# *Shakespeare and the Nature of Metaphor*

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## I

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth
to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath strong imagination
That, if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush suppos'd a bear?[1]

THESEUS's ironic glance at poetic language, his view of the poet as a kind of madman composing in an exalted "frenzy," his poetic eye "rolling" frantically, is one that every literary period has been acquainted with in varying forms, and in some sense has had to assert itself against. The suspicion that imaginative language involves the creation of things that have no real existence in nature and which are therefore partial, subjective, and fraught with deceit, is a perennial one. And it is the more difficult to deal with in that it is most frequently voiced by writers themselves. Theseus's viewpoint makes any idea of the seriousness of poetry extremely difficult. The most that can be claimed for it is that it offers a pleasing and harmless fantasy. If one were to ask what the substance of the poet's vision is, the answer would be "nothing." Clearly we are close here to a view of art as entertainment,

a view incidentally that fits in with the aristocratic hauteur of Theseus. For the assumption that imaginative literature necessarily has a human and moral commitment is one that we owe in part to the development within our culture of middle class preoccupations.

Theseus's argument is really concerned with the nature of poetic metaphor, and in one sense he is right in considering it to be the conjuring of something out of nothing. What is at stake, however, is the status of that nothing. All experience is to some extent bound by language. It is impossible to talk meaningfully about anything without drawing on the imaginative resources of language; and such resources are always vulnerable to the argument that Theseus puts forward. There is no objective yardstick by which we can measure the truthfulness of metaphor because the reality it reflects is always a human one. But this is true of all language, not simply metaphor. Although we talk of "imaginative language" there is in fact nothing else but that, since all language is necessarily an act of the imagination. Even at their most elementary level words involve the fusion of nature and art. And it is here that the heart of the problem lies, for words are, as a consequence, deeply ambiguous. On the one hand they are felt as things — we experience them physically in the mouth and the inner ear as sensations — yet their meaning is symbolic; they represent objects, but they are not truly objects themselves. They both are and are not products of nature. On them rests the whole expressed structure of our moral and human values and yet they can in no way guarantee their truth. Because of this, every major work of art, in one way or another, debates the nature of its own existence; it is to that extent, about itself and the world of values it creates. Shakespeare, perhaps more than any other writer, was supremely aware of the materials of his craft. This is evident not only in his preoccupation with the stage and the whole nature of theatrical illusion, but also in his concern with the deeper and more fundamental illusion offered by words.

The ambiguous nature of words can be seen even in Theseus's mocking lines. In reinforcing "nothing" with "airy," for example, he is in a way contradicting himself, since strictly speaking air cannot be said to be nothing. It is, if anything, the very stuff of

life, the first gift, according to Genesis, of God to man. Theseus is, of course, albeit in a scarcely noticeable fashion, using air in a metaphorical, not a logical sense. He is doing on a small scale what the poet does on a larger one. And the fact that he does so is because language only approximates to nature; words are not things. There is no real counterpart in nature to "nothing" since everything must be something. We talk about "spaces," "blanks" and "vacuums," but these simply imply gaps or absences of some kind. The concept of nothing is fundamentally different and essentially inexpressible. To give some idea of it we have to draw on the "airy nothing" that Theseus laughs at.

Theseus's speech illustrates the impossibility of trying to describe the activity of the imagination without using words that are themselves resonant with imaginative life. In order to describe the way in which a poet works Theseus has to use metaphor; and the metaphor he employs is that of natural creation. "[B]odies forth" powerfully recalls the physical creation of man. As an image it endows the imagination with a sense of the natural organic unity that is appropriate to the body. It implies notions fundamentally different from those of mere assembling or arranging. Together with the echo of "ex nihilo" in "nothing," and the reference to the act of naming, the religious frame of the passage is complete. Despite Theseus's sceptical irony, the lines tell us that the poet's art is a second creation, bearing in its substance a deeply analogous relation to the first. It is an act of miracle, and one that sustains the imaginative and spiritual life of man just as God's original creation sustains the physical. In an important sense then, one can say that the deep structure of Theseus's language works against his argument. It enacts a judgment on him, as does in fact his entire dramatic presence in the play, since he also is a creation of "airy nothing."

