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TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH  
TO SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

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BY

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## NOTES (INTRODUCTION)

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Bush and Alfred Harbage, eds. Shakespeare's Sonnets, (1967), 7.

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2) The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature I, ed. George Watson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 1560-1564.

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## INTRODUCTION

There are few works of criticism about Shakespeare's sonnets that are not prefaced by the observation that, to quote Douglas Bush's appropriately metaphoric version, "Shakespeare's sonnets are an island of poetry surrounded by a barrier of icebergs and dense fog".<sup>1</sup> Such remarks generally pave the way for the writer to add to the annals of sonnet criticism the fruits of his own research which, whether merited or not, will eventually be subsumed in the next general indictment.

Insofar as such remarks are so very common, they are amusing; insofar as they are true, they merit attention. They imply both that the writer is fully aware of the copious efforts, and the shortcomings, of his critical predecessors, and that he feels his own contribution to be, at last, unassailable. It is not, of course. And so it goes on.

In this particular field of Shakespearean criticism, the driving force is as much competition as curiosity. If the desire among scholars is great to know all the answers, it is even greater to be the one who discovers them.

The reason why Shakespeare's sonnets have generated so much, and such mixed, critical attention is fundamentally that so little is known about Shakespeare himself and his life. A few dates, several facts, two or three signatures and a portrait constitute the entire extant, factual evidence of his existence. The insatiable longing to know more has, understandably, led many scholars and commentators to scour the

plays for characters which seem to speak with a voice that could be Shakespeare's own. But the dangers inherent in such ventures are widely recognized and such approaches are treated for the most part with caution.

A collection of love sonnets, however, which seems to provide evidence of a series of real events, presents too great a temptation for Shakespeare's would-be biographers to resist. It was, and for many still is, impossible to approach the sonnets without the hope of discovering something which is translatable into evidence. The fact that the only original text was apparently unauthorized by Shakespeare and carries an enigmatic dedication, only complicates the situation.

Modern criticism was launched (unwittingly) by Edmond Malone's 1790 edition of Shakespeare's poems in which he suggested that some of the sonnets were autobiographical. It was an idea which instantly captured the critical imagination. The intellectual challenge of such detective work is immensely appealing, and when the clues are so slight, the diversity of opinion, and hence the degree of competitiveness, is enormous. It is instructive to notice the titles given to critical works by their sleuth-authors: The Secret Drama of Shakespeare's Sonnets Unfolded, With The Characters Identified (Gerald Massey, 1872); The Rediscovered Masterpiece: Shakespeare's Sonnets Restored After 350 Years of Deception; A Study in Literary Detection (John North North, 1968); The Riddle of Shakespeare's Sonnets and The Problem of Shakespeare's Sonnets are common, and sometimes even Shakespeare's Sonnets Solved. Here, 'the sonnets' have become synonymous with 'problem'. Most telling of all, however, is F.W.Bateson's memorable rebuttal to Leslie Hotson's theory about Sonnet 107 (the 'Mortal Moon'), which he called Elementary My Dear Hotson! A Caveat for Literary Detectives.<sup>2</sup>

There has been no Variorum edition of the sonnets since Hyder Edward Rollins' massive volumes which were published in 1944, and although there have been many significant contributions to sonnet criticism during the past thirty years, there is no assessment of the critical literature as a whole from a modern viewpoint. It is perhaps for this reason that a significant aspect of what is by now a vast body of critical literature has, to my knowledge, received scant remark, if any. It is this: the 'riddle' of the sonnets, the problems which for decades -- one can almost say centuries -- have taxed the scholarship and ingenuity of some of the finest literary minds, are all artificially created. The 'problems' emerge only when the reader makes assumptions about Shakespeare's sonnets which, even if to some extent justifiable on the grounds of probability, serve only to create problems which need not exist and which, even if finally and indisputably resolved, would not even fractionally advance the reader's grasp of the sonnets.

The nature of criticism is governed by the assumptions on which it is based. In the case of Shakespeare's sonnets, untested assumptions have shackled critical thought for almost two centuries, and, even today, the possibility of uncovering the definitive solution to what must be one of the most tantalizing of all historical riddles, still lures many commentators away from more constructive studies. As a result the accrued mass of scholarly studies of Shakespeare's sonnets constitutes a unique critical phenomenon. It originated when scholars began to erect 'barriers of ice and dense fog' against themselves by allowing biographical curiosity about the poet to overrule literary curiosity about the poetry. Since then, during the course of almost two hundred years, it has developed in a way peculiar to itself as

generations of scholars have chipped away at these critical barriers in the agonizingly slow process of rediscovering the poetry which lay beyond. A curious process indeed, but one which need not be considered entirely in vain, as I hope my study will demonstrate.

In the last seventy or so years, sonnet criticism has been marked by a gradual broadening of vision as one by one, obstructive critical assumptions have been challenged and undermined. It would, of course, be foolish to argue that the progress has been universal or even systematic. No clear path of enlightenment is discernible amidst the scores of critical studies which, by 1944, numbered well over sixteen hundred. The picture is rather of a morass of theories, marked here and there by works significant for their wisdom, their influence, and sometimes both.

This study, then, is not about Shakespeare's sonnets, but about what I have called the unique phenomenon of the criticism they have generated. It is based on a select reading of this critical literature, with the stress on the work of this century.<sup>3</sup> It is structured so as to emphasize the initial, successive demolition of questionable critical assumptions, and the consequent diversification of approach and progress towards a direct confrontation with the sonnets as literature.

## NOTES (INTRODUCTION)

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## CHAPTER ONE

It is all too easy, looking back over the body of Shakespearean sonnet criticism which accumulated during the nineteenth century, to take an amused, even patronizing view of it. From our modern standpoint, one we like to think of as detached and objective, the earnest debate between those who saw Shakespeare revealed in his sonnets, and those who could not, does seem absurd. It is therefore salutary, at the outset of a study such as this, to be reminded of two things. One is that there were not a few nineteenth century critics who held opinions which are very close to our modern ones, and who expressed them clearly enough, even though their thoughts went largely unnoticed.<sup>1</sup> The second is that the kind of literary detective work which so intrigued and engrossed James Boaden and others still holds irresistible fascination for modern writers, and the autobiographical view-point is by no means abandoned. Bearing in mind the warning that critics of a later age may well look back to the sonnet criticism of the 1970's, and make similar sweeping accusations of bias or narrow-mindedness, it is perhaps wise to approach nineteenth century criticism with rather more sympathy than seems usual.

Edward Hubler, in The Riddle of Shakespeare's Sonnets (1962), adds to the standard account of the general neglect of Shakespeare's sonnets from their first publication until that last decade of the eighteenth century the observation that such comment as they did attract was "judicial", concerned to evaluate them as poetry (p.11). It was probably Edmond Malone's 1790 edition of Shakespeare's works, and

his commentary on certain sonnets, which launched the autobiographical debate.

If it is because Shakespeare is such a great poet that his love sonnets are so convincing,<sup>2</sup> we immediately have a valid reason why the nineteenth century critics devoted so much time and energy to pursuing events, dates and identities. It is excusable to be convinced by convincing poetry; it is also justifiable to long to discover something factual about so great but so enigmatic a man. But this is not all. The Romantic view of poetry was that it contained the expression of an inspired soul, and of the poet, that he was the seer; the words of the poet were truth itself. It is a short step from here to the belief, voiced by Edward Dowden in 1875, that "In these poems Shakspere [sic] hid himself, and is exposed".<sup>3</sup> This, together with man's natural curiosity, his ingenuity and his formidable powers of logic, combined to produce the sonnet criticism of the nineteenth century.

There have always been irrational extremists among Shakespeare's commentators, and these generally drew as much scorn from their contemporaries as they now draw amused dismissal.<sup>4</sup> James Boaden, one of the early theorists, devotes much of his book (On the Sonnets of Shakespeare, 1837) to demolishing other people's theories, including one submitted by George Chalmers, holding that Shakespeare's sonnets were all addressed to Queen Elizabeth. This, says Boaden, is "matchless absurdity" (p.5). Boaden's own view, that William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, was the Mr. W.H. of the dedication, is carefully argued. But his guarded conclusion is of greater interest, because it at once delineates the moral dilemma into which the debate led its participants, and characterizes the internal conflict which the more thoughtful writers of

the period found impossible to resolve:

Perhaps the imaginations of the writers have overleaped the bounds of just inference, and the love of the mighty Bard has not slightly trespassed upon the respect due to the great moral duties. Whoever be the defaulter, the irregular passion of no husband should be defended; nor should a decided wanton and jilt, however accomplished, be treated with admiration and indulgence; because accident, and absence from his home, led the greatest genius in the world to become a dupe to her fascinations. (pp.61-2)

In his Shakspeare (1878) Edward Dowden supports the autobiographical theory, but in his summing up he acknowledges other less literal interpretations:

So the Sonnets must be interpreted if we accept the natural sense they seem to bear. But several persons have held that they are either altogether of an ideal nature, or allegorical, or were written in part by Shakspeare not for himself but for the use of others. The natural sense, however, is, I am convinced, the true one. (p.113)

In his earlier work, Shakspeare His Mind and Art (1875), he gives a more detailed account of the varying types of current critical approach. He lists them in a footnote (pp.394-5): the sonnets are considered to be poems about an imaginary friendship, or 'a great allegory', autobiographical, or written for the use of someone else, or any of several possible combinations of these types. As early as 1870, H. Brown was advancing the theory that the sonnets were a parody of Elizabethan love poetry. In the 'great allegory' category, he names a work called Schlüssel zu Shakspeare's Sonnetten (1860), in which the author, Dr. Barnstorff, claimed that the youth, Mr. W.H., is "Mr. William Himself"!<sup>5</sup> (The exclamation mark is Dowden's.)

It is interesting to observe Dowden in his efforts to justify both an autobiographical reading of the sonnets, and an image of

Shakespeare as hero.<sup>6</sup> He says that we learn of Shakespeare's devotion, sensitivity and forgiveness in the sonnets, but adds that some critics are "so jealous of his honour that they are unable to suppose that any grave moral flaw could have impaired the nobility of his life and manhood". He goes on:

Shakspere as he is discovered in his poems and his plays, appears rather to have been a man who, by strenuous effort, and with the aid of the good powers of the world, was saved, so as by fire. (pp.395-6)

And although he cannot say that Shakespeare's life was blameless, he defends him by pointing out the absence in his works of far worse sins -- cold-bloodedness, hardness and selfishness.

His account of Shakespeare glows as he warms to his subject, in the kind of well-meaning but emotional prose which has achieved for much nineteenth century criticism such a bad name. But he is perceptive enough to observe that

Nevertheless, such experiences as those recorded in the Sonnets could not possibly pass out of his life, and in the imaginative recurrence of past moods might at any subsequent time become motives of his art. (p.399)

Fifteen years later, in 1890, Charlotte Stopes' review of Thomas Tyler's edition of Shakespeare's sonnets<sup>7</sup> is far closer to the twentieth century stereotype of nineteenth century criticism. She says of Tyler that "he answers most of the questions that face every thoughtful reader". (She is referring to identities and events.) Of Tyler's theory that the Dark Lady is Mary Fitton, she writes:

Having made clear his own discovery, Mr. Tyler examines the internal evidence from the Sonnets as to Shakespeare's feelings, beliefs, religion, philosophy, learning, melancholy and sensitive tenderness. (p.188)

She eventually concludes:

I attempt to prove nothing, except that such valuable work as Mr. Tyler's, tends to produce more work, that

may at last lead to fuller facts, and clearer truth, regarding this most autobiographic production of our universal Poet. (p.204)

Thus far, it is evident that all the theories, whether of the autobiographical, imaginary or allegorical type, rest on the general assumption that the sonnets tell a coherent story, any apparent incoherence due simply to the dis-ordering of the manuscript prior to publication. (This, says Mrs. Stopes, can be elucidated by re-arrangement. (p.189)) The theories differ only in the extent to which their proponents claim that the sonnets embody a reflection of Shakespeare's life experience. The nineteenth century critic who perhaps comes closest to challenging this assumption is Nikolaus Delius, whom Frederick Boas, in his Shakespeare and His Predecessors (1896), quotes as saying that the sonnets are the "free outcome of a poetic imagination" and adds that Delius regarded them as "mere exercises in verse" (p.14). Boas, for his part, was staunchly of the 'genuine autobiographical confessions' school.

It is inconceivable that such intensity of passion as they reveal -- the love, the jealousy, the remorse, the strivings between sense and spirit -- should spring from no solid basis in fact. (p.115)

But unlike Boaden and Dowden, Boas was not afraid to confront squarely the implications of his belief. He admits that in the face of the facts, "all aimable assumptions that Shakespeare's life was as stainless as it was outwardly prosperous go for nothing" (p.115).

But the 'exercises in verse' theory, in fact first voiced by J.O.Halliwell-Phillipps in his Life of Shakespeare (1848), while not in itself a radical view, provided the framework on which radical theories about the nature of the sonnets might well have been made to hang. An 'exercise in verse' cannot possibly contain the outpourings of the poet's

soul, with all that this notion implies concerning chronology, actual events, and so on, and it is in this distinction that dissent is first found.

A generation later, Halliwell-Phillipps published a two-volume work which he called Outlines of Shakespeare (1881). J.M. Robertson in The Problems of the Shakespeare Sonnets (1926), my source for this information, quotes a passage in Halliwell-Phillipps which elaborates on the idea:

some of [these strange poems] were written in clusters, and others as separate exercises, either being contributions made by their writer to the albums of his friends, probably no two of the latter being favoured with identical compositions....The victim of spiritual emotions that involve criminatory reflections does not usually protrude them voluntarily on the consideration of society. (p.42)

It could perhaps be contested that in the passage quoted there is hardly concrete enough evidence to suggest that Halliwell-Phillipps was attempting anything so clearly defined as a challenge to the underpinnings of the narrative theories. But in another part of Halliwell-Phillipps' 1881 study, he makes a statement which makes it perfectly clear that he very well knew what he was doing. Boas quotes:

There are no external testimonies of any description in favour of a personal application of the Sonnets....If the only safe method, that of discarding all mere assumptions, be strictly followed, the clearer the ideality of most of them, and the futility of arguments resting on any other basis, will be perceived. (p.114)

In his 1926 volume about the problems of the sonnets, J.M. Robertson gave Halliwell-Phillipps' view very short shrift: "The conclusion, obviously, has been too lightly reached..." (p.43). But in this celebrated study, both compression of much matter into comparatively little space, and an A.L.Rowse-like high-handedness enable

Robertson to assemble (and, for the most part, to dismiss) the work of no fewer than eighty-five scholars in slightly more than a hundred pages. He does, however, perform a valuable service for the student of sonnet criticism. Although he is as prejudiced as most of his predecessors and contemporaries, very few of them hold views which coincide with his own. Consequently, in finding fault with almost all, he provides a survey from a standpoint which is consistent throughout. Thus he effectively demonstrates the considerable variety exhibited in nineteenth and early twentieth century approaches to the sonnets, despite the general overriding assumption of narrative structure.

Robertson announces his own approach in a two and a half page Preface. He claims that he is not attempting "to add a new theory of the Sonnets to the large stock already on record", but endeavours, "by collating all the competing theories with each other and with the data, to indicate the direction in which critical research may most profitably proceed" (p.v.).

With regard to this last claim, the modern reader has considerable reservation. The difficulty is that although Robertson's idea proceeds from a justifiable desire to direct Shakespeare sonnet criticism away from the autobiographical mainstream, his idea of what constitutes disciplined procedure is hardly better than arbitrary pronouncement, and his own bias is as strongly marked as that of any of the critics whose work he so peremptorily dismisses. His 'science' emptily rests on such notions as 'concrete literary tests', and "that rectitude of inference dictated to men of science by the high standards of their calling" (p.v.).

Commenting on the undisciplined "lawless activities" of sonnet

theorists, Robertson takes them to task for proceeding on "three ill-warranted assumptions which they have never tested". The first is that all the sonnets (except about four) are written by Shakespeare, the second that one hundred and twenty six of them are addressed to a man, and the third, that these all refer to one and the same man, whatever his identity. By inference, Robertson has made three observations about the sonnets. He has noted their unequal quality, the fact that many sonnets in the first group (ie.1-126) are not specifically addressed, and thirdly, that there are differences in tone among these sonnets. Looked upon in this light, Robertson's reading of the sonnets has clearly been assisted by 'an awakened literary sense' (and the work of earlier critics), and the reader might have hoped that a critical work of some importance could be based on such firm ground.

But Robertson was as much a victim of the assumptions he challenges as anyone else, for although his starting point is unimpeachable, his first step is governed by the longest-standing of all assumptions, that Shakespeare could write no wrong. His bias is summed up in the last paragraph, and in particular, the last two lines, of his preface:

If, finally, it be asked what is to be gained from a critical analysis which confessedly leaves central enigmas unsolved, it may suffice to answer that at least we have found reasons for regarding a large number of Sonnets as non-Shakespearean, and a number more as having had a different destination from that commonly inferred, thus pro tanto altering our conception of Shakespeare for the better. (p.vii)

It is demonstrated in action in his first chapter, when he takes Sir Sidney Lee<sup>8</sup> to task for making an assumption (that Shakespeare wrote all the sonnets), when almost thirty years before, Lee had substantially undermined the assumption that Robertson himself makes, that Shakespeare

cannot be held accountable for anything less than perfect poems.

Robertson's solution to the problem of explaining the presence of inferior sonnets in the master's sonnet sequence is simply to demonstrate that Shakespeare did not write the vast majority of them. Of those lesser sonnets Shakespeare did write, Robertson argues, many were written on behalf of other people to yet others. His 'proofs', like his 'scientific approach', are swept past the inattentive reader on such phrases as "Who will dispute that...?" and "The long debate...might now be closed by common sense". And what is more, his 'proof' relies heavily on autobiographical surmise infinitely wider in scope than anything before or since, embracing Southampton, William Hervey (Shakespeare's third stepfather), Barnabe Barnes, numerous anonymous men and women and mothers and sons (for whom Shakespeare is supposed to have been commissioned to write occasional sonnets), Chapman and, of course, Shakespeare in his own person.

In his favour, it must be pointed out that Robertson does try to allow his intuitive response to the sonnets some influence in the task of making qualitative judgements about them. His conclusions, however, do not bear scrutiny, partly because he feels compelled, like the nineteenth century critics with whom he has much in common, to make factual deductions from his intuitive response. Even more unfortunate is the fact that he is hampered by the very approach he advocates which, ideally, aims towards a balance between the intuitive (the 'awakened literary sense') and the objective ('rectitude of inference'). The fact is that Robertson cannot achieve this balance because his critical motivation stems from a source external to the sonnets, the desire to defend Shakespeare against himself.

## NOTES (CHAPTER ONE)

<sup>1</sup> In the preface to Volume I of H.E.Rollins' New Variorum edition of the sonnets (1944), he remarks that "the more one observes the intrepid repetitions of Shakespeare's present-day editors and critics, the more one admires the learning and wisdom of their predecessors"(p.vii).

<sup>2</sup> In the introduction to his edition of the sonnets (1961), Douglas Bush makes just such a claim: "To say that these poems, as distinguished from most other Elizabethan sequences, have a special note of actuality and intensity in only to say that Shakespeare was a greater poet"(p.10).

<sup>3</sup> In Shakspeare His Mind and Art, p.vi.

<sup>4</sup> In An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets (1969), Stephen Booth describes 'a most bizarre' interpretation (made by Allen Cabaniss in 1960), based on the fact that the total number of sonnets (154) is only one more than the number of Hail Marys in the Holy Rosary. Cabaniss apparently supports his interpretation by demonstrating that Sonnet 37 contains evidence of the fourth Joyful Mystery (p.13).

<sup>5</sup> J.M.Robertson, The Problems of the Shakespeare Sonnets (1926) comments that "Barnstorff's 'Mr. William Himself' solution naturally one of the best remembered in the whole literature of the subject did not suffice to discredit entirely his general hypotheses that the poet is apostrophising his ideal self under the alternative guises of a youth and a mistress"(p.20).

<sup>6</sup> In the preface to the first edition of his Life of William Shakespeare (1898), Lee uses the word 'hero' to denote Shakespeare. (In the 1912 edition, p.xxv).

<sup>7</sup> "Shakespeare's Sonnets edited by Thomas Tyler", Shakespeare Jahrbuch XXV (1890), 185-204.

<sup>8</sup> Two of Lee's books, A Life of William Shakespeare (1890) and Elizabethan Sonnets (1904) are the subject of Chapter II.

## CHAPTER TWO

It is ironic that Robertson, who, it seems, had little time for the monumental research in Shakespearean studies of Sir Sidney Lee, should dismiss one aspect of Lee's research with a mild charge of plagiarism, for Lee's 'discovery' was that the majority of the 300,000 sonnets penned during the vogue of sonneteering were themselves merely plagiarized from their European predecessors.

Two things are startling about Lee's work. One is that it is not an oversimplification to describe Lee's findings in such bald terms. Though he wrote at length and over a period of many years on the subject, the essence of his research and conclusions was that the Elizabethan sonneteers were blatant borrowers and imitators, or mere translators. The implications of these conclusions for Lee and his contemporaries are more complex and will be discussed more fully below.

The other startling fact is that Lee includes Shakespeare's sonnets among the plagiarisms. In the nineteenth century, as we have seen, the protagonists in the autobiographical debate had been forced, by the necessity of preserving Shakespeare in his role of hero, either to maintain that he was morally incapable of sinking to such depths as those plumbed by the poet-speaker in the sonnets, or to concede that Shakespeare the man was inevitably (though slightly) embroiled in the world's temptations and that this experience formed the basis of Shakespeare's greatness as dramatist of the human psyche.

Lee, however, was saying something new. He attributed to Shakespeare as much as to his contemporaries, the practice of copying

other poets' work and putting his own name to it. This is a different matter altogether, and demands investigation.

Prior to 1898, the year in which Lee published the first edition of his A Life of William Shakespeare<sup>1</sup>, Lee had played his part in the quest for the identity of the fair youth, and had jumped in turn onto the Pembroke and the Southampton bandwagons.<sup>2</sup> But in the Life, he presented the fruits of "an original line of investigation". He undertook the task because of the necessity which he felt, as Shakespeare's biographer, to examine closely the autobiographical theories which had dominated Shakespearean sonnet criticism until then. He found himself in disagreement with the theories, in whatever guise, and devoted a substantial section of his biography to substantiating his findings.

