

ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS PROTEUS

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THE idea of picturing Shakespeare as Proteus was conceived in circumstances which will not recommend it to most critics of our day. Chapter xv of *Biographia Literaria*, which deals, as the author's summary indicates, with 'the specific symptoms of poetic power elucidated in a critical analysis of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*' concludes, somewhat unexpectedly, on a brilliant visionary parallel. Seeing the playwright seated 'on one of the two glory-smitten summits of the poetic imagination, with Milton as his compeer, not rival', Coleridge writes:

while the former darts himself forth and passes into all the forms of human character and passion, the one Proteus of the fire and the flood; the other attracts all forms and things to himself, into the unity of his own ideal. All things and modes of action shape themselves anew in the being of Milton; while Shakespeare becomes all things, yet for ever remaining himself.¹

The insistence on character is perhaps a little surprising in a critical analysis of two non-dramatic poems. But Coleridge, though he acknowledges no debt, seems to be here directly inspired by a predecessor. Some forty years before, in 1774, William Richardson, the author of *A Philosophical Analysis and Illustration of some of Shakespeare's Remarkable Characters*, had formulated the same idea in support of the view that human nature can nowhere be studied better than in Shakespeare. For the moralist, as the serious and reasonable student of humanity that he is, finds himself confronted with a dilemma: he cannot dispense with the living, intimate knowledge—of the passions especially—which actual experience provides; but, on the other hand, as Richardson puts it with some ingenuity:

by what powerful spell can the abstracted philosopher whose passions are all subdued, whose heart never throbs with desire, prevail on the amorous affections to visit the ungenial clime of his breast, and submit their features to the rigour of his unrelenting scrutiny?²

¹ *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford, 1958), ii. 20.

² Edinburgh, 1774, p. 16.

It is therefore most fortunate that there should be a great dramatist thanks to whom, not only the amorous affections but also others that are less amiable, indeed all the affections of the human heart are, without improper risks, submitted to the analyst. For, Richardson declares:

the genius of Shakespeare is unlimited. Possessing extreme sensibility, and uncommonly susceptible, he is the Proteus of the drama, he changes himself into every character, and enters easily into every condition of human nature.¹

The transcendental view of the poet which Coleridge and the other Romantics have done so much to establish was thus, at its birth, associated with and perhaps dependent upon what would now be mostly regarded as one of the worst superstitions of Shakespeare criticism: the vulgar error of taking characters in a play for real people, for 'fellow humans with ourselves' as Ellen Terry once said.

It will, I am afraid, seem very ungracious and very unwise of me to propose this pursuit of Proteus—the symbol in any case of elusiveness—in answer to the great honour of being invited by the British Academy to give the Shakespeare lecture for the present year. An honour which, to me, is all the more impressive as few of my countrymen have received it, and the last of them (nearly fifty years ago) no other than Emile Legouis, one of the Founding Fathers of English studies in France.

Some secret compulsion—to use the language of psycho-analysis—must have forced upon me the choice of so ill-advised a subject. Yet I am persuaded at the same time that, if properly understood, the idea which it propounds is not inadequate, not irrelevant to the questions of our time. It is even one, I shall venture to say, that the poet himself invites us to consider.

When Richardson, or Coleridge, or Hazlitt after them,² tell us that Shakespeare is another Proteus, they take it for granted that what they say is nothing if not flattering. But then they must be forgetting that the dramatist's one brief reference to the figure of classical mythology occurs, early in his career, as one more touch added to the self-portrait of a determined villain. Drawing up a list of all the deceitful mischief-makers he intends to emulate in order to 'get a crown', Richard, Duke of Gloucester, finally exclaims:

¹ Op. cit., p. 40.

² 'On genius and Common Sense', *The Complete Works*, ed. P. P. Howe, viii. 42.

I can add colours to the chameleon,
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
And set the murderous Machiavel to school.¹

A notorious fraud, Proteus is not out of place in such detestable company. He is the worst of seducers. Such is at least the assumption which the author of *King Henry VI* seems to share with most of his contemporaries.