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is in part about the difference between illusion and delusion. It debates in its very structure the paradoxical existence of illusion, and the extent to which imaginative truth is necessarily a violation of logic. As such the play offers a defence of dreaming which is both subtle and sophisticated in its understanding of the ambiguous substance of words and the relation they bear to nature. Its view of dreaming is in a

totally different key from the one we have come to accept since Freud. Freud's view of dream imagery as a disguise for appetites which are too disturbing to be acknowledged is grounded in a radically divergent concept of the imagination. Clearly, what we make of poetic language and its claim to offer a distinctive form of truth depends largely on the relation we assume between the aesthetic and the physical, between that is, the imagination and the body.

Shakespearian metaphor is characteristically based on an underlying sense of analogy. In the image "bodies forth" for example, natural creation is used to suggest imaginative creation; the one is a Type of the other. There is a fundamental assumption both of likeness and of difference. At the same time there is an implicit causative link, viz. it is only because we have bodies in the first place that we can imagine and create. The second creation depends on the first and is to some extent an aspect of it. But it is not identical with it; the body becomes a Type of the imagination, not an explanation of it. Shakespeare does not suggest that the imagination is simply the body in another form. Freud, however, does, and so does his most sympathetic literary counterpart, Swift.

Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* is perhaps the greatest single assault in English Literature on the Shakespearian concept of the imagination. In its preoccupation with the anal/erotic roots of our fantasy life it startlingly anticipates the subsequent, more clinical, but equally devastating critique offered by Freud. In the *Tale* Swift suggests that playing with words is like playing with genitalia, in fact more than that — it is that in another form. The imagination is really the body usurping its natural function, tyrannizing over us in disguise; the task of the writer is to keep nature in its place by tying words down to a world of plain, simple fact. Metaphor becomes the sign of neurosis, or in eighteenth-century terms, original sin. It is against this background that we can view that century's preference for simile over metaphor, and the struggle to find a new form in which the world of fact might seem to predominate — the novel. It is in this context also that we can see the peculiar tension of eighteenth-century satire in which the imagination seems so often to pull against an argument that

would annihilate it. Nowhere is this more true ironically than in Swift's *Tale* itself where, despite the apparent argument of the narrative, Swift's fertile imagination is everywhere evident.

Swift's anxiety over metaphor is fundamentally then an anxiety about nature. In metaphor words achieve their maximum freedom, and as such their ambiguous status as entities within nature becomes more obvious. Arguably, Swift reflects an uncertainty about words which is greater in a print culture. With printing words seem more obviously to be facts; they become units made up of pieces of type. Print is anonymous and totally objective, there is no individual signature to it; it could come from anyone and anywhere. As such the literature appropriate to such an age is one which exploits the possibilities of disguise and impersonation which print affords. The deceptive capacity of words becomes more apparent simply because print confers an authority on language which the literary artist is able to show as specious. Shakespearian drama, on the other hand, reflects the more religious feelings that surround language in a predominantly oral literary culture. In the theatre words are sensed, not as items on a page, but as sound, with all the mystery and range of suggestion that human inflexion can give them. Moreover, the dramatist makes meaning manifest in a directly human context. It is tempting to see in Theseus's words "And as imagination bodies forth" a reference to the theatre, since the playwright does express his meaning through the bodies of his actors. They are, in a sense, his metaphors. Illusion is basic to his craft and his use of language, just as delusion is central to those forms that thrive through the medium of print.

Our perennial uncertainties then about the status of words, as both a part of nature, and yet distinct from it, are reflected in the two quite different attitudes towards metaphor which make up the dialectic of our literary experience. In the first case, the suspicion of metaphor answers to our impulse to locate words as precisely, and therefore as factually, as possible within nature. In the second, the exploration and expansion of metaphorical significance answers to our sense of words as symbolic entities, not facts, but intimations of pure being. Throughout Shakespearian drama there is a continuing debate about poetic language which

centres directly on the question of the real meaning of words. In particular, Shakespeare is concerned with the function of metaphor, and the genuineness of its claim to sustain a particular kind of truth. All the plays oppose a world which is analogical against one which is anti-analogical and ironical. If we take the tragedies as an example, we could say, broadly speaking, that the heroes inhabit the first and the villains the second. It is never quite as simple as that, however, for the point is that we recognize in the villain a certain attitude to language and experience which we know in part to be ours, just as we see in the hero an opposing linguistic attitude towards which we aspire. The villain represents the collective use of language, his is the voice of assertive selfhood, the hero, the individual use, the voice which reaches towards true being, and it is the interchange between these two which is so often the ground of dramatic interest in Shakespeare.

