G. WILSON KNIGHT
AND
THE LAST PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

Thesis for the Degree of Ph. D.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

John Emory Van Domelen

1964

This is to certify that the

thesis entitled

G. WILSON KNIGHT AND THE

LAST PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

presented by

John Emory Van Domelen

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

Ph. D. degree in English

Herbert Weisinger
Major professor

Date May 15, 1964

ABSTRACT

G. WILSON KNIGHT
AND
THE LAST PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

by John Emory Van Domelen

This dissertation is an attempt to define and appraise G. Wilson Knight's contribution to contemporary Shakespearian criticism, and it includes an intensive study of Knight's "spatial" approach to Shakespeare's last five plays--Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale, The Tempest, and Henry VIII. This study reveals that Knight finds in Shakespeare's last plays certain mythic patterns and that he interprets these patterns and the dominant imagery in metaphysical terms. An examination is made of Knight's literary interpretation, beginning with his first published article, a note on Wordsworth's "Immortality" Ode in The Adelphi (September, 1926), and ending with Knight's estimate of Scrutiny in Essays in Criticism (January, 1964).

Knight's article, "The Poet and Immortality," outlining his thesis concerning Shakespeare's last plays, appeared in the September and October, 1928 issues of The Shakespeare Review. This was published the following year in Myth and Miracle, which was in turn later incorporated in The Crown of Life (1947). Knight has written 18 books of literary interpretation, among which is a set of books concerned with Shakespeare. This set includes

The Wheel of Fire, The Imperial Theme, The Crown of Life, The Shakespearian Tempest, The Sovereign Flower, and The Mutual Flame. However, all of Knight's work is at least in part concerned with his Shakespearian theories.

A comparison of Knight's interpretative work with other recent Shakespearian scholarship which has appeared since the publication of A. C. Bradley's Shakespearian Tragedy in 1904 reveals that what distinguishes Knight from other recent Shakespearian scholars is not a tendency to "Christianize" Shakespeare, for there are many scholars recent and past who have attempted this; moreover, Knight's theory of a Power-Love, Christ-Eros synthesis in Shakespeare would make him a somewhat eccentric ally, unlikely to be acceptable to the more orthodoxly inclined Christian humanists. It is rather his interpreting Shakespeare as a romantic: Knight sees the synthesizing Coleridgean imagination as sovereign in Shakespeare. A close reading of Knight's Shakespearian works with special attention paid to his The Starlit Dome, a volume on Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, reveals that Knight's quest is for the eternal: the immortality of Wordsworth's ode and the immortality Knight finds in the birth and rebirth patterns in the last plays of Shakespeare are both fitted by Knight into his private metaphysical scheme.

G. WILSON KNIGHT

AND

THE LAST PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

By

John Emory Van Domelen

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

1964

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to thank Mr. G. Wilson Knight for his willingness to answer numerous questions and for his generosity in furnishing me with much of his work--some of it unpublished--that I otherwise would not have had the opportunity to read.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

The purpose of this chapter is to relate G. Wilson Knight's interpretation of Shakespeare to the Shakespearian scholarship which has appeared since the publication of A. C. Bradley's Shakespearian Tragedy in 1904. First, I shall enumerate the books of G. Wilson Knight as they appeared chronologically and indicate which ones are relevant to a study of Knight's interpretation of Shakespeare; afterwards, I shall attempt to indicate: i) where Knight departed from the dominant critical theory of his time and, ii) where Knight was in substantial agreement with various contemporary critics who, like Knight, challenged the prevailing critical orthodoxies by introducing new methods of criticism or of interpretation. Later chapters will show that much of Knight's work which was taken at the time of its appearance as a radical new departure is in reality only a logical extension of what had already been going on in Shakespearian scholarship, some of it since the time of Coleridge.

G. Wilson Knight's first published article, which appeared in The Adelphi, September 1926, was a note on Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode." In the Shakespeare Review, September and October 1928, appeared Knight's article, "The Poet and Immortality," which outlined his thesis concerning Shakespeare's last plays. This essay was published the following year in Knight's first book,

Myth and Miracle. Knight's constant concern with immortality, the centrality of the last plays of Shakespeare in his scheme of interpretation, and the romanticism of his interpretation of Shakespeare are thus significantly revealed in the very first of Knight's writings. All three of these points will be treated later, when it will be demonstrated that even the most extravagant or eccentric of Knight's later books is merely a further carrying out of what was implicit in his work from the start.

The Wheel of Fire, the book which has done the most to establish Knight's reputation as one of the major modern Shakespearian critics and which has exerted the most influence upon such scholars as D. A. Traversi[1], J. F. Danby[2], R. Walker[3], S. Bethell[4], and L. C. Knights[5], appeared in 1930. Since its first appearance, The Wheel of Fire has

---

[1] See his Scrutiny essays; for example, "Troilus and Cressida," Vol. VII (1938-9), 301-19. In a footnote on p. 301 he acknowledges Knight's influence.

[2] J.F. Danby, Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature (London, 1949) and Poets on Fortune's Hill (London, 1952). There is no mention of Knight in either, though both in his book on Lear and in the essays on the final plays Knight's influence is patent.

[3] Roy Walker, The Time is Free: A Study of Macbeth (London, 1949).

[4] S.L. Bethell, The Winter's Tale: A Study (London, n.d.). There is no mention of Knight.

[5] For example, in his Scrutiny essay, "Prince Hamlet," Vol. IX(1940-1), 148-60, where on p. 150 he acknowledges the achievement of Knight in his two Hamlet essays in The Wheel of Fire.

gone through five editions. The Scrutiny critics, whose reaction to Knight's later writing is, for the most part, unfavorable[6], acknowledge the profound influence and the brilliance of many of the essays contained in The Wheel of Fire.

The Imperial Theme, published in 1931, is concerned with further interpretations of Shakespeare's tragedies, including the Roman plays. The Imperial Theme appeared the year after Caroline Spurgeon's first pamphlet, Leading Motives in the Imagery of Shakespeare. Her Shakespeare's Iterative Imagery came out in the same year as The Imperial Theme. Stanley Hyman in The Kenyon Review(Winter, 1948) has argued that from The Imperial Theme onwards Knight owes a debt to Caroline Spurgeon. In reply to Hyman's assertion, Knight maintained that "wherever any detail of her discovery lay within the area of my own rapidly unfolding interpretations, I tended to see it...as a debt. This was the more natural, since our relations were most friendly."[7]

In 1932 Knight's growing tendency to build a metaphysical scheme out of his Shakespearian interpretation became increasingly apparent with the publication of his The Shakespearian Tempest. Knight's close analysis of the imagery in Shakespeare had led to his concluding that the

---

[6] See, as examples, F. R. Leavis's review of The Christian Renaissance, Vol. II(1933-4), 208-11; R.O.C. Winkler's review of The Burning Oracle, VIII(1939-40), 233-6; and R.G. Cox's "Interpreter or Oracle?" (review of The Crown of Life), XIV (1946-7), 317-20.

[7] The Imperial Theme, 3rd ed., corrected reprint, 1961, p. vii.

two fundamental categories of the Shakespearian schema were tempests and music (Tempests he equates with chaos and music he identifies with harmony). Knight attempted to establish a polarity between tempests and music and in this way to obtain a coherence uniting the whole of Shakespeare's work. In what I believe a just summary of Knight, M. C. Bradbrook, reviewing the book for Scrutiny, concluded that "Mr. Knight provided Shakespeare with a philosophy which, while wholly idealist in its tendency, is strictly dualist in its organization."[8] It is apparent that Knight was not long content to treat imagery without subordinating it to some unifying principle. I shall later show that Knight used British destiny as the unifying theme of Shakespeare's history plays--including Henry VIII--and that other polarities besides the tempest-music opposition are introduced by Knight into his Shakespearian interpretation.

The Christian Renaissance, containing Knight's interpretations of Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe, appeared first in 1933; a revised edition came out in England in 1961 and in the following year in the United States. It is in The Christian Renaissance that Knight's affinity with J. Middleton Murry first becomes apparent. Like Murry, Knight is unwilling to remain a mere literary critic but instead assumes a prophetic or apocalyptic role. As with Murry, there is no mincing matters: on the first page

---

[8] Scrutiny, I(March, 1933), 396.

of the text in The Christian Renaissance Knight maintains that: "It has been evident that my interpretations of Shakespeare must eventually be related to Christianity." It is not the purpose of this writer to examine Knight's somewhat private brand of Christianity; it is sufficient to emphasize that neither the author's intention nor his achieved result is primarily literary.

The following year, 1934, saw the publication of the pamphlet, Shakespeare and Tolstoy, which is Knight's reply to Tolstoy's essay, Shakespeare and the Drama," which had appeared in England in 1926 in a book published by the Oxford University Press, Tolstoy on Art. The pamphlet is important in forming an estimate of Knight's Shakespearian interpretation because it reveals much of what Knight rejects of the nineteenth century approach to Shakespeare. To summarize briefly: Knight sees Tolstoy's estimate as understandable but wrong-headed because of Tolstoy's insistence upon the importance of psychological naturalism in evaluating poetic drama, which, according to Knight, should not be judged by the same criteria as the novel. In other words, Tolstoy is trying to measure poetry by the standards of prose-fiction, and at a time when realism was an important standard of judgment. Likewise, Robert Bridges[9], whose somewhat moralistic arguments

---

[9]Robert Bridges, "The influence of the Audience on Shakespeare's Drama," Collected Essays, Vol. X, London, 1927.

against Shakespeare Knight also refutes in the pamphlet, is wrong in objecting to certain of Shakespeare's characters as being inadequately motivated. He, too, according to Knight, is seeking psychological realism in poetic drama, where it need not be.

Two years later, in 1936, Knight published his Principles of Shakespearian Production[10] as well as his imaginative and autobiographical Atlantic Crossing. A sequal to Atlantic Crossing, The Dynasty of Stowe, was published in 1945. A third autobiographical work concerning part of Knight's life prior to that covered in Atlantic Crossing has been written but is not yet published.[11]

The Principles of Shakespearian Production, on the other hand, is valuable for three reasons: i) it contains much of Knight's literary theory; ii) it contains much of Knight's view of Shakespeare's last plays; and iii) it contains some sound sense, of use to anyone wishing to free stage-productions of Shakespeare from the tyranny of realism and the various technical gimmicks which Knight, rightly I believe, condemns for diverting attention from the poetry.

In 1939 The Burning Oracle was published; and though Knight in this book admits that Shakespeare's concern was

---

[10] Scheduled to reappear sometime in 1964, revised and enlarged.

[11] Referred to in The Dynasty of Stowe, where The Dynasty of Stowe is spoken of (p.7) as "the third part of an autobiographical trilogy of which the second has already appeared and the first, though written, has yet to be published." Mr. Knight has informed me that it has not yet been published.

primarily humanistic rather than naturalistic or supernaturalistic and sees Shakespeare's main issues being "fought out in terms of a humanistic conception setting man between subhuman tempests of nature and a superhuman music blending with the universe and thence the divine,"[12] it is evident that he is by this time mainly intent upon making Shakespeare the creator of a satisfying synthesis between the various oppositions which Knight believes to exist in Shakespeare's plays. Some of these oppositions are: remantic emotion versus critical cynicism, order against disorder, soldierly honor opposed by feminine devotion, life struggling with death, and tempests symbolically countered by music. Even more important, this book drives home hard the growing tendency on the part of Knight to yoke together violently opposed literary figures who in fact have very little in common. With the mere excuse of a few superficial similarities in subject-matter, Knight, in The Burning Oracle, compares the following writers: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Pope, and Byron. Moreover, in his effort to show "the slow transmutation of volcanic and destructive into creative energies, together with the substitution for the power of the sword of the power of Christ, the sun,"[13] Knight groups Tennyson, Browning, Hardy, Arnold, Eliot, Sean O'Casey, John Cowper Powys, Francis Berry, and G. Wilson Knight (in his own Atlantic Crossing, "my own attempt at a modern art-form of concentric

---

[12] The Burning Oracle, p. 30. [13] Ibid., p. 292.

circles, with discursive views on the general situation....").[14] It is thus apparent, and I shall return to this later, that Knight is not now concerned either with the ordinary tasks of literary criticism or with those of literary scholarship; rather, he is pressing into his service writers of the most diverse interests and styles--who often did not even work in the same literary form--in order to bolster his metaphysical theories.

The works which Knight wrote about British destiny during the Second World War or shortly thereafter will be described briefly; they all contain varying mixtures of patriotism and Knight's private metaphysical system. Most of them could be called "apocalyptic." They are: This Sceptred Isle(1941), The Chariot of Wrath (1942), The Olive and the Sword (1944), Hiroshima (1946), and Christ and Nietzsche (1948). There is little matter here that is directly to our purpose, except that the Shakespeare who emerges from these books is a Shakespeare with an apocalyptic vision of British destiny. Indeed, Knight would have Shakespeare see England as the world's future spiritual hope, the heir and successor of Rome. The only matter in Knight's books on British destiny that need concern us is his use of Henry VIII.

