

ST. THOMAS AND SHAKESPEARE

—A study in metaphysical relationship—

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I.

Nowadays one frequently hears the complaint that with the increasing departmentalization of knowledge we are losing the universal vision which shows the parts in their true meaning and interrelation. The words of Kipling, "East is East and West is West, and ne'er the twain shall meet", may well be applied to the different branches of learning, whether scientific or literary, in their relations with one another. Yet the very recognition that this is an undesirable condition is an encouraging sign. As in the political world, different countries feel the need of rapprochement and even of federation with one another; and as in the religious world, the "ecumenical movement" is flourishing among the different Christian bodies; so in the world of learning, there is a growing need of comparative study, not only within the fields of literature, philology and religion, but also between the fields of literature and theology, literature and philosophy, and so forth. In a recent article, "In Search of Fundamental Values" which appeared in a special issue of *The Times Literary Supplement* for July 26th, 1963, the well-known critic, L.C. Knights, made the notable statement:

"The study of literature cannot remain self-enclosed. Indeed, it is my own conviction... that there is important work waiting to be done 'on the frontiers', where the study of literature joins hands with the study of history, philosophy, theology, etc."

Such investigation of "frontiers" has largely been neglected by students of literature, many of whom are unversed in the mysteries of

philosophy and theology; yet it is not only a legitimate, but an increasingly needful field of study. After all, literature is the expression of human thought on an unlimited variety of topics; and as the writers of literature have invariably been men of education, they cannot but have been deeply affected by the philosophical currents of their time.

This is particularly relevant to the dramatic work of Shakespeare, who lived in an age when philosophy—both the Aristotelianism of mediaeval Scholasticism and the Neo-Platonism of the Renaissance—had permeated the common thought and life of men; and when theological and religious controversy provided frequent topics of ordinary conversation. Thus in the famous graveyard scene of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare introduces two grave-diggers solemnly arguing the question “Whether suicides may receive Christian burial” in the manner of a scholastic disputation, using syllogisms terminating in “argal”, the corrupt form of the Latin “ergo”. The actual name of Aristotle is occasionally mentioned in the plays, as in the first scene of *The Taming of the Shrew*, where Lucentio is seen on his way to Padua to study “virtue and that part of philosophy that treats of happiness”, but he is warned by Tranio not to become “so devote to Aristotle’s checks as Ovid be an outcast quite abjured” (Act I, Sc. 1). On the other hand, though the name of Pythagoras is not uncommon (in connection with his theory of metempsychosis), that of Plato does not occur at all; though it has been maintained with some plausibility (by John Vyvyan in his book *Shakespeare and Platonic Beauty*) that Shakespeare deliberately followed Platonic ideas in several of his mature Comedies. As for Socrates, the ironical method of discourse and the ideal of self-knowledge characteristic of that philosopher were introduced to Shakespeare through the *Essays* of Montaigne, which exercised a considerable influence on his thought, especially in the Tragedies.

What, then, of the great philosophers and theologians of the Middle Ages, and above all, of the prince of Catholic theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas? Do they ever make an appearance, either by name

or by quotation, in the plays of Shakespeare? The answer is simple: they are all ignored; and it is unlikely that any of them exercised a direct influence on the mind of the great dramatist. Indirectly, however, there were many channels through which the thought of these thinkers might have flowed into his subconscious mind, receptive as it was of mediaeval tradition. The Mystery plays which he saw in his boyhood at Coventry evidently held a deep attraction over his mind and gave him a living presentation of the Bible in its mediaeval interpretation. When he himself later came to write plays for the Elizabethan stage, he took over many conventions that can be traced back both to these Mystery plays and to the more abstract Morality plays which reflected the mediaeval interest in psychology. His romantic imagination was deeply coloured by the mediaeval poetry of Chaucer and Gower, and his treatment of classical authors such as Ovid and Virgil shows a mentality more akin to the Middle Ages than to the Renaissance. It is, moreover, not unlikely that Shakespeare was acquainted with the poetry of Dante, the great poetical exponent of the theological system of St. Thomas. All this—and it is by no means all—might well have served to put the mind of Shakespeare into “sympathetic contact” with the great scholastic thinkers of the thirteenth century, however indirect such a contact may seem to us. After all, their main philosophical ideas were not considered as the copyright of individual philosophers, but were widely disseminated amid the lively intellectual discussions of the age and produced a deep impact on all branches of contemporary learning and literature. It is not, therefore, a wild conjecture to suggest that even after the lapse of three centuries they may have been picked up by Shakespeare, with his sympathy for things mediaeval and metaphysical, and given new dramatic expression.