## II

I want at this point to deepen my argument by looking in more detail at a particular example of the dialectic within Shakespeare of the attitudes towards metaphor of which I have been talking. Arguably, Shakespeare's most potent dramatic emblem of the anti-analogical way of perceiving is Shylock. With his "merry bond" (I.iii.167), and obsessive literalism he is Shakespeare's supreme ironist. Words to Shylock are a form of power; this is implicit in his notion of the bond — a legal form of language whose force lies in its literalness. The bond suggests that words are things, just as money is a thing, and Antonio's flesh is a thing. In fact there is a close connection made between all three in Shylock's mind; they guarantee the reality and meaning of each other. He uses words carefully and precisely; they express their value in the same direct and literal manner that money seems to. And if we ask what the real value of money is for Shylock, then the answer which the whole movement of the play suggests is "flesh."

Shylock's literalism is in fact a more intense form of fantasy, and we can see this most clearly in the imagery which he habitually uses. Some of the most powerful images which Shylock em-

ploys are those of feeding, but they gain their potency from the fact that for Shylock they are not really images at all. When, for example, he says of Antonio that he will "feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him," (I.iii.42), we have only to change the line to "feed *with* fat" to move close to the literal truth of what he intends. As for the image of feeding itself, there is more than a hint in the play that Shylock is perversely savouring the idea of Antonio's flesh as food — as he points out himself, what other reasonable use could it serve? Shylock understands metaphor not in terms of likeness, but in terms of equivalence; his images have the urgency of disguised appetites. In his attempt to convert fantasy into fact — to act out his hatred — he negates the whole comparative basis of metaphor. It is metaphor in reverse. Such a confusion of wish fulfillment with that of reality is something we associate with madness. One feels that it is a condition that Swift might well have understood. The distaste for the imagination, which at root is also a distaste for nature, is something he knew well, and showed powerfully in the final condition of Gulliver.

Shylock's fantasy of mutilation is as close as we can get to a dramatic picture of the kind of neurosis that underlies the development of capitalism. We keep this fantasy still, for example, when we talk of a business being "carved up" or of a tough manager doing a "hatchet-job," or someone "making a killing." The fantasy is present in Swift's *A Modest Proposal* where the economist's logic reaches its natural conclusion with the translation of financial devouring into physical devouring. Again, it is a kind of metaphor in reverse — treated literally. Implicit in Shylock's equation of three thousand ducats with a pound of Antonio's flesh is an uncomfortable truth about the nature of the Venetian world, and by extension, of our modern world. Shylock represents the fearful constriction of imaginative energy which lies at the root of the modern psyche. Its manifestation is a literalism which is not the denial of the imagination, but the perverting of it.

Shylock inhabits then a world of confused identities rather than genuine metaphor. As such his images are really acts of transference in which he transfers human and moral values to impersonal things. It is typical of him, for example, that he should attribute sexual properties to money and talk of money "breeding" money

(I.iii.91). It is also typical of him that his normal linguistic habit should involve a good deal of repetition and rhetorical insistence. His personality is obsessional, and it is worth bearing this in mind even at those moments in the play when the rhetoric seems almost to humanize him. His speech "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands. . . ." (III.i.50), is a powerful plea for a basic humanity. But it is *basic*. Our attitude to his view of men as conditioned by stimulus and response, "if you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh"? is surely a "yes, but," not the overwhelming "yes yes" which overly impressed readers sometimes give it. If man is no more than this then we can almost echo Lear, "Man's life is cheap as beast's" (II.iv.266).