The Starlit Dome, which reappeared in an enlarged edition in 1959, first came out in 1941. Though the book is concerned with Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats,

---

[14] Loc. cit.

it is important for my argument because of its concern with immortality and Knight's own kind of romanticism. The book, which its author regards as a companion piece to The Burning Oracle, shares both the preoccupations and the weaknesses of the other book. In addition to the manifest difficulty of treating four such diverse poets coherently, there is a continual drafting of unlike literary works by dissimilar writers to serve the preconceived purpose of the author. The four poets dealt with in this book are all shown "making a blend of instinct with sanctity and of power with the grace to make a golden humanism...."[15] When Wordsworth proves himself recalcitrant, Knight observes disapprovingly that in Wordsworth's poetry "there is a failure in face of erotic powers."[16]

But with Coleridge it is an altogether different matter. Knight, who himself sees poetry as a balance between the natural and the transcendent, observes approvingly: "Coleridge's ever-present itch for transcendence in three main divisions: (i) natural, (ii) human, and (iii) divine. But the groups intershade and each poem is at once naturalistic, psychological, and religious."[17]

The Starlit Dome, moreover, reveals how much of Coleridge's literary theory there is in G. Wilson Knight's work. I hope to prove that Knight has accepted Coleridge's view of the imagination in toto; that Knight regards the imagination as sovereign not only in the creation of art but also in its interpretation; that Knight depends upon

---

[15] Ibid., p. 158. [16] Ibid., p. 82. [17] Ibid., p. 97.

the synthesizing imagination to unite his myriad dualities or oppositions; that Knight accepts the formula

$$\frac{\text{The crown}}{\text{The state}} = \frac{\text{The sovereign imagination}}{\text{Art, the mind, or the interpretation of art;}}$$

and that if one were to carry Knight's pronouncements to their logical conclusions, the synthesizing imagination would ultimately be the same in Knight's metaphysical scheme as divine grace is to orthodox Christianity.

The most important single volume for our purpose is The Crown of Life, which contains essays interpreting Shakespeare's final plays. Though this book, which appeared in 1947, was regarded by its author as the conclusion of his work on Shakespeare, it has, in point of fact, been succeeded by two other books primarily concerned with Shakespeare, The Mutual Flame (1955) and The Sovereign Flower (1958).

The Crown of Life contains as its first essay "Myth and Miracle," which had, as we recall, appeared in 1929 as Knight's first published statement of Shakespearian interpretation. It is in the Preface to the original edition that Knight states his long-considered opinion that "those two binding principles of Shakespearian unity, the tempest-music opposition and Elizabethan nationalism, are vital to any full appreciation of Shakespeare's last, and perhaps supreme, phase; so too, is the study of the romantic poets."[18] This statement is doubly significant for our purpose: i) it indicates the importance that the last plays occupy in Knight's final, comprehensive, estimate of

---

[18]The Crown of Life, vi.

Shakespeare; and ii) it hints at what is, in essence, Knight's romantic view of Shakespeare. This dissertation rests primarily upon two arguments: i) that the totality of Knight's Shakespearian interpretation can best be comprehended through an intensive analysis of his interpretations of the last plays, and ii) that a proper understanding of Knight's treatment of the final five plays is the key to an understanding of Knight's own peculiar variety of romanticism.

At the same time, however, the quotation in the preceding paragraph betrays Knight's attempt to find principles of coherence in what are otherwise plays dealing in vastly different ways with widely diverse subjects. Indeed, I hope to prove that Knight's search for unity or coherence at the price of an abrogation of esthetic judgment and an ignoring of the differences in the tone and texture of the poetry is an ever-increasing threat to his stature as an interpreter of Shakespeare. R. G. Cox, reviewing Knight's The Crown of Life in Scrutiny, offers an excellent criticism of Knight's work that I believe is still valid. He asserts that "it is the peculiarity of Mr. Knight's analysis that it improves in direct ratio to the strength of the text."[19] The closer Knight adheres to the text, the better the criticism; it is when Knight departs from the Shakespearian text in his metaphysical speculations or when he deals with writers whose work he does not know as intimately as that of Shakespeare that the results are unfortunate.

---

[19] "Interpreter or Oracle?", Scrutiny, XIV, 320.

The three published works which deal with Byron lie, for the most part, outside of the range of this study. They are: Byron's Dramatic Prose (1953), a short pamphlet published by the University of Nottingham; Lord Byron: Christian Virtues, which appeared in the same year; and Lord Byron's Marriage (1957), in which Knight develops his somewhat bizarre thesis that the root cause of Byron's emotional and marital difficulties was his unacknowledged homosexuality.

Among the many oppositions into which Knight divides the cosmos is that of sex; the homosexual, or the seraphic temperament, as Knight usually calls it, is an intermediate sex, i.e., a synthesis or resolving of the conflicts that arise between the sexes. This bisexual theory with all its metaphysical ramifications becomes increasingly prominent in his later work. As well as in the above-mentioned books on Byron, Knight treats homosexuality in most of his later works--Christ and Nietzsche, The Golden Labyrinth, and The Mutual Flame. It is in the last-named that he is applying this theory to Shakespeare, concentrating almost exclusively upon the Sonnets.

Knight's book, Byron and Shakespeare, has not yet been published.

The Laureate of Peace (1955) is primarily of use in this study because it contains a partial explanation of Knight's "spatial" method. As an interpretation of Alexander Pope it leaves much to be desired. The wrenching of Pope out of his time and place is best illustrated by a

quotation from the book itself: "Pope offers what is perhaps the most valuable of all insights: a coherent romanticism."[20] Another unfortunate tendency is the forced comparison between the neo-classical satirist and the Elizabethan dramatist: "Notice in the Essay on Man (i) the reference of human evil to earthquakes and tempests, as in the Shakespearian symbolism; and (ii) the preliminary forgiveness of all evil which we may suppose to be at the back of Shakespeare's work."[21] Tone, texture, and context all go by the board in an effort to prove similitudes where differences greatly predominate.

Most of G. Wilson Knight's fiction--Klinton Top, The Shadow of God, and The Green Mazurka, all novels--is unpublished and today exists only in typescripts. A play, however, The Last of the Incas, was published by the author at the University, Leeds, in 1954. The play was produced by the Little Theatre Players of the Sheffield Educational Settlement, Sheffield, under the direction of Arnold Freeman, on 25 October, 1954. It is a three-act play and the action takes place in Peru in 1532-33. This is not the place for a criticism of the play, which is, after all, relevant only because of two things: Valverde, one of the Spaniards, echoes a sentiment which we shall encounter at various points in Knight's Shakespearian work; Valverde declares that "whoever enters the arena of action, in that choice engages in evil, inevitably and irrevocably.

---

[20] The Laureate of Peace, p. 46. [21] Ibid., p. 44.

That is what we mean by calling man a fallen creature." The other relevant point is Atahualpa's being portrayed as a sacrifice, a Christ-figure. Knight finds many such Christ-figures among the Shakespearian characters. I am making no case for either the originality or the validity of Valverde's statement: one need go no further than Robert Penn Warren's All 'The King's Men to find a modern application of this idea. But it is of interest that the same view occurs both in Knight's interpretative work and in his creative effort. Indeed, Knight apparently makes an inadequate distinction between literary creation and literary interpretation, since he sees both of them as governed by the imagination.

The Sovereign Flower, published in 1958, adds much to our understanding of the author's conclusions about Shakespeare. In The Sovereign Flower there is an interesting return to the nineteenth century way of seeing Shakespeare the man in the works of Shakespeare the artist. For example, Knight asserts that: "Here [in Timon of Athens] Shakespeare sets his soul on paper as perhaps in no other work, not even Hamlet."[22] There are two very important essays in The Sovereign Flower: one is the recently anthologized[23] "The Shakespearian Integrity," which had already appeared in The Burning Oracle, and the other is "The Third Eye,"

---

[22]The Sovereign Flower, pp. 53-4.

[23]In Shakespeare Criticism, 1935-1960, ed. Anne Ridler (World's Classics).

a perceptive essay on *All's Well That Ends Well*. Moreover, there is additional matter on *Henry VIII*, which Knight regards as being loaded with "orthodox Christian feeling."[24] It is also in this book that Knight recapitulates his view of the final plays as the conclusion or culmination of the Shakespearian progress.

The last two works by Knight to appear, both in 1962, are *Ibsen* (Writers and Critics series) and *The Golden Labyrinth*. These two books simply continue to reflect the prevailing concern of their author with various dichotomies or dualities, such as the Christ-Dionysus opposition, the antithesis between virtue and virility. There are scattered bits of information in *The Golden Labyrinth* relevant to our concern with Knight's theory of poetic drama. It is interesting that Kenneth Muir in his *Last Periods of Shakespeare, Racine, and Ibsen* (1961) has also--as Knight does in his *Ibsen*--called our attention to certain similarities between the last periods of Shakespeare and Ibsen.

Knight's Shakespearian interpretation will next be related to the various schools of contemporary Shakespearian scholarship. The first of these to demand our attention will be the enormously influential Bradley-school of character-analysis. With this school will be included Robert Bridges and Leo Tolstoy, both of whom, according to Knight, interpreted Shakespeare's plays largely in terms of psychological realism. Another very important school of interpretation

---

[24] *The Sovereign Flower*, p. 73.

to be discussed is the one which concentrates upon the study of imagery and symbolism. With this school are to be associated the Scrutiny critics, C. Spurgeon, and Knight himself. Attention will also be given to the literary historians, the realistic school of E. E. Stoll and L. L. Schücking, and the "disintegrators" who attribute Shakespeare's work to other authors. Various Shakespearian scholars will be introduced into the discussion in order either to indicate their influence upon Knight or to indicate the agreement or disagreement that exists between Knight's conclusions and their findings.

The most profound difference between the Shakespearian criticism of A. C. Bradley and of the nineteenth century and what has followed the appearance of Knight's The Wheel of Fire (1930) and C. Spurgeon's pamphlet, Leading Motives in the Imagery of Shakespeare, is the shift from character-analysis to an intensive study of imagery and symbolism. F. R. Leavis has, in the recently reissued photographic reprint of the long-scarce Scrutiny, [25] perhaps claimed more credit for the Scrutiny writers in effecting the dislodgement of the Bradley-Archer school of character-analysis than they deserve. He asserts in "Scrutiny: A Retrospect" that "it [Scrutiny] did indeed effect the relegation of Bradley...." [26] He goes on to maintain that "Scrutiny will be credited in literary history with having effected a reorientation in Shakespeare criticism." [27] But

---

[25] Scrutiny, reissued in 20 vols., with an Index and Retrospect by F. R. Leavis, Cambridge, 1963.

[26] Scrutiny, Vol. XX, 12. [27] Ibid., 12-13.

a simple glance at the chronology of the appearance of Knight and Spurgeon's work and at that of Scrutiny, which did not come into being until 1932, will refute this assertion. Moreover, all of the significant Shakespearian essays in Scrutiny--those of D. A. Traversi, for example[28]--did not appear in the first year of its life. A sharing of credit, if not an acknowledgment of influence is, I believe, in order.

The fact that many younger writers--F. R. Leavis, D. A. Traversi, L. C. Knights, for examples--did shift their attention from the study of character to that of imagery and symbol and began to regard Shakespeare's plays as poetic and symbolic drama instead of as dramatized fiction subject to the same criterion of psychological realism as the nineteenth century novel, does not mean that other, often older, critics did not continue to follow the lead of A. C. Bradley.[29] Such scholars as L. L. Schücking,[30] H. B. Charlton,[31] and J. Dover Wilson[32] remained unreconstructed and unregenerate Bradley men.

However, there are many Shakespeare scholars whose contributions are concerned primarily with neither characters nor symbols. One should not ignore the excellent insights

---

[28]Traversi's first Scrutiny essay, "Coriolanus," did not appear until 1937 in Vol. VI, 43-58.

[29]Prefatory Note to the 1947 ed. of The Wheel of Fire, pp. v-vi.

[30]Character Problems in Shakespeare's Plays, London, 1922.

[31]Shakespearian Tragedy, Cambridge, 1948.

[32]Fortunes of Falstaff, Cambridge, 1944.

of Harley Granville-Barker, who saw Shakespearian drama primarily in terms of stage-presentation. Then, too, there was the important contribution by Ashley Thorndike;[33] whether or not one agrees with his conclusion that Shakespeare imitated Beaumont and Fletcher in his final plays. The Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher on Shakespeare was a perceptive study of possible influence. Nor should one forget such literary historians as A. Harbage[34] and G. B. Harrison.[35] Moreover, the contemporary preoccupation with "themes" in Shakespeare, as reflected in the writings of L. C. Knights,[36] J. F. Danby,[37] W. C. Curry,[38] and John Vyvyan[39] was prefigured by such writers as Colin Still,[40] Msgr. F. C. Kolbe,[41] and R. Moulton,[42] who could not fairly be categorized either as Bradley disciples or as apostates to the Bradley creed.

---

[33] The Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher on Shakespeare, Worcester (Mass.), 1901.

[34] Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions, New York, 1952.

[35] Shakespeare at Work 1592-1603, Ann Arbor, 1958.

[36] Some Shakespearian Themes, Stanford, 1960.

[37] Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature, London, 1949.

[38] Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns, Baton Rouge, 1937.

[39] The Shakespearian Ethic, London, 1959.

[40] Shakespeare's Mystery Play, London, 1921.

[41] Shakespeare's Way, London, 1930.

[42] Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist, 3rd ed. rev. and enlarged,

The reaction of G. Wilson Knight to the Bradley-Archer school of character-analysis is best formulated in Shakespeare and Tolstoy (1934). This essay first appeared as Pamphlet No. 88 of the English Association, but in 1947 it was included in a later edition of The Wheel of Fire, which contains most of the remainder of Knight's criticism of character-analysis. Shakespeare and Tolstoy is concerned with far more than Tolstoy's hostility toward, or failure to appreciate, Shakespeare. Nor does the addition of Knight's analysis of Robert Bridges's adverse criticism completely define the purpose of this essay. What Knight is doing here is to expose the weaknesses and deficiencies of the nineteenth century tendency to concentrate exclusively upon "characterization." Bradley, Bridges, and Tolstoy were simply representatives of the movement which sought to apply rigid standards of psychological realism to the wrong art-form, that of poetic drama.