II.

In examining the question of the possible influence of mediaeval thought on the mind of Shakespeare, it is unavailing, as well as irre-

levant, to search the plays for quotations that may be paralleled in the writings of the mediaeval philosophers. It is of greater importance to attend to similarities in the main lines of thought, which were more likely to be transmitted through the various media of tradition than particular phrases or expressions. We may, therefore, embark on our quest by restricting our attention to the thought of St. Thomas among the many scholastic thinkers of the time, and by determining the main aspects of his thought which seem to have a special bearing on human drama. On reflection, three such aspects naturally suggest themselves as a suitable "point of departure": three ideas in which the thought of St. Thomas is at once most personal and most representative of the mediaeval view of life.

In the first place, the basic idea of St. Thomas as a mediaeval philosopher, viewing the whole created world in the light of divine faith, is that the essence of creatures is to depend on their Creator and by their various degrees of being to manifest His supreme goodness. As he declares in the *Summa Contra Gentes*:

"Ultimus finis divinae voluntatis est bonitas ipsius, cui propinquissimum in rebus creatis est bonum ordinis totius universi; cum ad ipsum ordinetur, sicut ad finem, omne particulare bonum hujus vel illius rei, sicut minus perfectum ordinatur ad id quod est perfectius." (iii. 64)

A little later, he elaborates this general thought:

"Perfecta bonitas in rebus creatis non inveniretur nisi esset ordo bonitatis in eis, ut scilicet quaedam sint aliis meliora: non enim implerentur omnes gradus possibiles bonitatis, neque etiam aliqua creatura Deo similaretur quantum ad hoc quod alteri emeretur. Tolleretur etiam summus decor a rebus, si ab eis ordo distinctorum et disparium tolleretur. Et quod est amplius, tolleretur multitudo a rebus, inaequalitate bonitatis sublata: cum per differentias quibus res ad invicem differunt, unum altero melius existat; sicut animatum inanimato, et rationale irrationali." (iii. 71)

Thus the manifestation of God's goodness in creatures, which is the end of creation, consists in the order of their arrangement in certain stages or degrees of being reaching from the highest to the lowest. Among rational creatures this concept of order is further characterized as "hierarchy", or sacred order, which springs from the ineffable unity of the Creator:

"Quia unus est Deus princeps non solum omnium angelorum, sed etiam hominum, et totius creaturae; ideo non solum omnium angelorum, sed etiam totius rationalis creaturae, quae sacrorum particeps esse potest, una est hierarchia." (ST I. cviii. 1)

and this order among rational creatures is reflected in the order and movement of irrational creatures (including the irrational elements in human nature). Moreover, the movement of the irrational creatures, imitating the hierarchy of the rational creatures, is explained in terms of an "appetitus materialis", as the potentialities with which each is endowed in greater or less degree tend upwards to their full actualization in man, and so through man in God. This is the theme of a famous passage in the third book of the *Summa Contra Gentes*:

"Oportet quod intentio cujuslibet in potentia existentis sit ut per motum tendat in actum. Quanto igitur aliquis actus est posterior et magis perfectus, tanto principalius in ipsum appetitus materiae fertur. Unde oportet quod in ultimum et perfectissimum actum quem materia consequi potest tendat appetitus materiae quo appetit formam, sicut in ultimum finem generationis.... Ultimus igitur finis generationis est anima humana, et in hanc tendit materia sicut in ultimam formam." (iii. 22)

Man is thus the "high priest" of the whole material creation, when by the use of his rational power he recognizes the signs of God's goodness in the order of material creatures, and by the use of his freedom he offers them all to God in an act of praise.