The probable source for this conception is Ovid's first book of *The Art of Love*, at the end of which the teacher of the art gives the following instructions to his pupil:

I was about to end but various are the hearts of women; use a thousand means to waylay as many hearts. The same earth bears not everything; this soil suits vines, that olives; in that, wheat thrives. Hearts have as many fashions as the world has shapes; the wise man will suit himself to countless fashions, and like Proteus, will now resolve himself into light waves, and now will be a lion, now a tree, now a shaggy boar.²

The most typically protean of the high deeds of Gloucester is, in *Richard III*, the wooing and winning of Anne—a victory achieved, as he comments exultantly, against God, her conscience, and her 'extremest hate', yet with no friends on his side but 'the plain devil and dissembling looks'. Richard proves in this more capable than many of his changeful kind. More capable, for instance, than the Proteus of Spenser, in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, where this 'Shepherd of the seas of yore' rescues Faire Florimell from the clutches of the lustfull Fisherman only to assail her chastity with more cunning—but all in vain. More capable, too, than Volpone, the Magnifico of Venice, who boasts to Celia that, for her love, 'in varying figures' he would have contended 'with the Blue Proteus' and tries, though with no success, to tempt her to a riot of erotic encounters under an infinity of fabulous shapes.

We are invited, by John Manningham in his diary, to believe that at the time when they performed *Richard III*, Burbage in the main role, Shakespeare was not above cheating his fellow out of an amatory conquest he had made and jesting that it was only right for him since 'William the Conqueror was before Rich. the 3'.³ But if it is hard for us to imagine that the shameless seducer is a type in which the young poet would have recognized himself, who can deny, on the other hand, that between

¹ *King Henry VI*, Part 3, iii. ii. 191-3.

² Ovid, *The Art of Love and other poems*, translation by J. H. Mozley, The Loeb Classical Library, London, 1962.

³ E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1930), ii. 212.

the dramatist and his villainous hero there is a real sort of intimacy. 'Shakespeare himself', says a critic, 'was obviously fascinated by Richard.'¹ The relationship is one in which intense absorption goes along with hatred and fear. Richard is a prodigious player, an actor, and as such he owes a great deal to the author's inside knowledge of the profession. But, in return, what an image of his art is offered to the playwright in the dark detestable mirror of Richard's doings! It is, one feels, because the character is so different from his maker, and so like him, that for the first time with such strength the tension inherent in dramatic creation declares itself. The paradoxical gaiety which enlivens the otherwise cruel drama bears witness to an 'alacrity of spirit' which, as much as the protagonist's, is that of the poet. For he too, engaged within himself in the deep contest of love with 'extremest hate', enjoys the exhilaration of almost incredible success.

It is not therefore because Proteus had a bad name at the time that Shakespeare would have been prevented from any sympathy with him. However briefly the figure of old may have passed across his mind when he thought of Richard, there was that in it which was apt to retain for him an enduring significance. The fact is, at any rate, that before long he had decided to have a Proteus of his own.

From *Richard III* to *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: I am well aware of the anti-climax. The comedy is not a well-loved play. Judicious critics have mostly written about its failure. As for the gentlemen themselves, neither of them has been favourably received. A remarkable essay has recently recalled, in a spirit of understandable feminine compassion, that George Eliot was disgusted with a work in which two girls could be treated so shamefully by their lovers. For the author of this essay, inadequate representation in dramatic terms of the evils of inconstancy accounts for the lack of consistency which she finds in the comedy.²

It is not my intention to plead that the play is better than one usually admits, nor that Proteus, who has the main role, is an extremely interesting person. A considerable, and possibly harmful, element of derision has, I am persuaded, found its way into the composition. For it was partly written, I think, in a

¹ Anne Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London, 1962), p. 98.

² Inga-Stina Ewbank, "'Were man but constant, he were perfect": Constancy and Consistency in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*'; *Shakespearean Comedy* (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 14), London, 1922.

spirit of retaliation for the treatment inflicted upon *The Comedy of Errors* during the Gray's Inn festivities of Christmas 1594. And the ostentatious devotion rendered to the Goddess of Amity together with the masque of 'Proteus and the Adamantine Rock', as they are complacently reported in the text of *Gesta Grayorum*, may well have inspired the main theme and the main character of the play.¹ The smugness of the gentlemen of Verona glances at the conceit of the little gentlemen of Gray's Inn.