Since Tolstoy and Bridges were too intelligent, sensitive, or discerning to be satisfied with Shakespeare on the basis of his "unreal" character-creations, they attacked him for his failure to achieve the right degree of verisimilitude in his characters. Knight begins his essay by granting that:

> The Shakespearean world does not exactly reflect the appearances of human or natural life. The events in his world are often strange to the point of impossibility. Whoever knew the sun go out? What man has ever acted as did King Lear, what woman as Hermione? Now Shakespeare has been praised to excess for his 'characterization'. The term is vague. But, if

> we take it in its most usual and popular sense, as photographic verisimilitude to life, depending on clear differentiation of each person in the play or novel, we find 'characterization' not only not the Shakespearean essence, but actually the most penetrable spot to adverse criticism that may be discovered in his technique.[43]

Knight goes on to summarize his estimate of Shakespeare and the fallacious views of Bridges and Tolstoy: "Shakespeare is a great poet. We have, misled by nineteenth-century romantic criticism, regarded him rather as a great novelist."[44]

Knight excuses the misguided strictures of Bridges by assuring the reader that: "Writing when he did, Bridges could not be expected to read the deeper meanings in Shakespeare."[45] Here Knight is subjecting Bridges to the transience of time, a thing which he never does with Shakespeare. Indeed, Shakespeare is always treated "spatially"; his imagery is detached from its context, since it possesses a "vertical" quality, which Knight associates with eternity. Imagery, regarded by Knight "spatially" as a permanent structure, need not be submitted to temporal consideration, which Knight refers to as "horizontal." Knight's "spatial" approach will be dealt with more thoroughly in a later chapter.

Expecting to find the familiar faces of surface reality, Bridges and Tolstoy see only blurred outlines and distortions. The reality experienced in Shakespeare is, Knight rightly maintains, much more profound:

---

[43] Shakespeare and Tolstoy, The English Association Pamphlet No. 88, April 1934, p. 3.

[44] Loc. cit. [45] Ibid., p. 11.

> Again, the Shakespearian world is not the world we habitually see. But it is the world we experience: the poignant world of primal feeling, violent subterranean life, and wayward passionate thought, controlled, denied, hidden often, then upgushing to surprise ourselves; the inner world we experience, the world we live and fear, but not the world we normally see; nor the world we think we understand.[46]

It is the poetic vision that is primary; and imagery is the best means to realize this vision, while human realism is strictly subordinated to this poetic vision.

After attacking realistic criticism for blinding Bridges and Tolstoy to the power of Shakespeare's symbols, Knight further asserts that this school of criticism (the one advocating psychological naturalism and the importance of verisimilitude) soon metamorphosed itself into the school of the "disintegrators," "such pseudo-realism and pseudo-scholarship, if carried far, being essentially disintegrating and destructive."[47] Now it is manifestly unfair to make J. M. Robertson the logical product of the Bradley school; Robertson with his rationalistic and skeptical speculations upon the authorship of what had been regarded as the Shakespeare canon needed more in his intellectual ancestry than A. C. Bradley, himself the natural product of the romantic preoccupation with character begun by that archromantic Coleridge.

In his Character and Characterization (1962) Leo Kirschbaum, in a critical aside, warns that though there has been much excellent work undermining the critical

---

[46] Ibid., p. 16. [47] Ibid., p. 24.

assumptions of Bradley's Shakespearian Tragedy, yet Bradley's work "is not quite the simple target most of the avant garde Shakespeare critics take it to be."[48] Knight is, I believe, one of the modern critics who has perhaps done more than any other one interpreter of Shakespeare to establish the current dictum that Shakespeare wrote poetic drama and not naturalistic drama.

Let us examine first Knight's criticism of the Bradleyite "character" school and then his qualification of his own criticism. In The Wheel of Fire (p. 9), Knight declares that: "In the following essays the term ['character'] is refused, since it is so constantly entwined with a false and unduly ethical criticism." Again, on the following page, Knight has the criticism of Bridges, Tolstoy, and Bradley in mind when he states that "ethical terms, though they must frequently occur in interpretation, must only be allowed in so far as they are used in absolute obedience to the dramatic and aesthetic significance: in which case they cease to be ethical in the usual sense." Many modern critics welcome the shift away from the ethical preoccupation, but few--barring John Middleton Murry--would endorse Knight's pronouncement that (p. 11) "interpretation must be metaphysical rather than ethical." It is precisely his growing obsession with metaphysics that causes critics who would otherwise acknowledge their debt to Knight to keep silence.

---

[48] Character and Characterization, p. 1.

One could continue to cite instances from The Wheel of Fire of Knight's running attack upon Bradleian "character" analysis--or upon most of the other recognizable schools of criticism that flourished at the time the book was written. But the mellower Knight of 1947, secure in his own accomplishment, can afford "to clear up certain misunderstandings." Knight concedes that: "My animadversions as to 'character' analysis were never intended to limit the living human reality of Shakespeare's people. They were, on the contrary, expected to loosen, to render flexible and even fluid, what had become petrified. Nor was I at all concerned to repudiate the work of A. C. Bradley."[49]

Knight repudiated the Bradleian position as summarized by Bradley himself in his Shakespearean Tragedy (1904): "The centre of the tragedy, therefore, may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action."[50] For Knight, symbol and pattern replace character and plot. But the Bradley who wrote Oxford Lectures on Poetry (1909) shows us the Bradley who wrote, in addition to his classic "The Rejection of Falstaff," the essay "Poetry for Poetry's Sake," in which he introduces a distinction between art and life that is certainly one of Knight's tenets: "The one [life] touches us as beings occupying a given position in space and time, and having feelings, desires, and purposes due to that

---

[49] The Wheel of Fire, p. v.

[50] Shakespearian Tragedy, reprint of 2nd ed. (1905), New York, 1949, p. 12.

position: it appeals to imagination, but appeals to much besides. What meets us in poetry has not a position in the same series of time and space...."[51] Poetry, he continues, is addressed only to the imagination. Knight not only accepts this but adds a questionable corollary of his own: interpretation too is addressed solely to the imagination.

One unconverted Bradley man, H. B. Charlton, has voiced his dissenting views of the assault upon Bradley in his Shakespearian Tragedy (1948), and one cannot doubt that he has G. Wilson Knight in mind when he refers to those who attack Bradley because "he takes Shakespeare's dramas as plays and not as poems; he accepts the persons of them at their value as semblable men and women, and not as plastic symbols in an arabesque of esoteric imagery, nor as rhythmic ripple, intoned in a chromatic ritual."[52] Furthermore, Charlton touched upon the weakest point of those who emphasize the importance of symbolic imagery in Shakespeare when he saw the principal shortcoming of this mode as its lacking syllogistic universality: "One man's imaginative sequences are not another's: for each one, the ultima ratio is personal, individual and autonomous."[53] When Knight adheres to the Shakespeare text his interpretation possesses some objective validity, but much of his later interpretation would deserve Charlton's criticism.

---

[51] Oxford Lectures on Poetry, London, 1919, p. 6.

[52] Shakespearian Tragedy, p. 1. [53] Ibid., p. 80.

In Knight's early work on Shakespeare, he relied upon a close scrutiny of the text and a heavy emphasis on the significance of imagery. Also apparent in Myth and Miracle and The Wheel of Fire is his brilliant handling of mood or atmosphere, themes and patterns. The later work, in which Knight pays less attention to the text, distressed F. R. Leavis and various Scrutiny reviewers, who see Knight as deserting the rightful tasks of literary criticism to fashion a nebulous system of metaphysics.

Knight has sometimes been grouped with the 'Cambridge' school of literary criticism,[54] which has been said to include such diverse figures as T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, and F. R. Leavis; but this is somewhat misleading, though Eliot's introduction to The Wheel of Fire would seem to lend itself to this view.

It is the emphasis upon theme, pattern, and symbolic imagery--Knight sometimes sees an entire play as an expanded metaphor[55]--that Knight shares, in varying degrees, with such writers as F. R. Leavis, D. A. Traversi, L. C. Knights, Colin Still, Caroline Spurgeon, Maud Bodkin, and Msgr. F. R. Kolbe.

The best work of Knight, contained most abundantly in The Wheel of Fire, though also, to a lesser extent, in The Imperial Theme and The Crown of Life, is characterized

---

[54]See Kenneth Muir, "Changing Interpretations of Shakespeare," The Age of Shakespeare, ed. Boris Ford, Pelican, 1955, p. 298; compare Knight's reaction to this kind of grouping, The Imperial Theme, 3rd ed. London, 1951, p. vi.

[55]Shakespeare and Tolstoy, p. 17.

by a close exegesis of the text and what may be called the inductive method. What Knight is doing in these books, essentially, is devoting a rational method to a romantic end. Much of Knight's work contains a strange amalgam of precise analysis and vague and nebulous apocryphal speculations.

But employment of the inductive method to literary interpretation was not original with Knight. Knight himself directed my attention to Msgr. F. C. Kolbe's excellent though short book, Shakespeare's Way: A Psychological Study (1930) in which the author uses the inductive method in finding the themes and significant imagery in a selection of Shakespeare's plays. Kolbe, in turn, acknowledged the influence of R. G. Moulton, who in his Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist (1906) lays down the principles of inductive criticism. It is interesting that Moulton points out the association of Ariel, with the upward-tending elements of Air and Fire and the higher nature of man; and that of Caliban with the downward-tending elements of Earth and Water and the lower nature of man. Colin Still, whose Shakespeare's Mystery Play (1921) Knight regards as 'disciplined speculation',[56] incorporates this theory in his elaborate attempt to show that The Tempest contains the pattern found in pagan initiation rites and is indeed "an account of the spiritual redemption of man." Colin Still will receive more consideration when I treat Knight's

---

[56] The Imperial Theme, p. v.

method of interpretation and theory of poetic drama in Chapter II and again in Chapter IV when I examine Knight's interpretation of The Tempest.

The Wheel of Fire, like Spurgeon's Leading Motives and Kolbe's Shakespeare's Way, advanced a similar thesis: in Shakespeare's plays there are significant coherences that can be discussed without being subjected to plot and character; in other words, there are key themes and patterns in Shakespeare that are not part of plot or character. However, Spurgeon emphasized only the importance of imagery while Kolbe gave equal attention to images, ideas, and things. That Knight's own concern--at least in his later work--is not confined to imagery is asserted in the preface to the third edition (1951) of his The Imperial Theme: "'Imagery' by itself is--in so far as we make such distinctions at all--always a minor accompaniment, and by itself as likely as not merely to modify, even sometimes, in the way of art, to tend to contradict the central interest, as with the pastoral similes in Homer and Virgil."[57] This is as good a statement as any to distinguish between the differing degrees of importance attached to imagery by Knight and Spurgeon. To Spurgeon, imagery was largely a statistical matter and a means of reconstituting Shakespeare the man; to Knight it is just one means among several of securing a degree of coherence, whether in an individual play or among the entire Shakespeare canon.

---

[57] Ibid., p. ix.

In his Image and Experience (1960), Graham Hough suggests that "Wilson Knight expresses himself in traditional moral and metaphysical terms, but his discovery of symbolic patterns in drama, underlying and partly differing from the overt pattern of character and incident, could hardly have been made without the habits of thought to which psychoanalysis has accustomed us."[58] Precisely: and both Maud Bodkin and Colin Still could easily be substituted for Knight in the above quotation. It was only a few years after the appearance of Knight's first books that Bodkin's Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (1934) appeared. In 1936 Colin Still published his The Timeless Theme, which is really only his Shakespeare's Mystery Play with an elaborate critical theory added, a theory I shall later show to be most congenial to Knight's own theory of literary interpretation. Knight, however, never insists upon establishing as elaborate a relationship between the patterns he discovers in Shakespeare--that of immortality in the last plays, for example--as Colin Still attempts in his Shakespeare's Mystery Play. Knight is usually content to regard the archetypal pattern as Maud Bodkin, following Gilbert Murray, chooses to denominate it: that which "leaps in response to the effective presentation in poetry of an ancient theme."[59] Still's book may be regarded as the extreme mythic approach beyond which one cannot go.

---

[58]Graham Hough, Image and Experience, London, 1960, p. 124.

[59]Maud Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry, London, 1934, p. 4.

Knight never attempts an elaborate comparison of a symbolic work either with pagan ritual, as Still does, or with the medieval Christian tradition, as John Vyvyan[60] has attempted.

Knight has been attacked for lacking the historical sense,[61] refusing to acknowledge the validity of traditional scholarship (literary history and philology),[62] declining the task of literary evaluation,[63] and substituting subjectivistic interpretations of esoteric symbols for character-analysis. This last charge, we will recall, was that made by H. B. Charlton, but since it was dealt with earlier it need not concern us now.

One could handle all the criticisms at once by replying that they are all valid. They are: but it is necessary that we discover why Knight rejects the more orthodox scholarly methods and what he substitutes for them. A summary explanation would be that Knight sees a transcendental rather than an immanent Shakespeare; that he believes literature should cast light upon its age and not the reverse; that he repudiates philology because of the triviality of its concerns and the insignificance of its achievements; that he is continually distinguishing between the rational faculty of the critic, whose duty it is to evaluate,

---

[60] The Shakespearean Ethic, London, 1959.

[61] See Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, New York, 1956, p. 200.

[62] In YWES, XIV (1933), 9-10.

[63] By M. Bradbrook in Scrutiny, I, 397-8.

and the imaginative faculty of the interpreter, whose function it is to see the work in its wholeness; and that the interpretation of symbolic imagery is a truer key to the themes and patterns that unite the plays of Shakespeare than the study of character.

In his somewhat discursive autobiographical book Atlantic Crossing, Knight gives his view of the more orthodox modes of literary scholarship: "Shakespeare disclosed shafts of rich ore, and hidden veins of stratified and variegated tints like the foothills below Persia. This was the beginning of the ascent, red-gold riches of thought and symbol passed by centuries of desert commentary."[64] Elsewhere he becomes more explicit. In The Wheel of Fire the first essay is entitled "On the Principles of Shakespeare Interpretation." Much of the content of this essay rightly belongs to the next chapter, which will discuss the theory of Knight's technique. But it also contains much of the "why" for Knight's rejection of other kinds of literary study.