Secondly, through this perception of order in all creatures, both static according as they are arranged in fixed degrees of being and dynamic

according as they move towards the attainment of their appointed ends, St. Thomas arrives at his metaphysical intuition of being. All creatures participate to a greater or less degree in being; but because they only participate in being, they are distinct from perfect being and compensate as it were for this defect by their multitude and continual interchange of perfections. This fundamental idea is expressed as follows in the *Summa Theologica*:

“Deus produxit res in esse propter suam bonitatem communicandam creaturis, et per eas representandam. Et quia per unam creaturam sufficienter representari non potest, produxit multas creaturas et diversas, ut quod deesset uni ad representandam divinam bonitatem suppleatur ex alia; nam bonitas quae in Deo est simpliciter et uniformiter, in creaturis est multipliciter et divisim. Unde perfectius participat divinam bonitatem et representat eam totum universum quam alia quaecumque creatura.” (I. 47. 1)

Multitude and change are, therefore, of the essence of created beings and of the order by which they manifest the goodness of the divine Being. It is, however, the aim of the philosopher to look beyond this multitude and mutability of created beings to the unchanging goodness of the one divine Being in which they are all united, as it were above themselves. For the divine Being is present in each and in all of His creatures, yet is not fully present in any of them or in them all together. He exists perfectly in Himself, independently of them, and it is to Him alone that the final intuition of rational creatures must be directed. Only in the light of this intuition can one appreciate the total order of creation and the different degrees of being in creatures, considering that these degrees are constituted by the measure in which each created being participates in the Being of God, and that the order of creation serves to manifest His wisdom and goodness.

Thirdly, in contrast to this calm intuition of divine Being and Goodness, which are one and the same in God, there is the troubling spectacle of evil in the world, upsetting the harmony of creatures am-

ong themselves and striking as it were as the very source of Being itself. This is a problem calling for immediate solution; since if evil really exists, how can it be compatible with the existence and goodness of God? In an important question of the *Summa Theologica* St. Thomas discusses *De Causa Mali*, and there he makes the vital distinction between "malum quod in defectu actionis consistit" and "malum quod in corruptione rerum aliquarum consistit". In its former sense, the cause of evil cannot be in Good, since His Being is perfect Act in which there can be no defect; but it can be in His creatures, by reason of their imperfection in that, while participating by nature in the divine Being, they can still turn against Him by their use of free will. This they can do, because, though their natural instinct directs them ultimately to God, as their final end, they can attend to the immediate good in other creatures and prefer this to their ultimate good. Thus evil comes into existence for much the same reason as it becomes a problem for those who contemplate its existence. As St. Thomas explains in a passage which resumes his argument against the Manichees:

"Qui posuerunt duo prima principia, unum bonum et alterum malum, ex eadem radice in hunc errorem inciderunt... quia scilicet non consideraverunt causam universalem totius entis, sed particulares tantum causas particularium effectuum.... Judicium autem de bonitate alicujus rei non est accipiendum secundum ordinem ad aliquid particulare, sed secundum seipsum, et secundum ordinem ad totum universum, in quo quaelibet res suum locum ordinatissime tenet." (I. 49.3)

When, therefore, the world is seen as a whole, in the light of its universal cause in the divine Being, the presence of evil in its midst ceases to constitute a problem, since it is finally assumed into the order of divine Providence for the good of the whole. Evil may seem to triumph in some places and for a certain time; but in the general process of change in the world, it is good which finally triumphs over evil. This is the reiterated teaching of St. Thomas, in

which he applies his ideal of the order of creation, as seen in the goodness of the divine Being, to the solution of the problem of evil:

“Si malum a quibusdam partibus universi subtraheretur, multum deperiret perfectionis universi; cujus pulchritudo ex ordinata malorum et bonorum adunatione consurgit, dum mala ex bonis deficientibus proveniunt, et tamen ex eis quaedam bona consequuntur ex providentia gubernatis; sicut et silentii interpositio facit cantilenam esse suavem,” (CG iii. 71)

III.