For the first time in the one hundred year old procession of Shakespearean studies, Lee systematically examined the literary context from which Shakespeare's sonnets sprang, and his work is among the earliest, if not the earliest, which is scholarly in its aspiration to objectivity, rather than idealistic. His starting point, like Robertson's, was the observation that the sonnets are unequal and seem to be linked together in small groups.<sup>3</sup> Lee described Shakespeare's sequence as one which "presents the appearance of an extended series of independent poems, many in a varying number of fourteen-line stanzas", and claimed on this basis that it is unlikely that Thorpe's 1609 order is chronological (p.100). This in itself argues against the autobiographical theory, and Lee insists that the sonnets provide no more story narrative than any other motley collection of poems, and are no more homogeneous. Lee adds to his initial premises the belief that Thorpe's division of the sonnets into two sections is hard to justify, that frequently the sex of the

recipient is not specified and that many poems are purely meditative. He caps these observations by an unusual interpretation of Benson's reasons for re-arranging the sonnets under descriptive headings (1640). He suggests that Benson, far from misunderstanding the sonnets, understood very well, recognizing that the collection was "a disconnected series of occasional poems in more or less amorous vein" (p.104).<sup>4</sup> He goes on to say that regardless of the order in which Shakespeare's sonnets are read, they cannot possibly be interpreted as autobiographical records because this was entirely uncharacteristic of the Elizabethan sonnet:

Elizabethan sonnets were commonly the artificial products of the poet's fancy. A strain of personal emotion is occasionally discernible in a detached effort, and is vaguely traceable in a few sequences; but autobiographical confessions were very rarely the stuff of which the Elizabethan sonnet was made. The typical collection of Elizabethan sonnets was a mosaic of plagiarisms, a medley of imitative studies. (pp.104-5)

Between Lee's initial observations and this conclusion, lay a great deal of research which he does not detail in the Life, but which forms the substance of the one hundred page introduction to his two volume edition of Elizabethan Sonnets (1904). Here, his approach is carefully documented.

Lee makes it clear at the outset that he regards Shakespeare's sonnets as vastly superior in 'poetic merit' and 'psychological interest' to any of the contemporary sequences. Almost immediately, however, he qualifies this declaration by indicating that nevertheless, the student is advised to read Shakespeare's sonnets in the context of those of his contemporaries:

Not merely will his appreciation of their aesthetic quality be thereby quickened, but he will understand the contemporary circumstances of literary history which brought them into being. (p.ix)

But it very soon becomes clear that the fundamental purpose of Lee's particular approach (and it is only an approach, for in this work he does not deal with Shakespeare except by inference) is to lay the ground for ascertaining the extent to which it is likely that Shakespeare's sonnets were the 'fruit of his personal experience', and the extent to which his work was simply another product of an artificial, literary fashion.

Lee's approach, consequently, is an historical one. He seeks to trace and to illustrate the ancestry of the Elizabethan sonnet through Ronsard and the Pléiade, to Petrarch, and beyond. His object is to establish the supremacy of Petrarch as sonneteer and as originator. The latter aspect of Petrarch in relation to the sonnet is vitally important to Lee, as we shall note, and Lee loses no opportunity to stress it. In doing so, he ably lays the ground for his second major point, that all the later sonnet writers, up to and including Shakespeare, were entirely indebted to him.<sup>5</sup>

Lee deals with the Elizabethan sonneteers from Wyatt and Surrey to the eve of Shakespeare, by comparing their sonnets with earlier French and Italian ones. His indignation at finding so many, and such close similarities among these works is hardly concealed:

Indeed, some of the Elizabethan sonneteers (whose literary morality and whose claim to the honours of poetic invention have not hitherto been impugned) prove, when their work is compared with that of foreign writers, to have been verbatim translators, and almost sink to the level of literary pirates. (p.xxxiv)

His thinly veiled disgust, however, reveals a very strongly biased mind which has reached a conclusion and no longer permits any degree of objectivity. While condemning them for "degenerate Petrarchism", Lee is ambivalent about the enormously important contribution made by

Wyatt and Surrey toward a sonnet structure more suited to the English mode of thinking, a point of fundamental difference between the English and Petrarchan sonnet. At the same time, while berating Sir Philip Sidney at even greater length for borrowings and worse, he commends him as the only English sonneteer to show loyalty to his foreign models regarding sonnet form.

As if to maintain the validity of this interpretation of his findings, Lee also notes that several contemporary critics (Puttenham, Drayton, Davies and other parodying poets including Shakespeare himself in Love's Labour's Lost) were equally contemptuous of the borrowing and imitative practices of the sonneteers. But I think Lee's trust in these advocates of his argument is misplaced, and that it is more likely that such critics were protesting an immoderate literary fad which was producing much bad poetry, rather than condemning the practice of borrowing. Lee himself observes with disbelief the fact that so many Elizabethan sonneteers blatantly acknowledge the European source for their imitation and borrowing, but with yet greater horror, those who do not have the grace to do even this. It is perhaps strange that, in the face of such wholesale borrowing, and especially in the face of Du Bellay's manifesto, Défense et Illustration de la Langue Française (1549), which, in a footnote, Lee describes as recommending "the deliberate imitation in French of the best Greek, Latin, and Italian poetry", Lee failed to consider that there was evidently a different literary ethic in operation in Elizabethan times, which fully embraced such practices.<sup>6</sup>

A more significant objection to Lee's critical judgement, however, lies in his inability to make any concessions to the skill of the Elizabethan sonnet writers. He quotes, to cite only one example,

Daniel's "finely phrased" appeal to "Care charmer Sleep, son of the sable Night/Brother to Death, in silent darkness born" (Delia 49,1-2), but comments that "This is again for the most part a mere adaptation from Desportes". He adds: "So endless is the chain which links sonneteer to sonneteer in the sixteenth century" (pp.lviii-lix). Because his outlook was conditioned by his Victorian background (the idealization of the poet as seer, and poetry as the language of the soul), Lee was incapable of allowing that if a borrowed idea works, the information that it is borrowed is irrelevant, and if it does not, the information is unnecessary.

When in his Life of Shakespeare (1898), Lee applies these observations to Shakespeare's sonnets, he cannot exonerate the poet from the charge he levels at the other sonneteers. But his findings placed him in a critical dilemma -- in fact the same critical dilemma in which generations of critics before him had found themselves. He has to admit, on the basis of his investigation, that "adapted and imitated conceits are scattered over the whole of Shakespeare's collection". But inevitably there follows the qualification: "They are usually manipulated with consummate skill, but Shakespeare's indebtedness is not thereby obscured" (p.115).<sup>7</sup> Like his predecessors, Lee is unable to deny strong feelings of empathy with the poet at times, but is unwilling to admit that these passages have anything in common with the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling'. His head overrules his heart, and he refuses to permit his instinctive approval of Shakespeare's supremacy to eradicate his distaste for what he perceives to have been Shakespeare's method.

It is with something approaching excitement that Lee (in the

Life) reveals that in six sonnets, 144, 40, 41, 42, 133 and 134, the subject matter is unprecedented in sonnet literature. These, he observes, "seem only capable of explanation by regarding the topic as a reflection of Shakespeare's personal experience".

Lee concludes:

He borrows very many of his competitor's words and thoughts, but he so fused them with his fancy as often to transfigure them. Genuine emotion or the writer's personal experience very rarely inspired the Elizabethan sonnet, and Shakespeare's "Sonnets" proved no exception to this rule. A personal note may have escaped him involuntarily in the sonnets in which he gives voice to a sense of melancholy and self-remorse, but his dramatic instinct never slept, and there is no proof that he is doing more in these sonnets than produce dramatically the illusion of a personal confession. (p.163)<sup>8</sup>

It is a telling passage. Lee has, for his time, resolved one critical problem, that of autobiographical readings which were difficult to explain, but he has created another: how can the greatness of Shakespeare the dramatist be reconciled with such shortcomings as a sonneteer? On this point, Lee shows himself to be a critic divided. He must acknowledge passion in the sonnets, but only that it occurs "involuntarily". Had Lee been familiar with the writings of Freud, he might have been led to quite different insights, as was Mahood much later (see Chapter Six).

But for the time being, Lee defends Shakespeare in every way he can. According to Lee, Shakespeare does not borrow and imitate but is "indebted". Within the narrow confines of the Elizabethan sonnet tradition as he defines it, Lee magnifies Shakespeare's achievement. But above all, he plays down or denies the achievements of Shakespeare's contemporaries, admitting (in 1904),

In spite of the wide dissemination of literary interest and literary feeling in Elizabethan England, the average literary capacity was not much higher than that of other

epochs. It was consequently inevitable that, when the rage for sonneteering set in among the Elizabethans, the mass of their sonneteering efforts should be bad. (p.xi)

Of such sonneteers Lee concludes: "They are the mere wallowers in the bogs that lie at the foot of the poetic mountain".

It is difficult, without access to all the critical writings about Shakespeare's sonnets, to give an accurate assessment of Lee's contribution to it.<sup>9</sup> The two books I have dealt with are landmark works, in spite of their shortcomings, because of the methodical research and documentation on which they are based, and because of the entirely new approach they embody. They could have revolutionized Shakespeare sonnet studies, if for no other reason than that in terms of the critical and literary background of Shakespeare scholars at the turn of the century, Lee had disposed of all possibility that Shakespeare's sonnets were autobiographical, or indeed that they demonstrated any kind of narrative structure, real or imaginary. It should have been contingent upon anyone maintaining these views after Lee's work of 1898 and 1904 to show why he felt Lee was wrong.

But generally speaking this did not happen. J.A. Fort, in 1926, opens a paper called "Thorpe's Text of Shakespeare's Sonnets"<sup>10</sup> by indicating that his aim is to make progress toward revealing the story which lies hidden within the sonnets because "If we are ever to understand them fully, we must know at least the persons to whom Shakespeare addressed his letters" (p.439). For Fort, the "all important but most baffling problem" is to discover whether Thorpe's order was the order of composition, for without the order, we can never arrive at the story.

Fort's essay is largely a consideration of a study by Dr. Rudolf

Fischer, in which Fischer extracted a story roughly based on Thorpe's text, re-ordered the sonnets so as to exemplify the story, and distributed the misfits according to their general mood. Both Fort and Fischer assume Southampton to be the youth. It is inconceivable that neither critic had access to Lee, and yet in the essay there is no evidence at all of Lee's ideas and scholarship.

In 1944, Louis Anspacher<sup>11</sup> undertook to distinguish between real fact and poetic truth:

The point I wish to stress is that poetry is the most definite, the most concrete, economic, concise, and crystallized form of utterance. The poetic imagination seizes economically on the very essential and the most characteristic concrete element and uses it as a symbol to reveal, or to suggest the whole of anything. (p.18)

He seems to be trying to say that the truth of the sonnets is intuitively understood, and in going on to point out that the reader does not need critical help in coming to grips with Shakespeare's finest sonnets, he makes a sound point. But then he proceeds to base the most extraordinary interpretations on these premises:

But you can find Shakespeare himself and what he personally thought about things in the sonnets. These are autobiographical; and I think they should be read as closely as St. Augustine's and Rousseau's "Confessions". (p.35)

Shakespeare's statements about the immortality of his verse, says Anspacher, are the product of "the basic confidence of all true genius". He continues with a biographical account of the sonnets, which includes such observations as "Elizabeth was a small woman but she evidently packed a terrific punch", and that "there is no doubt that Mary Fitton had 'it'". He concludes, inexplicably, that "In this world, apparently nothing withstands the gnawing tooth of time but beauty" (p.55).

Leslie Hotson in his more reasonable Mr.W.H. and A.L.Rowse in his extraordinary Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problems Solved<sup>12</sup> (both

books published in 1964) are among other scholars who have been unable to resist the urge to solve biographical mysteries, and the latest work in what is, regardless of Lee, (and for that matter Shakespeare himself), an inevitably endless series, is Shakespeare's Lady of the Sonnets by Bidy Darlow (1974), with wood engravings by the author.<sup>13</sup>

There were, of course, reverberations as a result of Lee's work. In spite of the fact that Robertson does not give very much conscious emphasis to Lee, he makes reference to the fact that

the great mass of the ostensibly "personal" Elizabethan sonnets are just poetical exercises, even if in certain cases the sonneteers were set exercising by a "passion". The thing had been a mere craze in France and Italy for long before; and a large number of the English sonnets are little more than translations. (p.210)

The observation is Lee's, and in fact it is on this observation that Robertson bases his theory that some of Shakespeare's sonnets were written as if for a drama, for someone else to speak. Robertson's sweeping acceptance of the facts he lists in the above passage is an indication of the extent to which Lee's research at least had been incorporated into the body of Shakespearean knowledge. There were other reverberations too, more direct and on a larger scale, which will be the subject of the next chapter.

There are several reasons why Lee's work did not have as great an impact as one might have expected. Robertson himself gives one:

Lee's substantial rejection of all biographical interpretation has never satisfied the majority even of those who recognize its probable applicability to some or many of the Sonnets; and the reasonable assumption that many are outflows from personal experience is shared by critics with different standpoints in other regards. (p.67)

In other words, Lee did not sufficiently heed his intuitive response to the sonnets and carried his 'objectivity' too far. In his defense it

can be argued that progress is usually initiated by means of the first reactionary swing of the pendulum (which is always the greatest)<sup>14</sup> and Robertson's comment made a quarter of a century later represents a more moderate view. This, I think, is the most important and significant reason in terms of the phenomenon of criticism.

One of the effective reasons why Lee's theories fell on so many deaf ears was that he had, as Robertson noted, already changed his mind three times on the autobiographical question, and in the highly competitive world of sonnet criticism, this does not inspire faith.<sup>15</sup> Another is simply that in the context of a century old tradition of criticism that had countenanced so much attempted sabotage and rebuttal, the appearance of yet another outlandish-sounding view was not recognized as one which, though open to critical attack, could nevertheless have led to a more constructive mode of criticism than any the belaboured autobiographical theory had so far produced.

In retrospect, however, it is possible to recognize that there was some progress made as a result of Lee's work although it sprang not, as we have seen, from its general acceptance, but from the nature of its rejection. The evidence Lee produced of blatant and widespread borrowing was irrefutable, but the notions of Shakespeare as hero and of poetry as the voice of the soul die hard. As a result a few Shakespearean scholars found themselves faced once more with the problem of accommodating the new evidence while resisting its implications. What resulted was an examination of the nature and categories of experience, and its relationship with poetry, in the attempt to find an acceptable compromise. The weight of critical inertia, however, the unwillingness of critics to relinquish opinions arrived at over years of reading and

thought, while moderating the extremists, tends to inhibit progress. This process, and its effect on Shakespearean sonnet criticism is very well demonstrated in some of the work of E.S.Bates, to which I would now like to turn attention.

## NOTES (CHAPTER TWO)

<sup>1</sup> The copy of Lee's Life which was available to me was the 1912 edition, the second. In the Preface to this edition, however, Lee indicates that the only substantial changes are in the form of new factual discoveries which are appended to the Preface.

<sup>2</sup> Robertson (op.cit.) comments: "Lee had taken up successively, with equal confidence, three positions, the Pembrokian, the Southamptonian, and the 'impersonal', standing finally for the last view, with a resort to the Southampton connection as explaining Shakespeare's original resort to sonneteering; but never setting forth his reasons for abandoning, in turn, each of his former positions, which had been as unreservedly held, and which remained on lasting record. Such a situation invited flank attacks, and they were forthcoming" (p.6).

<sup>3</sup> Lee was not the first critic to notice this. Robertson mentions several such remarks in the early part of his book. Charles Armitage Brown (1838) is a case in point (p.13).

<sup>4</sup> The more usual accounts claim that Benson re-arranged and named the sonnets in order to give an air of authenticity and novelty to the collection in the interest of sales and profit. Lee does not, however, choose to note that Benson changed many of the pronouns from 'he' to 'she' to avoid scandal (it is said).

<sup>5</sup> Katherine Wilson, Shakespeare's Sugared Sonnets, (1974), takes the same approach as Lee, but arrives at entirely different conclusions. She writes: "The sonnets have been misread through being studied out of context. Lacking the background that gave them meaning, we had the problem of explaining them, and so have invented such theories as that they were autobiographical, expressions of the poet's relationship with a real man, and if not written to a real woman, were at least about her. Or we may read them as self-contained reflections whose recondite expression reflects depth of experience. But this cannot have been the approach of either Shakespeare or his contemporaries. Shakespeare must have had the cadences, imagery and ideas of his predecessors in his mind as he wrote. He used the same or similar tunes and the same imagery and conceits as the other sonneteers, to pay the same flattering and devoted attention, but to a man, not a woman. Apart from this he differed from them only by beginning his sonnet sequence with a section of seventeen sonnets each coming to an identical and ridiculous climax in the couplet, begging his friend to marry and that for the most fantastic of reasons, and by reserving the more vituperative outpourings of the sonnet tradition for a woman. That

is to say he reduced the whole thing to the absurd.

Nothing is more difficult to prove than a joke, for the only proof is to be surprised into laughter by it, since unexpectedness makes one of its essential elements. By a stroke of luck I made a chronological study of the main Elizabethan sonneteers for another purpose, and was surprised into laughter when I arrived at Shakespeare. My difficulty in showing that he wrote his sonnets as a parody is that I cannot recreate this experience for others. It seems I must give the game away first" (pp.82-3).

<sup>6</sup> It is stranger still when we remember that he claims (in the passage quoted above on p.18) to aid the student "to understand the contemporary circumstances of literary history which brought them into being".

<sup>7</sup> Compare Wilson, op. cit., pp.144-5: "And we can be sure that it is Shakespeare who 'borrows', since the relationship is that of parody".

<sup>8</sup> On page 127 of his Life, Lee states "It is quite possible that he may have met in real life a dark-complexioned siren, and it is possible that he may have fared ill at her disdainful hands. But no such incident is needed to account for the presence of the 'dark lady' in the sonnets. It was the exacting conventions of the sonneteering contagion, and not his personal emotions, that impelled Shakespeare to give the 'dark Lady' of his 'Sonnets' a poetic being". Wilson (op. cit., p.355), however, observes: "Putting Shakespeare's sonnets in their literary background leaves no chink for a real man and woman".

<sup>9</sup> Earnest Sutherland Bates, in "The Sincerity of Shakespeare's Sonnets", Modern Philology VIII (1910), writes of "the great and meritorious contribution of Mr. Sidney Lee, a contribution that may outvalue in productiveness almost every other that has been made, since the sonnet discussion first began" (p.2). I have not come across any other such recognition of Lee's work.

<sup>10</sup> Review of English Studies II (1926), 439-445.

<sup>11</sup> In Shakespeare as Poet and Lover and the Enigma of the Sonnets.

<sup>12</sup> In a sense, Rowse's book provides a test case by which to demonstrate the unhelpfulness to sonnet criticism of "irrefutable identification" of the "characters". Rowse announces with no probable, possible doubt whatever, that the dark lady is one Emilia Lanier, and interprets the sonnets accordingly. ("[Rollins] asks for answers to his 'unanswerable questions'. Now at last we have them.") His glosses, however, are no more enlightening -- if any thing they are less so -- than any others, with or without benefit of positive identification.

<sup>13</sup> This title was gleaned from the Library of Congress Catalog. I have not seen the book.

<sup>14</sup> I use the image of the pendulum swing to refer to nineteenth century sonnet criticism deliberately because it emphasizes the polarity of the critical views held and debated then (Bush op. cit., p.10, aptly describes this process as "much throwing about of brains!") In a sense, Shakespearean sonnet criticism needed a third option, and Lee's work, in that he directed attention to contemporary sonnet literature, provided just that.

<sup>15</sup> In fact, however, Lee had not, strictly speaking, changed his mind in this last question. He maintained his premise, his critical viewpoint that poet and poetry are seer and sincerity. He simply changed his conclusion.

### CHAPTER THREE

Perhaps the most spectacular example of a critic who is hampered because there is yet no suitable critical vehicle for his ideas is provided by Richard Simpson. Robertson gives him scant attention, but he tells the reader sufficient to allow him to form an idea of what he wanted to say.

In 1869, Simpson published a treatise called An Introduction to the Philosophy of Shakespeare's Sonnets, in which, Robertson tells us, he suggests that the sonnets "embody the philosophy of Love as expounded by Plato and by Boethius, and developed by Italian poets and philosophic essayists". Robertson quotes Simpson on the subject of the identification of Mr.W.H.: he was, said Simpson,

either the Earl of Southampton, or some other young man of birth and wealth, wit and beauty, who had travelled into Italy and come back brimming over with academes and love philosophy, with Petrarch and Platonism, upon which he disputed with Shakespeare, and by his discussions begot the Sonnets. (p.30)

Robertson, of course, ridicules the idea and dismisses such a far-fetched notion. It is, of course, true that the last inference contained in the passage, together with others he (apparently) makes later, claiming that Shakespeare must have authorized the publication of the sonnets, because they "appear to be articulated with rare subtlety, and care", are all examples of the manipulation of material to fit a theory.

But the point is this: Simpson's observation that there is evidence in the sonnets of the philosophical ideas of Plato, Boethius and Petrarch is justifiable. However, in 1868 the critical avenue of

over-riding importance was that provided by autobiographical theory, and all critical observations tended to be shaped by, and shaped to that frame of reference. In explaining what was an acute and useful observation by suggesting that Mr. W.H. was a young man who travelled to Italy and returned, Simpson was simply responding, predictably, to his critical environment. However, even for Simpson's contemporaries, the explanation was beyond the bounds of acceptability and so the idea was rejected with the explanation.

By 1898, however, Sir Sidney Lee was looking at Petrarch and the ancients, philosophers and poets, in his study of literary contexts, and a decade later in 1909, he published an essay called "Ovid and Shakespeare's Sonnets".<sup>1</sup> In this study, Lee investigated the availability of Ovid's Metamorphoses to Shakespeare because he recognized in Ovid the source of Shakespeare's particular way of expressing his preoccupation with time, mutability and immortality. He discovered that the Metamorphoses was translated into English by Caxton and then by Arthur Golding. The latter's translation ran to seven editions during Shakespeare's lifetime. Without entering into the details of Lee's study, it is enough to say that he concludes that it is likely that Shakespeare owned a copy of Ovid translated, and that this, together with such familiarity with Ovid as was gained from the French and Italian poets, was the source of Shakespeare's characteristically Ovidian themes.

