



The Uncompleted Man

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The nature into which Shakespeare's Macbeth dabbles so unsuccessfully with the aid of witchcraft, in the famous scene on the heath, is unforgettable in literature. We watch in horrified fascination the malevolent change in the character of Macbeth as he gains a dubious insight into the unfolding future—a future which we know to be self-created. This scene, fearsome enough at all times, is today almost unbearable to the discerning observer. Its power lies in its symbolic delineation of the relationship of Macbeth's midnight world to the realm of modern science—a relationship grasped by few.

The good general, Banquo, who, unlike Macbeth, is wary of such glimpses into the future as the witches have allowed the two companions, seeks to restrain his impetuous comrade. " 'Tis strange," Banquo says,

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.

Macbeth who, in contrast to Banquo, has immediately seized upon the self-imposed reality induced by the witches' prophecies, stumbles out of their toils at the last, only to protest in his dying hour:

And be these juggling fiends no more believ'd ...
That keep the word of promise to our ear
And break it to our hope!

Who, we may now inquire, are these strange beings who waylaid Macbeth, and why do I, who have spent a lifetime in the domain of science, make the audacious claim that this old murderous tale of the scientific twilight extends its shadow across the doorway of our modern laboratories? [144] These bearded, sexless creatures who possess the faculty of vanishing into air or who reappear in some ultimate flame-wreathed landscape only to mock our folly, are an exteriorized portion of ourselves. They are projections from our own psyche, smoking wisps of mental vapor that proclaim our subconscious intentions and bolster them with Delphic utterances— half-truths which we consciously accept, and which then take power over us. Under the spell of such oracles we create, not a necessary or real future, but a counterfeit drawn from within ourselves, which we then superimpose, through purely human power, upon reality. Indeed one could say that these phantoms create a world which is at the same time spurious and genuine, so complex is our human destiny.

Every age has its style in these necromantic projections. The corpse-lifting divinations of the Elizabethan sorcerers have given way, in our time, to other and, at first sight, more scientific interpretations of the future. Today we know more about man, where he has come from, and what we may expect of him—or so we think. But there is one thing, in my belief, which identifies Macbeth's "juggling fiends" in any age, whether these uncanny phantoms appear as



witches, star readers, or today's technologists. This quality is their claim to omniscience—an omniscience only half-stated on the basis of the past or specious present, and always lacking in genuine knowledge of the future. The leading characteristic of the future they present is its fixed, static, inflexible quality.

Such a future is fated beyond human will to change, just as Macbeth's demons, by prophecy, worked in him a transformation of character which then created inevitable tragedy. Until the appearance of the witches on the heath gave it shape, that tragedy existed only as a latent possibility in Macbeth's subconscious. Similarly, in this age, one could quote those who seek control of man's destiny by the evocation of his past. Their wizardry is deceptive because their spells are woven out of a genuine portion of reality—which, however, has taken on this always identifiable quality of fixity in an unfixed universe. The ape is always in our hearts, we are made to say, although each time a child is born something totally and genetically unique enters the universe, just as it did long ago when the great ethical leaders—Christ, the Buddha, Confucius—spoke to their followers.

Man escapes definition even as the modern phantoms in militarist garb proclaim—as I have heard them do—that man will fight from one side of the solar system to the other, and beyond. The danger, of course, is truly there, but it is a danger which, while it lies partially in what man is, lies much closer to what he chooses to believe about himself. Man's whole [145] history is one of transcendence and of self-examination, which have led him to angelic heights of sacrifice as well as into the bleakest regions of despair. The future is not truly fixed but the world arena is smoking with the caldrons of those who would create tomorrow by evoking, rather than exorcising, the stalking ghosts of the past.

Even this past, however, has been far deeper and more pregnant with novelty than the short-time realist can envisage. As an evolutionist I never cease to be astounded by the past. It is replete with more features than one world can realize. Perhaps it was this that led the philosopher Santayana to speak of men's true natures as not adequately manifested in their condition at any given moment, or even in

their usual habits. "Their real nature," he contended, "is what they would discover themselves to be if they possessed self-knowledge, or as the Indian scripture has it, if they became what they are." I should like to approach this mystery of the self, which so intrigued the great philosopher, from a mundane path strewn with the sticks and stones through which the archaeologist must pick his way.