Knight first repudiates the school that seeks to judge the work of art by the artist's intentions: "There is a maxim that a work of art should be criticized according to the artist's 'intentions': than which no maxim could be more false."[65] On the next page Knight declares that his essays will "say nothing new as to Shakespeare's intentions'" and "attempt to shed no light directly on

---

[64] Atlantic Crossing, London, 1936, p. 40.

[65] The Wheel of Fire, p. 6.

Shakespeare the man."[66] Six years after the Wheel of Fire was published, J. Dover Wilson in the Robert Spence Watson Memorial Lecture for 1936, The Meaning of 'The Tempest', asserted that: "The Tempest was his [Shakespeare's] official congé; and if not in truth his last word, was intended [sic] to be so. It is the intention [sic] that matters and gives significance to the tone of the play."[67] Knight's implicit belief that the imagination should be sovereign in literary interpretation is apparent when he states that: "'Intentions' belong to the plane of intellect and memory: the swifter consciousness that awakens in poetic composition touches subtleties and heights and depths unknowable by intellect and intractable to memory."[68] Knight's constant and unwavering emphasis upon the primacy of the imagination should be remembered when we attempt to evaluate Knight's literary contribution in the concluding chapter of this study.

Knight's anti-rationalistic bias also goes far to explain his rejection of the usefulness of source-study: "Both [sources and intentions] try to explain art in terms of causality, the most natural implement of intellect."[69] Thus both intentions and sources are rejected because of their subservience to intellect. Knight, who regards artistic creation as a marriage between the material and the spiritual, i.e., an incarnation,[70] sees sources as being of

---

[66] Ibid., p. 7. [67] The Meaning of 'The Tempest', p. 3.

[68] The Wheel of Fire, p. 7. [69] Loc. cit.

[70] Ibid., p. 8.

greater use to the artist than to the interpreter[71] for the artist must find a body for his intuition, but the interpreter must only extract the intuition from the body. Thus a study of sources would be of little use to the interpreter.

Granville-Barker's knowledge of stagecraft does not win Knight's approval, either: "Nor will a sound knowledge of the stage and the especial theatrical technique of Shakespeare's work render up its imaginative secret."[72] In the prefatory note to the 1947 edition of The Wheel of Fire Knight was to remain firm in his 1930 criticism of Granville-Barker: "I would not regard the well-known commentaries of Harley Granville-Barker as properly within this central, more imaginative and metaphysical tradition."[73] It is significant that this "more imaginative and metaphysical tradition," in which Knight places himself, also includes Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Bradley, romantics all.

Knight also rejects the scholarly tradition that studies the influence of an artist's milieu upon his work: "Much as I respect the learning of such justly eminent scholars as Professor Dover Wilson and Mr. C. S. Lewis, I maintain that no such learning drawn from outside the poetic world of Shakespeare weighs anything when balanced against that world."[74] For, as Knight elaborates later on in the same essay, "it may be positively dangerous to

---

[71] Loc. cit. [72] Ibid., p. 13.

[73] Ibid., p. vi. [74] Ibid., p. 338.

read a great writer in the light of his age; it is safer, to my mind, to read the age in the light of the great writer."[75]

With the standard biographies of Shakespeare Knight was apparently unhappy: in The Shakespearian Tempest Knight is convinced that "from a careful study of the plays will surely emerge a William Shakespeare as different from that smug mixture of platitudinizing moralist and beery yokel which is our conventional 'Bard of Avon' as any Lord Bacon or Edward de Vere might be from 'Shaksper'."[76] So many of the conventional nineteenth century biographies of Shakespeare would fall under this censure that it is impossible to know at whom in particular Knight is directing this attack.

The Schücking-Stoll group of realistic critics is coupled by Knight with the Bradley-Archer school, weighed, and found equally wanting: "The older critics drove psychological analysis to unnecessary lengths: the new [in 1930] school of 'realistic' criticism, in finding faults and explaining them with regard to Shakespeare's purely practical and financial 'intentions', is thus in reality following the wrong vision of its predecessors."[77] It will be recalled that Knight regarded J. M. Robertson as the logical product of the same school of psychological naturalism that produced A. C. Bradley. But there are

---

[75] Ibid., p. 343. [76] The Shakespearian Tempest, p. 4.

[77] The Wheel of Fire, p. 13

greater differences than similarities between Bradley and E. E. Stoll, or Bradley and L. L. Schücking.

Knight's animadversions upon the more conventional modes of literary scholarship would undoubtedly fall on Ashley Thorndike also, since he wrote The Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher on Shakespeare, which concerns itself with a theory of causality--which Knight rejects--in literary history. The same would be true for A. Harbage and G. B. Harrison, the former concerned with moral matters--which Knight repudiated when he rejected the nineteenth century legacy of Robert Bridges and Leo Tolstoy --and the latter with relating Shakespeare's work to its own time and trying to prove the topicality of much of Shakespeare's work.

Harbage, who sees Shakespeare's plays as possessing moral homogeneity,[78] evidently thinks no more highly of Knight's accomplishment than Knight does of his: "...we must let them [our young students and scholars] see in Shakespeare a little less of Frazer and Freud, and a little more of Erasmus. There would be less religiosity in the criticism, less moralizing without reference to any identifiable morality, less of the confusedly edifying, if there were more respect for Renaissance principles as such and more trust in Shakespeare's own wisdom and tact."[79]

---

[78] As They Liked It, New York, 1947, p. xii.

[79] Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions, New York, 1952, pp. xiv-xv.

Knight is of course, aware of the objections that are raised by his interpretative method. In an essay, "The Prophetic Imagination," contained in The Christian Renaissance, Knight answers one such objection: "A usual complaint asserts that I do not consider Shakespeare in relation to his time or to his personal intentions. Why should I? It is poetry, not history or biography, that I wish to interpret, and with the greater writers we instinctively make what minor historical allowances may be necessary."[80] Knight's insistence upon the autonomy of the work of art he goes on to state even more clearly: "I regard any great work that has survived the centuries as independent of its generation: it is precisely this independence that is the condition of literary greatness, since we habitually and naturally consider as less significant those works which the race is content to forget."[81] Thus Knight endorses another tenet of the so-called New Criticism. Like the New Critics--who are actually following practices of great antiquity--Knight often believes that he sees each work of art as independent of all others and as free in all ways from its time and place as well as its creator. But we shall observe that Knight often departs from this view in practice and sometimes even lapses into nineteenth century biographical criticism.[82]

---

[80] The Christian Renaissance, p. 4. [81] Loc. cit.

[82] For example, in The Sovereign Flower, pp. 53-4, where Knight declares that "Here [in Timon of Athens] Shakespeare sets his soul on paper as perhaps in no other work, not even Hamlet."

Evidently Knight still felt in 1955 that he had not convinced the opposition of the validity of his interpretative method, for in The Laureate of Peace he refers to "those who most rigorously oppose my refusal to limit my studies to discussions of biography, sources, technique and the manipulations of language."[83] But many have been influenced by Knight, though they often fail to acknowledge it.

In 1906 Lytton Strachey directed his very influential essay, "Shakespeare's Last Period," against the view of the final plays that Dowden had advanced as early as 1874 in his Shakespeare: His Mind and Art. Before one can properly understand the significance of G. Wilson Knight's rejection of Strachey's view it is necessary to examine Strachey's essay; and before one can understand what Strachey was repudiating, it is necessary to know a little about the prevailing view--which Dowden perhaps more than any other one scholar did to advance--that Shakespeare wrote the last plays "On the Heights," in a final period of serenity and reconciliation after the stormy period of the tragedies.

In Shakespeare: His Mind and Art, Dowden declares that Shakespeare's final period is one of "large, serene, wisdom," and "in the light of the clear and solemn vision

---

[83] The Laureate of Peace, p. 8.

of his closing years all his writings shall be read."[84] Strachey might agree with Dowden that "Shakespeare's interest in his art was less intense than previously it had been,"[85] but he could not stomach Dowden's assertion that "after exhibiting the absolute ruin of a life and of a soul, Shakespeare closed the wonderful series of his dramatic writings by exhibiting the noblest elevation of character, the most admirable attainment of heart, of intellect, of will, which our present life admits, in the person of Prospero."[86] Strachey's reply was that "if Prospero is wise, he is also self-opinionated and sour, that his gravity is often another name for pedantic severity, and that there is no character in the play to whom, during some part of it, he is not studiously disagreeable."[87]

But what is more important is that Strachey sees that underlying a theory such as Dowden's--that the plays show a development of Shakespeare's mind--is "the tacit assumption that the character of any given drama is, in fact, a true index to the state of mind of the dramatist composing it."[88] And this assumption has never been proved. Yet Strachey himself, to quote the most-often quoted passage of his essay, does not reject this assumption:

---

[84]Edward Dowden, Shakspere: His Mind and Art (1874), New York, 1918, p. 358.

[85]Ibid., p. 360. [86]Ibid., p. 67.

[87]Lytton Strachey, "Shakespeare's Final Period" (1904), Books and Characters, 1922, p. 68.

[88]Ibid., p. 52.

"Is it not thus, then, that we should imagine him [Shakespeare] in the last years of life? Half-enchanted by visions of beauty and loveliness, and half-bored to death; on the one side inspired by a soaring fancy to the singing of ethereal songs, and on the other urged by a general disgust to burst occasionally through his torpor into bitter and violent speech? If we are to learn anything of his mind from his last works, it is surely this."[89]

Though Knight does not regard "character" as the binding element in Shakespeare's plays, and though he, unlike Dowden, does not see Shakespeare as a Jekyl-Hyde combination of practical man of the world and passionate idealist, he does accept the underlying assumption that the plays reveal a spiritual and artistic progress; in "Myth and Miracle" Knight writes that: "The Tempest is at the same time a record of Shakespeare's progress and a statement of the vision to which that progress has brought him. It is apparent as a dynamic and living act of the soul, containing within itself the record of its birth: it is continually re-writing itself before our eyes."[90] Knight's acceptance of Dowden's view is later in the same essay stated explicitly: "The progress from spiritual pain and despairing thought through stoic acceptance to a serene and mystic joy is a universal rhythm of the spirit of man."[91] We shall find that what distinguishes Knight from Dowden

---

[89] Ibid., p. 65.

[90] The Crown of Life, P. 27. [91] Ibid., p. 29.

and those who endorse Dowden's view of Shakespeare's last period is not whether or not Shakespeare was "On the Heights"--for they agree that he was--but is rather their differing evaluations of the last plays themselves.

What Knight rejects of Strachey he also rejects of Dowden, and that is the view that there was artistic decline apparent in the last plays. Strachey notices the "singular carelessness with which great parts of them [the] final plays] were obviously written,"[92] and Dowden states that: "The impression that Shakspere's interest in his art was less intense than previously it had been is confirmed by the circumstance that he now contributed portions to plays which are completed by other hands in an inferior manner."[93] Dowden goes on to add that "in Henry VIII, all artistic and ethical unity is sacrificed to the vulgar demand for an occasional play and for a spectacle."[94] Now Knight sees no such decline in the last plays; moreover, Knight regards Henry VIII as Shakespeare's crowning achievement,[95] aesthetically coherent,[96] and entirely Shakespeare's.[97]

It is interesting that Middleton Murry, in his

---

[92]Strachey, op. cit., p. 64.

[93]Dowden, op. cit., p. 36.

[94]Loc cit.

[95]The Olive and the Sword, p. 76.

[96]"Henry VIII and the Poetry of Conversion," The Crown of Life, pp. 256-336.

[97]The Olive and the Sword, p. 76.

earlier work accepted Strachey's view of the tired and bored Shakespeare; in his To the Unknown God (1924) Murry wrote that "after playing half-wistfully with figures of his imagination, in the Winter's Tale, in Cymbeline, in that part of Pericles that is indisputable his, after creating Perdita and Imogen and Marina, he gathered his strength together and conquered his own weariness to prophesy in The Tempest."[98] However, by 1936, when his Shakespeare appeared, Murry had changed his mind. For there he writes that "I have let myself be half-persuaded by Lytton Strachey's suggestion of 'tiredness and boredom'; but I have looked for the evidences, and found none."[99] That Murry should at one time have held Strachey's view is curious, for it is Murry more than anyone else who has provided Knight with an apocalyptic and prophetic Shakespeare. For already in 1924 Murry was writing that "I believe that The Tempest is the most perfect prophetic achievement of the Western mind,"[100] and that: "As Shakespeare is prophetic of the last, modern era of the Western consciousness, Christ was prophetic of the whole epoch, of which this last modern era is the culminating part."[101]

A brief enumeration of a few other critics who have

---

[98]Middleton Murry, To the Unknown God, pp. 184-5.

[99]Middleton Murry, Shakespeare, p. 380.

[100]To the Unknown God, p. 185.

[101]Ibid., p. 191.

seen Shakespeare's creative powers declining in the last plays follows. Frederick Boas,[102] H. B. Charlton,[103] F. E. Halliday,[104] E. K. Chambers,[105] and Allardyce Nicoll,[106] all subscribe, for various reasons, to this view. E. M. W. Tillyard,[107] and Kenneth Muir,[108] however, do not. In his interesting book on early seventeenth century literature, Patrick Cruttwell subscribes to the view only insofar as "the loosening of the bonds (both geographical and financial) which had tied Shakespeare to his Bankside theatre had resulted in a comparative indifference to that theatre's requirements."[109] Knight and other contemporary Shakespearian critics who regard the plays as poetic drama dominated by symbolic imagery are not confronted with the necessity of providing reasons why the characters or plots in the later plays are not realistic.