In 1915 Lee published another essay on the subject, "Shakespeare and the Italian Renaissance".<sup>2</sup> Here, Lee examines Platonism as it was transmitted by Bembo, Pico della Mirandola and Galileo (all Shakespeare's contemporaries). He enumerates the journeys of English scholars (Linacre, Grocyn and Colet) to Italy, and particularly to

Florence, at the end of the fifteenth century, More's translation of the biography of Pico della Mirandola, and Hoby's translation of Castiglione's The Courtier in 1561. He also mentions Sir Philip Sidney's journeys to Italy, court painter Nicolas Hilliard's journeys to France, and the journey made by Giordano Bruno to England. There is no need to cite all Lee's examples in full; the picture of the extent, and more particularly the nature of the communications between late Renaissance Italy and Elizabethan England is already clear enough. Lee concludes that "the Renaissance was a large source of his [Shakespeare's] achievement" (p.15).

Simpson's attempt to explain what he perceived in Shakespeare's sonnets seems, in the light later shed by Lee's research, to be considerably less absurd, Simpson's idea of a single journey to Italy and back being only a simplified version of what Lee was later to demonstrate as more complex fact. The chances probably are, had Simpson been intellectually able to adopt a more objective approach to the sonnets, or had he lived to be a contemporary of Lee, he might well have been able to beat Lee to his Renaissance conclusions.

Progressive criticism shackled in this way is also demonstrated in an important essay written by Ernest Sutherland Bates in 1910. The essay, entitled "The Sincerity of Shakespeare's Sonnets",<sup>3</sup> is an extraordinary, multiple sandwich of perceptive vision and muddled thinking, of potential for breaking new ground and enslavement to tradition.

Bates' opening remarks contain very much the kind of observations the reader might expect to follow a work such as Lee's already examined. He characterizes the piece by piece demolition of all

existing biographical theories, in part due to Lee, as "the one notable critical achievement of the nineteenth century" (p.88). Having acknowledged the fact that we do not, and may never, know the identities of the sonnet characters, he asks if we have the right "to affirm even their bare existence", echoing the thought hinted at by others, that perhaps they are all figments of Shakespeare's imagination. The method he proposes for examining the problem is the one Lee had already made available, the examination of Shakespeare's sonnets in the light of those of his predecessors and contemporaries.

Bates quotes Lee's contention (expressed in his Life in 1898) that "Genuine emotion of the writer's personal experience very rarely inspired the Elizabethan sonnet, and Shakespeare's 'Sonnets' proved no exception to this rule" (see my page 22). Bates, however, does not agree with Lee. He maintains that Lee goes too far, failing to distinguish between what Bates calls 'literal' and 'imaginative' sincerity.<sup>5</sup> Literal sincerity is biographical sincerity; the literally sincere poet is one who writes about his own, personal, specific experience and this, Bates claims, is the only kind of sincerity allowed for in Lee's theory. On the other hand,

Imaginative sincerity demands simply that a poet in recounting any situation, real or fictitious, shall not pretend to more emotion or to another kind of emotion than that which he actually feels. (p.89)

He continues:

The value of these two kinds should be sharply discriminated. The criterion of imaginative sincerity is an essential and primary aesthetic principle, and must be applied in every thorough-going criticism of poetry; it offers one of the most important standards of poetic evaluation. The criterion of literal sincerity has properly in itself nothing whatever to do with poetic evaluation; it is concerned solely with the cause of any given poem, not with the nature of the poem itself. (p.89)

For the most part, Bates' work thus far is clear, and his recognition that biographical sincerity is concerned primarily with that which gives rise to the poem, is a step towards a more accurate appraisal of the biographical studies. But Bates' problem as a critic of poetry -- and it is a fundamental one -- lies in his insistence that the distinction between literal and imaginative sincerity "be sharply discriminated". His argument with Lee is that Lee regards as one the idea of 'genuine emotion' (imaginative sincerity) and 'the writer's experience' (literal sincerity).

The fact is, however, that it is impossible entirely to divorce personal experience and its concomitant emotional and psychic experience, and it seems to me to be clear that unless the poet has in some way encountered the life experience about which he is writing in all its dimensions, there is little chance that he will be able to write about it with any conviction. In The Epistle Dedicatory for his sonnet sequence Licia (1593), Giles Fletcher suggested that "a man may write of Love and not be in love". This is true, but surely he must once have been in love. Consequently when Bates tries to clarify his point by example, that "either type of sincerity may exist without the other", his argument becomes arbitrary and indefensible:

For instance, a man may be deeply in love, and yet if he does not chance to be a poet, his expression of that love will probably be high-flown, exaggerated, and altogether lacking in imaginative sincerity. On the other hand, a real poet may feel intense, noble, and lofty emotion over an imagined situation, as is proved by the very existence of the poetic drama. (p.89)

The breakdown is due to two problems. One is this very fact, that literal and imaginative experience cannot entirely be separated, as much because of the intangibility of imaginative experience as because

it only exists as a product of actual personal experience.

The other is that in talking about 'imaginative sincerity' in the Elizabethan sonnet, Bates is actually referring to an indefinable quality in the poetry (he has himself called it an "essential...aesthetic principle" (p.3)), which can only be perceived intuitively. Hence Bates' examples depend on such phrases as 'will probably be' and 'may feel'. Had Bates been able to realize that Lee's references to personal experience were to very specific experiences, such as those actually recorded in the poems, he might then have made what seems to me to be a more useful distinction, between Lee's notion of specific experiences, linked to historical events, and experience in the most broad and general sense. As it is, the two inaccuracies I have described here have repercussions throughout Bates' essay.

Not that Bates' work should be summarily dismissed; far from it. In the passages devoted to the topic of literal sincerity, he has some very significant points to make. In a very clear-headed and perceptive account of the Petrarchan sonnet, he is, in terms of sonnet criticism, light years beyond Lee in noticing the Petrarchan poet's self-interest, his subjective enjoyment of the exquisite misery of unrequited love, and the non-developing, non-dynamic love-situation the Petrarchan lover celebrates. Since Petrarch himself seemed (to the Elizabethans) to have exhausted, or at least explored all possible themes within that of Platonic love, it was left for his successors only to imitate him in an attempt to out-do him, and each other, and to achieve the most perfect expression of devoted but doomed adoration. Imitation and borrowing, then, far from being degenerate habits, were the raison d'etre of the sonnet craze, and indeed, Lee might have been

warned from too earnest a search for specific biographical sincerity in poems which were the product of a short-lived, popular fad.

Love poetry and courtly flattery in time became almost indistinguishable; but Bates observes that although "In the poems of these sonneteers actual passion seems to be at a minimum and formal dexterity at a maximum", "Extravagance and overstatement prove the absence of art rather than the absence of feeling" (p.93). Bates' point, and it was revolutionary in its time, is that conventionality in the love sonnet meant not the negation of personal experience, but the confirmation of it, because convention is a systemising of common experience.<sup>5</sup>

The fact of wholesale imitation is indubitable, but can this fact be made to prove wholesale insincerity? On the contrary the ideas underlying almost all of the conceits above mentioned are of a nature to be readily emotionalised. It is a truism that love is much the same the world over; exaggerated admiration of the lady's beauty, experience of sleepless nights, sense of conflict between passion and reason, these and such as these are generic characteristics of all love. Objection to their over-emphasis in poetry should be made because of their commonplaceness, not because of their personal insincerity. (p.98)

The conventional themes and phrases provide the lover, whether layman or poet, with channels through which to express what he feels when he lacks the imagination needed to express it without them. Bates continues to point out that the only thing which can gainsay belief in the literal sincerity of Elizabethan sonnets is documentary evidence to the contrary, of which there is very little, if any. Bates comments that

the temperamental inability of the present-day Anglo-Saxon mind to form a rational conception of the true function of conventionality has doubtless been one reason for the lack of sanity in English sonnet criticism as contrasted with the French. To the average Englishman or American of today, social conventions seem disagreeable but salutary restraints upon the savage tendencies of the individual, who should on no account be permitted to contravene them, but who may be

allowed in compensation to express the ill-humour they cause him by as much grumbling as he pleases. To the French man, on the other hand, conventions are likely to appear as amiable contrivances for getting along with his neighbours, which are to be enjoyed while they last and changed as soon as they become burdensome. In this ability to live harmoniously under convention, the Renaissance Englishman was more like the modern Frenchman than like his own descendants, and in regard to him it is a false assumption that conventionality of speech necessarily proves insincerity of feeling. (p.97)

The last point Bates makes in this passage, that conventionality of speech does not necessarily mean literal insincerity is contingent upon his earlier observations. He distinguishes between artificiality of emotion and artificiality of expression, and says Renaissance poets are frequently (as by Lee) condemned as insincere when in fact they are simply unimaginative and reliant on hyperbole and over-worn conceits. The repeated use of a limited number of themes and conceits is fully acknowledged, but is interpreted as an unimaginative expression of the common experience.

Thus far, Bates has established that the reader may largely assume that all Elizabethan sonnets were literally sincere, if poor poetry. He has, however, already (p.4) distinguished Shakespeare from the crowd by claiming that

Shakespeare's sonnets, however, far from belonging as a whole to the conventional artificial type, are in essential spirit thoroughly opposed to it, and possess that higher imaginative sincerity which proves in itself the existence of 'genuine emotion'. (p.90)

Here, however, Bates is again on infirm ground, and his argument is question-begging: imaginative sincerity reveals genuine emotion; Shakespeare's sonnets reveal imaginative sincerity; therefore Shakespeare's sonnets reveal genuine emotion. Imaginative sincerity, as Bates defines it, is the relationship between what the poet's emotion is,

and what he says it is: "whether he says what he really means" (p.14).

In this passage the unsoundness of Bates' argument speaks for itself:

They [the Petrarchists] say that their lives are dominated by the desire to win the lady's love, when it is manifest that their desire really is to sing their own love; they say that the lady's coldness causes all the miseries of life, when in their hearts they must know better; they say their tears flow down and make rivers which are then dried up by the heat of their passionate sighs, when they know that this is not quite true; they say that they are frozen like ice when they mean that they are bashful, burning like a furnace when they mean slightly ardent, dying when they mean despondent. It is not because their love itself has no basis in fact that we object to all this, but because we know that no love could possibly justify the hyperboles. (p.100)

One wonders, parenthetically, whether Bates himself had ever been in love.

He concludes this passage with a reiteration of the false distinction with which he opened:

Whether or not poetry be literally true, it must be emotionally true, if it is to deserve its name. Fiction may serve the cause of poetry in spite of any amount of personal untruth, but exaggeration is necessarily a bad servant because of its artistic untruth. (p.100)

He seems to be suggesting that a poem may be literally insincere (ie. about experiences the poet has never had) but can be emotionally true; that is to say a poem must seem to be true to deserve the name of poetry. This is not 'does he say what he means', but 'does he mean what he says', and Bates comes perilously close to separating form and meaning. But (like his two kinds of sincerity) form and meaning, though distinct, are each dependent upon the other. Bates fails to convince the reader with regard to imaginative sincerity because he tries to bring objectivity and logic to bear on something which is irrational and intuitive.

Bates' last task is to demonstrate that not only are Shakespeare's sonnets literally sincere (because most Elizabethan sonnets were), but that his use of conventional themes and conceits, which had

drawn condemnation from Lee, in fact occurs in only twenty six or so of Shakespeare's sonnets. The rest are 'original'.

It is not, however, by the absence of the conventional but by the presence of the unconventional that the individuality of the Shakespearean sonnet is chiefly marked. (p.102)

It now becomes clear that Bates' purpose is much like Lee's and Dowden's and the rest: he wants to insist on Shakespeare's supremacy. His argument is this: if the sonnets of almost any of the Elizabethan sonneteers are at least literally sincere, Shakespeare's are not only literally sincere but, because he was a true poet and needs no recourse to convention, also imaginatively sincere. This sets Shakespeare's best sonnets far above any others.

Bates is quite firm about what he thinks he has accomplished:

Shakespeare's superiority to his sonneteering predecessors lies therefore not only in his unmatched technique, but also in the greater truth and depth of his attitude toward life. His sonnets show us feelings that are convincing and intensely human; we have in them a pre-eminent example of imaginative sincerity. Such is the conclusion which I have chiefly had at heart to prove. (p.106)

In fact, as we have seen, he has proved no such thing. But this, unfortunately, is not all. In the last two or three pages of his essay, Bates reveals that his underlying motive for wanting to establish Shakespeare's total sincerity is to argue for the autobiographical significance of the sonnets:

Shakespeare seems to be closely in contact with the minds of his friend and his mistress; the emotions flash back and forth from one to another; the feelings are not compressed within one static formula, but there is change, development, retrogression. Whether we will or no, we feel ourselves to be in the midst of some dimly outlined, unintelligible, but intensely real and vivid story. (p.104)

He proceeds by more question-begging argument:

Realism as opposed to sentimentalism is the fundamental note of Shakespeare's greatest sonnets as compared with

those of his contemporaries. If this be true we should expect to find more reference to specific incidents in his poetry than in theirs. And this is just what we do find. The definite theme of the threefold intrigue with its strange events of the friend's faithlessness and seduction of the poet's mistress, his repentance, and his forgiveness by the poet, is, as Mr. Lee himself admits, wholly unprecedented in sonnet literature. (p.105)

Bates finally concludes:

The fact that we have failed to identify and may never identify the friend, mistress, and rival poet is no sufficient evidence of their non-existence, and the appeal to the literal insincerity of the sonnet type can be disregarded until this insincerity shall be more adequately proved than it has yet been. The supposition of literal sincerity on Shakespeare's part still seems to me probable. I believe that in his sonnets we listen to a chapter from Shakespeare's own life. (p.106)

Bates' major contribution to Shakespearean sonnet criticism consists in his providing qualification of Lee's extreme interpretation of the important facts he uncovered. In some areas he was able to escape from the intellectual restrictions to which Lee's Victorian perception of the nature of poetry and the poet had subjected him, and in this sense Bates was ahead of his time. His failure to realize that the clarification of Lee's idea of personal experience lay, not where he had tried to find it but in the distinction between types of life experience, nevertheless challenges Lee's too sweeping dismissal of Elizabethan sonnetry. It is more strange that he failed to realize that in attempting to force a distinction between the imaginative sincerity of Shakespeare's poetry and the lack of it in others, he is simply responding to that peculiar elusive quality of Shakespeare's writing which had led a century of critics and, finally, Bates himself to opt for the autobiographical theory, namely the compelling "I" of the poet-speaker in the sonnets which, as G.K.Hunter observed in 1952, sets up

"an overwhelming biographical response" in the reader.<sup>6</sup> And although it is disappointing that he is unable to divest himself of the urgent desire to believe that the poet of the sonnets is Shakespeare himself (with all that that implies), he makes the point clearly which is only hinted at by others, that the reader can believe in the characters without knowing their names and without making any assumptions about them.

To claim that Lee's work introduced objectivity into Shakespearean sonnet studies is not entirely accurate, although he probably would have wanted to think so, for his general pro-Shakespeare and anti-Elizabethan sonneteers bias is considerable and evident. But his study of Shakespeare's sonnets through comparative and historical approaches, with very particular attention to their components, demonstrated some possibility of fruitful and informative findings from studies which aspired to objectivity and looked beyond the sonnets themselves.

In 1923 Oliver F. Emerson approached the sonnets with the intention of establishing some dates.<sup>7</sup> He did so by examining the early influences on Shakespeare's sonnetting. Among these, Emerson counts Surrey's form, the wide use of which he demonstrates by enumerating several sixteenth century collections of Elizabethan poetry. He adds to this the influence of Sidney's Astrophel and Stella which was the first sequence to contain the iambic hexameter. For the purposes of this survey, his conclusion is less important than the fact that in stating it, he insists that he has used only 'objective data' in pursuing his enquiry.

It was this same approach, and with the same aim to be objective, that Sir Denys Bray adopted in his attempt to arrive at an

acceptable ordering of the sonnets.<sup>8</sup> He introduces his study with a brief account of the various re-ordering attempts since Benson's 1640 edition, and observes that to date,

all these arrangements have a subjective basis. They are based partly on what each editor, often under the stimulus of some splendid or provocative theory, holds to be identity of subject; partly on aesthetics and the like. They are consequently often triumphs of literary mosaic. (p.2)

He goes on to specify his own aim:

I can lay claim to no such triumph of ingenuity. My own claim is at once greater and more humble. It is no new theory that I have to set forth. Only one hard fact: -- the mechanical coupling of sonnet to sonnet by rhyme-link. Not any brilliant arrangement of my own. Simply Shakespeare's. (pp.2-3)<sup>9</sup>

To provide a base for his project, Bray carried out a detailed, analytical study of all re-ordered sequences, and from them discovered that there are between thirty and forty sonnets which are coupled in Q<sup>10</sup> and which are rarely if ever separated in subsequent editions, regardless of each commentator's particular bias. Taking as an example 45 and 46 (which deal with absence and the four elements), he shows that they are connected not only by meaning, but by "mechanical links", that is to say, by pairs of rhymes which are echoed, and sometimes duplicated, between the sonnets. Here, gone-moan (44:10,12) and gone-alone (45:5,7) are cited, together with thee-be (44:6,8) and thee-me (45: 10,12). After many more such demonstrations, Bray applies his findings to reorder the entire sequence into one single narrative poem.

There are dozens of ways in which Bray's theory of mechanical linking is vulnerable to critical attack. In the first place, the rhyme links he cites are anything but compelling, as the examples given above indicate, and are indecisive and repetitive to the extent that without progressing beyond page 24 of his 45 page introduction, the reader can

challenge him by counter-example, drawn from the very sonnets he uses as illustrations. Sonnets 1,2,14,46,141, and 137 all show the eyes-lies link, but are not contiguous in Bray's final order. It is true that Bray claims to take meaning into account, but his supporting 'evidence' smacks of contrivance. He does not satisfactorily explain why Shakespeare would have undertaken such a devious, trivial endeavour as this in order to achieve an unbroken chain of sonnets, and why, having laboriously set up such a scheme, he should have broken it up purposely to "shield his secrets from an 'ill-wresting' world" (p.43).

The theory itself is little more than a curiosity,<sup>11</sup> but it is worth attention here because not only its inception but also its support and later its defence, owe much to Lee's methodology. Following Lee's example, Bray cites examples of rhyme linking in the work of contemporary sonneteers to indicate precedents:

The rhyme-link is in fact so commonplace a convention in the Elizabethan sonnet sequence that it would have been strange if Shakespeare had gone out of his way to avoid it altogether. (p.28)

He adds fuel to his fire by adding that Shakespeare uses not only ordinary rhyme-links, but rhyme-links in which the actual rhyming words themselves are repeated (for example, the eyes-lies links in the six sonnets referred to above). For this, too, Bray cites contemporary precedents:

Nor is the word-link Shakespeare's invention. It is another commonplace to the Elizabethan sonnet sequence. Of the 16 links in the 19 sonnets cited from the opening and close of *Astrophel and Stella* [sic], all but three are word links. There are 28 word-links among 33 links in Daniel's *Delia* [sic]. (p.31)

It is extraordinary that in his excitement about rhyme-, word- and even line-links, he fails to discover -- or deliberately ignores -- the fact

that the sonnets 36 and 96 have an identical couplet.

Robertson, commenting on Bray's work (in his Problems, 1926), refers ironically to Bray's "ostensibly objective and simple mode of proceeding" and adds "we are plunged in a perplexity that goes on deepening till we end in absolute negation" (p.96). He ends his seven page demolition of Bray's order with a characteristically Robertsonian, and particularly appropriate paragraph:

The necessary conclusion is that, just as by rhyme-links he brings in every Sonnet in the Quarto, good, bad, and indifferent, so he could have brought in by rhyme-links any number of sonnets by other sonneteers of that and any later period, in virtue of the simple facts that a considerable number of words in common use offer themselves to all rhymers with a fatal facility; and that one man's rhymes are apt to be remembered by his readers, as well as by himself. Thus "Shakespeare's Order" turns out to be a pleasing dream, which leaves us still free to believe that he did not write 20 and 55 and 145 and 153 and 154, and to doubt whether he wrote 126 and a good many others. As Mr. Forrest leaves Sir Denys placidly unconvinced, so Sir Denys will leave Mr. Forrest wholly undisturbed. (p.100)<sup>12</sup>

Only a year later, Robertson's rebuttal elicited from Bray a defence of his theory in the form of an essay which he called "The Art-Form of the Elizabethan Sequence and Shakespeare's Sonnets".<sup>13</sup> Here, Bray devotes well over half of his essay to demonstrating mechanical links in the poetry of all the better known Elizabethan sonneteers. In essence the few casual references to Elizabethan literary precedent for mechanical linking he made in the original introduction to his sonnets order are expanded to include many specific examples, adding "line-links" and "rhyme-echoes" to other sonneteering practices, and arranging these in descending order of size and obviousness, claims for them the status of elements of a conscious 'art-form'.

Like Emerson, Bray has some interesting, if not earth-shattering

observations to make about Elizabethan sonnet writing traditions and practices which were made possible by the new 'objective' style of approach to the sonnets in general, and Shakespeare's sonnets in particular. But just as Bates in 1910 was not sufficiently distanced by time and thinking from the overwhelming predominance of autobiographical theory in nineteenth and early twentieth century criticism, so Emerson and Bray reduce to insignificance aspects of the sonnets which are interesting and useful as observations, because of their compulsion to deduce significant fact from them.

It is appropriate here to add a proviso to Lee's method of comparative study. A theorist can probably demonstrate precedents in Elizabethan sonnet literature for almost any theory concerning Shakespeare's sonnets, for the very simple reason that sixteenth century poets produced hundreds of thousands of sonnets.<sup>14</sup> But all that such precedents can establish is a degree of probability that whatever assumption the theorist wants to make about Shakespeare's sonnets is a defensible one, and often the degree of probability is in fact very slight. But the practice has yet another drawback: a theory based on assumptions about Shakespeare's sonnets drawn from precedents in other contemporary sonnets is open to challenge by counter examples drawn from the same source. Bray in particular falls victim to his own scheme, as did Lee, and this fact should warn the critic of the limitations of 'objectivity' and the danger of over-dependence on fact and deductive logic in critical studies of poetry. A thoughtful observer, standing where Robertson did in the second half of the 1920's had it within his scope to see where Shakespearean sonnet criticism could most usefully be redirected.

## NOTES (CHAPTER THREE)

<sup>1</sup> In his Elizabethan and Other Essays, 1929. The article was first published in the Quarterly Review, 1909.

<sup>2</sup> This article was the published form of a British Academy lecture.

<sup>3</sup> In Modern Philology VIII, (1910), 88-97.

