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PART I

Practical study and criticism



## CHAPTER ONE

# Verbal and Physical Imagery

Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* is dedicated 'To my students' and carries the subtitle 'Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear [and] Macbeth'. A Preface further explains that the lectures are 'based on a selection from materials used in teaching at Liverpool, Glasgow, and Oxford'. The book's contents had been tested on a variety of listeners, repeatedly reconsidered, and cut down to what their author thought most necessary to communicate. And the process of reflection continued with the addition of long explanatory and often exploratory notes. Today most books about Shakespeare are written by teachers but at the beginning of the last century the long gestation and practical testing of this book were remarkable and signalled a new kind of attention to Shakespeare's plays, one that was both prolonged and personally engaged. Several times Bradley says that the plays should be read with an 'eager mind', and he implied that his book needed a similar mixture of diligence and excitement. More specifically Shakespeare's texts should be read as if they were one long continuous poem, written with the finesse and intensity of lyric poetry. Following the expectation of the romantic poets of the previous century, he expected Shakespeare to 'load every rift . . . with ore' (John Keats, letter to Shelley, August 1820). In the same spirit as Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817), he closely examined Shakespeare's imagery for the associations and reflections it brought to a reader's mind and the suggestion it gave of thoughts and feelings not directly or consciously expressed.

Since the 1930s many critics have taken the same approach. Caroline Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (1935) and H. W. Clemen's *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery* (1936, translated from the German in 1951) marked out the way and soon a careful dissection of a play's verbal imagery was used to reveal meanings, implications, and intellectual issues not previously recognized. For example, Cleanth Brooks argued that Shakespeare's texts required the same subtle investigation and exegesis as the complex, 'metaphysical' poetry of John Donne: failing that, they could not be understood. Bradley had said much the same:

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■ Where his power or art is fully exerted it really does resemble that of nature. It organizes and vitalizes its product from the centre outward to the minutest markings on the surface, so that when you turn upon it the most searching light you can command, when you dissect it and apply to it the test of a microscope, still you find in it nothing formless, general or vague, but everywhere structure, character, individuality. In this his great things, which seem to come whenever they are wanted, have no companions in literature except the few greatest things in Dante; and it is a fatal error to allow his carelessness elsewhere to make one doubt whether here one is not seeking more than can be found. It is very possible to look for subtlety in the wrong place in Shakespeare, but in the right places it is not possible to find too much. (p. 54) □

Bradley's study of imagery is marked apart from that of many later critics by the connection he perceived between verbal imagery and physical on-stage action. He was also aware that the value of any particular moment depends on its position in the progress of the drama. Here is his account of Ophelia's speeches and on-stage performance:

■ To the persons in the play, as to the readers of it, she brings the thought of flowers. 'Rose of May' Laertes names her.

Lay her in the earth,  
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh  
May violets spring!

– so he prays at her burial. 'Sweets to the sweet' the Queen murmurs, as she scatters flowers on the grave . . . (p. 118) □

From his study of the verbal and physical imagery of a play Bradley was able to write about sensations, impressions, imaginary 'pictures', 'atmospheres', and all manner of thoughts that are not consciously formed or recognized by the persons of the drama. He was paying attention to those elements in a reader's or an audience's experience of the play that are real enough but have little to do with argument or narrative, that are intangible and yet unmistakable. Such perceptions may occur only fleetingly in an instant and yet Bradley shows that they accumulate and grow in power so that they come to influence almost every other aspect of an audience's response, and never more so than in *Macbeth*:

■ A Shakespearean tragedy, as a rule, has a special tone or atmosphere of its own, quite perceptible, however difficult to describe. The effect of this atmosphere is marked with unusual strength in *Macbeth*. It is due

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to a variety of influences which combine with those just noticed, so that, acting and reacting, they form a whole; and the desolation of the blasted heath, the design of the Witches, the guilt in the hero's soul, the darkness of the night, seem to emanate from one and the same source. This effect is strengthened by a multitude of small touches, which at the moment may be little noticed but still leave their mark on the imagination. We may approach the consideration of the characters and the action by distinguishing some of the ingredients of this general effect.

Darkness, we may even say blackness, broods over this tragedy. It is remarkable that almost all the scenes which at once recur to memory take place either at night or in some dark spot. The vision of the dagger, the murder of Duncan, the murder of Banquo, the sleep-walking of Lady Macbeth, all come in night-scenes. The Witches dance in the thick air of a storm, or, 'black and midnight hags', receive Macbeth in a cavern. The blackness of night is to the hero a thing of fear, even of horror; and that which he feels becomes the spirit of the play. The faint glimmerings of the western sky at twilight are here menacing: it is the hour when the traveller hastens to reach safety in his inn and when Banquo rides homeward to meet his assassins; the hour when 'light thickens', when 'night's black agents to their prey do rouse', when the wolf begins to howl, and the owl to scream, and withered murder steals forth to his work. Macbeth bids the stars hide their fires that his 'black' desires may be concealed; Lady Macbeth calls on thick night to come, palled in the dunnest smoke of hell. The moon is down and no stars shine when Banquo, dreading the dreams of the coming night, goes unwillingly to bed, and leaves Macbeth to wait for the summons of the little bell. When the next day should dawn, its light is 'strangled', and 'darkness does the face of earth entomb'. In the whole drama the sun seems to shine only twice; first, in the beautiful but ironical passage where Duncan sees the swallows flitting round the castle of death; and, afterwards, when at the close the avenging army gathers to rid the earth of its shame. Of the many slighter touches which deepen this effect I notice only one. The failure of nature in Lady Macbeth is marked by her fear of darkness; 'she has light by her continually'. And in the one phrase of fear that escapes her lips even in sleep, it is of the darkness of the place of torment that she speaks. (pp. 253-4) □