But this is precisely where we perceive the subtle involvement of Shakespeare with his character. There is of course less that is repulsive for him in vain overweening youth than in ruthless tyranny. But with what Hamlet will call 'the proud man's contumely... and the spurns / That patient merit of th' unworthy takes' he is bound perhaps to be more immediately concerned. And the antagonism thus experienced provides another if not better occasion for dramatic consciousness to invest itself in a creature of fiction.

For this Proteus deserves his name not only because he changes from Julia to Silvia, and from friendship to treachery, but also because, in the eagerness of his wayward desire, he stages a full show of deceptive shapes. Richard is above all a consummate actor, occasionally willing to play his part in a scenario of devotion devised by Buckingham to fool the Mayor and Aldermen, but he relies mostly on his own histrionic powers. Proteus works out a mystification in which Valentine and Thurio and the Duke, as well as himself, are each assigned a role. As he says, once he has launched the action:

Love, lend me wings to make my purpose swift
As thou hast lent me wit to plot this drift,²

and the name which Thurio gives him later, 'sweet Proteus, my direction-giver', might suggest that we have indeed to do with the performance of a play.

Young Proteus as a man of the theatre, the fleeting vision is one in which Shakespeare was no doubt amused to see a reflection of himself. Amused, and, at the same time, rather serious about it. For the chameleon lover, changing and irresponsible as he may seem, is conscientious and even thoughtful. The importance of being constant is a major preoccupation with him. He swears his 'true constancy' to Julia before leaving her.

¹ *Gesta Grayorum 1688* (Malone Society Reprints), Oxford, 1915.

² *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, II. vi. 42-3.

If he uses treachery to Valentine, it is, as he says, to 'prove constant to myself'. And it is left to him in the end to draw the penitent conclusion:

O heaven, were man
But constant, he were perfect.

Even true love is resented by him at first as a regrettable alteration:

Thou, Julia, thou hast metamorphos'd me;
Made me neglect my studies, lose my time,
War with good counsel, set the world at nought;
Made wit with musing weak, heart sick with thought.¹

So he says in the first of his five monologues. And the very number of these is in itself a remarkable indication. Of all the early characters of the dramatist he is the most addicted to soliloquizing. This is admittedly not enough to make a Hamlet of him, but that the point of view and style of introspection should have been used so freely for the first time, and as it were initiated under the auspices of Proteus, this, I believe, is well worth our attention.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona inaugurates another feature of Shakespeare's dramatic writing which must also be considered here. Julia is the first of the girls of disguise to succeed in getting her man, a theme so dear to the author that henceforth there will be few of his comedies without at least some trace of it. Portia, Rosalind, and Viola come to mind. But even the Mariana of *Measure for Measure* and Helena, in *All's Well*, offer a variation in the more daring subterfuge of the bed-trick.

In most of these cases we are clearly dealing with a further reflection upon the idea of play-acting. Julia, for instance, does not only from the start prove highly skilled in the arts of maiden coquetry, but later in the play, disguised as Sebastian, she boasts to Silvia of successes won in 'the woman's part' in the Pentecost 'pageants of delight'. Imagination mixes here in a perplexing manner with reality, since it is a pseudo-Sebastian who claims that 'trimm'd in Madam Julia's gown', he 'made her weep agood'. For, says he (or she):

I did play a lamentable part.
Madam, 'twas Ariadne, passioning
For Theseus' perjury, and unjust flight.²

¹ *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, II. ii. 8; II. vi. 31; V. iv. 109-10; I. i. 66-9.

² *Ibid.* IV. iv. 156-66.

The real Julia, however, will not know the fate of Ariadne. It is not for her to be mourned as the forlorn heroine is mourned, in Racine, by a compassionate sister:

Ariane, ma Sœur! De quel amour blessée,
Vous mourûtes aux bords où vous fûtes laissée!¹

No, Julia will see to it that Proteus does not finally escape her.