It now remains to show how far this metaphysical view of creation is to be found in the plays of Shakespeare, not just in passing allusions, but in the central structure of his thought. Indeed, without the slightest forcing of the poet's meaning, it is possible to follow exactly the same line of thought in the development of his plays, though from the humanistic and ethical standpoint of a poet and dramatist.

In the first place, the order and harmony necessary for human society is a theme that plays an important role in Shakespeare's plays from the very beginning. As Prof. Tillyard points out in his *Elizabethan World-Picture*, the ideal of social order had been deeply impressed on the minds of Englishmen in the Tudor period by the preceding chaos of civil strife during the Wars of the Roses; and it was mainly the horror they felt at the idea of a renewal of this chaos that made them reluctant to offer vigorous opposition to the religious changes introduced by Henry VIII and Edward VI. This deep impression was likewise shared by Shakespeare, whose earliest History plays treat of the reign of Henry VI and the disastrous Wars of the Roses. Indeed, the chaos which forms the subject of these plays seems to enter into its dramatic treatment, so that the order of events is not easily distinguishable amid the confusion of scenes and acts. Yet the ideal of order is represented in symbolic scenes, such as those of Talbot's homage to the King at Rheims in Part I, and of Iden's garden in Part II, which

make a point of contrast with the ambitious quarrelling of the nobles and the rebellious discontent of the people. In this context, the words of Iden in his Kentish garden are of special significance:

“I seek not to wax great by others’ waning,
Or gather wealth I care not with what envy;
Sufficeth that I have maintains my state,

And sends the poor well pleased from my gate.” (Act V, Sc. 10)

For the ideal of order depends on individuals remaining content with their “degree” or place in society; whereas social chaos comes about through the ambition of individuals seeking a higher place than is due to them. The chaos of these early plays comes, therefore, to be epitomized in the person of Richard III, who gains the English crown by his unscrupulous ambition. Against him the forces of order concentrate their effort, and triumph in the victory of Henry Tudor, whose concluding speech emphasizes the contrast between the preceding madness of civil disunity and the renewal of peace and prosperity in the land.

It was also from his mediaeval inheritance that Shakespeare derived his ideal order for dramatic construction, which he found in the basic pattern of the Morality plays. This pattern appears already, in an explicit manner, in the structure of *Richard III*, where the true significance of historical events is shown to lie outside the events themselves, in relation to the ultimate issues of salvation and damnation and the ultimate states of heaven and hell. It is noteworthy how all the victims of Richard in the course of the play die with expressions of repentance on their lips and invocations of Christ as Redeemer; whereas Richard himself faces death in battle with impenitent defiance:

“Conscience is but a word that cowards use,
Devised at first to keep the strong in awe;
Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law,
March on, join bravely, let us to’t pell-mell;

If not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell.” (Act V, Sc. 3)

Thereafter, this moral, or religious, pattern enters deeply into the

structure of Shakespeare's plays, as he is led, through his dramatic studies of Prince Hal in the two Parts of *Henry IV* and of Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, to his penetrating analysis of human nature in the great Tragedies. For Shakespeare, tragedy consists precisely in the invasion of the moral sphere of human decision by the forces of chaos, through which good is no longer distinguishable from evil, but "fair is foul, and foul is fair". So when Brutus is being tempted by the envious Cassius to undertake the murder of Caesar, he reflects to himself how—

"Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma or a hideous dream;
The genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection." (Act II, Sc. 1)