The "historical" critics, such as E. E. Stoll and L. L. Schücking, members of a school that had its heyday

---

[102] An Introduction to the Reading of Shakespeare, London, 1927, p. 48.

[103] Shakespearian Comedy, New York, 1938, p. 267.

[104] Shakespeare and his Critics, London, 1949, p. 136.

[105] Shakespeare: A Survey, London (1925), 1955, p. 293.

[106] Shakespeare, London, 1952, p. 164.

[107] Shakespeare's Last Plays, London, 1951, p. 3.

[108] Last Periods of Shakespeare, Racine, Ibsen, Detroit, 1961, p. 37

[109] The Shakespearian Moment, London, 1954, p. 95.

in the 1920's and 1930's, and the "disintegrators" of the Shakespeare canon, whose most outstanding advocate is J. M. Robertson, are both rejected by G. Wilson Knight. Knight does so because he sees the plays of Shakespeare forming a coherent whole, though in his assertion that tempests in opposition with music "form the only principle of unity in Shakespeare,"[110] he does violence to the tone and context of the plays from which he abstracts these symbols. The early Shakespearian plays, culminating in King Henry V, Knight sees as united by the common theme of nationalism; the plays following Henry V are part of a coherent pattern because they fit into what Knight regards as Shakespeare's spiritual progress, culminating in King Henry VIII, which is the final nexus of all the diverse elements in Shakespeare. Knight regards the play as one possessing both national purpose and a vital religious concern which reconciles the various oppositions he finds in Shakespeare.

Since Knight regards Henry VIII as Shakespeare's crowning achievement, it is obviously necessary that he defend the integrity of the play against critics like J. M. Robertson, who attribute much of the play to other hands. Knight also assumes the Shakespearian authorship of such things as the Hecate scene of Macbeth, the early acts of Pericles, and the Jupiter scene of Cymbeline. This he

---

[110] The Shakespearian Tempest, p. 6.

does, I believe, not because he is aesthetically obtuse but because he has adopted the view that the Shakespeare canon is a unified whole; since "character," after the "realistic" work of Stoll, Schücking, Bridges, Tolstoy and others, is no longer acceptable as a principle of dramatic unity, and since the more obvious reading of Shakespeare the man into the work--as illustrated by Dowden--has been more or less discredited, Knight sees the uniting bond in symbolic imagery and in various metaphysical dualities. Committed as Knight is (like Dowden?) to the view that the plays reveal the growth of the poet's mind, it is most important that the plays upon which his case rests so heavily--the last plays, for example--be regarded as Shakespeare's own work.

In his introduction to The Wheel of Fire (1930), T. S. Eliot evidently gives some support to Knight's critical position when he asserts that: "To take Shakespeare's work as a whole, no longer to single out several plays as the greatest, and mark the other only as apprenticeship or decline--is I think an important and positive step in Shakespeare interpretation."[111] Furthermore, Eliot endorses Knight's method of seeking unity in Shakespeare when he states that "Mr. Wilson Knight has shown insight in pursuing his search for the pattern below the level of 'plot' and 'character'."[112] In short, Eliot thinks--at

---

[111] Introduction to The Wheel of Fire, p. xviii.

[112] Loc. cit.

least at the time of the first appearance of the Wheel of Fire--that "Mr. Knight, among other things, has insisted upon the right way to interpret poetic drama."[113]

To anticipate what I shall treat more fully in a later chapter--Knight's theory of interpretation--I shall quote the principle of interpretation that Knight has formulated to handle the "historical" critics and the "disintegrators." On p. 14 of his The Wheel of Fire he insists that: "Before noticing the presence of faults we should first regard each play as a visionary unit bound to obey none but its own self-imposed laws." For Knight believes that what impels critics to assume a decay in the artistic powers of the later Shakespeare or assume pernicious contemporary influence is their failure to understand a play in its totality. Knight lumps the moralistic critics with the historical critics when he states (p. 11) that: "But today there is a strong tendency to 'criticize' Shakespeare, to select certain aspects of his mature works and point out faults. These faults are accounted for in various ways: it is said that Shakespeare, though a great genius, was yet a far from perfect artist; that certain elements were introduced solely to please a vulgar audience; or even, if the difficulty be extreme, that they are the work of another hand."

One of the most outstanding features of Knight's

---

[113] Ibid., p. xix.

method is his substitution of "interpretation" for criticism. By excluding judgment from his method Knight is much freer to find whatever significant patterns he so desires in Shakespeare's work. By erecting a scheme with the benefit of possibly non-Shakespearian elements, and without the task of evaluating the different parts of the Shakespeare canon, it is far easier for Knight to stress various plays--especially the final plays--as heavily as he does. He wants coherence on a grand scale: the entire Shakespeare canon must illustrate the growth of the poet's mind. Knight wants to free the works of Shakespeare from time and place, but he does not want to free them from a pattern reflecting the author's spiritual growth. This not only reveals the essentially romantic nature of Knight's work but also what I believe to be its greatest single weakness: Knight is creating a chimerical Shakespeare because of his insistence upon using parts which might not be Shakespeare's own. Knight confesses, in an essay entitled "The Prophetic Imagination" which appeared in The Christian Renaissance, that "I accept what fits, and reject what does not fit, my sense of significance."[114] This is individualism or reliance upon the Inner Light with a vengeance.

In order to find a coherent pattern in Shakespeare's plays, Knight has run the risk of abstracting themes and

---

[114] The Christian Renaissance, p. 13.

images without taking tone and context into account. It has been difficult for Knight to resolve his conflicting loyalties: in the early work he is loyal first to the text, but from The Imperial Theme on his devotion to larger schemes outside the works themselves has triumphed. At first it was his ideal of a Shakespearian unity, but later it became a metaphysical dualism involving opposing cosmic forces the resolution of which has been the task of all the greatest poets in all their greatest poems. Only this explanation can account for The Christian Renaissance and most of his work which has appeared since.

Knight, however, is not alone among contemporary Shakespearian scholars in his tendency to abstract themes and patterns. W. C. Curry, J. F. Danby, L. B. Campbell, and L. C. Knights have all engaged in the same activity in various ways. The practice is far more widespread today, however, than it was when Knight wrote his Myth and Miracle and The Wheel of Fire. Indeed, Danby and Knights both owe Knight an obvious debt.

The process of abstracting themes was not original with Knight, nor does he anywhere claim that it was. What he has done, however, is to develop further what R. G. Moulton and Msgr. F. R. Kolbe had already been about. The difference between Knight and Moulton or Kolbe is his applying their method to all of Shakespeare. What Knight did was to abstract the themes by an intensive analysis of the imagery in Shakespeare; but unlike C. Spurgeon, he assigned a much greater symbolic value to the images:

Spurgeon's work with imagery was essentially prosaic while Knight's was imaginative.

Knight does not deny that what he is about is the abstraction of themes and symbols; nor is it unusual, when we hear him echoing R. G. Moulton: "I work...at a new science of poetic interpretation."[115] The quality of any "science" is its tendency to abstract, and Knight elsewhere in The Christian Renaissance tells us what science he has in mind: "My interpretations of Shakespeare bear the same relation to their original as does the science of Christian theology to the Bible. In both dominant symbols are abstracted to further our understanding."[116] [Italics mine] T. S. Eliot has provided us, in his introduction to The Wheel of Fire, with a useful insight into what Knight is about when he states that "Bradley's apothegm that 'metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct; but to find these reasons is no less an instinct;' applies precisely to the interpretation of poetry." Eliot goes on to maintain that: "To interpret, then, or to seek to pounce upon the secret, to elucidate the pattern and pluck out the mystery of a poet's work, is 'no less an instinct'."[117] Eliot, unlike Knight, does not regard imaginative interpretation as a substitute for literary creation: "Interpretation is necessary perhaps only in so far as one is passive, not creative, oneself."[118]

---

[115] Ibid., p. 4. [116] Ibid., p. 35.

[117] The Wheel of Fire, p. xvii. [118] Ibid., p. xviii.

In the final chapter of this study an evaluation of Knight's contribution will reveal that Knight is included among those whom Eliot regards as "imperfect" critics; Knight would find himself in the category of those who fail in the critical task because they insist upon competing with the creator, the artist: their criticism is not properly such, but rather something lying in limbo between art and criticism.

In this chapter, I have tried to indicate that Knight's work is consistent to his method throughout, and that the later work is prefigured in the earlier. I have also attempted to show that Knight is "modern" in his insistence upon the importance of symbolic imagery and the presence of patterns in Shakespeare's plays, patterns that are revealed on deeper levels than those of character and plot. Modern but not original, since Kolbe and Moulton had anticipated much of Knight's method and Spurgeon was working with imagery at the same time as Knight. Knight has rejected character-analysis, source-study, philology, the historical method, the "disintegration" theory, and the nineteenth century preoccupations with ethics and psychological naturalism. Knight has retained the Coleridgean romantic view that Shakespeare's work forms a coherent whole, and he believes in the primacy of the imagination in literary interpretation. In addition, Knight accepts the nineteenth century romantic view that there is a real spiritual development of the poet revealed in Shakespeare's work. There is

at least a congeniality of outlook between Knight and J. Middleton Murry, if not a real influence of Murry upon Knight.

It remains for the later chapters to examine Knight's method of interpretation and theory of poetic drama (Chapt. II), to observe his application of that method and theory to Shakespeare (Chapt. III) to analyze and criticize Knight's interpretation of the last plays--Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale, The Tempest, and Henry VIII (chapt. IV), and finally, to evaluate Knight's contribution to Shakespearian scholarship (Chapt. V).

CHAPTER TWO

As early as Myth and Miracle (1929), G. Wilson Knight was already making his distinctions between criticism and interpretation, and by the time he wrote The Wheel of Fire (1930), he had fully developed his interpretative theory.[1] According to him, the critic is governed by judgment and attempts to objectify the work of art. The interpreter, on the other hand, is ruled by imagination and tends to immerse himself in the poem. Unlike criticism, interpretation is not concerned with evaluation: to the interpreter there is no division between "good" and "bad."

The interpreter, unlike the critic, starts his task from within the poem itself: he accepts the poem on its own terms and attempts to work out from what Knight refers to as "a centre of consciousness near that of the creative instinct of the poet."[2] It then becomes necessary for the interpreter to divine the "creative instinct" of the poet, which is perilously close to seeking his "intentions," though it is on the level of the imagination and not that of intellect or memory that Knight seeks to surprise the poet. The interpreter, Knight believes, does not seek merely to amass facts in order to come to a conclusion about the poem but rather tries to get at the wholeness

---

[1]The interpretative theory is thoroughly discussed in Chapter I, "On the Principles of Shakespeare Interpretation," pp. 1-16. See also p. 26 of "Myth and Miracle," reprinted in The Crown of Life.

[2]Wheel of Fire, p. 33.

of the poem through "the quality of the original poetic experience."[3]

Interpretation, as Knight visualizes it, must be metaphysical rather than ethical.[4] What Knight here means by "metaphysical" is clear when he declares that: "Creation is...born of a union between 'earth' and 'heaven,' the material and the spiritual."[5] Poetry then becomes an incarnation, a marriage of time and eternity. We shall notice later how Knight takes the symbolic imagery in poetry to form a permanent structure, which he refers to as the poem's "spatial" quality.

Knight regards each play of Shakespeare as "a visionary whole, close-knit in personification, atmospheric suggestion, and direct poetic-symbolism: three modes of transmission, equal in their importance."[6] It is by concentrating on the third of these, however, that Knight has made his own abiding contribution to Shakespearian interpretation. By "visionary whole" Knight means that the poem has imaginative coherence, though he later sees poetry or the poet as "visionary" in the sense of "prophetic"; the first chapter of The Christian Renaissance (1933) reveals this most strikingly: it is entitled "The Prophetic Imagination." By "personification" Knight is thinking of symbolic character: Chapter XII of The Wheel of Fire is appropriately enough named "Symbolic Personification,"

---

[3] Ibid., p. 7.

[4] Ibid., p. 11.

[5] Ibid., p. 8.

[6] Ibid., p. 11.

and he there asserts that Timon is "first a symbol, second a human being."[7] Since "atmospheric suggestion" can hardly exist apart from, and is determined by, symbolic character, symbolic imagery, and symbolic action, it is evident that the "three modes of transmission" are not "equal in their importance," and that it is the interpreter's finding symbolic meanings in the imagery, character, and action that determines what kind of a "visionary whole" he finds the play to be. Since religious ritual is itself realized by one's assuming the role of a symbolic character, speaking in symbolic language, and performing a symbolic action, it is not at all unusual that Knight ultimately finds all great poetry to be profoundly religious.[8]

In his essay "On the Principles of Shakespeare Interpretation" in The Wheel of Fire, Knight formulates what he takes to be "the main principles of right Shakespearian interpretation." The first of these principles is: "Before noticing the presence of faults we should first regard each play as a visionary unit bound to obey none but its own self-imposed laws."[9] On the same page he adds that "we should attempt to preserve absolute truth to our own imaginative reaction," and that "we should at all costs avoid selecting what is easy to understand and

---

[7] Ibid., p. 250.

[8] The Christian Renaissance, p. 252: "...All poetry is Christian."

[9] Wheel of Fire, p. 14.

forgetting the superlogical." Thus the play is unique, imaginatively coherent, and subject only to whatever inherent qualities contribute to the overall reaction of the interpreter. Furthermore, one should eschew the obvious meanings and not hesitate to seek psychological or metaphysical implications. The uniqueness of the play obviates, and even renders impossible, the task of evaluating the work of art. By stressing fidelity to one's imaginative reaction, Knight would appear to be opening the door to impressionistic criticism. But his fidelity to the text is sometimes enough to forestall the lapse into complete subjectivism.