<sup>4</sup> Robertson (op. cit. p.66), referring to Professor Walter Raleigh's approach to the sonnets, observes that "all the Sonnets come within his praise as 'sincere' and as 'holding their place with the greatest poetry in the world'". The idea of 'sincerity' in the sense of biographical truth was clearly not a new one.

<sup>5</sup> The question of the nature of convention (to which Bates appears to have been the earliest critic to have focussed attention), and the concomitant problem of the nature of the relationship between experience and poetry is in itself a most interesting aspect of Shakespeare sonnet criticism. I do not give more than cursory attention to it in my study, but I would direct the reader's attention to it as it is manifested in many ways in the works of criticism with which I will subsequently deal. Northrop Frye, for example, in "How True a Twain", The Riddle of Shakespeare's Sonnets (1962), observes that the youth is to the sonnets as King is to Lycidas and Hallam to In Memoriam (p.42). Edward Hubler (The Sense of Shakespeare's Sonnets, 1952), observes "It seems to me that the friendship has historical reality, and also that the historicity is not a primary matter. Whether it derives from real or imagined events, the poet's subject matter is in his thoughts, emotions and convictions;...A poet adopts an idea because it awakens something in him, because he finds it true, or serviceably so in a germinal way" (p107ff).

<sup>6</sup> "The Dramatic Technique of Shakespeare's Sonnets", Essays in Criticism 3 (1952), 152.

<sup>7</sup> "Shakespeare's Sonneteering", Studies in Philology XX, 111-136.

<sup>8</sup> The Original Order of the Sonnets, 1925.

<sup>9</sup> In the light of such incredible confidence, it is worth noting a comment from Rollins' New Variorum edition of the Sonnets, Volume II. In 1938, Bray revised his order, "after years devoted to the pursuit of rime-links", calling his earlier work "immature" and his arguments

"inadequate". Rollins records that Bray later said of other rearrangements: "These differences may indeed point to the hopelessness of the search and to the moral that we had better be content with the order in the Quarto; they are no proof that there was nothing lost" (pp.110-111).

<sup>10</sup> Q is the symbol used to denote the 1609 order of the sonnets.

<sup>11</sup> In "The Order of the Sonnets", Shakespearean Gleanings, 1944, 110-124, E.K.Chambers salutes Bray's ingenuity and thoroughness, but differs from his conclusion mainly on the grounds that Bray's formal links sometimes destroy sense links which already exist in Q. He concludes that he feels "bound to reject, without hesitation, the whole of Bray's ingenious theory".

<sup>12</sup> H.T.S.Forrest, The Five Authors of "Shakespeare's Sonnets" (1923), claimed just this.

<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare Jahrbuch 63 (1927), 159-182.

<sup>14</sup> Lee, in his Elizabethan Sonnets I, p.xix, writes "It has been computed that the sixteenth century sonnets of Western Europe exceed in number 300,000".

#### CHAPTER FOUR

L.C.Knights opens his very perceptive article "Shakespeare's Sonnets" (1934)<sup>1</sup> with the traditional exclamation that "so little genuine criticism" can be found in the "terrifying number of books and essays" about the sonnets. But he adds to this the observation that this is largely due, not to the "superior attractiveness of gossip" but to the general, unquestioned acceptance of two assumptions about the nature of the sonnets. One is that "the collection is more homogeneous than in fact it is", and the other, that they are all of equal poetic merit (p.133).

In the most general terms, Knights in 1934 stood critically where Robertson did eight years earlier, in that they each addressed their attention to the fact that Shakespeare's sonnets are uneven in quality. But whereas Robertson retreated from the problem, defending Shakespeare against inferior sonnetmanship by arbitrarily removing all the unfavourable evidence, Knights faces it squarely, and significantly advances the cause of constructive sonnet criticism.

In the first place, Knights devotes some attention to the nature of the hazards of unchallenged assumptions of the kind he has noted for worthwhile criticism. He points out that an assumption, more than merely influencing the literary critic, actually determines what he will find; that the assumption, for example, that Shakespeare's sonnets are "SEREN, cleere and eligantly plaine...perfect eloquence"<sup>2</sup> determines the way editors will re-punctuate and re-group the sonnets "in the interests of 'clarity'", thus perpetuating the assumption for the new

reader. Robertson's own efforts could not be more accurately described.

Knights makes his point with brilliant emphasis: "'Shakespeare's Sonnets' is a miscellaneous collection of poems, written at different times, for different purposes, and with very different degrees of poetic intensity" (p.134: my italics). He claims as "the first necessity of criticism the independent assessment of each poem", and as the second, the discovery of what kind of development (as opposed to sequence) is to be found from one to another.

In his dealing with the 'popular', autobiographical view of the sonnets, Knights, apparently effortlessly, clarifies the point that I feel Bates was struggling to make while in the grips of the need to make factual deductions from what he read. Knights points out that the "foundations on which [autobiographical theories] are built have not, to say the least, been the subject of any very serious discriminating attention" (p.136). He is, as far as I know, the first critic to bring foremost to the sonnets a perceptive intuitive mind, and with this, insight into the fundamental vulnerability of the autobiographical theories. He directs the reader to sonnet 42 as among those "of supposedly highest biographical significance", and suggests that he read the lines in the sense of "expressions by a powerful mind of reactions to a situation in which the man himself is deeply concerned" (p.136). He emphasizes what seems to him to be clearly self-evident from such a reading, that "the run and ring of the verse" suggest anything but a man deeply embroiled in complex relationships. He adds (p.137) that "the complete insipidity of one 'autobiographical' sonnet is enough to cause some honest doubt" about others, and by means of further examples, he indicates that Shakespeare found much enjoyment in

writing this kind of syllogistic verse.

This of course brings Knights to the subject of the relationship between Shakespeare's verse and his own experience. In the light of the perspicacity of his opening paragraphs, it is not surprising that he is able to distinguish between specific events in Shakespeare's life, actual life experiences, such as the occasion on which he met particular friends, the exact nature of a quarrel, for which the biographers eternally hunt as the 'original stimulus' of each sonnet, and experience of life such as anyone, but perhaps especially a poet and humanist such as Shakespeare, naturally accumulates in the course of time. Knights expresses his thought with a brevity and clarity that Bates might well have envied, pointing out that if we knew without any doubt that the 'characters' of the sonnets were real, and who they were, we should still have only the poetry "as something made out of experience" (p.138).

With the same ease, Knights disposes of the Lee-based notions of the sonnets as exercises on conventional themes, by pointing out (as had Bates) that "a convention is a general thought, a general attitude, or a general mode of presentation" and he adds

a discussion of Shakespeare's Sonnets in terms of the 'typical' Elizabethan sonnet sequence tells us no more about them than an account of the Revenge Plays tells us about Hamlet. (p.139)

In the following section of his essay, Knights indicates what he means by the need "to assess each poem independently", although what follows is more a demonstration of approach than a sustained investigation of any one sonnet. This is appropriate, for he is clearly aware that he is a pioneer in this respect, and that by approaching the sonnets in the context of their relationship with the development of Shakespeare's

blank verse (an approach which he admits seems "unnecessarily roundabout") he hopes "to shift the stress [of criticism] to those aspects of the sonnets that it is most profitable to explore" (p.139: my italics).

In comparing early and later 'set speeches' in the plays, Knights points to the difference between those which Bates would have called 'conventional', in which

the imagery is elaborated out of all proportion to any complexity of thought or feeling, the emotion is suspended whilst the conceit is developed, as it were, in its own right. Similarly the sound and movement of the verse, the alliteration, repetition and assonance, seem to exist as objects of attention in themselves rather than as the medium of a compulsive force working from within. Such emotion as is communicated is both vague and remote. (p.140)

and those which are more immediate, more dynamic (having, Bates would say, 'imaginative sincerity'): here,

more of the mind is involved, and it is involved in more ways. It does not contemplate a general emotion, it lives a particular experience. Crudely, the reader is not told that there is a constant need for action, he experiences a particular urgency. (pp.140-1)

He elaborates the notion that the more mature Shakespeare's handling of technique became, the greater the 'potency' of his words, which 'release' and 'control' the reader's response, and that consequently, the reader himself is no longer merely reading the sonnet, but directly experiencing it.<sup>3</sup>

It is perhaps in his ability to allow his intuition to detect types and changes of tone and mood, and the emphasis he places on this kind of intuitive reading, that Knights' greatest contribution to Shakespearean sonnet criticism lies. He is the first critic consciously to acknowledge the fact that although the sonnets were probably intended for silent reading, the medium of poetry is the spoken word. Consequently

terms such as 'speech movement', 'speech rhythm', 'speech idiom', 'conversational tone or movement', and 'offhand colloquialism', 'ironic inflexions' and so on are the tools of his analysis, and through them he becomes alive to the subtlest nuance and the slightest change in tone and implication.<sup>4</sup> He is, too, acutely aware of the poetic power of ambiguity used consciously as a means of achieving clarity in compressed thought and intensity of double meaning, and the possibility that when ambiguity evades meaning, it may be an indication of "unresolved contradictions in the poet's mind" (p.151).

In all these manifestations, Knights recognizes that Shakespeare was "working towards the maturity of expression of the great plays" (p.152). The use of the phrase "maturity of expression" is careful, and should be stressed so as to clarify the distinction between Knights' perception of the relationship between the sonnets and the plays, and the more vague, arbitrary notions of this relationship held by earlier critics. In working towards a more perfect technique of expression, Knights maintains, Shakespeare was also striving towards a "more delicate discrimination and adjustment" of mood and emotion (p.152). This technique, once refined, was to become the medium, 'the servant' of Shakespeare's urgent preoccupation with the major concerns of his time in his middle and late plays.

Knights' final point echoes his first:

I do not think 'The Sonnets' in any sense an ordered collection; they vary from the most trivial of occasional verses to poems in which a whole range of important emotions is involved, and in the latter we find in embryo many of the themes of the later plays. (p.152)

Knights' replacement of the idea of chronological or narrative order as the organizing principle of the sonnets with that of 'themes'

represents another major step away from the old restrictive critical vision. It is perfectly in line with Knights' only concession to a biographical point of view, that "the sonnets yield their proper significance only when they are seen in the context of Shakespeare's development as a dramatist" (p.160).

In the year following the publication of Knights' essay, William Empson (whom Knights acknowledges for his work on ambiguity in the sonnets) included an essay on sonnet 94 in his Some Versions of Pastoral (1935).<sup>5</sup> The fact that it is basically a study of an individual sonnet, of the kind advocated by Knights, is interesting, although it is probably due more to the fact that the two men are concerned with similar matters than to any direct influence.

Empson's essay is difficult. It is hard to know exactly what he is saying about sonnet 94, if, indeed, he is saying anything 'exactly'. This, however, may be the point. In the course of his essay he makes one or two illuminating, general observations about Shakespeare's art which qualify and extend some of those made by Knights.

In the first place, Empson defends Shakespeare against interpreters who want to find precise meanings in his most complex poetry:

There is no reason why the subtlety of the irony in so complex a material must be capable of being pegged out into verbal explanations. The vague and generalised language of the descriptions, which might be talking about so many sorts of people as well as feeling so many things about them, somehow makes a unity like a crossroads, which analysis does not deal with by exploring down the roads; makes a solid flute on which you can play a multitude of tunes, whose solidity no list of possible tunes would go far to explain. (p.77)<sup>6</sup>

The explanation of this passage (and I think one is needed) is that in the sonnets, Shakespeare recorded experiences and devised metaphors which

he continued to 'apply' as 'wide generalizations' as a dramatist for the rest of his life. While this explanation seems to concur in major issues with Knights' concept of the relationship between life experiences and the sonnets, and between the sonnets and the plays, the notion of metaphors being generalized and re-applied contradicts Knights' contention that Shakespeare was striving towards a "more delicate discrimination and adjustment". This opposition is upheld by Knights himself in the essay discussed earlier in this chapter. Of Empson's interpretations of the sonnets (as set forth in his Seven Types of Ambiguity, 1930), Knights remarks that in the majority of cases,

his lists of meanings seem to me to be obtained by focussing upon a part of the poem (almost one might say by forgetting the poem) and considering the various grammatical possibilities of the part so isolated. His analysis of Sonnet 83, for example, ...is valuable as suggesting the conscious and subliminal meanings that may well have been in Shakespeare's mind at the time of writing, but only a few of them are there, in the poem. (p.151)

In his search for the meaning of line 6 in sonnet 94 ("And husband nature's riches from expense"), and referring obliquely to the time-worn practice of seeking elucidation by comparison with uses elsewhere of the same metaphor, Empson observes that the process of 'generalization' of metaphors, that is the application to many different situations of a metaphor which was invented to express a particular experience, necessarily makes it very hard to rely on such comparative practices. "It is", he says,

like using a mathematical identity which implies a proof about a particular curve and then finding that it has a quite new meaning if you take the old constants as variables. It is these metaphors that have grown, till they involve relations between a man's powers and their use, his nature and his will, the individual and the society, which could be applied afterwards to all human circumstances. (p.82)

But Empson is not arguing that the resulting ambiguity is necessarily a fault in Shakespeare's poetry. He is simply arguing

against the necessity for precise, definitive interpretations, and for an indefinable sense of breadth and depth hinted at by lines which refuse to yield a specific meaning. The whole idea is contained in this passage, in which Empson is concerned about the results of "taking the old constants as variables".

It is hard not to go off down one of the roads at the crossing, and get one plain meaning for the poem from that, because Shakespeare himself did that so very effectively afterwards; a part of the situation of the Sonnets, the actual phrases designed for it, are given to Prince Henry, to Angelo, to Troilus, to the Greek army; getting further from the original as time went on....It is only partly true that this untidy process, if successful, might tell one more about the author's biography. Discoveries of language and feeling made from a personal situation may develop themselves so that they can be applied to quite different dramatic situations; but to know about these might tell one more about the original discoveries. The fact that the feelings in this sonnet could be used for such different people as Angelo and Prince Henry, different both in their power and their coldness, is an essential part of its breadth. (p.86)

## NOTES (CHAPTER FOUR)

- <sup>1</sup> Scrutiny III (1934), 133-160.
- <sup>2</sup> Knights is quoting from the address to the reader in John Benson's 1640 edition of Shakespeare's Sonnets. Knights, p.133.
- <sup>3</sup> A similar idea is expanded in David Parker's "Verbal Moods in Shakespeare's Sonnets", Modern Language Quarterly XXX (1969), 331-339. He suggests that "it is profitable, at least temporarily, to consider Shakespeare's sonnets as other than statements", to emphasize the dramatic, dynamic rather than the meditative quality in the sonnets. He wants the reader to see the sonnets in terms not simply of the outpourings of the poet, but also of the effect, persuasive and imperative, on the reader.
- <sup>4</sup> Many more recent critics concur with Knights' perception of the power of the finest sonnets as spoken language, which demand to be read aloud. Sir John Gielgud and the Marlowe Society have each made recordings of the sonnets spoken, but neither recording does justice to the variety of tone, inflexion and speed which seem to me to be suggested by the texts.
- <sup>5</sup> "They That Have Power to Hurt" was first published in Tokyo Studies in English Literature XIII (1933).
- <sup>6</sup> Compare G. Wilson Knight who observes (of the enigmatic sonnet 107): "True, no one knows what it means, but in that very vagueness lies much of its appeal, the sense we receive of great issues, rather as with the mysterious 'two-handed engine at the door' in Lycidas, which would lose half its potency if we knew what it was". Mutual Flame, 1955, p.11. Also compare James Winney in The Master Mistress (1968) on sonnet 62: "Some element of uncertainty remains, and ought not to be reduced in the interests of a clarity which the poet did not intend" (p.202). Earlier (p.38), Winney delivers a truly Empsonian line: "Such attempts to render episodes of Shakespeare's personal life into the Sonnets help to obscure the indefiniteness that is a part of their poetic character, and to ignore the point of narrative consistency which provide a truer indication of what the poems represent".

## CHAPTER FIVE

The year 1944 proved to be a watershed for Shakespearean sonnet criticism. Two events were primarily responsible: Hyder Edward Rollins published his massive two volume variorum edition of the sonnets, and C.S.Lewis delivered a series of lectures at Cambridge about sixteenth century literature, in the course of which he spoke about Shakespeare's poems. In 1954 these lectures, in expanded form, were published in the Oxford History of English Literature series under the title English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, and it is in this form that I came into contact with Lewis' work. It is important for this study, however, to recognize that Lewis' ideas were first made public -- albeit to a limited section of the public -- ten years before they were published.

Questions of merit aside, in the context of the sheer mass of repetitive critical literature about the sonnets, Lewis' work is remarkable. In the space of a mere twenty-one pages, in which he deals with sonnetry in general as well as Shakespeare's sonnets, he reveals more critical acumen, more concise thinking and more common sense than generations of his predecessors. He has an amazing ability to crystallize ideas which others have been struggling for years to define. The relationship between Lewis and his predecessors is something like that between Knights and Bates. But Lewis has a sharper mind than Knights, and a more articulate pen.

It is important to notice at the outset Lewis' forthright

manner, for this serves as Lewis' equivalent for Knights' "roundabout approach" which he adopted in order to shift critical stress (see my page 52). Lewis is as aware as Knights that radical redirection of critical literature is essential, and he sets about it by facing the situation with uncompromising candour.

His first attack is against all narrative-structure theorists. When in his History he first comes into contact with the "full-blown sonnet-sequence" he announces at once that "something must be said about that misunderstood Form" (p.327). He states bluntly that "The first thing to grasp about the sonnet sequence is that it is not a way of telling a story" (p.327). He explains his point by reminding the reader that Dante (the originator of the form), in his Vita Nuova, furthered his story element by means of prose links between sonnets or groups of sonnets, a practice which, even by the time of Petrarch, had been more or less abandoned. The crucial point, however, is that Lewis recognizes -- I think for the first time -- that there is nothing whatever inherent in the sonnet itself which necessitates, or even lends itself to, narrative. In fact the reverse is true since the sonnet is, by definition, a self-contained unit. The term 'sonnet sequence' is, as Lewis implies, misleading, because its only sequential element is the numbers applied to its components by the authors -- or publishers.<sup>1</sup> 'Sonnet series' is surely a more accurate description, and productive too in Knights' sense that assumptions determine critical findings (see my page 49).

Lewis characterizes the sonnet sequence as "a form which exists for the sake of prolonged, lyrical meditation" on love chiefly, but sometimes also on current or personal events, which provide additional meditational material. The latter type of sonnets have long been

regarded by critics as narrative links, and herein lies the problem. He explains by analogy which he extends to incorporate challenges of several other common assumptions:

Thus you get an island, or (if the event gives matter for more than one piece) an archipelago, of narrative in the lyrical sea. It is not there in order to interest you in the history of a love affair, after the manner of a novelist. To concentrate on these islands, and to regard the intervening pieces as mere links between them, is as if you value a Mozartian opera chiefly for the plot. You are already turning away from the work of art which has been offered you. To go further and seek for the 'real' (that is, the biographical) story is to turn your back on it altogether. To go further still and to start rearranging the pieces in the hope of mending the story or squaring it with other biographical data is, in my opinion, to commit yourself to unresisted illusion. (pp.327-8)

However, Lewis does not leave it at that. Clearly he has recognized the polarity of views which characterizes Shakespearean sonnet critical literature to which I shall have occasion to refer elsewhere in this study. He unconditionally dismisses critics who "present us with the preposterous alternative of 'sincerity' (by which they mean autobiographical) and 'literary exercise'", and consequently disposes of the work of hundreds of scholars and almost two centuries of criticism.

I think he is not entirely fair to some of those who argue for 'sincerity' in the sense of Knights' "poetry made out of experience" (see my page 51). But an unsympathetic reader might very well say of Bates, who, in 1910, misguidedly used his acute observation of the relationship between convention and common life experience only to support an autobiographical interpretation of the sonnets (see my page 40) what Lewis here feels justified in saying of 'sincerity' critics in general. The important point is that in simply recognizing and drawing attention to the unproductive swing of the critical pendulum between two extremes (i.e. autobiographical or not, homosexual or not, 1609 order or

not), the case is made and the opportunity created for fresh approaches, unshackled by assumptions or traditional critical stands, as we have seen was the case with Bates among others (see my Chapter Three).

All this in one paragraph. But Lewis has not only brought forward necessary challenges; on the constructive side, he has used the term 'work of art' to refer to the sonnet or the sonnet sequence. It is an important logical progression from Knights' suggestion that attention must be given to the sonnets in their own right. The progression lies mainly in the fact that Knights suggests, while Lewis insists.

Later, still on the subject of the sonnets generally, Lewis has this to say:

The sonneteers...wrote not to tell their own love stories, not to express whatever in their own loves was local and peculiar, but to give us others, the inarticulate lovers, a voice. The reader wants to seek in a sonnet not what the poet felt but what he himself felt, what all men felt. A good sonnet...was like a good public prayer: the test is whether the congregation can 'join' and make it their own. (p.490-1)

Here, Lewis elucidates Bates' struggling with 'imaginative sincerity' and Knights' concept of the reader experiencing the sonnets. The convincing character of the sonnets lies in their probing of humanity's common experience; they stimulate empathy or they are cathartic. It is as simple as that.

The general direction in which Lewis propelled Elizabethan sonnet criticism was toward consideration of the sonnet and sonnet groups as works of art, self-contained units. This approach entails the rejection of all assumptions concerning narrative structure, autobiographical inference and authentic sonnet order. This in its turn adds momentum to a trend first clearly articulated by Knights but mentioned peripherally by Dowden, Robertson, and others,<sup>2</sup> that of considering the

'subject matter' of the sonnets in terms of the themes on which the sonnets are, to use Lewis' word, 'meditations'.

As far as Shakespeare's sonnets themselves are concerned, Lewis begins by characterizing, effortlessly, the whole spectrum of controversy which has so far gone under the name of criticism. He speaks here of attempts at dating, but the comment is, I think, more widely applicable: "The evidence from style produces strong convictions in all readers, but not always the same convictions" (p.502). He decides -- and it is the only decision which makes any sense -- to settle for agnosticism where such matters as facts concerning Shakespeare's life are concerned. He adopts the same reasonable attitude toward the problem inherent in the fact that a good number of Shakespeare's sonnets are addressed to a man. He first identifies arguments for and against the possibility of pederasty. He observes that the relationship is extraordinary, that it defies categorization -- and that it "makes singularly little difference to our delight" (pp.503-4).

