other and produces a new antithesis. First, ill versus good; then if ill, why good? then if good, why ill? Abruptly present fears give way to horrible imaginings, function is smothered in surmise, and nothing is but what is not. Within a dozen lines, as fast as thought, Macbeth is inhabiting the future.

So antithesis, for Macbeth, is not an orderly dialectical process that resolves itself in a synthesis of thought (as in Hamlet’s “*Thus* conscience . . .”). It is an invasion of thought by the imagination which is continually spinning new images out of old fabric. Every conclusion is instantly inadequate: nothing is but what is not. It is this restless production of new images that brings on the condition of trance (“Look how our partner’s rapp’d”) and the sense of Macbeth’s having been plunged into the fantastical world he has involuntarily created, much as the dreamer may be said to be plunged fully into the world unfolding in his own head. In fact, Macbeth’s thought process is much like the processing of images in the dream-work where, as Freud suggests, antithesis, or contradiction, is a major strategy that may serve the ends of censorship or wish fulfillment. What we see, finally, is a mind stretched on the rack of its own constructions: the contradiction is synthesized in the emotion, or in the *commotion* in the mind. In short, to have *one* such antithesis—as in not being able to make up one’s mind about something (“To be, or not to be”)—is one thing; to be continually making antitheses, as a persistent structure of thought, is another. It is the torture, and possibly the thrill, of being (as Freud would say) a halfway house between actuality and possibility—an extratemporal being of sorts.

Another persistent characteristic of the dream is that the dreamer’s consciousness, lacking the brake provided by the waking world, is continually spurred on to seize and transform its own images, bringing them to a fatal perfection. This phantasmagoric quality emerges most spectacularly in the “pity” soliloquy, which might have been painted by Salvador Dalí. It was Caroline Spurgeon who noticed the running pattern in the play’s imagery of “the reverberation of sound echoing over vast regions, even into the limitless spaces beyond the confines of the world.”⁶ She offers only four examples from the play (two from the “pity” soliloquy), but she was looking primarily for images of reverberation rather than listening to the reverberation of images. If one looks closely at the evolution of the speech, her thesis is far better than her evidence suggests. For each image, by virtue of Macbeth’s peculiar trick of mind, amends the previous image, and the direction of the amendment is always toward the more “limitless” implication. For example, the knife *blow* (1. 4) that will give Duncan his surcease is converted eventually into the horse / winds that *blow* the horrid deed in every eye. *Life to come* is initially intended by Macbeth to refer to the immediate aftermath of the crime, but once the

⁶Caroline F. E. Spurgeon *Shakespeare’s Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1965), p. 327.

trumpet-tongu'd angels enter the vision, that intention becomes obsolete, or at least secondary. *Judgment here* initially refers to Macbeth's fear of a bloody counteraction among the thanes, but *here*, in itself, converts it into a dialectical term that implicitly contains judgment beyond. Moreover, the *surcease / success* pairing not only converts to its opposite, the *deep damnation* of the life to come, but it reveals Macbeth's hoped-for success as standing under the aspect of eternity: what he imagines as a be-all and an end-all *here* is graduated to the end-all, or surcease, of time itself. In other words, present fears and hopes continually "echo" as terminal imaginings and the equivocation by which the fiends entrap Macbeth turns out to be the subconscious property of his own imagination. For there is, overall, a riddling quality in the soliloquy, if we think of the riddle as a puzzle that openly hides its torqued meanings in its own terms. The master equivocation, of course, is that in equating his murder with time—that is, a single and last murder, a murder that will murder time—it gets confused with its eschatological replica. Murder and universal atonement draw together in a relationship that is partly synecdochic and partly paradoxical—paradoxical because, as the final torque, there is the extraordinary closing image—"I have no spur,"—in which Macbeth replaces the cherubins with his own hors'd figure, riding in the sky with his smoking steel. One might argue that Shakespeare was simply keeping his horse image alive in the interest of poetic symmetry, that he didn't really *mean* to put Macbeth up there; however, there he is, on horseback again, the sense in the words having him stumble and fall to earth while the poetry vaults him into the heavens "beyond the confines of the world." Here, if anywhere, Macbeth is in the predicament of Freud's poor ego trying to serve three masters at once: "driven by the id, confined by the super-ego, repulsed by reality, [the ego] struggles to master its economic task of bringing about harmony among the forces and influences working in and upon it."⁷

