

“On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*”

- Thomas De Quincey

In this essay Thomas De Quincey exhibits the procedure in Romantic criticism of making the “understanding” wait upon “feelings”. That is, instead of judging the success or failure of a work by its conformity to prior critical theory, De Quincey brings in theory only to explain his impression or immediate emotional response to the passage. He strongly urges his readers not to pay any attention to his understanding “when it stands in opposition to any other faculty of his mind.”

De Quincey begins with the assertion that the knocking of the gate in *Macbeth* which follows the murder of Duncan produced in him “a great perplexity” - a feeling that he could not account for. The knocking reflected back upon the murderer “a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity”. The question “*why* it should produce such an effect?” perplexed him.

The knocking at the gate in *Macbeth* makes the fact of murder appear all the more awful. The knocking marks the moment when the goings-on of human life are suddenly resumed. To put it more clearly, in Act II Scene 2 ordinary life was suspended as the dramatist focused on Macbeth and his fiendish deeds. In Act II Scene 3 the suspension ceases as life resumes, thereby making the earlier scene all the more striking. As De Quincey elaborates, “the knocking at the gate is heard, and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the reestablishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.”