Having, as reformer, removed most of the critical stumbling blocks, Lewis as pioneer is now able to break new ground in approaching the sonnets themselves. In the first place, Lewis finds the overriding theme of the sonnets to be love -- not in any particular way, but as "quintessence of all loves whether erotic, parental, filial, amicable, or feudal" (p.505). He continues in a rather lyrical vein, which he would no doubt justify in terms of his own empathetic response to Shakespeare's poetry, poetry "a man can walk into and call his own":

The love is, in the end, so simply and entirely love that our cadres are thrown away and we cease to ask what kind. However it may have been with Shakespeare in his daily life, the greatest of the sonnets are written from a region in which love abandons all claims and flowers into charity:

after that it makes little odds what the root was like....  
 In certain senses of the word 'love', Shakespeare is not  
 so much our best as our only love poet. (p.505)<sup>3</sup>

This is an indication of Lewis' own personal experience of "identification of the inarticulate with the poet", his thesis of intuitive approach in action, and he makes his point.

Lewis' second approach is more objective. He seeks to examine the technique Shakespeare displays as sonnet writer, what it is about the way he handles the sonnet form and the language which makes his best poetry so powerful. He applies close, but brief attention to the part such things as stress, rhyme, alliteration and assonance play in his achievement. In itself this necessitates attention to individual sonnets entirely divorced from their context. An even more significant outcome for Lewis of this kind of attention is the observation that "The rhetorical structure [of a sonnet] is often that of theme and variations" (p.506). He means that the theme of the sonnet is not simply stated, but preceded and followed by statements of the theme in different guises and in different contexts. The specific application of the theme thus generally demonstrated logically completes the structure and the meaning. The concept of 'theme' -- what the poem is about, together with close reading of individual or groups of sonnets to discover things intrinsic in them -- was to open up an entirely new set of critical approaches to Shakespeare's sonnets.

Hyder Edward Rollins' Variorum edition of the sonnets (published in 1944) is a monumental work of reference. Volume I contains all the sonnets with all variant readings, together with major interpretive views from the eighteenth century onwards. Volume II contains fourteen appendices, each devoted to a facet of Shakespearean sonnet criticism.

In his preface, Rollins informs the reader that he has examined 1637 items (works up to and including 1942) and in addition, "numerous others" of more general nature.

Rollins claims that his work was undertaken to save future scholars the tedious task of searching through the massive body of critical literature, and the consumption of countless hours. He also claims to present his material impartially -- a superhuman undertaking in which he does not succeed. However, the frequent, caustic asides and the fairly pervasive tone of amused incredulity together with a fluent style of writing make the work accessible -- because eminently readable as well as superbly organized and indexed -- to all.

The accessibility of the work is important if it is to be regarded as influential, as I think it was. A. Nejgebauer, writing (in 1962) a very condensed survey of sonnet critical literature<sup>4</sup> has mixed opinions of Rollins' work:

The combination of non-selective objectivity and personal comment often grants equal space to irresponsible casual remarks and to the well-founded results of scholarly research, obscuring the critical method and the weight of the argument. (p.11)

But Nejgebauer's important observation is that the Variorum edition, in amassing and juxtaposing almost two centuries of critical views, presents a powerful object lesson in "the failures in criticism of the sonnets". Nejgebauer concludes with the remark that since the publication of Rollins' edition in 1944, there have been fewer but more considered works of criticism of the sonnets.

At the beginning of this section, I described the year 1944 as a watershed in Shakespearean sonnet criticism, for reasons which I hope are now clear. Lewis' lectures crystallized the critical findings resulting

from the process of discarding meaningless assumptions. To this crystallization he lent impact and impetus, indicating clearly the paths along which sonnet criticism might be purposefully and fruitfully directed. The coincidence of the appearance in the same year of Rollins' edition could not have been better timed had it been planned.<sup>5</sup> In a sense, the conscientious student of sonnet criticism in 1944 was presented at one and the same time with a mirror which showed him where criticism had been, and a signpost indicating the next step.

This fortuitous coincidence was given additional if delayed impact by the fact that Knights' essay on the sonnets (the subject of the last chapter) was republished in 1946 in a collection of essays.<sup>6</sup>

It is appropriate and useful to conclude this section of my study by briefly drawing attention once again to Nejgebauer's survey article of 1962. He makes two comments which, while not connected directly with the events of 1944, nevertheless provide satisfying professional corroboration of my general thesis thus far. Like the hypothetical student of Lewis and Rollins in 1944 (whose existence I surmised above), Nejgebauer looks both behind him and ahead.

It is a relief to realize that since about 1930 a change may be observed in the general criticism of the sonnets; it has tended to become more cautious, eclectic, sophisticated. An awareness of the complexity and controversial nature of the subject has begun to be felt, even in the most fanciful writings. The increase in knowledge has also brought about an inevitable specialization. (p.16)

Although it is not clear what Nejgebauer means by the term 'knowledge' in this context, I presume that he means knowledge not only about Shakespeare but also about the phenomenon of criticism, and that he has in mind the kind of common-sense approach to criticism itself with regard to the sonnets, which will 'inevitably' lead to greater concentration

on the sonnets as a separate -- and considerable -- entity in the Shakespeare canon, rather than a by-product, warranting only small chapters or essays in books of much larger scope.

His second comment is this:

Wholesale interpretation of the sonnets will have to give place to a careful examination of individual sonnets or natural groups of them before new syntheses, based both on historical considerations and on assessments of intrinsic merits, can be profitably attempted. As regards the use of language, stanzaic structure, metre, tropes and imagery, these demand the full tilth and husbandry of criticism. (p.18)

Here, too, one might wonder what Nejgebauer means by 'new syntheses'. But the basic idea is, I think, clearly enough expressed. Nejgebauer was writing in 1962. In fact, by this time, as I hope to show in the remainder of this essay, the newly opened approaches to sonnet criticism were already being explored. It remains now to survey the modern critics, and to estimate the success with which they have used these new approaches.

## NOTES (CHAPTER FIVE)

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Daniel is known to have changed the number of sonnets, their order and even the sonnets themselves in his Delia sequence of 1591-2. It is perhaps only the habit of numbering sonnets (which would make sense in a sequence with a prose narrative) which has perpetuated the idea of 'ordered sequence' which has been the stumbling block of so many nineteenth and twentieth century critics.

<sup>2</sup> Dowden, for example, (in Shakspeare His Mind and Art, 1875, p.400) narrates the story of "The prudent and sober Shakespeare", recognizing the thematic substance of the sonnets without abstracting them from the narrative framework and isolating them as themes in their own right.

<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless in these lines I sense a tone which seems to be consciously negating a suspicion that the doubts voiced by others may have some foundation in fact, and worse, that it would make a difference. I sense the same tone in Wilson Knight's footnote (Mutual Flame, p.25): "It may be worth stating, since confusion is fairly general, that 'homo' derives from the Greek, and means 'like', or 'similar'. It does not derive from the Latin word for 'man'. Nor does it signify physical vice: 'homosexual' is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'having a sexual propensity for persons of one's sex'. 'Propensity' is defined as 'inclination'". Use of the word 'vice' says much.

<sup>4</sup> "The Sonnets", Shakespeare Survey 15, 10-18.

<sup>5</sup> As a postscript to his Preface in Volume I, p.vii, Rollins notes that the intended date of publication had been 1942, but was delayed until 1944 by war conditions.

<sup>6</sup> Explorations (London: Chatto and Windus, 1946), pp.46-65.

## CHAPTER SIX

The two critical trends, the thematic and the analytic, which are clearly distinguished in Lewis' Clark lectures account for a very large part of modern criticism. The analytic trend particularly seems to have been developed by a desire on the part of the analysts to define, or at the very least, to examine what G.K.Hunter (in 1953)<sup>1</sup> called the "peculiar quality" of "an excellence recognizably Shakespearean" (p.152).

But the analytic or objective branch of criticism had already been launched by the time Rollins published his Variorum edition of the sonnets in 1944, although it was not to gain much attention until later.<sup>2</sup> It was launched in fact, quite violently, in the form of an article written by a scientist in a psychiatric journal.

In 1939 B.F.Skinner, of behaviorism fame, wrote an article which he called "The Alliteration in Shakespeare's Sonnets: A Study in Literary Behaviour".<sup>3</sup> His initial observation is that

Examples of alliteration are frequently cited as contributing to the effect of a literary work, and it is usually implied that they represent deliberate acts of arrangement on the part of the writer. (p.186)

He reports that he carried out an analysis of one hundred of Shakespeare's sonnets. He compared the number of times certain consonants occurred in each of Shakespeare's lines, with a previously calculated figure which indicated the probable number of times that such consonant repetition would occur naturally, without the conscious effort of the poet. He tabulates his findings and concludes that

In spite of the seeming richness of alliteration in the sonnets, there is no significant evidence of a process

of alliteration in the behaviour of the poet to which any serious attention should be given. So far as this aspect is concerned, Shakespeare might as well have drawn his words out of a hat. (p.191)

There are many points at which Skinner's experiment is open to attack, not the least of these being his claim that we have to allow for a certain amount of alliteration which happens by chance. It seems to me that this very assumption proves (among several things attributable to a behaviourist philosophy) the question-begging nature of Skinner's undertaking. In assuming that not every word in a poem is there because of the poet's 'design and skill', he reduces his argument to a question merely of degree. And since he neither reveals the method by which he arrived at his 'probability' figures, nor explains what degree of difference in incidence rates between these figures and actual occurrence of consonant repetition is 'significant', the argument is clearly open to any kind of wilful manipulation the analyst's bias might lead him to indulge in.

Barely seven months later in 1940, the literary world responded. Elmer Edgar Stoll delivered himself of a sober but well justified retort,<sup>4</sup> in which he enumerates the inaccuracies of Skinner's assumptions and the deficiencies of his experiment. He points out that alliteration often extends beyond the single line, which Skinner had taken as his unit; is often to be found within words instead of at the beginning; may involve repetition of 'kindred consonants'; and that in any case, alliteration is not a discrete part of poetry. Most important of all is Stoll's insistence that 'the delicate ear' is a more perfect instrument in such matters than science. His opinion is contained within this sententious paragraph:

Error, which in criticism doth so easily beset us, is, when in the guise of science and armed with statistics, particularly insidious and dangerous. It seems to, but does not, put other error to flight: it is therefore in special need of detection. (p.390)

Ten years later in 1950, scorn of Skinner still ran high among outraged literary scholars. Ulrich K. Goldsmith was moved to write an article in support of Stoll's rebuttal, which he called "Words out of a Hat?",<sup>5</sup> and he included a comment in a first page footnote which says much:

Because Professor Skinner is also the inventor of a mechanical baby tender and has succeeded in making a pigeon play the piano, he was interviewed in The New Yorker two years ago. In the course of the interview he mentioned his "spilling over into literature".... (p.33)

Goldsmith states as his aim to present considerable evidence in justification of Stoll's remark (in his retort to Skinner) that "Not from out of a hat but a head came such words...". First, he differentiates eleven alliterative patterns derived from the Middle English poetic practice, from which, he claims, Shakespeare chose according to his poetic need. Then he lists examples of each pattern, with sensitive comments as to the special effects each type of alliterative pattern can achieve.

The cumulative effect of Goldsmith's examples and remarks is considerable. His article stands as it were as documentary evidence against Skinner. But at the same time, it effectively draws the reader's attention to the myriad of alliterative devices Shakespeare developed, and, because of its simple, well-organized format (about which I shall have more to say), makes what is in my opinion, the most significant contribution of its kind towards defining the quality of Shakespeare's poetic excellence. His summary, again pointedly directed against Skinner, contains an observation which later analytic critics would have done

better to have kept in mind:

After surveying Shakespeare's 'literary behaviour' with regard to alliteration and assonance, one must conclude that it is characterized by a sovereign discretion in the use or non-use of these elements of poetic form. For the quality of an individual sonnet does not depend on their presence or absence. Some of the greatest among the Sonnets contain very little or no alliteration at all. (p.47)

Among other analytic studies of alliteration in the sonnets, Anton M. Pirkhofer's (1963) contribution<sup>6</sup> is mainly that he emphasizes alliterative patterns which extend over several contiguous lines (six and more), an aspect certainly not absent from Goldsmith's study, but a logical elaboration of it. David Masson, in 1968,<sup>7</sup> also takes Goldsmith as his starting point, and, like Pirkhofer, concentrates on one alliterative practice, the complex interweaving and permutations of sound patterns in the sonnets, and the way in which these clarify and enhance meaning in terms of supra-logical argument. However, neither Pirkhofer nor Masson reveal anything about Shakespeare's use of alliteration that the careful reader, armed with some ideas culled from Goldsmith's catalogue and Stoll's 'delicate ear' could not in general perceive for himself.

Part of the reason for the un-usefulness of Pirkhofer's and Masson's articles is the methodology used in examining the sonnets. Scientific objectivity and the study of poetic language are wary bed-fellows, and the proponents of scientific literary criticism claim to be aware of the hazards. The most dangerous aspect for literature is the assumption inherent in scientific analysis that poetry is only the sum of its parts, however many and however minute these are shown to be.

The method itself was (as I have shown) inaugurated by Skinner in 1939, but the fear of it among literary scholars was generated at the

same time, as the tone and matter of Stoll's indictment indicate. His claim that science and the 'delicate ear' have nothing to learn from each other is one that was to be taken up by future literary analysts, and vacillation between the desire to be objective and the fear of being non-literary, characterizes their approach to the subject.

Goldsmith, who has the least to fear on the latter account, still prefaces his numbered lists of examples with an apology, explaining that he chooses this form of presentation "merely for the sake of an orderly arrangement". Pirkhofer, on the other hand, has much to answer for, and although he claims (repeatedly) that he is aware of the problems the scientific approach to poetry entails, his work shows little evidence of this concern. His article, he claims, was written so as to establish

renewed elucidation of the method employed in studying Shakespeare's alliterative technique, or more precisely of a system by which the 'alliteration-spotter' is enabled to count and 'weigh' alliteration in Shakespeare's verse. (p.4)

He is aware of the need

to make up for the isolated consideration of single lines and to obviate the objection of unduly dissecting the living organism of the 'poetic artifact'.... (p.5)

Nevertheless he proceeds, using the jargon of phonetics, to show how Shakespeare's alliterative practice changed during the writing of the sonnets, with the ultimate aim in mind of deducing dates of writing. In his attempt -- and I think it is a genuine one -- not to "unduly dissect the living organism", he inter-mingles with his analytic findings subjective interpretations of the meaning they reveal. In writing of Sonnet 1, for example, he says:

The thematic function of alliteration becomes more apparent in ll.6,8, and 11. The double s-f alliteration in l.6, which

is supported by a third s in thesis ("-sub/"), illustrates the sonnet's theme of refused procreation, the series of f and s sounds imitating the self-confined hiss and flicker of a real light and, what is more, running over into the "famine" and the sub-liminal s sounds of "abundance lies" of 1.7 as well as the s-f sounds of the "Thyself-foe-sweet self" sequence of 1.8. On the psychological plane one is tempted to assume that the s-f staves express a feeling of smouldering indignation on the part of the poet, a feeling that may be due to subconscious association with "fie". (p.8)

I am aware in these comments of a sense of contrived effort by the writer to justify his method, or to pacify his critics. It is hard, for me at least, to understand how alliteration can possibly illustrate the theme of refused procreation, and I certainly find no hint of smouldering indignation in these lines. In any case, the passage shows that for all the pseudo-scientific establishment of 'fact', the critical use made of it still depends on subjective interpretation. But the important point is this: once Pirkhofer has reproduced the sonnets in his article with the major alliteration patterns emphasized by italics, he has really done all that is necessary for his purpose.

Masson's article, written in 1968, only compounds the problems generated by scientific literary criticism. In his work, the reader finds everything he found in Pirkhofer, only more so, and this is surprising because it is Masson who makes the most perceptive comments of all about the shortcomings of the scientific method. Referring to Skinner he says that

A far greater degree of complexity would have to be attained in mathematical, linguistic and acoustic analyses, before this sort of study could be pursued with any subtlety by statistical methods. In the mean time common sense and a careful 'ear' will achieve far more than mathematics. (p.280)

It is startling but true that mathematics, the very critical tool which it seems should be able to embrace and deal with a myriad of detail and complex permutation, fails because it is not detailed enough, not

sufficiently advanced to avoid being arbitrary.

Nevertheless, Masson follows this observation with a statement of intent, and the usual disclaimer:

Quasi-mathematical notation, and phonetic and other devices, bring out our patterns immediately and save an interminable quantity of discussion and description. But they can be expensive and are not congenial to all readers. We cannot avoid using them to some extent. So as to dispense as much as possible with these devices, however, we are obliged to employ and even to coin, a number of generic terms for types of pattern and pattern-constituent. It is hoped that their meaning will be transparent enough for easy recall. They are convenient labels for various departures from the regularity of rigid repetitions; and these irregularities often reflect the mood or the meaning. (pp.281-2)

An example of the analysis in action is taken from Masson's comments about sonnet 106. He has been talking about Daniel:

Shakespeare, however, can outdo this subtlety. Sonnets cvi 1 - 2, "When in the chronicle of wasted time, / I see discriptions [sic] of the fairest wights", contain as their most extensive subpattern a figure which is supremely musical in the strict, not the popular, sense. The structure, of motifs not words, is  $A B A' C / (C) B A^* - C^*$ , where A and its varieties are variants of /e:/ [me/wa:/ε:-w](fε:/ε:], B is kr, and C's varieties are (ε)ɔi/ɔi(ε); where A\* is loosened, and A\*, C\* are each inverted and contracted together. Besides its musical qualities, this subpattern has rhetorical values: kr connects the "chronicle" and its "discriptions" [sic]; and the line-end interchange-pair relates "fairest wights" to the "wasted time" to which they belong. (p.284)

I can find no information in the codified message which is not already perfectly obvious in the quoted, italicized lines. When he comes to the sestet, Masson admits that the "motif-structure is too complex for ABC analysis" (he does not seem to recognize in this comment any relationship between it and his earlier criticism of the shortcomings of mathematical criticism), and again quotes the lines concerned with appropriate italics. A critical system which breaks down under pressure is hardly a valuable one, the less so when, in dealing with the breakdown (simply by quoting and italicizing the lines) it is shown that it is

superfluous anyway. A far more useful system would be one which, by annotation by means of italics and a few other symbols such as stress marks, would denote visually, on the printed page, the alliterative (or other) pattern to which the critic wants to draw attention; a system which is a simple extension of the method of italicizing words or parts of words presently used by even the most esoteric critic (even Masson himself). It is this system, and this simplicity which makes Goldsmith's study infinitely more valuable than any other of its kind that I have come across.

The fact that the scientific approach to analytic criticism necessarily demanded initial attention to one sonnet<sup>8</sup> -- and to one aspect of it -- at a time, seems to have encouraged other critics to adopt a similar approach. Two useful contributions appeared in the second volume of Essays in Criticism (1952). J.M.Nosworthy's investigation of "Internal Evidence in Shakespeare's Sonnets" develops what seems to be a potentially useful critical procedure. He is concerned with the much used critical practice of using parallel words and passages in sonnets and plays to establish chronology and sequence, and demonstrates the extreme fallibility of the method by taking some of Sir Edmund Chambers' "conclusive parallels" and undermining them by counter example.<sup>9</sup> He reproduces, side by side, remarkably similar passages from plays which are known to be as much as fourteen years apart. His point is that simple examples of parallelism are inadequate evidence, but he suggests, however, that multiple parallels might present more substantial arguments.

His investigation takes the form of an examination of the concordances, in order to assess the relationship between Shakespeare's verbal habits and his growing maturity. He has already demonstrated a

considerable number of parallels between Sonnet 107 and Antony and Cleopatra. Now, by selecting nine key words from the sonnet and comparing the rate of incidence for the same words in the plays, he establishes a strong possibility (he recognizes that it can be no more than this) that Sonnet 107 was written shortly after Antony and Cleopatra, in about 1606-7.

He strengthens the validity of his method by listing the results of three similar investigations, all of which support the thesis of late dates of writing for the sonnets concerned. He does not, however, carry out the tests which have the greatest significance for his method, the analysis of word incidence in sonnets 136 and 144, which we know were written by 1599. Nevertheless, the idea of testing sonnet and play links (a critical pastime from the very beginning of sonnet criticism) in multiple ways including word incidence rates seems sensible, provided it is always borne in mind that the most it can do is to increase probability. Its largest drawback, as with Skinner's analysis, is that it deals with isolated components of poetry. It follows that findings from the concordance tests must, to deserve serious attention, be supported by multiple parallel passage links from the plays in which the particular relationship between the key words and the ideas they express is the basis of comparison, and not simply the particular aggregate of words used.