We are told, in an article on 'Proteus in Spenser and Shakespeare: the Lover's Identity', by William O. Scott, that 'the redeeming heroine who brings her man to a true concept of himself' is a significant part of 'the serious subject of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* implied in the myth of Proteus'²—an assertion with which I am quite ready to find myself in agreement. But in that case it is hardly possible to avoid the conclusion that Shakespeare had a better knowledge of the mythical story than I have assumed so far. He must have been acquainted, even if indirectly, with more primary sources than the derivative accounts or allusions which are to be found here and there in Ovid, and perhaps Pliny. With the episode of the bees of Aristaeus in Virgil's *Georgics*, Book iv, he was no doubt familiar. And although the extent and nature of his acquaintance with Homer remains problematical, there is, I believe, good reason to accept the claim that he was not ignorant of *The Odyssey*.³

He would then, in the story which extends over more than two hundred lines of the poem, have learnt how Menelaus, held back by a dead calm on the shore of the Egyptian isle of Pharos, was pitied by Eidothea, daughter of mighty Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea; how she told him that the immortal seer, her father, 'who knows the depth of every sea and is the servant of Poseidon', would, though reluctantly, let him know the means of pursuing his journey; how she instructed Menelaus to lay in wait for the Old Man, as he came, according to his custom, to rest at noonday among his herd of seals; how she warned the Greek hero that Proteus would strive and struggle to escape, 'assuming all manner of shapes of all things that move upon the earth, and of water, and of wondrous blazing fire'; how she encouraged him nevertheless to hold on and said: 'only when he speaks at last and asks you questions in his natural shape, just as he was when you saw him lie down to rest, then stay thy

¹ *Phèdre*, I. iii. 253-4.

² *Shakespeare Studies I* (1965), pp. 283-93.

³ J. W. Velz, *Shakespeare and the Classical Tradition* (Minneapolis, 1968).

might, and set the old man free, and ask him who of the gods is wroth with thee'. Shakespeare would have learnt further how Menelaus with three of his comrades were provided each with a skin of seal newly flayed to conceal themselves, together with some ambrosia of sweet fragrance against the deadly stench of the beasts; how, when the time came, they leapt upon the old man and flung their arms round his back; how he, undaunted, used his wizard arts, turning into a bearded lion, and then into a serpent, and a leopard, and a huge boar, and then into flowing water, and into a tree, high and leafy; how, for all his wiles, they held on unflinchingly with steadfast heart, until, tiring of his magic, he at last offered to speak.¹

If such is the original of Proteus, what irony there is in the name given to the pretty gentleman of Verona! How frivolous the vain youth in comparison with the athletic keeper of Poseidon's herd of seals—though like him changeful and, in the end, caught! But the dubious hero of this early comedy is only a beginning. Under different names, he will reappear and grow into something more impressive. He will be seen again, for instance, in the obstinate Duke of Illyria whose devotion to the countess Olivia is but fancy—fancy 'so full of shapes . . . / That it alone is high fantastical'. Such a man, according to Feste, ought to have a 'doublet of changeable taffeta' for his mind 'is a very opal'. He should be 'put to sea', the sea from which Viola has seemed to emerge miraculously. Even though he is to be tamed in the end by the lamb he had threatened to kill in his rage, there is in this Orsino a suggestion of savagery. Moreover the time comes when Shakespeare will devise his truly fierce and dangerous men of passion and with them he will go on pursuing his protean image among bewildering shapes of illusion.

But it is essential that this image should be seen for what it is: a myth of change confronted with the claims of identity and truth. And here we must pause to observe that, as such, it does not countenance the interpretation which the Romantics have put upon it.

The Romantics have used Proteus as a symbol of activity not only blameless but also wonderfully facile. 'He enters *easily* into every condition of human nature' says William Richardson.

¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Bk. iv, translation by A. T. Murray; The Loeb Classical Library, London, 1953.

Coleridge speaks of a poet who '*darts himself forth* and passes into all forms of human character and passion' and he adds in the most off-hand manner, as if the thing was simply too obvious: 'Shakespeare becomes all things yet for ever remaining himself.' This is, however, too quickly said to be convincing. The fact is that to conceive protean change as smooth and careless cannot but lead to the easy assumption of a personal identity invariably preserved among infinite variations, and ultimately to the denial of this identity. Before long the fiction of the 'chameleon' artist, traditionally associated with that of Proteus but more appropriate to the idea of instinctive effortless transformation, will serve to express a longing for the impersonal. And behind it all what is at work is the deep romantic desire to be relieved from the anguish of individual existence. A case in point is that of John Keats when he writes:

As to the poetical character itself. . . it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing.—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated.—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous Philosopher, delights the camelion Poet.¹