What this speech evokes, for me, is not a specific, subconscious motive but the sense of a man whose visions drive him relentlessly past his purposes and his hesitations. It is the nature of Macbeth's mind, not his earthly needs, that requires the murder, and continues to require murder as a new potentiation of self and will, a new sense of abridging the intolerable distance between head and hand. This aspect of Macbeth's momentum was beautifully understood by Kierkegaard who resorted to the play twice (and most pertinently to the line, "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill") in his treatise on "Continuation in Sin" in *The Sickness Unto Death*. There are, on one hand, Kierkegaard says, ordinary men who "take a hand in the game of life as it were, but they never have the experience of staking all upon one throw, never attain the conception of an infinite self-consistency." They always talk about "the particular, particular deeds, particular sins." On the other hand, there are the men who exist under "the rubric of spirit" for whom consistency of self is the essential gyroscope. For them, "the least inconsistency is

⁷*The New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, SE, XXII, 78.

a prodigious loss, for with that in fact a man loses consistency.”⁸ Macbeth, he implies, is such a man, for the spiritual existence may be lived either by a believer or a demoniac, and:

as with the believer, so it is also with his counterpart, the demoniac man. . . . Only in the continuation of sin he is himself, only in that does he live and have an impression of himself. What does this mean? It means that the state of being in sin is that which, in the depth to which he has sunk, holds him together, impiously strengthening him by consistency; it is not the particular new sin which (crazy as it sounds to say it) helps him, but the particular new sin is merely the expression for the state of being in sin which properly is the sin . . . ; in the particular new sins the momentum of sin merely becomes more observable.

(pp. 239, 237)

I should say that this is not intended as an interpretation of Macbeth’s career in crime. In *Macbeth*, Kierkegaard simply found the illustrative text for the *momentum* of sin, the sinner’s loss of existential security, his need to “hold himself together” in new sin as a way of reifying his lost “single state.” It is a moot point as to whether sin is even the issue in *Macbeth*. But I think Kierkegaard’s intuition is right: that Macbeth’s “sin” should not be considered motivationally as a series of particular sins, each owing to some new cause (though he himself gives new reasons for each new sin: “My fears in Banquo stick deep,” etc.), but rather as a spiritual state that requires an *infinite* self-consistency, that possesses an *infinite* capacity for fear and an *infinite* sense of consequence and loss. “The more excellent the machine,” Kierkegaard says, “all the more frightful . . . the confusion.”

In less sinful terms, apocalyptic movement, as I have been tracing it here, is the movement toward nothingness or all-at-onceness, which in Macbeth’s case is the time-hidden reverse side of “success” (equated by Macbeth with “surcease”). Thus Macbeth’s career in crime is an attempt to finish off what was begun with the murder of Duncan whom he had brought to a saintly perfection in the tapestry of his vision; or, as Shakespeare puts it in *The Rape of Lucrece*, it is an attempt to “make something nothing by augmenting it” (l. 154). Murder is both a something and a nothing; that is, it is an act and a negation, with the side effect of the murderer’s moral suicide. Murder is teleological. What happens after murder is that the neutrality of the world is cancelled; the world now bristles with “prating” signs, as in a dream – which is to say that the world becomes both witness and nemesis. There is no turning back and all going ahead is iteration because time is now permanently reallocated as the zone of “consequence.” Renown and grade are dead, and all the finite categories of honor, love, obedience, and troops of friends are extinguished forever.

⁸Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1954), p. 238.