In the same way, the effect of the ghost's revelation on Hamlet's mind is to induce a state of uncertainty as to whether he is "a spirit of health or goblin damned", and so to cut him adrift as it were from his bearings with relation to heaven and hell. Yet it is against such a background of chaos and moral uncertainty that Shakespeare comes out with a notable statement of the ideal of "degree" in the speech of Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, a problem play exactly contemporary with *Hamlet*:

"The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre
Observe degree, priority and place,
Insistute, course, proportion, season, form,
Office and custom, in all line of order;
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
Amidst the other; whose medicinable eye
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil,

And posts, like the commandment of a king,
Sans check, to good and bad." (Act I, Sc. 3)

Then, in contrast to this ideal of "degree" in all things both in heaven and on earth, he presents a vivid picture of the opposite disorder:

"But when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues, what portents, and what mutiny,
What raging of the sea, shaking of earth,
Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors,
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
The unity and married calm of states
Quite from their fixture! O when degree is shaken,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
The enterprise is sick." (ibid.)

The great Tragedies, indeed, present us with the temporary triumph of the forces of chaos, which plunge the world for a time into the darkness of blood and confusion. Thus for Othello, when he turns against his "married calm" and casts out his love for Desdemona, "chaos is come again"; and he pronounces the terrible vow:

"Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell!
Yield up, o Love, thy crown and hearted throne
To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught,
For 'tis of aspics' tongues!" (Act III, Sc. 3)

Similarly, in Macbeth's murder of Duncan, his sovereign and his guest, "confusion now hath made his masterpiece"; he and his wife are plagued by nightmares in consequence, which lead him to declare:

"Let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,
Ere we will eat our meal in fear and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly." (Act III, Sc. 2)

Perhaps the most notable expression of the forces of chaos triumphing over man's world is to be found *King Lear*, where the old king

wanders in the storm defying the elements to do their worst to match the moral chaos of filial ingratitude:

“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow,
 You cataracts and hurricanoes; spout
 Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
 You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
 Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Smite flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!
 Crack nature’s moulds, all germens spill at once
 That make ingrateful man!” (Act III, Sc. 2)

It is, indeed, remarkable how many expressions of the destructive force of chaos are to be found in the plays of Shakespeare. Yet with all this, the fundamental order of things is never shaken: the light of heaven still peeps “through the blanket of the dark”, and no crime is ever left without retribution—the “ordinis redintegratio” of Thomist moral philosophy. The great Tragedies invariably conclude with an epilogue spoken by some representative of the forces of order; and the general triumph of these forces is revealed at greater length in the final Romances with which Shakespeare brought his dramatic career to a close. In these final plays, there invariably occurs a symbolic contrast between storms, which always stand for chaos in Shakespeare’s mind, and the harmony of music, which accompanies the manifestation of order and peace. Thus the series of reconciliations with which *Cymbeline* draws to its end, prompts the Soothsayer to exclaim:

“The fingers of the powers above do tune
 The harmony of this peace” (Act V, Sc. 5)

On the other hand, the concept of “degree” and order is not to be identified with the merely external forms of law and orderly procedure on which the king insists in *Richard II*. It is a principal defect in Richard that he makes too much of outward degree, and “the ceremony that to great one’s longs”, things that are good only in so far

as they reflect the substantial good of moral order; whereas he himself, after having connived at the murder of his uncle, foolishly thinks that he can effectively hide this fact under cover of the existing order in his kingdom. He fails to recognize what Hamlet later so clearly recognizes, that—

“Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.”

(Act I, Sc. 2)

It is because of his disregard for the underlying moral order, while preserving the outward forms of social order, that Richard is eventually brought to his ruin by Bolingbroke and to realise in his ruin the contrast between the dignity of the royal office and the humility of the human person. In contrast, Shakespeare emphasizes the greatness of Henry V, which makes him look beyond his royal position to his human nature; so that on the eve of his victory at Agincourt he can mix with his soldiers, unrecognized by them, and tell them what he thinks of the king:

“Though I speak it to you, I think the king is but a man as I am: the violet smells to him as it doth to me; the element shows to him as it doth to me; all his senses have but human conditions; his ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man; and though his affections are higher mounted than ours, yet when they stoop, they stoop with the like wing.”