The significance of Shylock lies in the way in which he holds up a mirror image to the rest of the Venetian world. There is a sense in which he enacts a judgment on it, for there is nothing and no one in Venice with enough authority and credibility to answer him. Portia is the only character whose language offers any kind of challenge to Shylock's. Her world is one in which metaphor is actively alive and engages with the real world to transform it into meaning. We see this dramatically, in the way characters are affected by Belmont — Bassanio has more dash and vigour there, and Lorenzo and Jessica become *genuine* lovers — but we see it most of all in the wit and humanity of Portia's language, the best example of which is the speech in which she commits herself to Bassanio:

> You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
> Such as I am. Though for myself alone
> I would not be ambitious in my wish
> To wish myself much better, yet for you
> I would be trebled twenty times myself,
> A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times
> more rich,
> That only to stand high in your account
> I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends,
> Exceed account. But the full sum of me
> Is sum of something which, to term in gross,
> Is an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractis'd;
> Happy in this, she is not yet so old
> But she may learn; . . .

> Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit
> Commits itself to yours to be directed,
> As from her lord, her governor, her king.
> Myself, and what is mine to you and yours
> Is now converted. (III.ii.149-68)

Portia's expression of her love for Bassanio is couched in the language of money and financial accumulation: "trebled twenty times . . . ten thousand times more rich . . . high in your account . . . Exceed account . . . full sum . . . term in gross." The important point, however, is that she turns money into genuine metaphor, and without any of the flippant self consciousness we might associate with such wit. The "conversion" that Portia makes combines humour with genuine feeling; it exhibits what F. R. Leavis refers to as "heuristic thought."[2] In Portia's metaphor money becomes innocent once again by becoming the object of serious and intelligent playfulness. As for the argument that Portia is not exactly doing herself justice in calling herself "an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractis'd," this seems to me one of the truest parts of the speech. It is a familiar moment in Shakespearian comedy. We might compare it, for example, with Rosalind's quaking at the knees following on the scene in which she has scornfully held Orlando at bay. Both occasions are a revelation of the "girl" in the woman.

In Portia's declaration to Bassanio, money becomes the vehicle for feelings and a condition of being which transcend it. The nature of its currency is fundamentally changed; we do not think that love is debased by its association with money, but rather that money acquires a new value because of the witty and unexpected use to which it is put. In desiring more money and better looks Portia is wishing for them as tokens of her love, not as substitutions for it. Her declaration to Bassanio in fact makes plain a basic paradox about love and the language of value which it employs, namely, that whilst the most important human experiences are unique, incomparable, and beyond value, they nevertheless can only be expressed in the language of evaluation. We have no words for what cannot be expressed except negatives — we call something beyond value, "valueless" or "priceless," as if, ironically, it was not worth anything. As a consequence, love naturally

seeks out metaphor to express itself; it needs some vehicle to relate itself to the human world of measurement. But implicit in such language is a recognition of its inappropriateness — that it is not being *literally* employed. When the lover asks "how much do you love me"? he does not expect a literal answer, to do so would be a sign not of love, but of vanity. It is Lear's expectation of such an answer that throws Cordelia into confusion. To such a demand as his the only possible reply can be "nothing."

What is dramatically demonstrated in Portia is a quite different use of language, and a different sense of the relation of imagination to nature from that of Shylock. Her bond has the human resonance and inflexion of the spoken language, whilst his has the impersonality and inflexibility of the written. Moreover, the fact that Portia's words of love have a precise meaning for us is because of our implicit understanding of the essential worth of what they relate to. Her act of giving is guaranteed by the fact that she is giving herself — unique, irreplaceable, and beyond value. There is a fundamental and dramatically identifiable difference between the notion of personality enshrined in Portia's language and that contained in Shylock's bond. Portia's body underwrites this as Antonio's body underwrites the other, but in Shylock's case he does not see Antonio as a self, but simply as flesh. He is caught out because he falls into a trap set deeply within language. When talking about the body we naturally tend to speak of it as if it was an assemblage of parts — we speak of "flesh *and* blood" (as does Shylock in Act III sc. i when he learns of his daughter's elopement). But whilst language separates flesh from blood, we know in fact that they are inextricably mixed, in that one is partly the creation of the other. Language suggests that the body is a mechanism, whereas we experience it as an organism. Shylock's bond takes the mechanical view of the body, and in so doing ignores the fact that language only approximates to nature. Our awareness of the body as a subject with its own mysterious unity, and not simply as an object, can only be expressed through metaphor. It is in this respect that we must understand the significance of the ring that Portia gives to Bassanio.