Winifred Nowotny, on the other hand, is concerned with the means by which Shakespeare structured his sonnets.<sup>10</sup> Dealing only with Sonnets 1-6, she attempts to show that

in Shakespeare's sonnets imagery is subordinated to the creation of the form of the whole and that imagery itself is at its most effective when it supports or is supported by the action of formal elements of a different kind. (p.76)

The statement seems to carry a contradiction in that if imagery in the

sonnets either "supports or is supported by" formal elements, whether of a different kind or not, it can hardly be subordinate to the creation of the form. The statement, and in fact the discussion which follows, seems to emphasize the close interdependence of imagery and form. As such, it is a very revealing study, in which she shows Sonnet 1 to contain a "litany of images" linked only by their relationship to the subject matter, a prefiguration of the richness of the imagery in the sonnets to come. Sonnet 2 presents visual beauty and beauty as treasure, with a modulation from one to the other in the second quatrain. Sonnets 3 and 5 elaborate on visual beauty and Sonnets 4 and 6 on beauty as treasure. Her close analysis of Sonnet 4, showing it to be a "tour de force in the handling of form" (p.81) with its brilliant blending of the two 'voices' of beauty and of treasure, is masterly. It is interesting that in the midst of her perceptive and clearly articulated study, in which the possibility of the need for a disclaimer does not even cross the reader's mind, she makes this comment:

What is remarkable is the way in which the poet evolves from this material an intricate and beautiful form which is very close to the art of fugue. Like the fugue, its effect resides in the interaction of the parts; critical analysis, which cannot reproduce the simultaneousness of the original, must labour heavily behind, discussing first the development of each part and then their interaction. (pp.79-80)

Her concluding remarks refer not to the matter of her study, but to the manner, and she comes very close to echoing the thoughts expressed in the article by Hunter to which I referred at the beginning of this chapter:

Such a study can help one to arrive at a fuller understanding of Shakespeare's means of communication and a fuller possession of those poetic experiences with which the Sonnets deal....A close study of the language of the Sonnets makes it clear that, great as was Shakespeare's ability to use imagery not only for its beauty but also for its integrating power, he

possessed in even greater measure the power to make the formal elements of language express the nature of the experience with which the language deals. (p.83)

More recently, a somewhat greater constructive use has been made of close attention to aspects of language in individual sonnets, by M.M.Mahood and Douglas Peterson. In Mahood's chapter on the sonnets in her Shakespeare's Word-play (1957), she outlines her general thesis, which is that Shakespeare's best sonnets are marked by wordplay which is "a consciously used, hard worked rhetorical device" (p.91). This, she suggests, implies a balance in Shakespeare's mind between embroilment in and detachment from "the experience that gave rise to [each sonnet]". Conscious, labored wordplay, as in Sonnet 24 (Mahood describes 24 as "an elaborate forensic allegory"), suggests that "Shakespeare often sat down 'to write a sonnet' as resolutely as Tennyson did before breakfast!" (p.89)

On the other hand, when the wordplay is submerged, ambiguous and deep, as it is in Sonnet 49 (for example in line 5: "Against that time when thou shalt strangely passe"), it reveals "an unresolved and painful tension in Shakespeare's feeling for his friend" (p.96); and suggests that he was not sufficiently emotionally detached to enable him to write of feeling "purified by being fully and finally comprehended" (p.103).<sup>11</sup> When he has arrived at this point of self-knowledge,

in all those sonnets where verbal ambiguity is thus used as a deliberate dramatic device, Shakespeare shows that superb insight into states of strangely mixed feelings which enabled him to bring to life a Coriolanus or an Enobarbus. Like Freud, he found the cause of quibbling by studying his own quibbles; and the detachment which such an analysis implies imparts to the best of the Sonnets that objectivity we look for in the finest dramatic poetry. (p.110)

Five years later, Mahood pursued part of her theory a little further, dwelling on what she now calls "the complex and profoundly

disturbed relationship of the poet with the friend to whom most of the sequence is addressed" (p.50). Mahood now attempts to define the nature of the "experiences whose real-life occasions are now lost to us and are in any case, none of our business", by the parallel passage technique. Impressive parallels of language, ideas and feeling of sincerity are found between Sonnet 33 ("Full many a glorious morning..."-- the first sonnet to cast a shadow on the friendship) and plays -- several plays it should be emphasized, in view of Nosworthy's warning (see my page 75), Richard II, Julius Caesar, I Henry IV, Henry VIII, Antony and Cleopatra, and King John. Careful comparison of the language of both sonnets and plays provides Mahood with sufficient justification to transfer the inferences drawn from the language of threatened friendship in the plays to the situation explored in the major portion of the sonnets. Using further comparison of friendship situations in Merchant of Venice, A Midsummer Night's Dream and others, she defines the nature of the shadow over the friendship as "fear of trust" -- a fear that the friend is not what he appears to be.

Mahood carefully points out in both articles that she intends no transference of the element "fear of trust" from the subject of the poetry to real life experience, and quotes (from Rollins Vol.II) Robert Bell (1855) in support:

...the particle of actual life out of which verse is wrought may be, and almost always is, wholly incommensurate to the emotion depicted, and remote from the forms into which it is ultimately shaped. (p.139)

But if the ambiguity of some of the more difficult, evasive sonnets can be seen as expressive of "fear of trust", while all is not thereby made clear, Mahood's work defines a context within which they may be better understood.

Douglas Peterson's long chapter on Shakespeare's sonnets in his study The Elizabethan Lyric from Wyatt to Donne (1967), is a mine of observations and ideas. But to conclude this chapter, I want to refer only briefly to one aspect of Peterson's approach, because it represents the literary critic's antidote to attacks on critical method by scientists. In the first place, Peterson is an adherent of the kind of intuitive 'long-hand' interpretation which comes most naturally to the critic who experiences his way through the sonnets. His interpretations which are, at times, brilliant, are inevitably long -- space and time consuming -- and imprecise, anathema to scientists. He demonstrates, without this being his primary intention, the impossibility of talking in specific terms, about the nature of a work of art. Of Sonnet 97 he says

Its success is due, I believe, to the connotative power of pure language employed in the drawing of comparisons from nature, and from the elements of style that are characteristically Shakespearean in their 'music' -- cadences reinforced by patterns of assonance and alliteration....They are the accomplishment of a generation of poets dedicated to achieving eloquence in the mother tongue. Shakespeare's triumph is his realization of the potentialities for subjective reflection that are available in the tradition he has inherited. His most striking contribution to the tradition is a language that is suitable to the expression of a wide range of nuance but which is also, because of its simplicity and precision, equal to the most demanding kind of close psychological analysis. (pp.222-3)

The reader must respond to such criticism intuitively in the same way that the critic has responded to the poetry itself.

But a more important point is yet to be made. Peterson discusses, sympathetically, John Crowe Ransom's essay "Shakespeare at Sonnets" (1938),<sup>14</sup> in which he repeatedly takes Shakespeare to task for logical inconsistencies in structure and imagery. While acknowledging, in connection with the "Bare ruin'd choirs" of sonnet 73, that Ransom is

right, technically speaking, in his view that

It is one thing to have the boughs shaking against the cold, and in that capacity they carry very well the fact of the old rejected lover; it is another thing to represent them as ruined choirs where the birds no longer sing. The latter is a just representation of the lover too, and indeed a subtler and richer one, but the two images cannot, in logical rigor, co-exist. (Ransom, pp.297-8)

Peterson observes that

in spite of the difficulties arising out of close analysis, the connotative power of the quatrain successfully conveys the speaker's emotional response to the approaching winter of life. In fact, the very line which violates the logic of the trope is especially powerful in its conveying of the sense of time's encroachment. (p.224)

It is the illogical aspects of poetry with which science cannot, by definition, deal, and where cold analysis reveals illogicality, it is the intuitive response which must always be allowed the deciding vote.

## NOTES (CHAPTER SIX)

<sup>1</sup> "The Dramatic Technique of Shakespeare's Sonnets", Essays in Criticism 3, 152-164.

<sup>2</sup> In fact the idea of an analytic approach to sonnet criticism was not new. In 1874, F.J.Furnivall published a book called The Succession of Shakespeare's Works and the Use of Metrical Tests in Settling it. He applied himself to five beat rhyming lines, blank verse lines, the placing of caesuras, run-on lines, end pause lines, weak and strong endings and so on. He then used tables to contain his resulting information.

<sup>3</sup> In Psychological Record III, 186-192.

<sup>4</sup> "Poetic Alliteration", Modern Language Notes LV (1940), 388-391.

<sup>5</sup> In Journal of English and Germanic Philology XLIX (1950), 33-48.

<sup>6</sup> "'A Pretty Pleasing Pricket' -- On the Use of Alliteration in Shakespeare's Sonnets", Shakespeare Quarterly 14 (1963), 3-14.

<sup>7</sup> "Free Phonetic Patterns in Shakespeare's Sonnets", Neophilologus XXXVIII (1954), 277-289. David Masson is not to be confused with the nineteenth century critic David Masson (see my page 84).

<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that since Knights drew attention to the necessity of attention to individual sonnets (see my page 50), this has been a common approach, as a glance at bibliographies and the Shakespeare Quarterly index demonstrates, although whether this is a direct result of Knights' work it is hard to say.

<sup>9</sup> Nosworthy does not indicate to which of E.K.Chambers' studies he is referring. With regard to Nosworthy's challenge by counter example, see my comments about Lee (p.46) and about Bray (pp.43-4).

<sup>10</sup> "Formal Elements in Shakespeare's Sonnets I-VI", Essays in Criticism 2 (1952), 76-84.

<sup>11</sup> Katherine Wilson (op. cit. p.145) refers briefly to Shakespeare's "Road to Xanadu-like entanglements". She also suggests that "a Livingstone Lowes type of analysis might reveal memory of sounds of words as a linking-factor in his [Shakespeare's] creativeness". (Livingstone Lowes is the author of The Road to Xanadu (1927), a study of Coleridge's use of language.)

<sup>12</sup> In "Love's Confined Doom", Shakespeare Survey 15 (1962), 50-51

<sup>13</sup> Hubler (The Sense of Shakespeare's Sonnets, 1952) had already observed that "In the twenty-third sonnet, his [Shakespeare's] first apology for neglecting the friend, he gives as his reason for his silence "fear of trust". There is the recurrent fear that the love given openly is not fully returned and might be misconstrued" (p. 91).

<sup>14</sup> In his The World's Body, 1968, 270-303.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

In his study of the problems of Shakespeare's sonnets (1926), J.M. Robertson classified Richard Simpson's 'Italian journey' theory of the sonnets as esoteric -- a word which, for Robertson, denotes the height of absurdity.<sup>1</sup> With the same epithet he dismisses the 'Attempted Elucidation' of the sonnets by one Cuming Walters (1899), in which Walters suggests that the majority of the sonnets are the poet's expression of an

all consuming desire for immortality. Begin as he may with his theme, he almost invariably merges into allegory, and represents himself as the contestant of death. Bodily death he does not fear; oblivion he dreads. He therefore argues incessantly on the course he shall pursue to defy the ravages of time and prevent the loss of reputation. (p.49)

Before declaring that Cuming "does but make darkness visible", however, Robertson concedes that his 'elucidation' does take into account "that constant sense of the flight of time which Professor Masson<sup>2</sup> has justly stressed as a special note in Shakespeare" (p.49).

In Cuming and Masson, as in Simpson, we can recognize critics whose perceptive powers were not so deadened by the autobiographical theories that they were not aware of something more important, if more difficult to define, in Shakespeare's sonnets. But as Simpson was shouted down, so were Cuming and Masson, and in Rollins' *Variorum* edition (1944), Masson is recorded only for his support of an autobiographical reading, and Cuming does not even earn a spot in the index. The term 'theme' is likewise missing, and there are more entries under Times Literary Supplement than under 'time', and almost none under 'love'.

Clearly, before 1944 there was no extensive preoccupation with the possibilities of exploration of the sonnets from the thematic point of view.

After Lewis' Clark Lectures therefore, T.W. Baldwin's On the Literary Genetics of Shakespeare's Poems (1950) must have been one of the very earliest works of criticism to attempt something like a thematic approach. He divides the sonnets (in the Q order) into six groups, and explains that each group deals with, or develops, what Baldwin perceives to be its subject matter. Thus Sonnets 1-26 deal with "Procreation to Outlive Time"; 27-52, with "Separable Spite in Unity"; 53-77, with "Tempus edax Rerum, But Not of All in All"; and so on. He begins with promise. He first traces Shakespeare's 'all in one and one in all' theme from Plotinus to Southampton (whose motto it was), and concludes that this was not a conventional sonnet theme. Next he demonstrates by means of reference to Erasmus, and Wilson's Arte of Rhetorique (1560), that the "theme of immortality by nature's law of procreation was a Renaissance convention known to every learned grammarian of the time". At this point, however, Baldwin loses his grip. It soon becomes apparent that in searching out Shakespeare's 'themes', their sources and Shakespeare's use of them, Baldwin is presenting what he evidently hopes is a strong argument for the authenticity of Thorpe's order, his own dating theory (which is that the sonnets were written between 1593 and 1599), and his 'discovery' that the sequences within Shakespeare's collection fall into six series. This observation prompts Baldwin to question "whether a quire of twenty-four leaves of paper is the basis for each series" (p.343), and so on, into another improbable theory about how the sonnets were written down. His bibliographical references show that he had neither

read Knights nor heard of Lewis. To his credit is only the fact that he calls attention to a new field of enquiry in which more perceptive, thoughtful critics might discover something of genuine value.

Such a critic is J.W. Lever. In his study The Elizabethan Love Sonnet (1956), Lever tackles Lee's attitude toward convention and originality in the sixteenth century sonnet, clarifies the 'problem' of Shakespeare's lover, suggests a fresh way to approach a reading of Shakespeare's sonnets, and finally, based on all this, presents a serious, imaginative and provocative interpretation. No two studies could be more unlike than Baldwin's and Lever's.

To say simply that Lever directs critical attention to the existence of what he calls the "Renaissance doctrine of imitation", and describes the history of the sonnet from Petrarch, via France, Wyatt and Surrey to Shakespeare as a positive, creative evolution of a poetic form, is to do gross injustice to half of Lever's book. However, for the purpose of this study, it is mainly important to know that in challenging Lee at every point, Lever reinstates the conventional Elizabethan love sonnet as a form within which the Elizabethan sonneteer had ample space to exercise his own originality.<sup>3</sup> But he goes much further. He explains that in choosing to address most of his sonnets to a male friend, Shakespeare defied convention. He finds the arguments which are usually proffered to smooth over this oddity -- the cult of friendship, the Platonic ideal, the customarily strong bond between sixteenth century poet and patron -- insufficient. All this

does not explain the choice of friendship as the major theme of a sonnet sequence. An individual's private experience was not enough, in the circumstances of Renaissance literary composition, to overthrow the whole weight of a convention established for over two centuries. Courtship stood at the

very foundation of sonnet tradition. It is true that friendship as a subsidiary theme was never quite excluded: Petrarch himself found a place for it. The sequences of Bembo, Della Casa, and others, as well as of the Pléiade poets, included individual sonnets of compliment to friends and patrons; there are even examples of short runs of such poems. But there is no parallel in the whole corpus of Renaissance poetry to Shakespeare's sustained exploration of the theme of friendship through more than a hundred and twenty sonnets. (p.165).

Lever suggests instead that just as in his middle plays, Shakespeare explored contemporary issues and values, so in his sonnets, by "a transformation of the central theme" from courtly love of a romance-mistress to that of friendship for a male-patron, Shakespeare freed himself to bring all the "wider issues" which are the subject of histories and comedies "within the confines of the sonnet medium".

The idea is ingenious. Lever finds in the Elizabethan sonnet prior to Shakespeare a staleness induced by the combination of not always first rate poets and the limited scope of the conventional theme of courtly love. Shakespeare's "transformation" not only "revitalized" the sonnet, but it also paved the way for the inclusion of a subsidiary sequence of sonnets to a dark mistress which describe

the negative aspects of an erotic experience, where sensual desire and intellectual scepticism combined to induce a psychic disintegration such as no sequence in the romance tradition -- not even Sidney's -- could describe. (p.167)

It allowed him to explore the overriding preoccupation of his day, that of mutability, without limitation, and to confront the idea of Time the universal conqueror.

The detailed interpretive essay which forms the second half of Lever's book does not embrace all the sonnets, as he admits, though not quite in those terms. But this is by no means an impediment to his dramatic -- and dramatically different -- reading which is complete and

self-sufficient. It also works to the same end as does Knights' "unnecessarily roundabout approach" with which I have already associated Lewis' forthright manner; that is, it embodies a conscious attempt to "shift the stress of criticism". Lever realizes, as did the earlier critics, that intellectual leaps are less likely to be generally accepted than rational, metaphorical 'bridges'. Robertson and his 'esoteric' category is ample witness to that (see my page 84). Lever's ingenious explanation provides him with a sound and valid base from which to thrust out in several new critical directions in a way that Baldwin was patently unable even to conceive.

One of Lever's new directions confronted the problem of the sonnet order. He makes the usual observation that while Q is not satisfactory, neither is any of the subsequently devised orders. Nevertheless there is some evidence of order in Q, and he suggests an alternative approach to the problem:

On the analogy of scenes in a drama, it is possible to consider the Sonnets as a number of groups, like that formed by the first nineteen sonnets of the Quarto, each based upon some well-defined theme or situation, expressed through all the technical resources of this medium. Such groups would in turn form part of a composite sequence -- using 'sequence' in a more flexible sense than has been considered hitherto -- developing not in steady progression from beginning to end, but through the juxtaposition of themes and situations parted by intervals of time and modifications of outlook. (p.172)

Here, Lever is not on entirely new ground. In 1952, G.K.Hunter wrote a short article<sup>4</sup> in which he suggests that the 'excellence recognizably Shakespearean' as yet undefined, and the poet's skill in presenting "traditional materials so that an overwhelmingly biographical reaction is set up in the reader" (p.152), lies in the fact that Shakespeare writes as a dramatist. He explains that in the sonnets:

the reader is not concerned with solitary imaginings presented as of universal significance... but with the relation of one human heart to others. By setting up a system of tensions between forces presented as persons Shakespeare's sonnets engage the reader's interest in a manner akin to the dramatic....the effect that is almost unique in Shakespeare is that of immediate contact with the suffering mind. (pp.154-5)

While Hunter does not progress beyond the idea of 'stock themes', it is clear that when he speaks of 'emotional states' and 'situations' (and he frequently does), he is talking, roughly, about the same thing that concerns Lever in the passage quoted above.

The rest of Lever's book is devoted to a study of six groups of sonnets which examine six aspects of the poet-friend relationship from the point of view of the poet as he experiences them, adjusts to them and grows through them.<sup>5</sup>

It is not possible within the limited scope of this essay to examine Lever's interpretation in detail. But two passages are worth quoting at length. The first confronts the problem of the nature of the young man who was so praised, loved, even adored by the poet, yet who was so subject to narcissism, infidelity, callousness and a host of other such faults. Lever explains:

Here is a treatment of character which presents a mortal man, subject to the universal laws of change and decay, who is yet the fons et origo of all positive values in nature and society. The conception is indeed anomalous in terms of logic or metaphysics; but this need not impair its imaginative validity. It effectively crystallizes the late Elizabethan vision of an anthropocentric universe, experienced by the poet in the act of creative composition. Though consciously he may have assented to all the orthodoxies of the age, in his poetry they became contingent upon sensory experience and individual response. The traditional assumptions were not explicitly rejected, as they might have been by a modern rationalist; but they were reconceived with ultimate reference to the individual, sentient human being, who epitomized all the virtues and energies diffused throughout the cosmos. Inevitably the vision carried within itself its own negation, and the virtual apotheosis of man was coupled with a vivid awareness that he

was exposed to all the hazards of mutability and corruption that were latent in the phenomenal world. Shakespeare's achievement in the Sonnets was to focus this duality upon the person of the patron-friend, who now stood in the place of the conventional romance-heroine. In doing so he coupled his eulogies with an explicit acknowledgement that the new hero was the potential victim of every mortal chance. (pp.184-5)

The passage is indicative of Lever's breadth of vision and perhaps should be compared with, for example, the passage from Masson's 1968 study (see my page 74), with regard to the contribution each makes to sonnet criticism.

The second passage contains the clearest, most concise summary of his interpretation of the sonnets to the friend:

in taking the noble friend as his theme, Shakespeare freed himself from all the encumbrances which hampered the sonnet poets of his time. Without impropriety or strain, this theme admitted a consideration, at once intellectual and impassioned, of the wide vistas of politics and society, cosmic destiny and the human predicament, which exercised the imagination of the age; while all these concerns were centred upon, and subordinated to, the supreme reality of a unique individual in his weakness and power. Thus the co-existence of beauty and corruption, of truth and mutability, and the universal tyranny of Time, which were the tissue of Shakespearean drama, became in these sonnets the touchstone of personal integrity; and through the prepotency of human love, on a plane customarily reserved for divine grace, a poetic resolution was affirmed for the antinomies of life. (p.276)

On the face of it, this view of the breadth of Shakespeare's theme is a far cry from Lewis' equally sincere vision of Shakespeare as "not so much our best as our only love poet":

The love is, in the end, so simply and entirely love that our cadres are thrown away and we cease to ask what kind. (see my page 62)

But in fact what we see is two men finding in Shakespeare's sonnets the articulation of their own shadowy vision. Lewis identified this process, and permitted himself to demonstrate it within his own study (see my page 62). Lever's presentation of a series of dramatic cameos is enhanced by

the resonance of his own prose, his sense of dramatic development and his own empathetic identification with the growth-through-suffering of the poet:

Insofar as the Friend is a microcosm of the universe, the poet's love for him effects a universal redemption: yet in the last reckoning it is only through individual human beings and personal relationships that the creative spirit can perform such a task. Such a faith may be illogical, unphilosophical, even un-Christian; yet it supplies the forces which animate a Lear and a Cleopatra in Shakespeare's tragedies and which prevent these plays from becoming an insufferable holocaust. Here, it may be said, this faith underlies the complex genius of Shakespeare's sonnets, immortalizing -- even in the eyes of all posterity -- a certain unidentified Friend whom he declared to have been his all-the-world. (p.260)

J.B. Leishman's approach to the sonnets as he reveals it in a study which he called Themes and Variations in Shakespeare's Sonnets (1961) is rather different from Lever's. It is certainly no less intuitive; in fact I think Leishman comes eventually to an even closer understanding of the sonnets than Lever is able to. The reason is that whereas Lever's response is ultimately generalized emotion ("...we cease to ask what kind"), Leishman's is sharpened by a remarkably fine intellect which enables him to perceive -- and to articulate -- shades of meaning, the existence of which other critics do not even remotely suspect. It is these shades of meaning, the variations on a theme, which are the subject of Leishman's book. His intention is, as he puts it, to compare Shakespeare with his peers,

for very many of the sonnets, -- perhaps, indeed nearly all the most memorable -- are concerned with a few large general topics, of which Shakespeare's treatment, both in its resemblances and in its characteristic differences, may be illuminatingly compared with that of various poets from the beginnings of European literature until his own day. (p.11)

Because of the nature and quality of Leishman's work, its perspicacity, its logic, its sensitivity and its breadth of vision, and

the density of the prose in which his thoughts are expressed, it does not bear rapid or careless reading, and it defies any kind of condensation. Consequently, although it is a book worthy of much critical attention, it is the one about which I am the least able to speak precisely, or even adequately. I have attempted a summary of three of Leishman's more self-contained points, simply as an indication of the type of work Leishman has done, and to justify in a small way, the esteem in which I hold it.

The first section of the study is devoted to an examination of twenty eight of the sonnets in which Shakespeare speaks of his own poetry. Leishman looks at them in the light of the poetry from ancient times to the sixteenth century which, like those twenty eight of Shakespeare's sonnets, deals with the idea of poetry as immortalization.