Contemplating the Fish

Let me illustrate what I mean by a very heavy and peculiar stone which I keep upon my desk. It has been split across; carbon black, imprinted in the gray shale, is the outline of a fish. The chemicals that composed the fish—most of them at least—are still there in the stone. They are, in a sense, imperishable. They may come and go, pass in and out of living things, trickle away in the long erosion of time. They are inanimate, yet at one time they constituted a living creature.

Often at my desk, now, I sit contemplating the fish. It does not have to be a fish. It could be the long-horned Alaskan bison on my wall. For the point is, you see, that the fish is extinct and gone, just as those great heavy-headed beasts are gone, just as our massive-faced and shambling forebears of the Ice Age have vanished. The chemicals still about us here took a shape that will never be seen again so long as grass grows or the sun shines. Just once out of all time there was a pattern that we call *Bison regius*, a fish-like amphibian called *Ichthyostega*, and, at this present moment, a primate who knows, or thinks he knows, the entire score. In the past there has been armor; there have been bellowings out of throats like iron furnaces; there have been phantom lights in the dark forest, and toothed reptiles winging through the air. It has all been carbon and its compounds, the black stain running perpetually across the stone. [146]

But though the elements are known, nothing in all those shapes is now returnable. No living chemist can shape a dinosaur, no living hand can start the dreaming tentacular extensions that characterize the life of the simplest ameboid cell. Finally, as the greatest mystery of all, I who



write these words on paper, cannot establish my own reality. I am, by any reasonable and considered logic, dead. This may be a matter of concern to you reading these words; but if it is any consolation, I can assure you that you are as dead as I. For, on my office desk, to prove my words is the fossil out of the stone, and there is the carbon of life stained black on the ancient rock.

There is no life in the fossil. There is no life in the carbon in my body. As the idea strikes me—and believe me it comes as a profound shock—I run down the list of elements. There is no life in the iron, there is no life in the phosphorus, the nitrogen does not contain me, the water that soaks my tissues is not I. What am I then? I pinch my body in a kind of sudden desperation. My heart knocks, my fingers close around the pen. There is, it seems, a semblance of life here.

But the minute I start breaking this strange body down into its constituents, it is dead. It does not know me. Carbon does not speak, calcium does not remember, iron does not weep. Even if I hastily reconstitute their combinations in my mind, rebuild my arteries, and let oxygen in the grip of hemoglobin go hurrying through a thousand conduits, I have a kind of machine, but where in all this array of pipes and hurried flotsam is the dweller?

From whence, out of what steaming pools or boiling cloudbursts did he first arise? What forces can we find which brought him up the shore, scaled his body into an antique, reptilian shape and then cracked it like an egg to let a soft-furred animal with a warmer heart emerge? And we? Would it not be a good thing if man were tapped gently like a fertile egg to see what might creep out? I sometimes think of this as I handle the thick-walled skulls of the animal men who preceded us, or ponder over those remote splayfooted creatures whose bones lie deep in the world's wastelands at the very bottom of time.

A Question at Night

With the glooms and night terrors of those vast cemeteries I have been long familiar. A precisely

similar gloom enwraps the individual life of each of us. There are moments in my bed at midnight, or watching the [147] play of moonlight on the ceiling, when this ghostliness of myself comes home to me with appalling force, when I lie tense, listening as if removed, far off, to the footfalls of my own heart, or seeing my own head on the pillow turning restlessly with the round staring eyes of a gigantic owl. I whisper "Who?" to no one but myself in the silent, sleeping house—the living house gone back to sleep with the sleeping stones, the eternally sleeping chair, the picture that sleeps forever on the bureau, the dead, also sleeping, though they walk in my dreams. In the midst of all this dark, this void, this emptiness, I, more ghostly than a ghost, cry "Who? Who?" to no answer, aware only of other smaller ghosts like the bat sweeping by the window or the dog who, in repeating a bit of his own lost history, turns restlessly among nonexistent grasses before he subsides again upon the floor.