My case for the apocalyptic theme rests here. But by way of a theoretical postscript, I want to turn now to a consideration of *Macbeth* as a symptom of its creator's method. Our question might be: what, apart from the citation of passages taken out of context, is the textual justification for such a reading? How does the apocalyptic theme arise from a text that has not *quite* proclaimed it openly, or at least as openly as *Hamlet* proclaims the theme of death or *King Lear* the themes of love and duplicity? Or even: is it possible to misread a text without falsifying it, on the theory that certain texts, being more algebraic than arithmetic, invite misreadings because they cast anagogic shadows beyond their local meanings? If so, what makes such a text algebraic? Let me begin with an observation that is commonly made of the play:

What is distinctly absent in *Macbeth* is a public element in its hero's life. Shakespeare gave him no scenes of friendship or intimacy (except with his confederate, Lady Macbeth), no political scenes, and—most important—no behavioral *range*; hence, no visible potential, in the eventuality of “success,” to enjoy the fruits of power, as Claudius does, once he has them. Here we encounter the well-known lacuna between Macbeth's motive and his behavior that formed the basis of E. E. Stoll's argument with Robert Bridges and J. I. M. Stewart's with Stoll. That is: there is a gap between the facts the play asks us to assume (Macbeth kills to obtain the crown and continues to kill in order to protect it) and the subjective drama the play sets before us. I am not suggesting that ambition is therefore invalid as a motive, simply that it is treated as a fact rather than a passion, and we must now try to see what the consequence of this treatment is.

We normally think of motive as the most direct subjective cause of an act. It is the word (hatred, ambition, jealousy) taken from the book of human passions that explains the act, or at least enables us to put it to rest in the causal order. But of course motive itself originates in character, or disposition, and it follows that having found the motive for an act we become amateur biographers and seek the motive for this motive in the wider province of character. One always wants to know *what kind* of person was motivated to commit the act. For example, I read in my encyclopedia that John Wilkes Booth was a “charming egomaniac” and “an ardent confederate sympathizer.” Here we have the essential ingredients of a biography: the former belongs to the sphere of character—something Booth *was*, something that led (among countless other things) to a career on the American stage; the latter belongs to the sphere of motive—something Booth *wanted*, and an act, as Sartre points out, always rises out of a desire to change the shape of the world in some degree.⁹ Even though we cannot keep the actor / egomaniac out of the Ford Theatre on the evening of April 14, 1865—even though someone in the theatre might cry out, “Some maniac has shot the President!”—we would not be apt to

⁹Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Books, 1966), p. 559.

attribute Booth's motive in killing Lincoln to egomania. The most we could say is that character may assume a conical shape with motive as the point, among many in a lifetime, at which it refines itself into a concern, and thence into an act.

My point is that if Shakespeare were telling the story of Booth's assassination of Lincoln, he would have given us a play about charming egomania rather than one about ardent sympathy for the confederate cause. Of course, he would probably have altered the nature of Booth's mania and charm to suit his own purposes, but he would certainly have shifted the emphasis from the "nearest" cause (as expressed in Booth's cry, "*Sic semper tyrannis! The South is avenged!*") to the characterological foundation on which it is formed. This is Shakespeare's habit, at least with respect to his major tragic figures: having inherited, say, jealousy or ambition or revenge as the primary causal factor of the fiction he has chosen to adapt to the stage, he ignores it as a passion or an appetite—he *states* it openly ("I have no spur . . . but vaulting ambition . . .," or "O, beware the green-eyed monster" or "Remember thee? Ay, thou poor ghost. . ."), thereby giving it validity on conventional *de casibus* grounds (sins, like virtues, are self-explanatory categories of motivation); then he finds a more interesting "motive" in the very construction and potency of the hero's personality to which the stated motive stands in a decoy and, in part, inimical relationship. It is a form of characterization almost directly opposite that of the *humourist* (Johnson and Molière, for example) who scrupulously avoids any departure from the appetite: greed and lust have no auxiliary or interior features—they are precisely what we see. To the humourist, motive and character are virtually identical.