His careful study demonstrates the difference between (for example) Pindar's and Horace's self-glorification in their verse which will, they claim, without question, secure immortality for themselves (and, incidentally, for those whom the poetry celebrates), and Petrarch's self-effacing, tireless promotion of Laura's fame throughout the mortal world. Unlike the Roman poets, post-Christian Petrarch never for a moment suggests that Laura is dependent for immortality upon his poetry because he is convinced with Christian certainty through faith that she has attained everlasting life in heaven. Against this distinction, Leishman sets Shakespeare's twenty eight sonnets, and defines further distinctions. Unlike the Roman poets, whose loves are egotistically based, Petrarch's and Shakespeare's loves are 'spiritual' in that they both celebrate an undefined lover, an essence rather than an object, before whom each poet subordinates himself. Shakespeare, however,

quite unlike Petrarch, "speaks with an unforgettable and Horatian resonance of his 'powerful rime'" (p.52). Leishman suggests the possibility that Shakespeare did not subscribe to the Christian belief in an afterlife, but cannot commit himself to such an opinion with anything approaching certainty. He concludes that it is the unique combination of an Horatian conviction that the immortality of the fair youth depended alone on Shakespeare's verse, and the Petrarchan self-effacement before the youth, which is in some measure responsible for that elusive quality of his finest poetry which, for want of a more precise term, we call 'Shakespearean':

Shakespeare's sonnets, like Petrarch's, are unworldly, but not, like Petrarch's, other-worldly, and they are filled with a sadness different from Petrarch's and resembling that which breathes from so much of the great poetry of the ancient world: an almost overwhelming sadness at the fact of human transience. (p.52)

In his second section, Leishman examines the themes of 'Devouring Time and Fading Beauty' as they are treated in the poetry of the Greeks and in subsequent poetry until Shakespeare's own time. In the works of ancient poets, Leishman distinguishes between the idea of Time the devourer and that of the short span of human life, and further, between the brief span of life generally and the even briefer span of youth and beauty. From this observation and the subsequent examination of poetic examples, Leishman elucidates several points which are defined, probably for the first time. He demonstrates that though Shakespeare shares a hatred of Age and Time with the ancient poets, he does not submit to them as conquerors, but perceives that Time, in spite of concomitant Age, is essential for the growth of Love, and that Love is, in this respect, a defier of Time.

Nevertheless, as Leishman points out, there is no evidence of the ancient carpe florem or carpe diem motifs,<sup>6</sup> no 'invitation to pleasure' in Shakespeare's sonnets, and none of the compensations for old age and the loss of youth and beauty such as are frequently found in 'attractive and sympathetic presentations' of the mature and old in the plays. Leishman extracts from this evidence an observation about the 'one-sided intensity' of the greatest tragedies and that of the sonnets:

Philosophic writers on Shakespeare's tragedies have spoken much of 'reconciliation', but is such reconciliation as we can there spontaneously experience really different from the kind of reconciliation Shakespeare himself reaches in the sonnets? And is there not a very close relation between the irreconcilability of the sonnets and that of the tragedies? Just as in the sonnets there is no suggestion that Time and Age and the transience of youth and beauty are no more than necessary shade in the masterpiece of what eighteenth-century Deists called 'the Great Artificer', even so in the tragedies there is no suggestion that Shakespeare is reconciled to the existence of Iago and Edmund, Goneril and Regan, or to the fates of Othello, Desdemona and Cordelia. The only reconciliation which Shakespeare's tragedies can properly be said to offer us is akin to that which he offers himself in the sonnets: that, on the one hand, 'this vile world' is so vile that we should be glad that death will eventually take us out of it, and that, on the other hand, there appear in it and, as it were, in despite of it, incarnations in human form of loveliness which are a compensation for all its evils and to which nothing can prevent us from being 'true'. (p.146)

Leishman's final chapters are the most densely packed of all in terms of inter-related thought. He begins with a close look at what he calls Shakespeare's 'un-Platonic hyperbole'. He explains:

I have put the phrase in inverted commas, and I feel that each of the two members of it ought really to be so placed. What I mean is this: there is much in Shakespeare's sonnets which may be described, sometimes perhaps with confidence and sometimes perhaps only question-beggingly, as 'hyperbole', and which is often closely associated with something that, at first sight, may seem to resemble what, in other Renaissance poets, we are accustomed to call 'Platonism'. (p.149)

He proceeds to distinguish between Platonism and Renaissance Platonism. The Platonic system acknowledges earthly forms only as types of the celestial paradigm, and recognizes no link between the human and the divine form and idea. Christianity, on the other hand, provided a philosophical link: the Word, incarnated in Christ, was the means to celestial life. Form, therefore, for the Christian, is a manifestation of the divine. Leishman explains post-Christian, Renaissance Platonism, and Shakespeare's relationship with it thus:

In all this essentially Christian love-poetry, whether mainly 'Petrarchan' or mainly 'Platonic', the beloved object, though never superseded or transcended by the lover, is itself transcended by that archetype of which it is a type, by that transcendence which is immanent within it, and from which it is represented as deriving its authority over the lover. This poetry, like Plato's philosophy, is transcendental in that the distinction between human and divine, terrestrial and celestial, remains, although this distinction is no longer, as in Plato, an absolute separation, but exists only within the great Christian paradox of Incarnation. Now what distinguishes Shakespeare's sonnets, or those among them with which I am mainly concerned, from the love-poetry I have been trying to describe, is this: that although they are in a sense 'transcendental', just as they are also, in a sense, 'spiritual' and 'idealistic', or even 'metaphysical', they are so only within the limits of the terrestrial. In all Shakespeare's expressions of the meaningfulness to him of his friend and of his love for his friend the distinction between human and divine, terrestrial and celestial, nowhere appears. The friend is represented as transcending all other objects of desire or ambition or contemplation, but never (never, at any rate, with anything like even an approach to explicitness) because of the immanence within him of that which transcends him even as he himself transcends. Indeed, he is sometimes explicitly described, not as a type of beauty and excellence, but as the archetype of all other beauty and excellence. (pp.150-1)

Leishman follows this delineation of what he calls Shakespeare's 'Inverted Platonism' with a study of the Platonic hyperbole, frequently regarded (as sixteenth century theoreticians such as Puttenham insisted) as merely decorative, dutiful flattery. He explains that whereas it is

quite possible that at first, in the early sonnets written to the patron, Shakespeare consciously searched for such hyperbolic means of flattery, meaning less than he said, as his relationship developed, Shakespeare came to mean as much, and finally much more than he said. In his finest sonnets, Leishman believes, Shakespeare is once more using hyperbole in its original form and for its original purpose, not even simply as a means of expression of the limits of emotional states, whether it be love or anger, but as "the only possible expression" of what Shakespeare had to say.<sup>7</sup> By the phrase 'Shakespeare's un-Platonic hyperbole', Leishman means that when Shakespeare says (for example) "For fear of which, hear this, thou age unbred:/Ere you were born was beauty's summer dead'" (Sonnet 104), not only is he clearly demonstrating his 'Inverted Platonism' in his description of the friend as the pattern of all beauty, but his hyperbolic expression of this idea (of the youth as archetype) is not meaningless compliment such as is found in other Elizabethan sonneteers, but conveys feeling very deeply meant.

It is in part for this reason that Leishman later suggests that in Shakespeare's finest poetry, the metaphors logically analysed (as Ransom was prone to do) make no logical sense. Shakespeare is speaking from the depths of his being; he means more than he says, and because the poem proceeds from such intensity of feeling, it can only ever be comprehended in a like manner -- that is to say, through the reader's own intuition.<sup>8</sup>

To have said this much about Leishman's study is to have said very little, and that, very inadequately. Leishman's approach, at rock bottom, is exactly that of Lee sixty years earlier. But the penetrating insights Leishman is able to achieve bear so little relation to Lee's

'discoveries' and his superficial conclusions, that even to contemplate such a comparison seems sacrilegious. Leishman's work constitutes perhaps the finest, and the most valuable single critical study of Shakespeare's sonnets yet produced. Certainly no-one has come closer to putting a finger on the peculiar quality of Shakespearean excellence. He has achieved a rare and subtle balance between the methodical, clear-sighted objectivity of the scientific analysts, and the super-sensitive intuitive response of aesthetic critics such as Lever, and expresses all in crisp, dense prose. Yet Leishman's work is in no sense a compromise. He has produced a study which has achieved new levels of critical response to Shakespeare's sonnets.

In the most general way, Claes Schaar's study of Elizabethan Sonnet Themes and the Dating of Shakespeare's Sonnets (1962) has something in common with both Baldwin's and Leishman's. With Baldwin, Schaar shares an interest in how comparison between Shakespeare's poetic use of themes and that of contemporary poets, and between his use of them in the sonnets and in his other works, can assist in dating the sonnets. However, Schaar is infinitely more objective in his approach -- an inheritor, clearly, of the scientific method, though acknowledging that "the subjective element cannot be wholly eliminated" (p.20). He aims to examine parallel passages with a view to establishing the nature, degree and direction of influence among Elizabethan poets, in order to establish some chronology, and, therefore, some dates. He states his method:

I may sum up as follows what to my mind are the decisive criteria: If two passages in different poets resemble each other in some striking manner, if this resemblance cannot be explained as due to chance, a common source, or conventional phrasing, and if one of the parallel

passages shows notable deviations from the author's usual style and manner, from common rhetorical principles, or from simple logical and psychological norms -- then these facts are strongly indicative of imitation on the part of the poet in whom the deviations occur. (p.20)

In the course of his analysis, Schaar occasionally makes a fine distinction which is very distantly reminiscent of Leishman's work. He notes, for example, that for Shakespeare, the motif of the wrinkled face denotes the 'fading beauty' theme, whereas for Daniel, the motif is used to illustrate the lover's sufferings. Consequently there can be no question of any dependence of one poet on the other. But Schaar everywhere lacks Leishman's depth and maturity of mind, and the broader vision which is unconcerned with such technicalities as occupy Schaar. Unconsciously, Schaar shows himself to be a victim of the occupational hazard of the scientific analysts, whose data-collecting habit of mind blinds them to more significant issues. It is not surprising, then, that in his introduction, he allies himself far more with Baldwin, whose work he describes as "comprehensive and systematic" (p.10) than with Leishman, whom he takes to task for limiting his discussion of French and Italian sonneteers to six:

how can we hope to make any generalisations about the 'presence or absence of significant treatments of particular topics' -- for instance, such generalisations as are made by LEISHMAN himself -- unless we try to cover as much of this vast quantity as we can? If we make an attempt we have at least a fair chance, particularly if we take notes in order to remember better; if we give up in advance we have none at all. (p.15)

In the end, all Schaar has is a set of tentative, approximate dates, in support of which he quotes Baldwin (Literary Genetics):

These statistics...probably give some probability that the bulk of Shakespeare's sonnets were early. (p.342: my italics) 9

and draws up a chart showing "the resemblances of detail between the

Sonnets and Shakespeare's other works at different periods" (p.191).

Of the four major works considered in this chapter, there is little doubt which make the most profitable reading for their own sake, which open up the widest avenues of approach to the experience of the sonnets, and provide the greatest stimulation, and which present the greatest challenge to the reader to go back to the sonnets themselves and tackle them again on a one-to-one basis, as literature.

## NOTES (CHAPTER SEVEN)

<sup>1</sup> Robertson (op. cit.) uses the term (linked with Simpson's name) in his index. He comments: "the treatise does but substitute the hopelessly complicated problem of a poetical allegory for the concrete problems which face the student. In the light of Simpson's later compilation, 'The School of Shakespeare' (1878), one can realise the fatality of his cast of mind. With much learning and diligence he tables a series of propositions as to Shakespeare's connection with a set of old plays never otherwise assigned to him, without a shred of either internal or external evidence to bear him out" (p.31).

<sup>2</sup> This Professor David Masson is the nineteenth century critic.

<sup>3</sup> A dismal contrast to Lever's re-consideration of Lee's evidence is provided by Henry W. Wells (in "A New Preface to Shakespeare's Sonnets", The Shakespeare Association Bulletin 12 (1937), 118-129). He claims to prove Lee wrong on all counts, and attempts to do so with Robertsonian arbitrariness, and to no purpose.

<sup>4</sup> "The Dramatic Technique of Shakespeare's Sonnets", Essays in Criticism 3 (1952), 152-164.

<sup>5</sup> I omit Lever's discussion of the Dark Lady sonnets; he himself regards them as secondary.

<sup>6</sup> In 1910, E.S. Bates (op. cit., p.97) observed that "the 'carpe diem' [sic] motive is 'sung' by all Elizabethan sonneteers except Shakespeare".

<sup>7</sup> Compare Bates (op. cit.: see my page 39) who claims the insincerity of hyperbole: "no love could possibly justify the hyperboles".

<sup>8</sup> Compare Empson's idea (see my page 55) of generalised metaphor.

<sup>9</sup> In full, the extract from Baldwin reads: "The most that can as yet be said on the chronological problem is that these five or six works [plays] are by concensus of opinion early. The probability would in that case be that the sonnets themselves are early. We already have that probability, however, by virtue of the very fact that they are sonnets. These statistics, therefore...probably give some probability that the bulk of Shakespeare's sonnets were early" (p.342).

## CHAPTER EIGHT

In his comprehensive Variorum edition of the sonnets (1944), Rollins includes in the eighth appendix (on the Friend), seven pages tightly packed with quotation and comment on "The Question of Homosexuality". It seems that once again, it was Edward Malone in 1790 who initiated this particular furore (although if it had not been Malone, it would doubtless have been someone else), thinking it necessary to explain (says Rollins) "that in the Elizabethan period men often addressed one another in loving terms which to the Georgians sounded indecorous" (p.232). Rollins illustrates another reaction thus: (the speaker is one De Wailly, in 1834):

"Good heavens! What do I notice in rereading some of the first sonnets? He instead of she? Nearly all are in direct discourse: you and thee. Can I be mistaken? Can these sonnets be addressed to a man? Shakespeare! Great Shakespeare! Did you feel yourself authorized by Virgil's example?" (p.233)

Thenceforward, critics have leapt in all possible directions in the attempt to vindicate Shakespeare from accusations of pederasty. The problem drew forth notions of 'ideal Platonic relationships', the 'Renaissance cult of friendship', even arguments based on assertions that the text in no way supported such interpretations. Those critics less able to turn a blind eye simply pleaded Shakespeare's innocence, his naiveté in the ways of the world which prevented him from seeing that he was being led into sin. Some, more bluntly, insisted that evil is only in the eye of the reader. Robertson reports that Hallam (metaphorically throwing his hands, I suppose) declared that "it was impossible not to

wish that Shakespeare had never written the Sonnets" (p.15).

Rollins' own sardonic amusement at the process is indicated by his incredulous announcement that in 1937, Young published "a whole book on the subject": but Young exonerates Shakespeare:

"'A woman's face' would add no charm in the eyes of a homosexual, and the one thing which nature so carelessly added would not have been to his purpose nothing. It would, so far from defeating him, have been the one thing absolutely essential."

and Rollins comments: "One might call it poetic justice that 20, about the most indecent sonnet of the lot, has helped to clear Shakespeare's name" (P.239), and adds that he hopes that future critics will let the problem stay solved: "It belongs to the outworn buried age".

They did not, of course; that is to say, not exactly. In the same year in which Young's book was published (1937), Henry Wells explained away the problem with something like divine right:

One suspects that critics have been disinclined toward an investigation which threatened quite wrongly, I believe, to lead to speculation regarding homosexuality.

But there is, happily, no reason for moral alarm, and we may safely conclude that at least so far as the Sonnets are concerned we have no evidence of abnormality. (p.120)

More recently, such conservative critics as Douglas Bush (in the introduction to his 1961 edition of the sonnets), felt it necessary to observe, selfconsciously: "That one often could not say, and does not need to ask, whether an individual sonnet is concerned with love for a man or a woman" (p.15). Here is an echo of Lewis in 1944 (see my page 62). Dover Wilson (in An Introduction to the Sonnets of Shakespeare, 1964) says something of the same kind, with rather more of the same tone:

And as many readers nowadays, when all matters of sex are openly debated, will be ready to assume without question that Shakespeare was writing about homosexuality, something had better be said about that at once. (p.32) <sup>2</sup>

But it may be that Bush's and Dover Wilson's anxiety was not misplaced, for in 1974, Martin Green published a book called The Labyrinth of Shakespeare's Sonnets. It is an extraordinary study. Starting with the observation that Shakespeare was fond of punning, and that to appreciate the second meaning one must know the context to which it refers, he presents the thesis that if we can reconstruct the contexts in which Shakespeare's second meanings are to be understood, we shall have "factual information about that situation". Applied to the sonnets, which Green unquestioningly regards as autobiographical, Green declares that such an analysis "could be revelatory" of the facts of Shakespeare's life (p.2).

Green contrives, on a find-what-you-see basis, to 'reveal' a 'labyrinth' of sexual suggestion, inference and blatant crudity, and makes colossal leaps from unsubstantiated guesswork to established fact, with a brazenness which one is tempted to read as a parody of Freudian analysis. Of line 2 of Sonnet 2, for example, ("And make me travail forth without my cloak"), he writes:

But it is unlikely that here cloak means merely 'coat', and nothing else; if we read the word this way, we impute to Shakespeare either a limited intelligence, or an incredible pettiness, thus to blame a friend for his inability to make good on a promise of fair weather. And once we assume that cloak must have some metaphorical meaning, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the protective garment which Shakespeare was induced by his friend's 'beauteous day' to forgo was something very much like a condom. (p.20)

Green's thesis is that the sonnets tell the story of the fair youth who becomes 'stained' (by the Dark Lady) with syphilis, and Shakespeare's fear that the youth has passed the disease on to him. To support his theory, Green maintains (to refer to only one of dozens of similar examples) that the line "Those that have power to hurt..." (94)

means "Those that are syphilitic...". His conclusion is as follows:

Perhaps the richness of our finds still does not confirm our initial assumption, that the Sonnets are autobiographical, any more than the richness of Schliemann's discoveries at Hissarlik conclusively established that he was digging on the ruins of Troy. For myself, I cannot conceive of so much ingenuity to assert things obliquely being exercised in a poem, were there not some reason arising out of the circumstances of one's life requiring it. In sum, I believe the daedel artifice which went into the construction of the cryptic passages which are the subject of this book bespeaks so intensely both the compelling need of the lover to declare himself, and the urgent necessity for the sodomite to conceal himself, that the artifice itself, and the story it enshrouds, can only spring from what must have been the actual facts of Shakespeare's life. (p.99)

It has often been the case that in order to redirect criticism, an exaggerated stand needs to be assumed in order to stimulate new thought, and hence, perhaps, new insights. Since Green's book is barely two years old, it is perhaps premature to judge his efforts -- or rather, the efforts of any who might follow or respond to him. However, Green's argument has several strikes against its survival in a world of Leishmans and Levers. Not only is his method questionable in the extreme, and his contribution to a better understanding of the sonnets -- or at least a different one -- of doubtful value, if any, but he is dealing with an aspect of the sonnets which is trivial. Lever used the fact of Shakespeare's passionate friendship with a man in a constructive way, as a bridge which lead him to new insights into the sonnets. Compared with Lever, to say nothing of Leishman, Green does not rate even as an 'also ran'.

The question of Shakespeare's unusual friendship has, however, prompted three psycho-philosophically inclined critics to sharpen their wits somewhat more thoughtfully by means of studies which aim to probe the phenomenon of love sonnets written by a man to a man. Each critic

has centred his study on theories of duality. G. Wilson Knight, in 1955, conceives the youth and dark lady sonnets as representing Shakespeare's Apollonian (light, intellectual, pure) principle and his Dionysian (dark, mysterious, orgiastic) principle respectively.<sup>3</sup> His general thesis is that Shakespeare for a while leaves his 'normal life' as a married man and experiences these two contrasting loves, moving through them to "some higher integration" (p.28).<sup>4</sup> The theory owes much, as Knight frequently points out, to Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra and the concept of the Superman. During the integration process, Shakespeare's male and female elements are engaged in turn, an ambivalence, Knight claims, consciously experienced by all great writers, and perpetuated in Shakespeare's case by the fact that he constantly saw boys playing women's parts in the theatre, in fact was writing women's parts specifically for boys to assume. Knight's main conclusion is that the theme of bi-sexual integration explored in the sonnets is not anterior but central to Shakespeare's dramatic works.

Leslie Fiedler, writing in 1952,<sup>5</sup> proposes that the reader bring three separate literary contexts to Shakespeare's sonnets. One is the idea of the Two Loves, expounded in Sonnet 144, and Shakespeare's consequent adaptation of the love triangle from poet/wife/mistress to poet/boy/whore. The second is Shakespeare's fusion of Ovid's account of the legend of Hermaphrodite and that of Orpheus' villification of women after losing Euridice and his turning to pederasty, by which we are intended to recognize Shakespeare's favorite, compulsive theme of Venus (the lust-seeking, dark woman) and Adonis (whom Shakespeare merged with the figure of Hermaphrodite) the beautiful, passive, narcissistic boy-half-woman (the youth).

Thirdly, from the Symposium, the notion of the two kinds of immortality is brought to bear on the poet's initial emphasis (in the procreation sonnets) on the man-woman-body-offspring sequence as a means of achieving immortality, and the eventual resolution of this sequence to man-man-soul-art, with which the poet was deeply concerned.

James Winney's strangely uneven book (The Master-Mistress, 1968) identifies the youth of the sonnets with the Adonis of Shakespeare's poem, the narcissistic youth who refused to put his natural energy and beauty to use. Winney's thesis is reminiscent of Wilson Knight's in that he claims that the figures in the sonnets are imaginative projections of the negative and positive aspects of the same self. It represents, incidentally, Winney's response to the still raging autobiographical debate.

I have given to these three works only the most superficial attention, mainly in the interests of comprehensiveness. There is no doubt that these recent psycho-philosopho-sexual studies represent sincere attempts to discover in this aspect of the sonnets new light of their significance. But though they take the form of complex interpretive essays and seem to plumb as yet unexplored depths of the poet's psyche, they are, at rock bottom, elaborate constructions upon the rather mundane observation that there are very clear indications in the sonnets of conflict in the mental and emotional life of the poet. 'Dualist' theories are manifest in more ways than the three I have already mentioned. Katherine Wilson (in Shakespeare's Sugared Sonnets, 1974) maintains that duality was inherent in the concept of Platonic love,

for it had two dynamisms, one leading to spiritual development, and the other tending to degrade. Plato advocated the spiritual that reached its highest in love between men where it had not a physical expression. When

Dante, and more to our point Petrarch, transferred the Platonic ideal of a purely spiritual love to that for a woman, conflict inevitably resulted....Laura...both wounds and heals. Although she is the heavenly vision who enriches the imagination, separation from her leads to frustration and exhaustion. Both these attitudes are present in the sonnet tradition, and this duality is very apparent in the English sonneteers. (p.130)

Wilson adds:

Shakespeare brought this duality to a climax by splitting the two sides asunder and giving all the good to one and all the bad to the other, the spiritual to the man, the physical to the woman. (p.131)

Winney maintains (questionably) that the poet presents the drama between four persons in such a way that only two protagonists are ever involved at one time, because this best exploits his "motif of dualism" (p.172).