This is no doubt admirable, and true—to a certain extent. It nevertheless remains that Keats voices here aspirations of his own, aspirations moreover that lyrical poetry cannot so ideally fulfil. For, if, listening to the nightingale, the poet almost forgets 'the weariness, the fever and the fret' of this everyday world, the moment comes for him to return from elusive ecstasy to his 'sole self', and to confess that 'the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is famed to do, deceiving elf . . .' Whereas this can be claimed for dramatic poetry that, as an experience which is impartially and entirely distributed among several roles, it leaves nothing to the self. As Stephen Dedalus explains when he argues that the dramatic form is, higher than the lyrical and the epical, the supreme form of art:

The dramatic form is reached when the vitality which has flowed and eddied round each person fills every person with such vital force that he or she assumes a proper and intangible esthetic life. The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak. The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination. The mystery of esthetic like that of material creation is accomplished. The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his

¹ *The Letters*, ed. H. E. Rollins (Cambridge (Mass.), 1955), i. 387.

handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.¹

The irony of literary history is that Shakespeare, who had claimed no such apotheosis for himself, was nevertheless regarded by non-dramatic writers as the living proof that the dream is desirable and true, that it is possible through the ever-renewed metamorphosis of art to be redeemed from the burden of ordinary humanity and to reach in indifference the supreme achievement and the supreme reward of a poet.

The consequences of the paradox are still with us. In the description of the dramatic artist by James Joyce, we have, I think, a still valid indication of the kind of fame which Shakespeare enjoys among our contemporaries. He had once been granted a godlike power but he is now a dispossessed god who must remain for ever absent from the world he has created. His plays are a universe which it is perfectly safe for us to go on exploring provided we do not forget that his own relation to it has ceased to be relevant. It is by no means uncharacteristic nowadays to read what Northrop Frye, for instance, writes in his book, *A Natural Perspective*:

Shakespeare seems to have had less of an ego center than any major poet of our culture, and is consequently the most decent of writers. It is an offense against his privacy much deeper than any digging up of his bones to reduce him from a poet writing plays to an ego with something to 'say'.

Neither shall we be surprised to be told, as we are in the same book, that:

Shakespeare had no opinions, no values, no philosophy, nor principles of anything except dramatic structure.²

We may note that this is entirely in keeping with the common attitude of our times towards what we call—significantly—works of art. André Malraux makes the remark that statues of saints, which were originally meant for worship, are now valued as sculpture, sacred only to the mystery of aesthetics. He sees in this the mark of a civilization which, seeking in art a substitute for religion, proves incapable either of welcoming or of rejecting the unknowable.³

To adapt the idea to our subject, I would say that exclusive

¹ James Joyce, *A portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. C. G. Anderson (New York, 1974), p. 215.

² *A Natural Perspective* (New York, 1965), pp. 43, 39.

³ André Malraux, *La Tête d'Obsidienne* (Paris, 1974), p. 237.

concern for artistry and especially for dramatic structure in Shakespeare shows our growing incapacity either to welcome or to reject the meaning he ought to have for us. For it must be admitted that we are increasingly critical of the attempts which have been made to recognize the voice of the dramatist and to record what it is supposed to tell us. Of course, we would no longer make the mistake of believing that memorable sayings in his plays must be considered his own simply because they are memorable. We would not therefore maintain, as some have done, that Shakespeare's own philosophy consists in saying that life:

is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.¹

Nor would we, in smaller matters, ascribe to him the persuasion that:

Small have continual plodders ever won
Save base authority from others' books²

or that:

The chariest maid is prodigal enough
If she unmask her beauty to the moon³

an opinion in which he would distinctly *not* be our contemporary.

No one will deny that we are now in a much better position than, say, fifty years ago, to understand what were the mental habits of the Elizabethans, their beliefs, their world-picture. Background studies of great value have made it possible for us to approach the art and literature of the period with a far more appropriate knowledge of their basic assumptions. So that, being acquainted with the views commonly shared by the people of his time, it does not seem unreasonable to claim that we have an idea of what Shakespeare might have thought. But even then there is room for doubt and controversy. To maintain, as it is tempting to do on the evidence of many eloquent passages in the plays, that he was an exponent of sound Tudor doctrine, a strong supporter of hierarchy, order, and degree, is at least a simplification. It is also a simplification to say that he was the spokesman of the rising bourgeoisie and of its class-conscious anti-feudal spirit. For not only had the Renaissance its own inner conflicts, so that in any case it would be rash to conclude that authoritative doctrine necessarily represents the personal conviction of any man, but moreover it was then as always the proper business of drama to explore and stage such

¹ *Macbeth*, v. v. 26-8.