The attitude to language that Shakespeare explores through Portia is fundamentally religious. To see the real world as a vehi-

cle for a world of meaning which in itself is, humanly speaking, inexpressible is to see language as a form of disclosure, a mediator between the seen and the unseen. It is in this role of course that Portia is presented to us dramatically in the trial scene, and in a sense much of the last act with its detail of the music of the spheres and the soul's "muddy vesture" (V.i.64), is an elaboration of this significance. In its language and action the play suggests that the literal is only meaningful in so far as it contains the possibility of metaphor. Justice is only possible in as much as it acknowledges the possibility of mercy, without that it is mere revenge; and commercial fairness is only possible in so far as it acknowledges the existence of a kind of giving, free and unconditioned, whose ultimate form is love. To the imagination, money is a Type of love and the scales a Type of mercy, because they can be used by the poet to suggest a world that infinitely transcends them, a world related to them by metaphor and whose existence is necessary for the possibility of meaning. In a sense, to use the religious language of the play, money and number are "converted" through metaphor.

In *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare is looking at two quite different attitudes towards language both of which are important as indicators of the way in which we characteristically use words. Shylock's usage, despite the trappings of Judaism, is thoroughly secular. Words to him operate as substitutes for things, and as such, when they take on metaphorical life, they keep as close to the literal truth as possible. Metaphors are perhaps more truly, to the Shylock mentality, disguised things. Since Freudian psychoanalysis we have come to recognize that this is how we often do use words. Freud's interpretation of dream imagery, and the knowledge that our imaginative life is made up of a continual series of substitutions, or sublimatory acts, makes it possible for us to understand the significance of the Shylock attitude. We use words neurotically, and the evidence for this can be seen in a wide range of language uses, from television advertising to popular journalism. But we also use words religiously. Imaginative literature renews language by recovering the Typological significance that words convey. Metaphor operates not simply as a disguise for things but as a revelation of a possibly new significance.

In poetic metaphor words act as mediators between quite different areas of experience; in this way they are recovered as aspects of serious play, or heuristic thought. Put more fundamentally, the innocence of words is recovered in poetry. As Karl Kraus expresses it, "My language is the universal whore whom I have to make into a virgin."[3] "The poem refreshes life," so Wallace Stevens asserts, because "It satisfies / Belief in an immaculate beginning."[4]

In language, the self confronts nature either as an extension of the ego, as a world of vicarious gratification made manifest in the substitutionary acts of language, or as an escape from the ego, a Type of an inner world of wholeness and fundamental goodness. The first is the one we commonly inhabit and the mastery of which is essential to what Keats termed "men of power."[5] The satirist understands this world and mines deeply into it through nuance, innuendo, and pun. The second is the expression of a more underlying need, and it is the goal of the most profound literature. Shakespearian drama is in part an exploration of the relationship between these two worlds, both of their essential conflict and their basic dependence on one another. The world of the "Holy," to use Peter Brook's term, may challenge that of the "Rough,"[6] but it nonetheless arises in part out of it and uses it as a Type of its own particular drives. The poetry of the plays is to that extent a necessary part of their being, since they are concerned with the status of poetic awareness as the ground and guarantee of real meaning.

## III

We can look at Shakespearian drama then as an exploration of those major analogical relationships which make up our human existence. This can be demonstrated whether we look at the Histories, where the major issue is power, or the Comedies, where it is sex. The Divine Right of Kings which stands as an idea behind the History plays is not an outworn historical concept briefly resurrected for us by Shakespeare, but the dramatic focus for what is a fundamentally recurring paradox. In the world of the quotidian power is force, it is something one possesses, but analogically speaking power is a condition of being, like health — con-

sequently Shakespeare's use of the body metaphor throughout the Histories. Health implies a creative aspect to power as an organic constituent of everything else; force, on the other hand, suggests an external, egocentric, and fundamentally negative view of power. We can go further I think and say that in analogical terms power is virtue; this is the significance of the king as a Type of God. God's claim to absolute power lies in his absolute goodness; his force is his virtue — the Holy and Rough are one, as they are in the coronation oath where the literal and metaphorical aspects of power are united by language and ceremonial action. The human dilemma lies in what seems to be the inevitable separation of virtue from power. Ideally the king should rule because he *is* king, but in practice he has to *make* himself king. The possession of force compromises virtue, but at the same time virtue alone is ineffective. It is the underlying need of the one for the other, and at the same time their apparent antipathy, that the Histories explore.