The second principle is that: "We should be prepared to recognize what I have called the 'temporal' and the 'spatial' elements."[10] By "temporal" Knight is referring to the time-sequence of the action in the play; and by spatial he here means the "atmosphere, intellectual or imaginative, which binds the play." The "spatial" elements are the metaphors which do so much to create the atmosphere; Knights goes so far as to see each play of Shakespeare as an expanded metaphor.[11] It is important that Knight see atmosphere as being sometimes intellectual, sometimes imaginative, because on occasion-- in Troilus and Cressida,[12] for example--he finds that the appeal is primarily to the

---

[10] Ibid., pp. 14-15. [11] Ibid., p. 15.

[12] Ibid., "The Philosophy of Troilus and Cressida," pp. 47-72.

intellect rather than to the imagination. Moreover, in his interpretation of Othello in The Wheel of Fire, "The Othello Music," Knight concedes that: "Othello is a story of intrigue rather than a visionary statement."[13] That Knight's theory is not rigidly applied is apparent throughout the Othello essay. It is in this essay that he finds a play in which the "dominant quality is separation, not, as is more usual in Shakespeare, cohesion."[14] Furthermore, Knight in this essay allows that "metaphor is not essential to intensest Shakespearian power."[15]

Knight's third principle of Shakespearian interpretation is that "We should analyse the use and meaning of direct poetic symbolism--that is, events whose significance can hardly be related to the normal processes of actual life."[16] But symbolism is not here confined to imagery alone, but also includes purely aural effects: Knight cites the discharge of cannon in Hamlet and Othello and the sound of trumpets in Measure for Measure and King Lear.[17] This early reference to symbolic music is significant, since Knight in a slightly later book, The Shakespearian Tempest (1932), asserts that tempests in opposition with music "form the only principle of unity in Shakespeare."[18]

---

[13] Ibid., "The Othello Music," Chapter V, pp. 97-119.

[14] Ibid., p. 98. [15] Ibid., p. 101.

[16] Ibid., p. 15. [17] Loc. cit.

[18] The Shakespearian Tempest, p. 6.

The fourth and last of Knight's principles will be deferred until the next chapter, where I discuss Knight's application of his method to Shakespeare; it states that the plays from Julius Caesar to The Tempest fit into a significant sequence, which Knight calls "the Shakespeare Progress".[19]

Knight sees The Christian Renaissance as following logically after his earlier work on Shakespeare, and he devotes the first five chapters[20] to the theory behind his imaginative interpretations. It is in the first of these, "The Prophetic Imagination," that he refers to his work as "a new science of poetic interpretation."[21] It is here too that Knight defines the imagination as a blending of emotion and intellect, the blend resulting in a faculty which transcends and controls both its constituent parts.[22] Moreover, Knight attributes an element of love to all imaginative apprehension.[23] The next claim Knight makes for the imagination is that it is sovereign and has a hereditary claim to this sovereignty, though most people today refuse to recognize it.[24] Knight's final claim for the imagination clearly echoes Shelley; Knight maintains

---

[19] Wheel of Fire, p. 15.

[20] Names of titles: "The Prophetic Imagination", "Symbolism", "The Shakespearian Art-Form", "The New Testament as an Art-Form", "Creative Newness".

[21] The Christian Renaissance, p. 4.

[22] Ibid., pp. 5-6. [23] Ibid., p. 6.

[24] Loc. cit.

that: "Imagination is always prophetic; it is prophetic because it is creative; and it is creative because one of its parents is love."[25] If imagination is prophetic, then the poet is a prophet; if the imagination is sovereign, then the poet is a king; and if the imagination is a mediator between the eternal and the temporal, then the poet is a priest; thus the poet has assumed the functions that orthodox Christianity reserved for Christ: the poet is prophet-priest-king; it is hardly surprising, then, that Knight goes on to make such large claims for poetry or that he is continually making Christs out of his poets--Byron and Shakespeare, for examples.[26] Both Knight's interpretative method and his metaphysics rest completely upon one thing: the sovereign imagination, and without it neither would be possible.

Knight sees a vital relationship existing between his interpretations of Shakespeare and the Christian theologian's exegesis of the Bible: "My interpretations of Shakespeare bear the same relation to their original as does the science of Christian theology to the Bible."[27] This assertion is not necessarily so astoundingly arrogant as it at first might seem: Knight's best work is the interpretations in which he offers a close reading of Shakespeare that is analogous to a theologian's exegesis of

---

[25] Ibid., p. 20.

[26] Lord Byron's Marriage, p. 282.

[27] The Christian Renaissance, p. 35.

scriptures. This assertion by Knight also explains why at times one might suspect Knight of applying the old fourfold method of interpretation with a vengeance: one sometimes feels that the allegorical and the anagogical levels have gotten completely out of hand. Sometimes, however, as in his essay "Measure for Measure and the Gospels,"[28] Knight's finding allegorical meanings in the symbolism is fruitful even if not objectively verifiable.

Interpretation to Knight is not simply literary creation thrown in reverse gear: "If interpretation were to extract from the art-form only the thought or emotion put into it deliberately and consciously by the poet, together with any other essences that pre-existed or in some other way were independent of the creative act, it would be valueless."[29] Furthermore, Knight goes on to say: "Interpretation does not aim to extract what was originally integrated. It does not try to reverse the creative process but rather receives the whole creation as a unique reality pointing to the future, and then does the best it can to interpret in whatever terms seem most adequate this magical and mysterious reality."[30] An interpretative method that involved only the extraction of the thought would surely lead back to the nineteenth-century attempts to make Shakespeare a moralist or philosopher. The extracting of emotion would be a return to

---

[28] Wheel of Fire, pp. 73-96.

[29] The Christian Renaissance, p. 67. [30] Loc. cit.

the romantic preoccupation with Shakespeare the man. The "essences that pre-existed " are the materials which source-hunters are interested in. Any interpretative method that simply breaks down the work of art into its component parts Knight rejects. Knight regards the work of art as an indivisible entity that must be understood in its wholeness or not at all. Furthermore, he finds that the work of art is greater than the sum of its parts: "Creation is a multiplication of elements rather than an addition, and you cannot solve the mystery of poetry by a subtraction sum."[31]

The task of the producer of a Shakespeare play is, according to Knight in his Principles of Shakespearian Production (1936), essentially that of interpretation. Though Knight prescribes that the producer begin first with a close intellectual analysis of the play,[32] yet the ultimate objective of the producer is not intellectual but imaginative: "The producer's business is not translation, but recreation."[33] If there is any doubt as to Knight's meaning an imaginative "recreation," he resolves any such doubt later in the same book when he urges that "the first duty of film and stage alike is interpretation."[34] I have already demonstrated that for Knight the imagination and not the intellect is sovereign in his interpretative work.

---

[31] Ibid., p. 68.

[32] Principles of Shakespearian Production, p. 49.

[33] Ibid., p. 52.

[34] Ibid., p. 215.

As late as The Sovereign Flower (1958) Knight, restating his principles of Shakespearian interpretation, reiterated his belief that "we must start our interpretation from the thing to be interpreted."[35] Yet he sometimes deviates from this in practice, and he is aware of it. In Chariot of Wrath (1942), Knight found that his method of close textual exegesis was inadequate to explain Milton's work fully. After admitting that his own interpretation of Milton's work has been "something of a re-creation," Knight went on to modify--though not to retract--his strictures on Paradise Lost that had appeared in The Burning Oracle: "Adverse criticism of great literature must always remain provisional. Where direct interpretation proves impossible, our method must be indirect. We have therefore turned on Milton's later poetry full knowledge of his life and times, together with three centuries of national experience."[36] This was after he had earlier asserted in the same book that "our reading [of Paradise Lost] cannot be a pure, artistic, receptivity, as with Shakespeare. My usual method of neglecting considerations outside the statement of the art-form itself breaks down."[37] It should be kept in mind, though, that in The Chariot of Wrath Knight was more concerned with applying Milton to

---

[35]The Sovereign Flower, p. 255.

[36]Chariot of Wrath, p. 169.

[37]Ibid., p. 121.

contemporary problems than he was in interpreting Milton's poetry as art.

In another of his wartime publications, The Olive and the Sword (1944), Knight defends his interpretations of various symbols in the following way: "But you may say, neither the works of Shakespeare, nor our Britannia and Saint George symbolisms, no, nor the Crown, need necessarily possess those meanings I attribute to them, nor exert those compulsions I urge. No--they need not. Poetic perception, like religious faith, is no passive acquiescence, but rather an active co-operation, the very truth concerned being dynamic and needing, as does the actor's art, a lively response for its realisation."[38] The italics are mine, since it is important we notice that the "poetic perception" is not that of the creative artist but rather that of the interpreter. Moreover, Knight's constant and continual relating of religious faith and the imaginative faculty--here in the form of poetic perception--supports my assertion that in the final analysis Knight's concept of the imagination takes the place in his metaphysical scheme that grace occupies in the orthodox Christian scheme. In Knight's scheme it is the sovereign, prophetic, synthesizing, reconciling imagination that is God's greatest gift to man.[39] Without asserting that the

---

[38]The Olive and the Sword, p. 100.

[39]Loc. cit.; in a paraphrase of a biblical passage Knight goes so far as to maintain that "where there is no imagination, the people, sooner or later, perish."

interpreter actually collaborated with the creative artist in the composition of the work of art there is nothing more that Knight can claim for the interpreter than he claims in the above quotation. The interpreter, as Knight indicates at the end of the italicized passage, enters into a vital relationship with the creative artist. The artist is thus dependent upon the poetic perception of his interpreter. A sensitive imagination is undoubtedly valuable, but there is nonetheless a decided difference between poetic creativity and poetic receptivity. It is interesting that Knight, in spite of his identification of the imagination with religious powers and faculties, nevertheless makes a sharp division in his own work between his imaginative interpretations and his personal beliefs; in the Preface to Christ and Nietzsche (1948), Knight states that "my own writings in this kind are, however, always imaginative interpretations: my own religious beliefs, as opposed to the impersonal imagination, are seldom to be found in them."[40]

Enough has been revealed of Knight's theory of poetic interpretation to permit a few generalizations. It should be apparent that Knight regards each poem--and a Shakespeare play he treats as a poem--as an organic structure that must be considered in its uniqueness. Knight regards the imagination not only as the faculty which creates the poem but also as the best means for its interpretation.

---

[40] Christ and Nietzsche, p. 9.

The poet and the interpreter, both employing the impersonal, creative imagination, actively cooperate in order that the poem may realize its full potentiality. The most obvious weakness in this theory is that the tasks of the creative artist and the interpreter become confused, resulting in interpretative work that is neither creative art nor literary criticism. As long as Knight's ideal interpreter remains faithful to the text, there is a check upon his imaginative flights. But when Knight himself in practice deviates from his principles of interpretation, then all sorts of political, metaphysical, futuristic, and apocalyptic speculations take the place of literary interpretation. Knight's concept of the imagination embraces both the synthesizing imagination of Coleridge and the prophetic imagination of Shelley. Everything that Knight has ever written either implicitly or explicitly reveals his often-stated belief in the supremacy of the imagination. It is this that most emphatically puts Knight on the side of the romantics.

From Knight's concept of interpretation and the ideal interpreter let us turn to his theory of art and the creative artist. Already in Myth and Miracle (1929), Knight was relating art and religion by means of the imagination, which he sees as common to both. He asserts that "art is an extraverted expression of the creative imagination which, when introverted, becomes religion."[41] When

---

[41] Crown of Life, pp. 22-23.

Knight goes on to maintain that "the artist, in process of growth, may be forced beyond the phenomena of actuality into a world of the spirit which scarcely lends itself to a purely artistic, and therefore objective, imitation,"[42] he is referring to the occasional inadequacy of what T. S. Eliot has called the "objective correlative". In all fairness to Knight, we should keep in mind the context in which these quotations occur: Knight is discussion the final plays of Shakespeare and is trying to explain away certain technical imperfections which critics have found in them--the "crude anthropomorphism" in the Jupiter scene of Cymbeline, for example--by emphasizing the increasing inwardness of the poet's intuition and the consequent difficulty he had in objectifying his mystical vision. Again we should note that Knight's regarding great art as mystical visions is present in his work from the beginning: Knight emphasizes the anagogical and allegorical levels of meaning throughout his work, and it is not surprising that Shakespeare's last five plays, which do lend themselves to this treatment, should be regarded as the greatest art, Knight valuing The Tempest as "at the same time the most perfect work of art and the most crystal act of mystic vision in our literature."[43]

In The Wheel of Fire Knight claims that "the work of a great poet, when it reveals a rhythm of spiritual

---

[42] Ibid., p. 25.

[43] Ibid., p. 28.

development across a span of years, is of extreme interest and value, not alone to the man of letters, but to the metaphysician and the theologian; for the poetic faculty is exactly this--the power to express with clarity the darkest and deepest truths of the mind or soul. In proportion as we admit Shakespeare to be a great poet, we must admit his works to be a revelation, not of fancy, but of truth."[44] Certainly a lofty concept of poetry, but one that just as certainly leads away from the poetry itself. The spiritual development in Shakespeare that Knight finds culminating in the final plays is here erected into a general law equally applicable to other great poets. Even if one accepts Knight's dictum that this "rhythm of spiritual development" is of interest to the metaphysician and the theologian, he need not accept the unwritten corollary that the man of letters concern himself with metaphysics and theology. Knight is again claiming the poetic imagination to be the avenue to the profoundest truths, those of psychology and religion. For Knight the highest art thus becomes an objectively realized expression of the poet's religious experience.