I am thinking of something a good deal more specific than the commonplace that Shakespeare's heroes have depth of character, though the method (if we can call it that) certainly contributes to the effect of depth. But the true complexity of his heroes does not arise from a rich variety of traits or a "well-rounded" character but from his way of converting the motive supplied by his source into a form of reactionary intelligence. And this technique has at least two important consequences for the reader or viewer of the play. First, it is through this dramatic displacement of motive by nature—by the *intensity* of a nature, let us say—that we derive the impression of a "deep" subconscious filled with instincts, repressions, and infra-motives. In effect, there is a gap between motive and intensity: the two forces neither coincide nor are they completely incompatible. This gap serves a poetic function similar to that of the mind's preconscious screen where the work of censorship and displacement takes place, in Freudian psychology. It is here that we find the greatest lure to a psychoanalytic reading of character. For psychology is essentially a science of motives, and because Shakespeare's play contains so little psychology (in this sense) it becomes endlessly psychological in its appeal. To illustrate: Hamlet suspects that Claudius has murdered his father and sets up the play in which the murder will be imitated. The reaction is (predictably) a guilty one, and

Claudius sweeps out in a frenzy. Yet Hamlet does not act on this almost certain proof. Instead, he becomes highly excitable to the point of doing violence *to others*. It is not that his behavior is inconsistent (Hamlet is being his old self) but that the causal connection is not articulated in language: the text has become *algebraic* in the sense of having produced (or having maintained) an unknown whose value is to be determined from the known quantities in the play, as one chooses to see them. Here we enter the deep thicket of repression, displacement, and the like, and one can get out of it by any number of hermeneutical paths—or, one can simply marvel at the truth in Hamlet's mystery without trying to pluck it out.

So it is with Macbeth—in reverse: the energy, the killing, are there, but the motive is weakly stated. Think how many of Macbeth's lines—for example: "Strange things I have in head, that will to hand, which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd" (III, 4,38-39)—elude the whole province of self-explanation. What they leave us with is the verbal residue of an unspeakable motive that is, as Freud would insist, inadmissible to the consciousness. What can these "strange things" signal if not the *death* of motive, conceived of as the *reasons* the mind offers itself, and the emergence of something like brute will, or instinct, which is, as Freud says, "a certain quota of energy which presses in a particular direction."¹⁰ It is interesting that Freud himself, who could easily see the murder of Duncan as "little else than parricide," was so baffled at this stage of Macbeth's "unbridled" tyranny that he renounced any hope of "penetrating the triple layer of obscurity" of the play.¹¹ But Freud's, I suspect, is a special case of disappointment that the play did not finally live up to a preferred "deep" reading ("the motive of childlessness"), and this apparently blinded him to other possible (even Freudian) readings that could be supported by dozens of texts, beginning with the literature of the demonic.

There is a second and equally important consequence of this method of characterization. It is through this relative freedom from motive and appetite—freedom from a logic of determinism, if you will—that Shakespeare's heroes are sprung free of the earth: free to contemplate the symbolism of their acts, free to convert all of the relatives of their particular "cases" into absolutes. In this connection, it is worth noting how frequently Shakespeare selects plots that contain, or can be made to contain, a powerful agency of external persuasion. Unlike Marlowe's heroes of the massive appetite, who seem to be born with motives in full flight, Shakespeare's tend, on the whole, to have motives thrust upon them. Metaphysical forces like the Witches, the ghost of King Hamlet, and (in a more earthly way) Iago, whatever other functions they perform, serve dramaturgically to take at least some of the causal burden onto themselves, leaving the hero not only with a partial mandate for action but an overcharg'd soul as well. For there is always a lightninglike speed in the way