(Act IV, Sc. 1)

The most outstanding expression of this contrast between external form, which often serves only to puff up with vain glory, and the true moral order, which is for Shakespeare based on a true knowledge of self, is perhaps the speech of Isabella in *Measure for Measure*:

“Man, proud man,
Drest in alittle brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,

Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As make the angles weep." (Act II, Sc. 2)

In this way, Shakespeare points to a fundamental distinction between two levels of law and order: the superficial level of outward appearance, and the deeper level of spiritual reality. This distinction is not merely one that is hinted at from time to time in the course of his plays: it is fundamental to his whole dramatic development. In his plays he manifests a growing discontent with the mere appearances of beauty, form and order, which in this life often serve to conceal moral ugliness and confusion; and so he is led to search with increasing urgency for true beauty and order. This search is perhaps the main reason for the growing element of satire that is discernible in his romantic Comedies, in which he shows up the various kinds of false pretension prevalent in his time both among the aristocrats at court and among the populace of the city. A turning-point in these Comedies is marked by *The Merchant of Venice*, where the hero, Bassanio, is presented with a choice of three caskets in order to win the hand of the lady Portia: rejecting the gold and silver caskets for their fair but deceitful exterior, he chooses the casket of lead in which he discovers the true likeness of Portia. This may be taken as a parable of Shakespeare's own development from the gold of romantic Comedy through the silver of satire and bitter Comedy to the lead of Tragedy. In a mature Comedy like *As You Like It*, his satire remains genial and he criticizes fellow-satirists of the type of Jaques, who "commit most mischievous foul sin in chiding sin" (Act II, Sc.7); but he himself seems to fall into this very sin in his subsequent "bitter" Comedies, in which he exposes the worst vices of his age, as it were laying bare "the foul body of the infected world" without cleansing it.

At times, indeed, and notably in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare seems, in his search for the truth underlying the appearances of the world, to come very close to the mind of Pilate when he asked the cynical question: "what is truth?" Yet in the midst of his despair, Shakespeare

never wholly yielded to this temptation; and the unmistakable accents of the great poet are to be heard in the famous speech of Hamlet:

“Seems, madam! Nay, it is. I know not “seems”.
 ’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
 Nor customary suits of solemn black,
 Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
 No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
 Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
 Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
 That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
 For they are actions that a man might play.
 But I have that within which passeth show,
 These but the trappings and the suits of woe.” (Act I, Sc. 2)

The driving motive of Hamlet in the play is not the desire of revenge, nor the alternation of rage and brooding that characterizes the melancholic man, but the basic desire to know the truth of things. The revelation of the ghost does not, in fact, lead him to sweep to his revenge “with wings as swift as meditation of the thoughts of love”; but only impels him to ascertain for himself the truth of what he has heard. Yet his search for this particular truth is only incidental to his deeper impulse to explore the truth of man’s heart, both his own and that of others. Hence it is that in the very midst of his plan to “catch the conscience of the king” by means of the play he calls “The Mouse-Trap”, he is himself caught by the king in a soliloquy that expresses his own conscience; when his reflections are concerned not with plans for revenge, but with the problem of human life itself:

“To be, or not to be, that is the question.
 Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
 And by opposing end them.... Who would fardels bear,
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,

But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscovered country from whose bourne
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than fly to others that we know not of?" (Act III, Sc.1)

It can safely be asserted that this speech has no relevance to the main action of the play; and yet it is, paradoxically, central to its meaning, which is to be found not in this action but in the character of Hamlet. Hamlet himself is, in turn, to be regarded less as a private individual, than as a representative of modern man, perplexed by the problem of himself:

"What is a man
 If his chief good and market of his time
 Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
 Sure, He that made us with such large discourse,
 Looking before and after, gave us not
 That capability and godlike reason
 To fust in us unused." (Act IV, Sc. 4)

Nor can he himself find the solution, till the very end of the play; yet this is precisely what makes the play so fascinating, and so perplexing. It poses a problem to which there seems to be no solution.