Bradley has paid attention to 'a multitude of small touches' that, unless a reader seeks them out, will 'be little noticed but still leave their mark on the imagination'. Their effect on the actors' performance may be surreptitious but, inevitably, it colours how the words are spoken, and in turn influences physical performance. In certain scenes – after the murder, in the

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sleepwalking, or the solitary moments in the midst of the final battle – the movement from image to image, thought to thought, depends entirely on these unwilling and irrational movements of the mind. And Bradley remained alert to alternative sensations so that he continued:

■ The atmosphere of *Macbeth*, however, is not that of unrelieved blackness. On the contrary, as compared with *King Lear* and its cold dim gloom, *Macbeth* leaves a decided impression of colour; it is really the impression of a black night broken by flashes of light and colour, sometimes vivid and even glaring. They are the lights and colours of the thunderstorm in the first scene; of the dagger hanging before Macbeth's eyes and glittering alone in the midnight air; of the torch borne by the servant when he and his lord come upon Banquo crossing the castle-court to his room; of the torch, again, which Fleance carried to light his father to death, and which was dashed out by one of the murderers; of the torches that flared in the hall on the face of the Ghost and the blanched cheeks of Macbeth; of the flames beneath the boiling caldron from which the apparitions in the cavern rose; of the taper which showed to the Doctor and Gentlewoman the wasted face and blank eyes of Lady Macbeth. And, above all, the colour is the colour of blood. It cannot be an accident that the image of blood is forced upon us continually, not merely by the events themselves, but by full descriptions, and even by reiteration of the word in unlikely parts of the dialogue. The Witches, after their first wild appearance, have hardly quitted the stage when there staggers onto it a 'bloody man', gashed with wounds. His tale is of a hero whose 'brandished steel smoked with bloody execution', 'carved out a passage' to his enemy, and 'unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps'. And then he tells of a second battle so bloody that the combatants seemed as if they 'meant to bathe in reeking wounds'. What metaphors! What a dreadful image is that with which Lady Macbeth greets us almost as she enters, when she prays the spirits of cruelty so to thicken her blood that pity cannot flow along her veins! What pictures are those of the murderer appearing at the door of the banquet-room with Banquo's 'blood upon his face'; of Banquo himself 'with twenty trenched gashes on his head', or 'blood-bolter'd' and smiling in derision at his murderer; of Macbeth, gazing at his hand, and watching it dye the whole green ocean red; of Lady Macbeth, gazing at hers, and stretching it away from her face to escape the smell of blood that all the perfumes of Arabia will not subdue! The most horrible lines in the whole tragedy are those of her shuddering cry, 'Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?' And it is not only at such moments that these images occur. Even in the quiet conversation of Malcolm and Macduff, Macbeth is imagined as holding

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a bloody sceptre, and Scotland as a country bleeding and receiving every day a new gash added to her wounds. It is as if the poet saw the whole story through an ensanguined mist, and as if it stained the very blackness of the night. When Macbeth, before Banquo's murder, invokes night to scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day, and to tear in pieces the great bond that keeps him pale, even the invisible hand that is to tear the bond is imagined as covered with blood. □

This discussion of images, impressions, and 'atmosphere' is part of a more traditional criticism when linked to the progress of narrative and the sequence of on-stage action:

■ Let us observe another point. The vividness, magnitude, and violence of the imagery in some of these passages are characteristic of *Macbeth* almost throughout; and their influence contributes to form its atmosphere. Images like those of the babe torn smiling from the breast and dashed to death; of pouring the sweet milk of concord into hell; of the earth shaking in fever; of the frame of things disjointed; of sorrows striking heaven on the face, so that it resounds and yells out like syllables of dolour; of the mind lying in restless ecstasy on a rack; of the mind full of scorpions; of the tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury; – all keep the imagination moving on a 'wild and violent sea', while it is scarcely for a moment permitted to dwell on thoughts of peace and beauty. In its language, as in its action, the drama is full of tumult and storm. Whenever the Witches are present we see and hear a thunder-storm: when they are absent we hear of shipwrecking storms and direful thunders; of tempests that blow down trees and churches, castles, palaces and pyramids; of the frightful hurricane of the night when Duncan was murdered; of the blast on which pity rides like a new-born babe, or on which Heaven's cherubim are horsed. There is thus something magnificently appropriate in the cry 'Blow, wind! Come wrack!' with which Macbeth, turning from the sight of the moving wood of Birnam, bursts from his castle. He was borne to his throne on a whirlwind, and the fate he goes to meet comes on the wings of storm. (pp. 253–6) □

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