² *Love's Labour's Lost*, I. i. 86-7.

³ *Hamlet*, I. iii. 36-7.

perplexing contradictions. Ulysses is a most suspicious spokesman. Admirable as his speech in *Troilus and Cressida* may be, it must for us remain ambiguous.

But to disown any interest in Shakespeare's values or opinions and to profess exclusive care for dramatic structure does not really make things easier. Aesthetic pleasure cannot be enjoyed without a sense of meaning. As a matter of fact the fashionable attitude which consists in regarding a play as an artifact, an object to be treated objectively, leads to criticism that is increasingly more, not less, dogmatic. We are invited to approach the poem as something that can be thoroughly analysed, weighed, measured, computerized, envisaged as a system of lexical data, stylistic devices, image clusters, patterns, and themes, reiteration in general, especially if it tends to be obsessive. It would be nonsense to say that such methods are of no use. But they encourage the dangerous confidence that the over-all indisputable meaning of the work can be rationally determined. As if its life and soul could be seized and fixed for ever.

'Shakespeare criticism is in trouble.' With these alarming words, Professor Norman Rabkin begins a paper presented four years ago at the World Shakespeare Congress in Vancouver. His point is that 'the better our criticism becomes, and the more sharply it is focussed on explaining what plays are about, the farther it gets from the actuality of our experience in responding to them'. For, in his view, 'we have been betrayed by a bias toward what can be set out in rational argument'. *The Merchant of Venice*, which he chooses as an example, serves him to show that, while 'in recent years many of the critics have reached a consensus' which integrates 'the techniques developed in the last half-century for literary study', yet each of them is aware in his own way of an uneasy tension between the explanation and his actual experience of the play. Shylock remains particularly intractable. His large place in our consciousness fails to fit even the most subtle schematization. Professor Rabkin therefore concludes that 'we need to embark on a large-scale reconsideration of the phenomena that our technology has enabled us to explore, to consider the play as a dynamic interaction between artist and audience, to learn to talk about the process of our involvement rather than our considered view after the aesthetic event'.¹

¹ 'Meaning and Shakespeare', *Shakespeare 1971*, Proceedings of the World Shakespeare Congress, Vancouver, August 1971, ed. by Clifford Leech and J. M. Margeson, Toronto, 1972.

I could not agree more than I do with this idea of a 'dynamic interaction between artist and audience'. Only I would prefer to call it 'fighting with Proteus', for this brings me back to what the classical allegory truly means.

In the wealth of symbols which the story in Book iv of *The Odyssey* contains, it is hardly possible to ignore that of the furious fight on the sea-shore. A little imagination helps us to picture the mad wrestling, in splashing water, among the sleek nimble crowd of seals. And if Shakespeare is to be thought of as another Proteus, wrestle we must, in the like manner, with this Old Man of the Sea. No less than Menelaus, we are required to stay undaunted by changing shapes, either threatening or seductive, and to hold on unflinchingly, until at last the elusive being is seen and heard, speaking 'in his natural shape'.

The significance which I read in this is that, far from inviting unconcern for the person of the author, the protean image enjoins us on the contrary to do our utmost to know him. And the only way to do so is to struggle with the many changing illusions that both conceal and reveal him. Among them none are more misleading and none more instructive than the dramatic roles which he takes on under our eyes. This is why it is a good thing to be reminded—as we have been, with great authority—that the characters in his plays are not people. But on the other hand they cannot be reduced to mere elements of structure in a poem. Even Lady Macbeth (however problematic the number of her children) must have the kind of reality which Flaubert asserts in his own case when he says: 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi.' Professor L. C. Knights seems to admit as much when, returning to the question of character, he sees Shakespeare 'as much more immediately engaged in the action he puts before us' and says, quoting T. S. Eliot, that the plays, which dramatize 'an action or struggle for harmony in the soul of the poet' are 'united by one significant, consistent, and developing personality'.¹ To seek acquaintance with this personality is therefore not only legitimate but necessary. It is not so much, of course, a matter of knowing the man who was Shakespeare in his day, though this cannot be irrelevant, as of searching for him in his work.