¹⁰*New Introductory Lectures, SE, XXII, 96.*

¹¹"Some Character-types Met with in Psycho-analytical Work," *SE, XIV, 323.*

these forces “rap” the hero and ionize his world into a metaphysical field. And here we may note Shakespeare’s habit of abruptly condensing the onset of his hero’s fate into single lines which drop, like bane, into his life: “Ha! I like not that!” or “My lord, I think I saw him yesternight,” or “Nothing, my lord,” or “All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be King hereafter!” Such lines mark the entry of the hero into the ionized world: they are what Lukacs might call miracle moments in which the hero’s “empirical” life leaves off and his “essential” or tragic life begins. Any sweet sleep that he “ow’dst yesterday” is gone, and reality becomes a projection of his overcharged imagination. Now the entire force of personality rushes into the opening made by the decoy motive. Character becomes a portable concentration of essence that applies itself to every new event in the hero’s life; the *prospect* of the act, one might say, becomes the motive for his discourse with his Fate. Hence, Shakespeare’s play, built upon the soaring pillars of the soliloquy, is, in Kierkegaard’s term, a “dialectical lyric” in which the hero is driven continually to “go further,” like Heraclitus, ever moving to and fro in an insomnia of *problemata*. It matters little whether he is talking himself into his act or out of it. Everything flows *toward* the act, that foregone conclusion of the plot (thanks to which we *have* such a hero). It is only a question of the time required to purify the act (as Macbeth purifies Duncan) in the fire of his resistance. In this regard, Macbeth and Hamlet may be seen as fraternal agonizers between whom Shakespeare divides the ramifications of violent action: Hamlet gets the problematics of a good deed; Macbeth gets those of an evil deed. Even a speech as remote from vengeance as Hamlet’s “What a piece of work is a man” is a preparation for the act; it all goes into the Hamlet dossier against the enemy (what went wrong with what was right) and constitutes a psychical step in Hamlet’s unique movement toward the kill. Again, in the “deep” sense, one might say that Hamlet’s vengeance is not in the least delayed but continually carried out against a complacent world that has, for example, produced such creatures as Claudius. And in an equally deep sense, as I have suggested here, Macbeth’s ambition could be said to transcend its earthly and social manifestations (wanting *this* traitor’s head, wanting *this* throne) and becomes a wholesale reaction to “the frame of things.” In short, if you extend the principle of ambition far enough, into ultimate spheres, you arrive at total “success,” whose synonyms are not kingship and power but *surcease* and *end-all*—a termination of *longing* for success.

This is only one possible reading, and I admit that it is made possible by modern doctrines of freedom that Shakespeare knew nothing about. But it is one of the enticements of Shakespeare’s algebraic text, for better or worse, that it lures us into readings, or misreadings, of the kind that are less apt to arise with arithmetic texts in which the sum of meaning is not much altered by time. But to conclude: it is this unique relationship between motive and character that opens Shakespeare’s play to such a remarkable degree, in one sense deepening it psychologically, in another expanding it metaphysically. In

Macbeth these two dimensions are perfectly condensed in the symbol of the horse which haunts this play as the ghost of its motion, a nuance beautifully caught in Polanski's film version, by the way. Historically, there are two main aspects to the symbolism of the horse, and they are fused in *Macbeth*. The horse is, first, a symbol of psychical drive. We do not need Freud to validate this idea since he is only continuing a meaning that dates back at least to Plato's allegory of the charioteer. In all its attributes—speed, power, independence, wanton beauty—the horse bespeaks the energy of instinct and libido, the fire of the will, the capacity of the soul to break its civil stall. But also, of all the earthbound animals, it is the horse that we have endowed with wings. Put the horse against the sky and it becomes the emblem of the world's end: on it sit Death, War, Famine, and Plague. Now it confers riot on the world, as it does on the private soul of man. Thus in its mythic fury the horse defines two kinds of ominous space: interior and cosmic (just as in the history plays, where it is the obedient servant of warlike men, it defines the political space of the world). But in drama, where world is the creation of character, the distinction between these two kinds of space dissolves. Interior space, the unspeakable deep, is inverted: Macbeth's mind is spread out on the sky of his visions, and through the power of the image he becomes the contaminated soul of the world.