Yet elsewhere in The Wheel of Fire, Knight sees all art as a bridge linking the world of spiritual essences with the mundane world: "All art is a means of relating the higher, beyond-thought, super-state to the lower, normal,

---

[44] Wheel of Fire, p. 244.

consciousness of society."[45] Poetry to Knight is nothing less than the Word Made Flesh; in Myth and Miracle he refers to the "Divine Logos of Poetry." The context of this reference is the concluding paragraph of Myth and Miracle, in which Knight is indicating, but not developing, a comparison between the parts of Dante's Divine Comedy--Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise--and the three groups of Shakespeare's greater plays, the Problems, Tragedies, and Myths. The work of Dante and the work of Shakespeare reflect, according to Knight, "the incarnation in actuality of the Divine Logos of Poetry: the temptation in the desert, the tragic ministry and death, and the resurrection of the Christ."[46] Thus it is evident that already in 1929 Knight was preoccupied with metaphysical, non-literary, matters. It is, as he states in The Christian Renaissance (1933), the "futurity about high poetry"[47] that he wishes to emphasize.

The prominence of symbolic imagery in his interpretative work is again indicated when Knight in The Christian Renaissance defines poetry as "words inflated by mind, if we allow 'mind' to cover emotion and thought alike."[48] It is the fusing of a concrete image with a spiritual meaning that produces the poetic metaphor. But Knight does not

---

[45] Ibid., p. 303 ("Hamlet Reconsidered").

[46] Crown of Life, p. 31.

[47] The Christian Renaissance, p. 6.

[48] Ibid., p. 25.

restrict poetry to concrete imagery, for he regards all language as metaphoric, when powerfully used.[49] For poetry is a "fusion of the subjective mind with words to create a potent and living utterance,"[50] and abstract nouns too may be used poetically. The influence of Coleridge is patent throughout Knight's theory of art.

The influence of psychoanalytical theory is also present in Knight's work. For example, he asserts that "the artist works in terms of repressed and sublimated instincts."[51] Elsewhere in The Christian Renaissance Knight sees the main statement of poetry as "life and love, the erotic quest."[52] Knight develops the well-known theory that art derives from the tension between desire and realization, and that the need for art would not be present were human existence as harmonized as that of animals. Art, according to Knight, not only derives from such insufficiency but also exists to remedy it. Knight's theory of art as sublimated instinct is evident when he writes that: "It appears then that in so far as the artist satisfies his desires he can dispense with art; in so far as he is forced to repress and sacrifice them, he will tend to liberate them by artistic expression, surrendering them to marriage with words, images, stories."[53]

In spite of Knight's seeing the instinctual biological

---

[49] Loc. cit. [50] Ibid., p. 26. [51] Ibid., p. 31.

[52] Ibid., p. 212. [53] Christian Renaissance, p. 31.

drive as motivating the artist, he does not long keep this theory free of religious implications. He relates morality and artistic technique as follows: "Whether in art or life, submission and control are necessary: technique is the morality of art, just as morality is the technique of life."[54] Furthermore, "Art is an earnest of heavenly riches. And it is highly moral: for art is the surrendering of instincts to a material medium and universal purpose, with all that that implies; and morality is the surrendering of instinct to an end sanctioned by a judgment which regards the future as well as the present, the community as well as the individual."[55] Knight identifies the moral will with form in art and sees both concepts ultimately vanishing: perfectly harmonized instincts and an art that expresses form throughout the "organic whole" no longer require external controls. The essentially romantic Knight is here obvious. The romantic antipathy for external control--whether artistic or moral--is thus presented in its classic form. Knight can be said to be an extreme individualist: discipline is made an internal matter ultimately indistinguishable from the organic wholeness of the work of art or the harmonized instincts of the individual. Knight's conclusion is that: "The harmonies of art are thus born from and induce a harmony of being: art and morality converge."[56]

---

[54] Loc. cit. [55] Ibid., p. 32.

[56] Loc. cit.

With the premises that Knight starts from--that art is sublimated instinct that not only derives from but serves to harmonize our discordant instinctual selves--it is logical that he should deem "the making of a symbol or of poetry" to be "not only a fine way of expressing difficult things" but also " highly moral act": "The only immoral art is bad art."[57]

Since Knight sees the highest art and the greatest fact of religion as Incarnations, it is not surprising that he should see evil as a disuniting force separating spiritual significances and material forms. If we concentrate upon the material fact, we have science. If we concentrate upon spiritual significances to the exclusion of facts, we have philosophy. Now it would seem that Knight would have the highest praise for the writers who fused the material and the spiritual so perfectly that they are no longer distinguishable or separable. But Knight does not say this. Categorizing literary artists by their ability to fuse the material fact and the spiritual essence he states that: "We have accordingly three types of literary artist: the Dantesque, where philosophy and narrative seem fairly distinct; the Chaucerian or Tolstoyan, where the one is so perfectly incarnated in the other that no distinction seems possible; and the Shakespearian, set between the two, where we watch the process of marriage and resultant incarnation continually being acted before us,

---

[57] Loc. cit.

the philosophy appearing to vary according to the work in hand."[58] Since Knight sees the dualism resulting from the separation of fact and spiritual significance as the root of all evil, and since all symbolic creation--which to Knight includes both religion and poetry--is concerned with uniting material fact and spiritual essence, he decides that "the most important works are those which may be felt reintegrating the two worlds that have fallen asunder."[59] Therefore the supremely great art is that best represented by Shakespeare's plays, where this integrating process is, according to Knight, continually going on before our eyes. Shakespeare thus becomes "the great poet of incarnate life," since Knight feels that in Shakespeare "'Naked Spirit' is...all but correlevant to evil."[60] But Knight elsewhere in The Christian Renaissance states that "all evil is to be regarded as an imperfect incarnation of instincts."[61] It would appear that Knight is not quite clear about this matter; evil would seem to be of three kinds: that which separates, the state of separation, and any imperfect attempt at integration of spirit and matter.

The inconsistency in Knight's theorizing is elsewhere apparent: at one time in The Christian Renaissance Knight writes that: "The plays [of Shakespeare] are vivid experiences, to be lived through and judged not as life-

---

[58] Ibid., p. 39. [59] Loc. cit.

[60] Ibid., p. 43. [61] Ibid., p. 48.

memories but as life, not as a distillation of experience but as experience."[62] At another he states that: "We may regard poetry as an abstraction from life; a more perfect, because more concrete, abstraction than factual narrative on the one side and philosophy on the other, but still an abstraction."[63] Now, Knight regards Shakespeare's plays as poems; either he is tacitly exempting Shakespeare from his statement about poetry's being an abstraction from life or he is contradicting himself.

Knight in The Christian Renaissance is attempting to reconcile Eros and Agape, and it should not be surprising that he notes approvingly that: "Medieval literature with its elaborate Christian allegorization and romantic feeling often approaches the marriage of poetry and Christianity which it is my present purpose to forward."[64] But Knight sees a wide chasm yawning between the poetic statement and that of Christianity: "The main statement of poetry is life and love, the erotic quest; the main statement in the New Testament is also life and love, universal love."[65] Knight would seem to be approaching a vitalistic view when he argues: "But whether expressed in human marriage, social work or art, the erotic instinct is primary; it is the life-instinct."[66] Knight concludes that: "No art, no religion, is to take precedence of life itself."[67] But in spite of the opposition between Eros and

---

[62] Ibid., p. 37. [63] Ibid., p. 49. [64] Ibid., p. 185.
[65] Ibid., p. 212. [66] Ibid., p. 217. [67] Ibid., p. 223.

Christ that Knight sees threatening modern civilization, he is still able to claim that "all poetry is Christian," for two reasons: 1. The task of poetry, the harmonizing of our instinctual lives, is an essentially religious and hence Christian task; and 2. the central doctrine of Christianity, the Incarnation, is, according to Knight, essentially poetic.[68] Knight goes so far as to declare that the Renaissance poets attain to Christian grace by means of their erotically-inspired art.[69]

In many of Knight's later writings he alters his esthetic theory in order to account for the homosexual tendencies he sees in certain great artists, such as Shakespeare and Byron, and in order to find a means of reconciling one of his dualisms, that of Power and Love, the masculine and the feminine. Knight discusses this matter in an essay he added to the later editions of The Christian Renaissance, "The Seraphic Intuition," as well as other books, The Mutual Flame, Lord Byron's Marriage, and The Golden Labyrinth, (1955, 1957, and 1962 respectively) for examples. His argument goes as follows: art exists to resolve the tension between the masculine and feminine elements in the human psyche. Sometimes the masculine predominates in the individual, and sometimes the feminine. The Uranian personality exists when a feminine temperament is yoked to a masculine body, or, which is

---

[68] Ibid., p. 252.

[69] Ibid., p. 255.

rarer, a masculine temperament is yoked to a feminine body.[70] The Uranian, or Seraphic, personality is often inwardly integrated, able to understand far more than either a wholly masculine or a completely feminine individual. Since the Uranian, or bisexual, personality seeks love among members of his own sex there is no possibility of resolving the sexual tension in the natural way on the biological plane. Knight sees much great art--that of Shakespeare and Byron, for example--as motivated by energies that have been diverted from their usual sexual expression. However, the seraphic temperament need not always seek fulfillment in art: the perfectly integrated seraphic temperament--Christ, as Knight finds him to be--will substitute a universal love for the more frequently encountered erotic variety. But in any event, Knight concludes, it is necessary for the continuance of civilization that all energies are not to be directed to biological fulfillment.

Before entering into a discussion of Knight's theory of poetic drama we should examine his celebrated "spatial" method of interpretation. Like many of Knight's theories and methods this too has been with him from the start and is still employed, though on occasion, as in his interpretation of Milton in Chariot of Wrath, Knight deviates from it in practice.

---

[70] See Edward Carpenter's The Intermediate Sex, London, 1908.

In The Wheel of Fire Knight writes that "one must be prepared to see the whole play [of Shakespeare] in space as well as in time."[71] By the temporal element of drama Knight means the story-interest, the action, the sequence of events that unfold as the plot develops. By the spatial Knight means a permanent symbolic structure composed of imagery, themes, and patterns. Sometimes he refers to the spatial qualities of a play as its atmosphere, but always he means something independent of the time-sequence. At one time the spatial quality might reveal itself in a permanent ideological opposition--the intuition-intelligence opposition in Troilus and Cressida, for example; at another time it is the relationship existing between the Othello, Desdemona, and Iago conceptions.[72] Ultimately the distinction between the temporal and the spatial is the difference between the elements in poetry that Knight sees as subject to time and those that reveal the dimension of eternity. As Knight states in The Christian Renaissance, "the constituting elements [of all poetry] grow out of date in a year, an hour, a minute, but the experience symbolized is dateless."[73] It is this permanent element which reveals the spiritual essence, the eternal quality of art, that Knight calls "spatial." The dynamic quality of art is of the temporal

---

[71] Wheel of Fire, p. 3.

[72] Loc. cit.

[73] Christian Renaissance., p. 96.

order, while the static, changeless quality is spatial. The spatial quality of a poetic drama is the embodiment of its spiritual essence, which is the imaginative, intuitive experience or insight for which the poet seeks an objective equivalent.

The spatial quality Knight also defines as the structure that reveals "that burning core of mental or spiritual reality from which each play derives its nature and meaning."[74] Knight's spatial element has much in common with what Eliot offered the literary world as the now-famous "objective correlative." The resemblance is even more pronounced when one recalls that both Knight and Eliot were seeking to escape the nineteenth-century preoccupation with plot, character, story-interest, and the photographic representation of reality. What resemblance an Eliot poem has to reality comes not in the temporal sequence of events but in the imagery, drawn from actuality but charged by the poet with symbolic meanings. In his "On the Principles of Shakespeare Interpretation," Knight declares that "we should not look for perfect verisimilitude to life, but rather see each play [of Shakespeare] as an expanded metaphor, by means of which the original vision has been projected into forms roughly correspondent with actuality, conforming thereto with greater or lesser exactitude according to the demands of its own nature."[75] Drama by its very

---

[74] Wheel of Fire, p. 14.

[75] Ibid., p. 15.

nature is more external than any other form of literature; it is Knight's insistence upon the importance of the poetic vision of Shakespeare's plays to the exclusion of the elements of plot and character and various topical concerns that is at once his major contribution to Shakespeare scholarship and his major weakness. It is this that brought upon Knight criticisms such as that of Charlton that I quoted in the last chapter.

If poetry is an ideal fusion of space and time, then it partakes of eternity; in Laureate of Peace, Knight declares that: "Space-time is eternity, and art an approximation to its expression."[76] Thus it is easy to understand what Knight means when he writes that "space-time seeing has about it a certain forwardness, a prophetic element."[77] There are certain obvious similarities between some of the statements in S. Alexander's Space, Time, and Deity and Knight's theory of art. Alexander writes that: "Time is the mind of Space and Space the body of Time."[78] Knight, like Alexander and Oswald Spengler in his The Decline of the West,[79] identifies time with the intellect and space with structure.

There is another statement--Knight denies having

---

[76] Laureate of Peace, p. 81.

[77] Christian Renaissance, p. 12.

[78] S. Alexander, Space, Time, and Deity, London, 1920, 2 vols.; Vol.II, Bk. III, Chapt. 2, p. 38.

[79] Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West, New York, 1927, p. 122.

read Alexander[80]—in Alexander's two-volume work with which Knight's esthetic theory has obvious affinities: "Thus in the beautiful object, whether of art or nature, one part is contributed by the mind, and it is relatively a matter of indifference whether the mind in question is that of the person who creates the work of art or that of the mere spectator, who follows in the artist's traces."[81] When one recalls Knight's view that the interpreter and the artist cooperate to realize the full potentialities of the work of art, one can see the resemblance. Or when we recall that the interpreter's principal task, according to Knight, is to imagine himself into the original poetic experience, we can again see the resemblance. The importance of the imagination, which is the mind's contribution, again shows Knight's affinity with Coleridge and the romantics.