Such was in fact the purpose of a book published exactly one hundred years ago and by no means unworthy of a special

¹ *Further Explorations* (London, 1965), p. 192.

tribute on its hundredth anniversary, Edward Dowden's *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art*. As Dowden declares in his introduction:

To come into close and living relation with the individuality of a poet must be the chief end of our study.

To this I would readily subscribe. And if the book, highly praised and widely influential at first, has been since severely criticized, if indeed it is largely obsolete, it is because an attempt of this kind must of necessity be constantly renewed to take into account what changing outlooks and the progress of scholarship bring to it in the course of time.

It is also because the aim is difficult to achieve, the undertaking as paradoxical as the idea of the 'natural shape' of Proteus. Being so full of shapes, so changing, how can he be said to have a nature? There is only one answer to this and it lies in the true sense of our human condition. Proteus can be used as an allegory of Shakespeare because he is more fundamentally an allegory of the dignity of man. In his famous 'oration' on the subject, that great though much maligned Renaissance thinker, Pico della Mirandola, makes God speak to Adam in the following terms:

The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hands We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. . . We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.

Giovanni Pico explains further that:

On man when he came into life the Father conferred the seeds of all kinds and the germs of every way of life. Whatever seeds each man cultivates will grow to maturity and bear in him their own fruit. If they be vegetative, he will be like a plant. If sensitive, he will become brutish. If rational, he will grow into a heavenly being. . .

And thus the description of man's extraordinary privilege goes on until it is concluded with the fervent words:

Who would not admire this our chameleon? or who could more greatly admire aught else whatever? It is man who Asclepius of Athens, arguing from his mutability of character and from his self-transforming nature, on just grounds says was symbolized by Proteus in the mysteries.¹

¹ Translated by E. L. Forbes in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, eds. E. Cassirer, P. O. Kristeller, and J. H. Randall Jr., Chicago, 1948.

This no doubt is an audacious view. In a time which has some reason to fear the extremes to which mankind may be finally tempted to go in the assertion of its power over the universe and over itself, we are, as no one before, in a position to see what great risks are involved in this gift of freedom. The nature of man consists in being so free that he can deny his own nature, and there are those among us today who think that—after ‘god’—‘man’ is a word which has lost its meaning. But however great the risks this freedom involves, they must be faced. And I would venture to suggest that, in the same way, the artistry of Shakespeare takes its bewildering power from being rooted in a fearless humanity.

He was, says Ben Jonson, who could claim to have loved and honoured the man, ‘of an open and free nature’.¹ To my mind, this is no less true of his genius than of his person. Moralizing tendencies inspired most people in his time with a distrust of change. This is fairly clear in the case of Ben Jonson himself who cannot show enough contempt for whatever seems to flow with the flux of things. Nano, Androgyno, the monsters in *Volpone* are embodiments of the most hateful idea of metempsychosis. His own Proteus, the Magnifico of Venice, changes only for the worse. He debases himself to the indignity of animal life, and, becoming the beast he is fabled to be, finally endures ‘the mortifying of a fox.’

But Shakespeare, though not unaware of the dangers of bestial degradation, is more capable of smiling upon the vagaries of man, less prepared to be systematically censorious of them. True, his young gentleman of Verona is not seen without the stigma of his own debasement. At first a courtly lover, an admirer of Orpheus who could tame tiger and ‘huge leviathans’, he nearly ends as a ‘ruffian’, a brute beast ready to rape the unyielding Silvia. Animal imagery runs significantly throughout the play, as Harold Brooks observes, in an essay pleasantly concluded on a comparison of Proteus with Crab. A real cur in his lack of feeling, treacherous to Valentine and Julia, unfit for Silvia whom he persecutes with most objectionable attentions, Proteus in his dissipation is perhaps not unfairly portrayed as a young dog.² Similarly Orsino can be stupid and dangerous as a

¹ *Timber: or Discoveries*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford, 1947), iii. 283-4.

² H. F. Brooks, ‘Two Clowns in a Comedy (to say nothing of the Dog): Speed, Launce (and Crab) in “The Two Gentlemen of Verona”’, *Essays and Studies* 1963.

bear, but within the limits of comic ferociousness which his name suggests. Obviously Shakespeare finds more cause for amusement than for alarm in the wild propensities of his early protean characters.