Nevertheless, Shakespeare does not despair of finding a solution; and the subsequent great Tragedies may be regarded as his sustained attempt to solve the problem of man which he has set himself in *Hamlet*. It is a question not merely of the metaphysical nature of man as such, but of his moral nature in the actual world, involving his unaccountable inclination to evil. Hence, in their investigation of this question, the Tragedies of Shakespeare take on the quality of a profound analysis of human evil, which has first to be explained before human nature can be displayed in its ideal form. According to his analysis, this evil is rooted in the culpable inability of man to recognize the real truth of persons or things beneath deceptive appearances. Thus

Othello, for all his romantic idealism, is led astray by his excessive trust in the apparent honesty of Iago, who takes advantage of it to instil doubts as to the real honesty of his wife Desdemona. In his rage of jealousy, when passion has already darkened his best judgment, he murders her; and it is only afterwards that he learns of her innocence and of Iago's guilt—when it is too late. So he is prompted to ask the further question about Iago:

“Will you, I pray, demand that demi—devil

Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?” (Act V, Sc. 2)

But this is a question which, like that of Hamlet, must remain unanswered within the limits of this play, and which leads onwards to further investigation. This is carried out in the next great Tragedy, *Macbeth*, which shows the hero seduced into a path of evil not by honest appearances, but by the promises of the Witches who stimulate his ambitious spirit. Already he has the inclination to seek a higher position than is his by right, and the promises of the Witches serve to encourage him to follow his inclination in actual deed. Unlike Hamlet, his mind is directed not to the ultimate destiny of man, but exclusively to this world of time; and Shakespeare shows how the more such a mind is expressed in act, the more it brings chaos and destruction into human affairs. Before the crime, he reflects characteristically:

“If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well

It were done quickly. If the 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.” (Act I, Sc. 7)

Yet immediately afterwards, his eyes, like those of Othello, are opened to the truth of what he has done; and he realizes that

“To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself” (Act II, Sc. 2)

—he has given his “eternal jewel” to the “common enemy of man”,

and from this instant

“There’s nothing serious in mortality.

All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead,
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.” (Act II, Sc. 3)

Thus from the first, he has deliberately closed his eyes to the true aim of man, that which gives human life its eternal value; and by continuing to the end in this attitude, he comes to a state of ultimate despair as expressed in his closing soliloquy:

“Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.” (Act V, Sc. 5)

Such is for Shakespeare the final outcome of evil, which leads by a logical chain of consequences to the destruction of order and the very annihilation of being. At the same time, with the downward movement of evil, he presents a corresponding upward movement of good, resulting in the restoration of order and the manifestation of being in its true glory. This latter movement, which is only suggested at the end of the previous Tragedies, is given fuller attention in *King Lear*, the greatest and most metaphysical of all Shakespeare’s plays. Like Othello, Lear too is deceived by fair appearances in his wicked daughters, while he is blinded to the reality of good in his youngest daughter, Cordelia. He has, therefore, to learn by bitter experience the truth both of himself and of them, since up till the present “he has ever but slenderly known himself”. The effect of their cruel

ingratitude is to bring about a condition of madness which is fittingly reflected in the fretful elements of the storm; but as in his time of reason he had been blind to the truth about himself and his children, so now in his madness he comes to realize both the wickedness of his two elder daughters and his own condition as

“A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man”. (Act III, Sc. 2)

This truth, moreover, which he finds in himself, he gradually learns to find in all men in general, as he extends his feelings of pity from himself to his Fool and from his Fool to all “poor naked wretches” that “bide the pelting of this pitiless storm” (Act III, Sc. 4); until finally he comes face to face with the mad beggar in whom he recognizes the depths of “unaccommodated man”:

“Is man no more than this?... Thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art.” (ibid.)