"Trust the divine animal who carries us through the world," writes Emerson. Like the horse who finds the way by instinct when the traveler is lost in the forest, so the divine within us, he contends, may find new passages opening into nature; human metamorphosis may be possible. Emerson wrote at a time when man still lived intimately with animals and pursued wild, dangerous ways through primeval forests and prairies. Emerson and Thoreau lived close enough to nature to know something still of animal intuition and wisdom. They had not reached that point of utter cynicism—that distrust of self and of the human past which leads finally to total entrapment in that past, "man crystallized," as Emerson again was shrewd enough to observe.

This entrapment is all too evident in the writings of many concerned with the evolutionary story of man. Their gaze is fixed solely upon a past into which, one begins to suspect, has been poured a certain amount of today's frustration, venom, and despair. Like the witches in *Macbeth*, these men are tempting us with seeming realities about ourselves until these realities take shape in our minds and become the future. It is not necessary to break the code of DNA in order to control human destiny. The tragedy is



that men are already controlling it even while they juggle retorts and shake vials in search of a physical means to enrich their personalities. We would like to contain the uncontainable future in a glass, have it crystallized out before us as a powder to swallow. All then, we imagine, would be well.

As our knowledge of the genetic mechanism increases, both scientists and journalists bombard our ears with ingenious accounts of how we are to control, henceforth, our own evolution. We who have recourse only to a past which we misread and which has made us cynics would now venture [148] to produce our own future out of this past alone. Again I judge this self-esteem as a symptom of our time, our powerful, misused technology, our desire not to seek the good life but to produce a painless mechanical version of it—our willingness to be good if goodness can, in short, be swallowed in a pill.

Once more we are on the heath of the witches, or, to come closer to our own time, we are in the London laboratory where the good Doctor Jekyll produced a potion and reft out of his own body the monster Hyde.

Nature, as I have tried to intimate in this little dissection, is never quite where we see it. It is a becoming as well as a passing, but the becoming is both within and without our power. It is this lesson, with all our hard-gained knowledge, that is so difficult to comprehend. All along the evolutionary road it could have been said, "This is man," if there had then been such a magical self-delineating and mind-freezing word. It could have immobilized us at any step of our journey. It could have held us hanging to the bough from which we actually dropped; it could have kept us cowering, small-brained and helpless, whenever the great cats came through the reeds. It could have stricken us with terror before the fire that was later to be our warmth and weapon against Ice Age cold. At any step of the way, the word *man*, in retrospect, could be said to have encompassed just such final limits.

Not Starry Influences

Each time the barrier has been surmounted. Man is not man. He is elsewhere. There is within us only that dark, divine animal engaged in a strange journey—that creature who, at midnight, knows its own ghostliness and senses its far road. "Man's unhappiness," brooded Carlyle, "comes of his Greatness; it is because there is an Infinite in him, which with all his cunning he cannot quite bring under the Finite." This is why hydrogen, which has become the demon element of our time, should be seen as the intangible dagger which hung before Macbeth's vision, but which had no power except what was lent to it by his own mind.

The terror that confronts our age is our own conception of ourselves. Above all else this is the potion which the modern Dr. Jekylls have concocted. As Shakespeare foresaw:

It hath been taught us from the primal state
That he which is was wished until he were.
[149]

This is not the voice of the witches. It is the clear voice of a great poet almost four centuries gone, who saw at the dawn of the scientific age what was to be the darkest problem of man: his conception of himself. The words are quiet, almost cryptic; they do not foretell. They imply a problem in free will. Shakespeare, in this passage, says nothing of starry influences, machinery, beakers, or potions. He says, in essence, one thing only: that what we wish will come.

I submit to you that this is the deadliest message man will ever encounter in all literature. It thrusts upon him inescapable choices. Shakespeare's is the eternal, the true voice of the divine animal, piercing, as it has always pierced, the complacency of little centuries in which, encamped as in hidden thickets, men have sought to evade self-knowledge by describing themselves as men.