It is, however, the same open-minded generosity which makes it inevitable for him to face the trial of the great tragedies, and to face it, as he does, with merciless daring. The 'struggle in the soul of the poet' which those plays dramatize is so fierce that we may doubt whether it can result in harmony. His tragic figures are such strange shapes of almost inhuman terror and pity that, in them, he seems to test and challenge himself beyond all possible recovery. No easy answer is yielded to the question which Shakespeare asks himself in his great plays. Can it be that the question at last dissolves itself and that Coleridge's 'one Proteus of the fire and the flood' chooses in the end to be released with his own Ariel into the air? How admirably, at any rate, does the genius of the poet in his last works incline towards the fluidity of those elements. It is as if what Blake calls 'the human form divine' was losing its urgency for him. As, for instance, when Antony, yearning for death, muses on the undoing of his visible shape and says:

Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish,
A vapour sometime, like a bear, or lion,
A tower'd citadel, a pendent rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon't that nod unto the world,
And mock our eyes with air. . .

and, a moment later:

That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct
As water is in water.¹

In the romances, the beauty of metamorphosis is more than a theme; it is a mood, a manner of feeling and, we may say, of espousing the world. But as the poet—coming to terms with things continually moving and flowing into one another—seems to indulge in the freedom of change, one may well wonder whether he has finally lost or found himself.

It is not, however, and this will be my conclusion, for any man to decide of this, unless he takes up the challenge that is thrown to him in the poet's work. And he will not take it up without some truly personal motive for doing so. Returning for

¹ *Antony and Cleopatra*, IV, xiv. 2-11.

the last time to the story in *The Odyssey*, we note that it is told in Lacedaemon, by the king, to young Telemachus, who has come to ask about his father. That Ulysses lives is one of the things that king Menelaus has learnt of the servant of Poseidon after his mad struggle with him. It was urgent for Telemachus to know, just as it was urgent for Menelaus to be given the means of pursuing his own voyage. A need for vital knowledge is thus doubly stressed in Homer's narrative as leading to the revelation of Proteus. Neither his bewildering variety nor the secrets he can be hoped to let out are accessible to the indifferent, or the idle, or even those who are but moderately concerned. In the same way, I suggest that if Shakespeare has a message, it is only for those who are moved to ask for it by some strong personal reason, those who, in their way, are pilgrims and in quest of truth.¹ I believe that poetry, and indeed all great art, is an oracle. But it speaks only to those whom the enigmatic does not discourage, prepared as they are to strive for its meaning. They must be ready for a confrontation which Edward Dowden did not hesitate to compare with Jacob's fight in the dark against the mysterious man at Peniel. It means wrestling with the adversary until daybreak, when this strange man or angel, though still unwilling to tell his secret, gives a blessing in which he is nevertheless revealed. Shakespeare as a poet, did not write for professors or any of those who are concerned with him professionally. The best of his strength is hardly for the lecture-room. But nor is it even to be found in the theatre, unless a truly personal response can be found there.

What then, it will be asked, is the use of Shakespearian scholars? What is the business of Shakespearian criticism? It serves—I would say—the same purpose as the fair goddess Eidothea, the daughter of the Old Man of the Sea. She instructs those who deserve to know. She tells them about her father, says what is to be expected of him, explains how they must proceed with him. She provides them with the necessary

¹ On truth and Proteus, see Milton: 'For who knows not that Truth is strong next to the Almighty; she needs no policies, nor stratagems, nor licensings to make her victorious, those are the shifts and defences that error uses against her power: give her but room, & do not bind her when she sleeps, for then she speaks not true, as the old *Proteus* did, who spake oracles only when he was caught and bound, but then rather she turns herself into all shapes, except her own, and perhaps tunes her voice according to the time, as *Micaiah* did before *Ahab*, untill she be adjur'd into her own likeness. Yet is it not impossible that she may have more shapes than one.' *Areopagitica* in *Complete Prose Works* (New Haven: Yale U.P.), pp. 562-3.

equipment, warns them against the risks they run, and lets them shift for themselves. And we, 'abstracted' academics, who are but her journeymen, the only thing we can do is to help her in her task by contributing something to the indication she gives; we can, by throwing some light on this or that detail, by adding a touch here or there, perform our part of the needful work, of the work that is always in progress and always incomplete, always necessary and, in itself, never sufficient: the portrait of the artist as Proteus.