



## ON THE KNOCKING AT THE GATE IN MACBETH.

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**F**ROM 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 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, 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 effect 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. 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 anything 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 Shakespeare had invented: and all good judges and the most eminent dilettanti acknowledged the felicity of Shakespeare's suggestion as soon as it was actually realised. 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 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 a 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, Shakespeare 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

"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 unscholar-like 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."



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 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 recommencement 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 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 pageantry 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 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 nature, like the sun and the sea, the stars and the flowers,—like frost and snow, rain and dew, hailstorm 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!



## ON SUICIDE.

**I**T is a remarkable proof of the inaccuracy with which most men read—that Donne's *Bailhanatos* has been supposed to countenance Suicide; and those who reverence his name have thought themselves obliged to apologise for it by urging, that it was written before he entered the church. But Donne's purpose in this treatise was a pious one; many authors have charged the martyrs of the Christian church with suicide—on the principle that if I put myself in the way of a mad bull, knowing that he will kill me, I am as much chargeable with an act of self-destruction as if I fling myself into a river. Several casuists had extended this principle even to the case of Jesus Christ: one instance of which, in a modern author, the reader may see noticed and condemned by Kant, in his *Religion innerhalb die gronzen der blossen Vernunft*; and another of much earlier date, (as far back as the thirteenth century, I think,) in a commoner book—Voltaire's notes on the little treatise of Beccaria, *Dei delitti e delle pene*. These statements tended to one of two results; either they unsanctified the characters of those who founded and nursed the Christian church; or they sanctified suicide. By way of meeting them, Donne wrote his book; and as the whole



argument of his opponents turned upon a false definition of suicide (not explicitly stated, but assumed), he endeavoured to reconstitute the notion of what is essential to create an act of suicide. Simply to kill a man is not murder: *primâ facie*, therefore, there is some sort of presumption that simply for a man to kill himself—may not always be so; there is such a thing as simple homicide distinct from murder; there may, therefore, possibly be such a thing as self-homicide distinct from self-murder. There *may* be a ground for such a distinction, *ex analogiâ*. But, secondly, on examination, *is* there any ground for such a distinction? Donne affirms that there is; and reviewing several eminent cases of spontaneous martyrdom, he endeavours to show that acts so motived and so circumstantiated will not come within the notion of suicide properly defined. Meantime, may not this tend to the encouragement of suicide in general, and without discrimination of its species? No; Donne's arguments have no prospective reference or application; they are purely retrospective. The circumstances necessary to create an act of mere self-homicide can rarely concur, except in a state of disordered society, and during the *cardinal* revolutions of human history; where, however, they *do* concur, there it will not be suicide. In fact, this is the natural and particular judgment of us all. We do not all agree on the particular cases which will justify self-destruction; but we all feel and involuntarily acknowledge (*implicitly* acknowledge in our admiration, though not explicitly in our words or in our principles), that there *are* such cases. There is no man, who in his heart would not reverence a woman that chose to die rather than to be dishonoured; and, if we do not say that it is her duty to do so, *that* is because the moralist must condescend to the weakness and infirmities of human nature: mean and

ignoble natures must not be taxed up to the level of noble ones. Again, with regard to the other sex, corporal punishment is a peculiar and *sexual* degradation; and if ever the distinction of Donne can be applied safely to any case, it will be to the case of him who chooses to die rather than to submit to that ignominy. *At present*, however, there is but a dim and very confined sense, even amongst enlightened men (as we may see by the debates of Parliament), of the injury which is done to human nature by giving legal sanction to such brutalising acts; and therefore most men, in seeking to escape it, would be merely shrinking from a *personal* dishonour. Corporal punishment is usually argued with a single reference to the case of him who suffers it; and *so* argued, God knows that it is worthy of all abhorrence; but the weightiest argument against it—is the foul indignity which is offered to our common nature lodged in the person of him on whom it is inflicted. *His* nature is *our* nature; and, supposing it possible that *he* were so far degraded as to be unsusceptible of any influences but those which address him through the brutal part of his nature, yet for the sake of ourselves—no! not merely for ourselves, or for the human race now existing, but for the sake of human nature, which transcends all existing participators of that nature—we should remember that the evil of corporal punishment is not to be measured by the poor transitory criminal, whose memory and offence are soon to perish; these, in the sum of things, are as nothing; the injury which can be done him, and the injury which he can do, have so momentary an existence that they may be safely neglected; but the abiding injury is to the most august interest which for the mind of man can have any existence,—*viz.*, to his own nature: to raise and dignify which, I am persuaded, is the first—last—and holiest command



which the conscience imposes on the philosophic moralist.\* In countries, where the traveller has the pain of seeing human creatures performing the labours of brutes,†—surely the sorrow which the spectacle moves, if a wise sorrow, will not be chiefly directed to the poor degraded individual—too deeply degraded, probably, to be sensible of his own degradation, but to the reflection that man's nature is thus exhibited in a state of miserable abasement; and, what is worst of all, abasement proceeding from man himself. Now, whenever this view of corporal punishment becomes general (as inevitably it will, under the influence of advancing civilisation), I say, that Donne's principle will then become applicable to this case, and it will be the duty of a man to die rather than to suffer his own nature to be dishonoured in that way. But so long as a man is not fully sensible of

\* On which account, I am the more struck by the ignoble argument of those statesmen who have contended in the House of Commons that such and such classes of men in this nation are not accessible to any loitier influences. Supposing that there were any truth in this assertion, which is a libel not on this nation only, but on man in general,—surely it is the duty of lawgivers not to perpetuate by their institutions the evil which they find, but to presume and gradually to create a better spirit.