In the Comedies the major metaphorical designs concern the paradoxes of sexual desire. In the quotidian world sex is simply desire, pleasurable, appetitive, and individualistic, and as such a threat to any stable social order. Analogically however, sex is a form of absolute giving, the paradigm of which is Agape. It is the recurrent duality of this that the Comedies explore. Sex is both irrational, that is, below reason, and supra-rational, above reason. The delightfulness of a Rosalind or a Beatrice lies in the fact that they quite overtly inhabit both worlds. In their flirtatious wit sex becomes an aspect of play, it achieves innocence, but implicit in such playing is the acknowledgement of a world of experience, that courtship is a game with serious consequences. When Rosalind, disguised as Ganymede, satirically makes fun of love, running over quite clear-sightedly the transience of passion, its deceptiveness and irrationality, this side of her is held against our knowledge that she is at the same time helplessly in love with Orlando and ready to give herself completely. Sex as experience is held against sex as innocence — the physical elements of sexuality become a Type of self surrender; Eros is a Type of Agape. If we need further evidence of this we need only look again at Portia's speech quoted earlier. Implicit in the money images she

uses, in her expressed desire to be worth more and to "Exceed account," is an idea of the account that man must render to God. In Christian terms man is a debtor, but through the mystery of grace the account has been paid. The speech suggests, as indeed does the whole play, that behind human love stands the mystery of divine love. The linguistic echo of this is in the marriage oath, the outline of which can be clearly seen in Portia's lines.

The Tragedies, arguably, present the most complex and developed series of analogical relationships in Shakespearian drama. Shakespeare is concerned here with the fundamental metaphysical absolutes, and with the nature and meaning of temporal existence in relation to them. But by the mode in which it works Shakespearian tragedy debates perhaps the most important analogy with which we have to do. In the ordinary world we are *selves*, with distinguishing characteristics of mood, temper, and ability, which together make up our character. But analogically we are *identities*, of infinite worth, and totally unique. Our uniqueness can only be analogically described because there is no way it can be literally demonstrated. In the course of a Shakespeare tragedy we become aware of the hero, dramatically, as an identity, a Type of us, as opposed to the villain, who simply exhibits a series of selves. The nobility of the hero's suffering lies in its demonstration of human worth and significance; the tragic implications lie in the fact that such nobility results from transgression and leads to death. In his suffering the hero reaches out imaginatively to the world of wholeness that he is losing, and in so doing both enacts a judgment on himself, and reinforces our conviction that such a world does exist.

In the Tragedies human worth is experienced at its most acute point because it faces, in death, the severest threat of all. In the literal world death is simply dissolution, but analogically it is consummation, the fulfilment of the bond man shares with nature. In so far as there is a linguistic guarantee of this it lies in the funeral ceremony the words of which, in their formal recognition of the relationship between man and the earth, give death meaning. These words, with their associations of time, dissolution, and judgment, can be heard again and again in the background to the great soliloquies. In Macbeth's speech "Tomorrow and to-

morrow and tomorrow" they operate as the echo of a felt significance to life which has been lost:

> 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. (V.v.18-28)