The last stage of his self-recognition comes when he wakes up from his sleep to find his true daughter Cordelia beside him, and in knowing her he at last knows himself as he is. The sufferings born of ignorance have brought him at last to self-knowledge:

“I am very foolish fond old man,
 Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less,
 And to deal plainly,
 I fear I am not in my perfect mind...
 Do not laugh at me,
 For as I am a man, I think this lady
 To be my child Cordelia.” (Act IV, Sc. 7)

This further aspect of evil, as remedial in its effects and so entering into the design of God's Providence, is developed by Shakespeare in his final plays or Romances. A notable example of this is *The Winter's Tale*, which may have been intended as a continuation of the theme of *Othello* so as to crown it with a happy ending. The king, Leontes, conceives a jealous suspicion against his wife Hermione and

orders a public trial, at which he is the chief accuser; but the trial proves too much for her nerves, and she is taken from court in a dead faint. Realizing her innocence, Leontes performs a long penance, which is described in religious terms as amply redeeming his fault; and as a result of this penance he is restored to her whom he believed to have been lost in death. In this way, Shakespeare shows how good is drawn from evil in the order of divine Providence. The same truth is demonstrated in his final complete play, *The Tempest*, where the moral of the story is drawn by the good old counsellor, Gonzalo:

“Was Milan thrust from Milan, that his issue
Should become Kings of Naples? Oh, rejoice
Beyond a common joy! And set it down
With gold on lasting pillars. In one voyage
Did Claribel her husband find at Tunis
And Ferdinand her brother found a wife
Where he himself was lost, Prospero his dukedom
In a poor isle, and all of us ourselves
When no man was his own.” (Act V, Sc. 1)

In these words, which sound like an elaboration of the Church's exclamation in the liturgy of Holy Saturday, “O felix culpa!”, Shakespeare sums up as it were his life-long endeavour to “justify the ways of God to men”, which is all the more effective as it is less obtrusive than the parallel endeavour of Milton.

IV.

In conclusion, it may safely be asserted that there lies at the heart of Shakespeare's plays a deep metaphysical intuition, which is not unrelated to the metaphysical intuition of the great scholastic thinkers of the Middle Ages. Admittedly, this intuition is not expressed in the abstract form of Aristotelian or Thomist philosophy, but in the imaginative form proper to a great poet and dramatist. Some critics have, indeed, been deceived by this imaginative form to the extent of asserting

that "he was not a consistent and committed man with a clear-cut philosophy. Amid a life of such various activities, his thinking was quick, impulsive and intermittent" (Ivor Brown: *How Shakespeare Spent the Day*). But in order to find the truth of the matter, it is necessary to follow the example of Shakespeare himself, by looking beyond the external appearances of the plays, which appeal to the imaginations of the audience, to the underlying reality of their intellectual structure and meaning. For as warns us in the celebrated speech of Prospero towards the end of *The Tempest*, the external appearances whether of his plays, or of the theatre in which they are acted, or of the outside world, are all destined to dissolve and "leave not a rack behind" (Act IV, Sc.1). On the other hand, the whole development of his thought points, as we have seen, to an abiding reality, beyond outward actions, beyond conscious thoughts and motives, deep within the heart of man which is also the heart of the universe. There, at the very centre of creation, Shakespeare finds, on the one hand, an unmentionable and unimaginable horror of evil, which he strives to express in imaginative form in *Othello* and *Macbeth*, and, on the other hand, an even deeper source of good which continues to flow even after seeming to have been stopped and to bring about a reflowering of life. It is in this vision of the source of good that Shakespeare may be said to have experienced the same metaphysical intuition as St. Thomas Aquinas, however different his expression of it may have been; and it is for this reason that both philosopher and poet adopt a fundamentally optimistic view of human life. Moreover, just as their vision looks to the source of good at the origin of human life, so their different expressions of it rejoin one another in that happy ending with which the mediaeval poet Dante concludes his *Divina Commedia*—in the culminating vision of Divine Love,

"L'Amor què move il sole e l'altre stelle." (Para. C. xxxiii)