† Of which degradation, let it never be forgotten that France but thirty years ago presented as shocking cases as any country, even where slavery is tolerated. An eye-witness to the fact, who has since published it in print, told me, that in France, before the Revolution, he had repeatedly seen a woman yoked with an ass to the plough; and the brutal ploughman applying his whip indifferently to either. English people, to whom I have occasionally mentioned this as an exponent of the hollow refinement of manners in France, have uniformly exclaimed "That is more than I can believe;" and have taken it for granted that I had my information from some prejudiced Englishman. But who was my informer? A Frenchman, reader,—M. Simond; and though now by adoption an American citizen, yet still French in his heart and in all his prejudices.

the dishonour, to him the dishonour, except as a personal one, does not wholly exist. In general, whenever a paramount interest of human nature is at stake, a suicide which maintains that interest is self-homicide; but, for a personal interest, it becomes self-murder. And to this principle Donne's may be resolved.

A doubt has been raised—whether brute animals ever commit suicide; to me it is obvious that they do not, and cannot. Some years ago, however, there was a case reported in all the newspapers of an old ram who committed suicide (as it was alleged) in the presence of many witnesses. Not having any pistols or razors, he ran for a short distance, in order to aid the impetus of his descent, and leaped over a precipice, at the foot of which he was dashed to pieces. His motive to the "rash act," as the papers called it, was supposed to be mere *tedium vitæ*. But, for my part, I doubted the accuracy of the report. Not long after a case occurred in Westmoreland which strengthened my doubts. A fine young blood horse, who could have no possible reason for making away with himself, unless it were the high price of oats at the time, was found one morning dead in a field. The case was certainly a suspicious one: for he was lying by the side of a stone-wall, the upper part of which wall his skull had fractured, and which had returned the compliment by fracturing his skull. It was argued, therefore, that in default of ponds, etc., he had deliberately hammered with his head against the wall; this, at first, seemed the only solution: and he was generally pronounced *felo de se*. However, a day or two brought the truth to light. The field lay upon the side of a hill; and, from a mountain which rose above it, a shepherd had witnessed the whole



catastrophe, and gave evidence which vindicated the character of the horse. The day had been very windy; and the young creature being in high spirits, and, caring evidently as little for the corn question as for the bullion question, had raced about in all directions; and at length, descending too steep a part of the field, had been unable to check himself, and was projected by the impetus of his own descent like a battering ram against the wall.

Of human suicides, the most affecting I have ever seen recorded is one which I met with in a German book; this I shall repeat a little further on; the most calm and deliberate is the following, which is *said* to have occurred at Keswick, in Cumberland; but I must acknowledge, that I never had an opportunity, whilst staying at Keswick, of verifying the statement. A young man, of studious turn, who is said to have resided near Penrith, was anxious to qualify himself for entering the church, or for any other mode of life which might secure to him a reasonable portion of literary leisure. His family, however, thought that under the circumstances of his situation he would have a better chance for success in life as a tradesman; and they took the necessary steps for placing him as an apprentice at some shopkeeper's in Penrith. This he looked upon as an indignity, to which he was determined in no case to submit. And accordingly, when he had ascertained that all opposition to the choice of his friends was useless, he walked over to the mountainous district of Keswick (about sixteen miles distant)—looked about him in order to select his ground—coolly walked up Lattrig (a dependency of Skiddaw)—made a pillow of sods—laid himself down with his face looking up to the sky—and in that posture he was found dead, with the appearance of having died tranquilly.



## HISTORICO-CRITICAL INQUIRY

INTO THE ORIGIN OF THE

### ROSICRUCIANS AND THE FREEMASONS.

**T**HERE is a large body of outstanding problems in history, great and little, some relating to persons, some to things, some to usages, some to words, etc., which furnish occasion, beyond any other form of historical researches, for the display of extensive reading and critical acumen. 1. In reference to *persons*, as those which regard whole nations—*e.g.* What became of the ten tribes of Israel? Did Brennus and his Gauls penetrate into Greece? Who and what are the Gipsies?—or those, far more in number, which regard individuals; as the case of the Knights Templars—of Mary Stuart—of the Ruthvens (the Gowrie Conspiracy). Who was the man in the Iron Mask? Was the unhappy Lady of the Haystack, who in our own days slept out of doors or in barns up and down Somersetshire, a daughter of the Emperor of Germany? Was Perkin Warbeck three centuries ago the true Plantagenet?\*

\* There can be no doubt that he was. But I mention it as a question which most people suppose to be yet *sub judice*