By far the most sensible and thoughtful approach to 'dualism' is Edward Hubler's in The Sense of Shakespeare's Sonnets (1952). Briefly, on the basis of evidence drawn from one of the plays, he establishes that Shakespeare was very well aware of the dichotomy of man's feeling about love, the "simultaneousness of attraction and revulsion" which he expresses in terms of the contradiction of eyes and heart (as in "But my five wits nor my five senses can/Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee" from sonnet 141), or of body and soul. Hubler claims that this is a "complexity which has often been misconstrued" by modern scholars (p.54), because Shakespeare's view of sex is not ours. Modern psychology has prepared -- even invited -- us to view the pain in any love relationship as symptomatic of neurosis. This was not Shakespeare's view. Hubler explains the difference:

In the popular view what is evil in man is thought of as deviation from a goodness he once possessed. Generally, even in our most robust fiction, the evil in man is in a sense man-made. Its social and neurotic origins are commonly

explained, and the most terrifying aspect of evil is thus explained away. This is what the average reader has come to expect of literature, and not finding it in Shakespeare, he often reads it into the text. Shakespeare's works assume the reality of both good and evil, and while it is once or twice suggested that a certain trait of character is the result of training (the only notable instance is Coriolanus) sexual evil is never presented as the manifestation of a neurosis. (p.55)

Hubler goes on to quote a passage from Freud's On War, Sex and Neurosis (1947), in which, according to Hubler, Freud 'out-Shakespeare's Shakespeare' in observing that

since [Shakespeare] was a man of strong passion and fine sensibility, the conflict between the claims of sex and his integrity as a civilized man were most apparent to him. It was inevitable that as a man of his time he should express the conflict in terms of body and soul, and that, when the expression pierces to ultimates, the point of view should be Christian. (p.56)

In pointing out (in the first extract from Hubler's book quoted above) that the average reader of Shakespeare inevitably reads his modern assumptions about the basic goodness of natural man into Shakespeare's text, Hubler puts his finger on the cause of the 'problem' that critics such as Knight, Winney and Fiedler feel compelled to confront and explain. In this respect, Hubler's own response is a remedial one, providing a necessary rein to less practical theories.

In spite of Hubler, however, I cannot help feeling that to note 'dualism' in the sonnets is to note only a common aspect of life which Shakespeare shared with the rest of mankind. Conflict among several factors is an ever-present, necessary condition for human life and progress. The 'dualism' demonstrable in Shakespeare's sonnets and plays is remarkable not because it is an unusual phenomenon, but because Shakespeare so well understood its all-pervading presence and influence in human life, and could so vividly dramatise it.<sup>7</sup> It will, I think,

take a mind as formidable as Leishman's to explore this aspect of the sonnets to any worthwhile purpose.

It is worth noting in conclusion that, like Hubler, all three of the writers whose work was mentioned earlier, identify Shakespeare with the poet of the sonnets: Knight automatically, Fiedler by direct admission, and Winney because he does not think consistently. It is both symbolic of what at present seems to me to be the dead-endedness of the psycho-sexual critics' contribution to sonnet criticism, and specially ironic, that Winney's study ends with this statement: "If Shakespeare is represented in the Sonnets, he is not the poet alone, but both figures, who are to be seen as positive and negative forms of the same self" (p.212). It seems that Barnstorff's theory that Mr.W.H. is Mr. William Himself<sup>8</sup> is still with us, and that, in this respect, sonnet criticism has simply turned full circle, and is back at square one.

## NOTES (CHAPTER EIGHT)

<sup>1</sup> "A New Preface to Shakespeare's 'Sonnets'", The Shakespeare Association Bulletin 12 (1937), 118-129.

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting application of the findings of the Kinsey report to Shakespeare's Sonnets see Hubler's The Sense of Shakespeare's Sonnets, 155-157.

<sup>3</sup> In The Mutual Flame. Knight applies these figures from Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy (p.20).

<sup>4</sup> Nejgebauer, op. cit., p.16, remarks "It is more interesting to find the 'straight' story kept but interpreted imaginatively on a deeper personal level as a record of 'bisexual integration' (a diluted modern version of the imputation of homosexuality) and to be reassured that Shakespeare was fortunately in the habit of becoming a woman at times and hence would expand his central themes from the sonnets into dramas". Nejgebauer's last comment refers to Knight's theory of the male and female elements of the creative artist, which he explains on pp.30-31.

<sup>5</sup> "Some Contexts of Shakespeare's Sonnets", The Riddle of Shakespeare's Sonnets (1962), 25-53.

<sup>6</sup> 'Dualism' crops up in very many works of criticism, sometimes under that heading, and sometimes in the course of commentary. Two examples: Lewis (op. cit., 504-5) conceives of the entire sequence as "an expanded version of Blake's "The Clod and the Pebble". Mahood (Shakespeare's Wordplay p.89) refers to Yeats' observation that "we make poetry of the quarrel with ourselves".

<sup>7</sup> This quality of Shakespeare's poetry also finds widespread and varied treatment in criticism. Knights (op. cit., p.158) writes "they [the sonnets] make finer experience available for others".

<sup>8</sup> See my page 8.

## CHAPTER NINE

It may seem odd to be beginning a chapter about the future as far back as 1934, but two of L.C.Knights' observations (already noted in Chapter Three) provide a useful spring board. He maintains that the sonnets are not, as we tend to assume, a homogeneous unit, and that

The first necessity of criticism is to assess each poem independently, on its merits as poetry, and to abandon all attempts to find an ordered sequence. (p.134)

On the face of it, it seems that Knights is right in his claim that to hunt for an ordered sequence has no value; after all, one only has to observe what has happened to all the attempts at re-ordering so far, (a task which Rollins' survey makes entertaining and easy) to see the point. Brents Stirling is the first to agree, and he opens the introduction to his own study<sup>1</sup> in re-ordering with this very observation:

Anyone familiar with Hyder Rollins' commentary in the Variorum edition knows that rearrangement of Shakespeare's Sonnets is a disreputable calling. (p.1)

He goes on:

Rollins did not comment at length. Rather, by digest and quotation, he allowed rearrangers an opportunity to confound themselves; and with few exceptions, such as Tucker Brooke, they did so. As a result, tampering with the sonnet order, once a perennial exercise, has all but disappeared. (p.1)

However, Stirling proceeds undaunted to set forth his own theory, and there is no doubt that it is an impressive piece of work. His explanations everywhere show post-Rollins caution; he does not insist that his order is necessarily the authentic order, although perhaps a more authentic order than any we have. He does insist that

his order does not preclude the possibility of other rearrangements: in fact he invites suggested emendations from his readers. And he does apologise for "statistical usage" in questions of probability.

His circumspect approach encourages a sympathetic hearing, which is well deserved because of the common sense and practical logic Stirling applies to the task in hand, even though it becomes clear (because of his meticulous care to consider every possibility) that he does believe that he has come closer than anyone to the definitive order of the sonnets.

Briefly, Stirling establishes forty units of "intensive linkage" sonnet groups which are already present in Q. This involves one hundred and fourteen of the one hundred and fifty-four sonnets. Over and above this, he establishes "homogeneous blocks", or runs of sonnets which may subsume several of the "intensive units"; that is to say, some of the units are themselves linked into groups because they are thematically related. From these 'facts', Stirling concludes that it was Shakespeare's practice to compose fairly long, coherent sonnet groups (numbers 1-17, for example). His working thesis is this:

At minimum, the evidence we have considered justifies an 'attitude' or bias, subject, of course, to ultimate rejection or acceptance based wholly on its results. It can be stated thus: when we judge Q for authentic sequence, (1) any interruption of a strongly coherent pattern (such as that of 76, 78-80, 82-86 by 77 and 81; or that of 137, 141-2, 147-152 by intervening sonnets) is to be viewed seriously as a possible corruption of the text, and (2) multiple affinity between separated sonnets (even those so widely separated as 32 and 76-86) is not to be taken lightly. Just this and nothing more. (p.28)

At great length, with impeccable logic and the utmost care, Stirling pieces together several poems, each containing already existing units, or units produced when intervening sonnets are removed and regrouped. Most impressive of all is the 'Verification', in which Stirling

demonstrates by experiments with playing cards and laws of chance, how the original manuscript, written on both sides of each sheet -- one poem to each side 'except for the occasional sheet which carried an odd sonnet at the beginning or end of a 'poem') -- became shuffled to produce Q.<sup>2</sup> Further, he shows how his method and results gain ever-increasing authority for as he 'restores' one unit or group of Q (perhaps by the removal of an intervening sonnet), this very restoration yields another when, for example, the removed sonnet fills the gap in another unit. Finally he tests his hypothesis by making it explain all the irregularities he uncovers in Q.

No doubt a mathematician or a logician could find inconsistencies in Stirling's hypothesis, and of course any hypothesis is only as good as its premises. But for the average reader, it makes very exciting reading; it seems intelligent, and what is more (remembering Bray), plausible.

However, no sooner was Stirling's book released, than Philip Edwards responded in the form of a chapter in his study, Shakespeare and the Confines of Art (1968). He registers his disagreement with Stirling and adds,

Unless the closest chronological continuity can be established (and it cannot), we can only impose what we wish to find. In a set of sonnets like that which we have before us, we cannot, by rearranging them, do more than give a personal guess at the pattern of love's progress which we think Shakespeare intended to set out. (p.18)

He has a point, of course. It is a point commonly made, and with reason, because critics seldom heed it. Among these is Edwards himself who proceeds to explain what he finds in the sonnets, which he insists were printed in their correct order in 1609, "the order in which they are

still printed because no one can find a better" (p.19).

The reader is tempted to shrug his shoulders and once more regret the senseless swinging of this particular critical pendulum. But he does this only from habit, formed, probably, while observing the endless debate about whether the sonnets are autobiographical, or whether they are not. In fact, there is no reason at all to dismiss re-ordering attempts out of hand, and Knights is not accurate in his assertion that there is no future in searching for "an ordered sequence". Like everyone else, he is arguing with the unspoken premise that there can be only one definitive order for the sonnets. It is this which accounts for Bray's incredible inverted-egotistical announcement which says in effect, 'not my order, but Shakespeare's' (see my page 43). It is more apparent still in Stirling's careful explanation which must be quoted in full:

For more than a century the impasse has brought such equal embarrassment to responsible and irresponsible ventures that many now see it as denying demonstration to any solution, even one that should happen to be right. Hyder Rollins, a consistent and therefore an unusual skeptic, took pains to say that a text like the 1609 Quarto gains no validity whatever from continued failure to amend it. But he scarcely doubted that the record of failure would persist, if only because of the built-in hazard: it is not that possibilities are lacking but that they abound; one rearranger vies with another and, except for contenders who may be mad, the competition will be about equal. Restoration of the text will fail from sheer opportunity.

So runs the traditional caveat. My statements about it may seem inconsistent; I introduced it as a conventional but finally irrelevant warning, and I have ended by calling it essential. But such is its double nature. Any satisfactory rearrangement of the Sonnets must dispose of competing alternatives, and the famine-in-abundance principle remains essential because it can identify and reject alternatives by the dozen. Yet its ultimate effect is not to preclude demonstration of all rearrangements, spurious or genuine, but rather to demand a wholly new standard of proof, and, incidentally, to imply what the standard must be. Once this is understood, the traditional warning may lose relevance simply because the new kind of internal evidence it requires may avoid the old fallacies it exposed. (pp.29-30)

My point is this. Surely the obvious conclusion to be drawn from the fact that there have been many attempts at reordering, none of which are 'better than Q', that (as Stirling observes), there are so many possibilities, is not that there is not (and never was) an order, not that it did once exist but will never be found (for how would we recognize it if we saw it?), but simply that Shakespeare's sonnets as we have them will yield many orders each as satisfying as the others. Although never consciously acknowledged, this conclusion has been tacitly approved every time Edwards' claim is made, that "no-one can find a better" order. The persistence of the phraseology is significant: no-one, it seems, has referred to a new order as being worse than Q, but only that it was not sufficiently better than Q to justify replacing it permanently. Tantalizingly enough, Stirling himself actually draws this very conclusion in the passage quoted above, apparently without realizing it:

it is not that possibilities are lacking but that they abound; one rearranger vies with another and, except for contenders who may be mad, the competition will be about equal.  
Restoration of the text will fail from sheer opportunity. (p.29)

I suggest that we should not be talking about failures, but about differences, and these differences lie in the nature of the particular cohering principle each rearranger applies to his material.

Knights' second observation, that the sonnets are not a homogeneous, single unit bears scrutiny rather better than his first. It has not, I think, been acknowledged in so many words, but since Knights' remark was made (in 1934), it has been tacitly acknowledged in most of the major studies, for they have tended to deal with small groups of sonnets within the entire collection. Stirling's re-ordered sequences are a case in point. But there are others.

Among them is Hilton Landry's study, Interpretations in Shakespeare's Sonnets (1963). Landry's approach is to examine some of the relationships among the sonnets and to discover 'relevant contexts' in which to read them.

The inevitable result of the perception of interrelations or groupings in the Sonnets is that one reads them in the light of each other. (p.152)

The idea is similar to the one Fiedler proposes (see Chapter Eight), although Fiedler's contexts were drawn from other literary works. Landry suggests, for example, that Sonnet 4, a 'parable of the talents', doctrinal sonnet, can help in the reading of Sonnet 94, and in discussing 94, he shows how critics have differed in their interpretations, depending on the contexts they bring to it.<sup>3</sup> He elaborates 94 by reference to 92-3, and 95-6. Landry's idea is interesting because it seems to emphasize, encourage and accept various readings. He is not consistent, however, sometime pouring scorn on critics for their lack of judgement in deciding which sonnets provide useful contexts for which. In the end he defeats what seemed to be his purpose, because of the competitive instinct. The idea though, remains a good one.

In 1969, Stephen Booth made some useful remarks about the concept he called "multiple ordering":<sup>4</sup>

I have tried to demonstrate that a Shakespeare sonnet is organized in a multitude of different coexistent and conflicting patterns -- formal, logical, ideological, syntactic, rhythmic and phonetic. (p.ix)

Although the components of Booth's system are not newly discovered (he takes Ransom's formal and logical structure, Mizener's 'figurative language' structure, Lewis' 'rhetorical structure' and Masson's 'free phonetic patterns'), the application at one time of multiple patterning systems is a useful one. He analyzes what I can only describe as the

as-it-happens experience of the reader as he meets each new word, phrase, concept, sound and so on in each sonnet. He describes first, in a masterly way to which I can do no justice, how sonnet 35, while presenting a new aspect to the incident behind sonnets 33-35, provides the reader with multiple links of the kind already listed, so that it "simultaneously adheres to and separates from its two predecessors" (p.7). Then he shows how sonnets which (when juxtaposed) show no direct relationship (for example, sonnets 35 and 37), when read in the sequence 35, 36, 37,

are connected by the direct relevance of 36 to both. In the experience of a reader moving from sonnet to sonnet in sequence, one kind of link can be as strong as another. As a reader comes upon 37, he feels that it belongs where it is. Probably the same feeling could be aroused by its proximity to many other sonnets: in its usual position it suggests poems other than the ones near it in the 1609 sequence, and other poems remind a reader of it. (p.10)

A little later, the writer explains the application of his system, and its superiority over others:

I did not choose a frame of reference and subordinate all others to it. My failure to focus my discussion, to choose an organization for the sonnets and for my analysis, is the primary source of a reader's difficulty with my description of the interrelations of sonnets 33-35. A similar failure of the collection itself, both in its 1609 order and in any of the subsequent substitute arrangements, is the source both of multiple directions of my analysis and of the various arbitrarily espoused solutions to the riddle of the sonnets and thus to the intellectual discomfort evoked by the multitude of the different kinds of equally active relationships among them. (pp.11-12)

Booth's fundamental idea has something in common with Landry's and Fiedler's, but Booth is at once more universal and more particular. More universal in that his thesis of multiple ordering applies not only to all the sonnets (although differently to each) but to all poetry, and more particular in that he is able, Leishman style, to isolate some

of the components of coherence.

But whereas Booth in 1969 elucidates the coherence principle, Lever in 1956 has already put it -- or something very like it -- into practice. In essence, what Lever has done is to select from the total number of sonnets a group which, arranged according to the ordering principle he felt to be dominant (the theme of the growth of a relationship as articulated by imagery), produces a coherent sequence. Though satisfying in itself, it does not aim, and makes no pretence to be, definitive. The truth of this claim is inherent not only in Lever's own admission, but in the fact that he does not use all the sonnets available to him. This is new, and it represents a very significant step forward, one which is justified both by the recognition that Shakespeare's sonnets can render -- and have rendered -- several satisfying orders, and by the recognition that coherent orders do not necessarily -- and because of their diversity hardly ever can -- include all 154 sonnets.

I have said that what Lever accomplished was 'new'. This is not strictly true, because there is a precedent for such a thing, in the field of music. First, however, Lever's relationship to the sonnets must be redefined.

Critics such as Bray (see Chapter Three) and Stirling, when re-ordering Shakespeare's sonnets, presented their readers with what they hoped was a clarification of Shakespeare's original order, and thus, his original purpose. Bray in fact said exactly this: his order was not any 'brilliant arrangement' of his own, but "Simply Shakespeare's". Lever, however, acted not so much as a rearranger, as a re-interpreter. He responded to the sonnets in the manner described and demonstrated by

Lewis (see Chapter Five): he 'walked in' and 'called them his own'. But because he also perceived, as did Knights and others, that the sonnets are not homogeneous or of equal merit, he selected from the one hundred and fifty four, which comprise the whole collection, those with which he felt the greatest affinity, and set them forth in such a way that they clearly articulated the meaning he found in them. In essence then, Lever has become the creative artist, drawing from the sum of his resources (in this case, Shakespeare's sonnets) such material as best suited his purpose, ordering it and presenting it as a satisfying work of art.

The connection between Lever's accomplishment and a modern development in the field of music becomes clear. In 1956, the very year in which Lever was publishing his study of the Elizabethan love sonnet, Pierre Boulez began to compose a piano sonata (No.3). Boulez's work was characteristic of the growing avant garde movement in music, in that it challenged the predeterminacy of traditional music structures, although it was not so extreme that both 'composition' and 'performance' were abandoned entirely to chance.<sup>5</sup> The sonata has five movements, which may be played in any order except for the third, which must always be in the centre. Within each movement, the order of sections, and the nature of details, may both be varied, and in some cases, the performer may choose from among several sections. Thus each performance of the sonata will be substantially different even though it is nevertheless the same sonata. By definition, the composition in its entirety can never be performed, and yet each performance is complete.

This brings me, almost, to my last point. In a footnote to the assertion that because we tend to assume that Shakespeare's sonnet

collection is more homogeneous than it really is, we tend to make "sweeping generalizations about 'The Sonnets'", Knights remarks that "The tendency is encouraged by the fact that the sonnets are printed in a numbered sequence, without titles" (p.133). From a hasty reading it might appear that in 1962, R.P.Blackmur<sup>6</sup> said something which, in spite of the opening proviso, sounds very like Knights' combined meaning:

No one can improve upon the accidentally established order we possess; but everyone can invite himself to feel the constant interflow of new relations, of new reticulations -- as if the inner order were always on the move -- in the sonnets....Thus the vitality of fresh disorder enters the composition and finds room there with every reading, with every use and every abuse we make of them. Each time we look at a set of things together but do not count them, the sum of the impression will be different, though the received and accountable numerical order remains the same. If we complain of other people's perceptions, it is because we feel there is greater vitality in our own. (pp.131-2)

Unfortunately he very soon turns what promised to be a very significant insight into a pedestrian reinforcement of a traditional view:

It is thought that the text follows that of original manuscripts or fair copies, and no intuition bids me think otherwise. Furthermore, till private interests rise, the sequence we have seems sensible with respect to their sentiments, and almost a 'desirable' sequence with respect to a notion of development. Anyone who feels weak about this should try reading the sonnets backwards all the way; they will turn themselves round again from their own force. (p.132)

Long before I encountered Knights and Blackmur, I had already begun to read the sonnets backwards, in an attempt to avoid being compelled against my better judgement to depend on the kind of assumptions which I was beginning to encounter daily as I read the earliest critical literature. Blackmur is right: the sonnets do 'jump back', though not for the reason he supposes. They jump back partly because the reader has generally already read the sequence through several times before reversing the process, partly because the critical

literature tends to reinforce the Q order, partly because they usually appear four -- or at least two -- on a double page, and partly, as Knights observes, because they are numbered, and it is difficult to avoid the influence of the numbers, even in reverse.

There is, however, a way to escape all these influences which could very well contribute towards a new approach to Shakespeare's sonnets. I suggest that an entirely different edition be designed as follows: the sonnets (in an exact transcription of one of the original manuscripts, the print only modernized), printed on single, loose-leaf sheets contained in a folder, one sonnet to a sheet, with no numbers, no introduction, no explanation and no apology.

Critical works of the calibre of Leishman's, Lever's and Lewis' are always valuable whatever the topic or the point of view they propound, simply because of the quality of the thinking and the clarity of articulation. But men with such finely honed intellects, whose grasp of poetics has in no way overwhelmed their ability to respond to poetry are, as perhaps this study has demonstrated, rare. A 'random reading' edition of Shakespeare's sonnets would, I believe, encourage students of Shakespeare to bring some degree of objectivity to the sonnets -- that is, a mind unhindered by the kind of assumptions which, regardless of the degree of their probability, have hampered criticism until comparatively recently; an objectivity which would nevertheless allow the intuitive response a fair hearing. Then, perhaps, Shakespeare's sonnets will be permitted to speak for themselves.

## NOTES (CHAPTER NINE)

<sup>1</sup> The Shakespeare Sonnet Order, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> It is unfortunate that this, Stirling's most ingenious idea, provides the weakest link in the theory. It assumes an ordered manuscript, for which I can see no compelling justification. Other critics have surmised that there was no 'manuscript' as such, but that Thorpe acquired the poems in the form of random, single sonnets or in small groups.

<sup>3</sup> Remember Empson's point, however (see my page 55).

<sup>4</sup> An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets.

<sup>5</sup> Boulez himself said "It does seem to me that choice of action, decision in the face of a multitude of possibilities, has become more and more confused with a licentious attitude toward the musical material; libertinage is not liberty, and it often leads to monotony". Boulez on Music Today, S. Bradshaw and R.R. Bennett, trans., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 24. First published in 1963.

<sup>6</sup> "A Poetics for Infatuation", The Riddle of Shakespeare's Sonnets, 131-161.

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