The firm metaphorical life of this passage makes clear to us the inner meaning of Macbeth's anguish. Despite the apparent nihilism, his pain is not so much that life is meaningless, but that *his* life is meaningless. The echoes of the funeral ceremony, clearly there in the lines — the brevity of life in "brief candle," "his hour" and "dusty death" echoing "ashes to ashes, dust to dust"; the funeral candles absorbed metaphorically in "lighted," "brief candle," and "walking shadow"; and the sense of judgment in "the last syllable of recorded time" with its echo of the recording angel — all suggest a compact with nature that has been broken and whose imagery has returned to plague Macbeth. The imagery passes judgment on him. Most amazing of all perhaps here is the use Shakespeare makes of language itself as a metaphor for this broken compact. The "last syllable of recorded time" suggests the grammatical order of the written word, more particularly the Book of Judgment, the final word of God to which all time inexorably moves, over against the rage of inarticulacy, "full of sound and fury," towards which Macbeth senses he is descending. Together with the metaphor of performance, and the suggestion of a part badly played — "poor player / That struts and frets" — it evokes an idea of the written script, the "tale" itself as a perennial measure against which individual performances can be judged. We have here an energy which is working with language not against it. It is not surprising, as Wayne Booth points out, that Macbeth should seek to annihilate his imagination by more killings because in a sense it becomes his most enduring enemy.[7] It is continually reminding him of his violation of the

natural relation of man to the earth, and of the potential wholenes of life which he has now forfeited.

What we can illustrate from Shakespeare again and again is that the struggle to wrest a meaning from life is the struggle to use words to their fullest creative potential. More particularly, it involves the poet continually rescuing the ordinary items of nature and the human world, and giving to them an extended and renewed significance. That Shakespeare was able to do this most supremely was due, in part, to the fact that he belonged to a culture which believed, not that nature contained meaning, but that it *was* meaning. Nature was God's trope, his metaphor, and as such its relationship to the spiritual world was fundamentally Typological. The significance of Elizabethan cosmology lay not in its picture of a conservative, static, hieriarchically ordered universe — although it was that — but in its conception of the universe as a kind of nervous organism, a Type of the body. It preserved in its pre-scientific calculations a mythopeic outlook. Thus we notice again the significance of Theseus's use of the word "bodies" to describe the process of poetic creation.

In performing his acts of rescue, however, the poet has always to take into account what he is rescuing from. Our view of nature is only intermittently religious, characteristically, it is utilitarian. From this standpoint nature is not implicitly meaningful, simply useful. Language is another form of power by which we fashion nature to our own use; nature, in other words, becomes our metaphor, offering us a series of disguises for our own needs and appetites. In this form language has a strong vein of literalism because its energy is directed towards approximating nature as strongly as possible with fact. The poet has to know this world intimately because it is against the pull of it that his own creative abilities are exerted and tested. Shakespearian drama is in part about this struggle, and a demonstration of it. It is concerned with the perennial battle in man between, on the one hand, his desire to project himself onto nature, to dominate and fashion it after his will, and on the other hand, his need to relinquish his ego and find an authority to which he can finally submit.

As such, the artistic imagination is crucial, and fundamentally maligned by Theseus. If, to return briefly to his speech, we look

at the examples he gives of a "strong imagination" we can see that they are anything but that. To suppose that someone is coming with good news or that a bush is really a bear is simply to reproduce in concrete form our own quite groundless hopes or fears. They are really examples of a weak or at least constricted imagination — the kind that produces minor escapist literature. A strong imagination would not suppose the bush to be a bear but would see in it the figure of Oberon, or one of the other fairies in the wood. This is the point, that in a different context, Blake makes:

> "'What,' it will be Question'd, 'When the sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?' O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.'"[8]

A strong imagination in other words transforms what it sees. Its essence is not simple hope or fear but genuine wonder. Despite the intellectual distance that separates us from Elizabethan metaphysics the point is worth making that the poet's art still rests, as did Shakespeare's, on the numinous capacity of words. To that extent all poetry bears in its bones the essentially religious impulse manifest in Shakespearian metaphor.

NOTES

1 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, v.i.12-22. Quoted from *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*, ed. P. Alexander (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1960), pp. 217-18. All subsequent references are to this edition.

2 *The Living Principle* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), p. 105.

3 Quoted from W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (1963; rpt. London: Faber, 1975), p. 23.

4 "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," III, st. i. Quoted from *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1953), p. 101.

5 Letter to B. Bailey, Saturday 22 Nov. 1817, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. M. B. Forman, 4th ed. (London: OUP, 1960), p. 66.

6 *The Empty Space* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968), p. 86, et passim.

7 "Shakespeare's Tragic Villain," *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, ed. L. Lerner (London: Penguin, 1963), p. 187.

8 "A Vision of The Last Judgement," *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. G. Keynes (London: OUP, 1966), p. 617.