Poetic imagery is most important in Knight's space-time scheme, for the ability to see significant patterns in the space-time world is what makes the poet a "seer" or a prophet. The imaginative sight itself, according to Knight, is not ordinary space-sight, but is a mental reality only.[82] Poetic imagery becomes important because it is only in that form that imaginative sight can be expressed in visual or aural terms. In order to capture the spiritual

---

[80] In a private letter to this writer dated January 8, 1964.

[81] Alexander, Vol. II, p. 291.

[82] Christian Renaissance, p. 13.

essence of a poem one must be able to hold the images in a significant pattern while at the same time letting them go by sequentially in the temporal flux: "We must see a poem first as a rapid series of complex pictures; next, keeping the whole in our memory, try to possess its images in one expansive view without forgetting the series."[83] Certainly no easy task, when we recall that poetic drama takes hours to view and that the early imagery fades out of consciousness as the later appears. It would seem that only the cloistered scholar and the man with a phenomenal memory would be able to construct the metaphoric structure of a play in his mind and keep it there while later waves of action continue to assault his sensibility. But this apparently is what Knight would have.

Knight's "spatial" theory is at odds with the esthetic theory of Lessing, who in his Laccoön (1766) discussed the limits of painting and poetry. Painting is primarily concerned with figures and colors in space while poetry is largely realized by means of articulate sounds in time. The two art-forms approach each other, since painting can imitate actions (which occur in temporal sequences), but only through bodies (which exist side by side in space); and poetry can imitate painting, but only through actions. G. Wilson Knight's "spatial" theory of course assumes the necessity of capturing the imagery as it occurs in the temporal sequences of poetry and constructing out of it a

---

[83] Ibid., p. 14.

mind-structure. Lessing rejects the theory that Knight refers to as his "spatial" theory. First he presents the kind of objection to his own theory that Knight's view would raise: "But some will object, the signs or characters which poetry employs are not solely such as succeed each other; they may be also arbitrary; and, as arbitrary signs, they are certainly capable of representing bodies just as they exist in space. We find instances of this in Homer himself, for we have only to remember his Shield of Achilles, in order to have the most decisive example in how detailed and yet poetical manner some single thing can be depicted, with its various parts side by side."[84] [Italics mine.] Lessing demolished the "spatial" theory in the following way: "I do not deny to speech in general the power of portraying a bodily whole by its parts: speech can do so, because its signs or characters, although they follow one another consecutively, are nevertheless arbitrary signs; but I do deny it to speech as the medium of poetry, because such verbal delineations of bodies fail of the illusion on which poetry particularly depends, and this illusion, I contend, must fail them for the reason that the co-existence of the physical object comes into collision with the consecutiveness of speech, and the former being resolved into the latter, the dismemberment of the whole is made uncommonly difficult and not seldom impossible."[85] Therefore Lessing concludes that: "It still

---

[84] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Laocoön, Nathan the Wise and Minna von Barnhelm, London, 1949, p. 60.

[85] Ibid., p. 63.

holds good; succession in time is the sphere of the poet, as space is that of the painter."[86]

The spatial elements in Shakespearian drama Knight allows to be both the imaginative design and the philosophic significance of the play, while the temporal may be both the story and the plot. It is the incarnated thoughts and feelings of the poet that form the "spatial" element.[87] Elsewhere Knight calls the spatial quality an "emotional field".[88] Here he calls the temporal sequence the "horizontal time-stream" and makes the spatial quality "vertical". The vertical dimension is the world not of time but of immediate experience, the world of immortality.[89] Thus we see that what began as a metaphoric structure has become a tower of Babel designed to scale the heights of heaven. The rapidity with which Knight converted an interpretative device, good within its limits, into a metaphysical scheme is indicative of the quick shift--foreshadowed in his earliest work--from literary interpretation to metaphysical speculation. The spatial method, which began with a metaphoric structure ends with a metaphysical one.

Later, in his The Starlit Dome, (1941), Knight applied his spatial method to four of the romantics--Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats--and we again find the spatial or vertical dimension leading to eternity or immortality: "Art is born from a jerking of consciousness

---

[86] Ibid., pp. 64-65.

[87] Christian Renaissance, p. 37.

[88] Ibid., p. 182.

[89] Loc. cit.

outside and above itself, throwing responsibility on to a higher centre, and technical structures are the medium through which this other domination is conjured into existence."[90] The italics are mine because I wish to emphasize Knight's use of a metaphoric structure to suggest permanence, immortality, eternity. With the poetry providing a view of eternity it is not then unusual that Knight refers to Wordsworth, the creator of such poetry, as "a lonely prophet of the eternal."[91] We will recall that Knight's first published article, which appeared in The Adelphi in 1926, was a note on Wordsworth's Immortality Ode and that his "The Poet and Immortality," which appeared the following year in The Shakespeare Review, outlined his thesis concerning Shakespeare's last plays. Therefore it need not seem surprising that Knight is The Starlit Dome should state that: "Wordsworth's ode, like Shakespeare's Pericles or Shelley's Prometheus, is a vision of immortality or life victorious."[92] When we remember that Knight sees immortality as a vertical dimension completely free from the horizontal, temporal, dimension, it is not odd that he goes on to add that Wordsworth's ode "need have nothing to say about life-after-death. It is rather a vision of essential, all-conquering life."[93] For life-after-death would be a continuation of the temporal sequence

---

[90] Starlit Dome, p. 38.

[91] Ibid., p. 12. [92] Ibid., p. 39.

[93] Loc. cit.

unchecked by death, which Knight never sees immortality as being. The "all-conquering life" is another reference to Knight's vitalistic gospel, which sees the erotic instinct as at least equal with the universal love of Christ. When Knight judges that in the poetry of Wordsworth "there is a failure in face of erotic powers,"[94] he is again manifesting his vitalistic belief.

Knight's desire to see art as a blend of time and eternity is apparent throughout The Starlit Dome and the title itself is indicative of its author's central preoccupation. In this work it is Coleridge who best fits Knight's purpose, possibly because Coleridge has, ultimately, exerted a more profound influence upon Knight than any other literary figure. Knight in The Starlit Dome perhaps succeeds best with Coleridge because he sees so much of himself in that great romantic poet and metaphysician, who, like Knight, lost himself in endless metaphysical speculations and who, like Knight, used the sovereign imagination as a means of harmonizing so many of the discords of life. Consequently Knight finds that in The Garden of Boccaccio Coleridge "feels literary art as, preeminently, a fusion of the fluid and statuesque, of sequence and pattern, content and form: which indeed, it is, all poetry aiming to blend, as it were, the river and dome of Kubla Khan."[95] Even Coleridge, though, lends himself to

---

[94] Ibid., p. 82.

[95] Ibid., p. 117.

Knight's purposes only within certain limits, limits which are not respected when Knight writes that: "Whatever his confessed beliefs and religious acceptances, Coleridge's genius when given to full-length and complex dramatic creation obeys a poetic law functioning similarly in Shakespeare, Byron, and Nietzsche, and his designing here implicitly charges our religious heritage with a certain decadence, a loss of contact with power-sources and heroic virility...."[96] [Italics mine] As he did in Laureate of Peace with Pope, and in The Burning Oracle with diverse literary figures, Knight is here doing with Coleridge: he is violently forcing a literary figure into a preconceived pattern--Knight calls it "obeying a poetic law"--in order to serve his own private, somewhat eccentric, metaphysical ends. But from Knight's viewpoint we should regard Coleridge as being greatly honored: he has been favorably compared with members of Knight's pantheon, Shakespeare, Byron, and Nietzsche, men in whose work Knight finds a "blend of instinct with sanctity and of power with the grace to make a golden humanism...."[97]

Knight is forever dragging in transcendental categories; in The Starlit Dome he writes that: "Eternity is the objective view of subjective experience: hence the importance of poetry."[98] And later in the same work he

---

[96] Ibid., p. 158.

[97] Loc. cit.

[98] Ibid., p. 203.

asserts that: "Each poem is a unique whole, with its own way of introducing us afresh to transcendental awareness."[99] One last quotation, this time from the Appendix to the 1959 edition of The Starlit Dome: "From the ancient world down, from Homer and Aeschylus to Byron and Hardy, the business of great literature may be defined as the interweaving of human affairs with spiritualistic appearances...."[100] This should be enough to indicate that Knight's primary concern is not with literature as literature but with literature as prophecy or philosophy, or religious statement, or an embodiment of eternal spiritual essences. What Thomas Hulme accuses the romantics of forever doing--of always "dragging in the infinite"--Knight is also continually doing, and on his own admission in Lord Byron's Marriage: "In one form or another, transcendental categories continually invade our discussion."[101] If one asks for evidence of Knight's obsession with the infinite from his interpretations of Shakespeare instead of from books such as The Christian Renaissance or The Starlit Dome, neither of which is concerned with Shakespearian interpretation (though The Christian Renaissance contains much theory), I refer him to The Wheel of Fire, where Knight declares that:"The grandeur and essential optimism of the true Shakespearian

---

[99] Ibid., p. 314.

[100] The Starlit Dome (1959 ed.), p. 316.

[101] Lord Byron's Marriage, p. 261.

tragedy is due to these two elements: passion and death. And both equally 'bring in the infinite'."[102] But the infinite came in very early in Knight's work: it was present from the time of his first published article on Wordsworth's Immortality Ode and present in his Shakespeare interpretation from the time of his first published statements in The Shakespeare Review. What happens in Knight's later work is not that he becomes romantic, or that he becomes increasingly preoccupied with the infinite; he was a romantic preoccupied with immortality from the start. What he does do is turn from Shakespeare, whom he knows intimately, to other writers whom he knows less well; he discovers nationalism; he becomes acquainted with Nietzsche's work; he modifies his erotic esthetic to account for the homosexual artist; he becomes a spiritualist; he ceases to pay attention to the integrity of the individual work of art or even the individual writer; he starts seeing everything in terms of Hegelian oppositions; and he begins to repeat himself.

There is another element in Knight's esthetic theory that owes something to the romantics. Poetry is expression, but not just the personalistic, peculiarly private, utterance of the individual poet. In The Wheel of Fire Knight finds poetry to be "largely a revelation of 'soul' or 'spirit'."[103] The experiences of the poet that his work

---

[102] Wheel of Fire, p. 245.

[103] Ibid., p. 286.

mirrors are not just his private emotions or subjective feelings; in The Christian Renaissance Knight declares that: "All great poetry mirrors our experiences, our immortality."[104] Furthermore, there is a universality of spiritual experiences: whether the poet is Shakespeare, Dante, or Goethe, "our greater deathless selves are all alike," and the poet's life-work is always "a record of his own and our own immortality".[105]

Elsewhere in The Christian Renaissance Knight shows yet another instance of romantic theory: "The poet sees with the romantic vision. He does not write actually saturated in its fire, but recreates his experiences in passivity."[106] This obviously goes straight back to Wordsworth's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads. In his Principles of Shakespearian Production Knight again refers to the creative process: "Whatever personal distresses and conflicts of his day the artist bodies forth, the resulting stillness makes a significant wedge into life exposing light for other generations with other conflicts."[107] [Italics mine] This resulting stillness is in the product, but it had its origin in the process: "The germ of composition is an intuitive perception of stillness of some sort, an idea or quality."[108]

---

[104] Christian Renaissance, p. 198. [105] Loc. cit.

[106] Ibid., p. 202.

[107] Principles of Shakespearian Production, p. 40.

[108] Ibid., p. 41.

This brings us back to Knight's "spatial" quality: the "stillness" in the creative process in the eternal, spiritual essence, not itself subject to time, but which comes upon the poet in his receptive passivity. True to his theory that the work of art is an incarnation possessing a "body" and a "soul," Knight believes that "we must suppose there to be always a moment of conception during the early stages of composition, when the essential nature of the work to be is first properly apparent."[109] The "stillness" in the creative product is the permanent metaphoric structure, which Knight calls "spatial" and which he throughout The Starlit Dome is comparing to architecture, the dome especially, with its static, fixed quality. Referring to the performance of a Shakespeare play, Knight in Principles of Shakespearian Production states that "a performance is...not simply a sequence but architectonic, and makes a mind-building."[110]

Knight has sometimes[111] referred to William James's The Varieties of Religious Experience but nowhere[112] in his work does he refer to James's Human Immortality (1898). I mention it in passing because there is so much there--as there is in The Varieties of Religious Experience--that Knight obviously is in agreement with. For example, one

---

[109] Loc. cit.

[110] Principles of Shakespearian Production, p. 42.

[111] Wheel of Fire, p. 240, in "Shakespeare and Tolstoy," pp. 240-248.

[112] In the letter dated January 8, 1964, Knight denies having read James's Human Immortality.

of the theses of Human Immortality is that though thought is a function of the brain, it need not necessarily be only productive function: "We are entitled also to consider permissive or transmissive function."[113] Knight has asserted that: "I am myself conscious not so much of thinking out ideas as of receiving thoughts that come either from within or without, in meditation or conversation."[114] Knight, who sees a universal spirit-world behind our everyday reality, would obviously accept the statement of James that "idealistic philosophy declares the whole world of natural experience, as we get it, to be but a time-mask, shattering or refracting the one infinite thought which is the sole reality into those millions of infinite streams of consciousness known to us as our private selves."[115] The resemblance in outlooks is startling when James goes on to illustrate his statement with a dome-image from Shelley's Adonais, much like what Knight draws from Yeats's Byzantium to use as the title of his The Starlit Dome in order to illustrate his spatial theory; James quotes the following lines: "Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,/Stains the white radiance of eternity."[116] The only approach to the subject of the brain's having a transmissive function in The Varieties of Religious Experience occurs early in the first lecture where James in

---

[113] William James, Human Immortality, Boston, 1898, p. 15.

[114] Christian Renaissance, p. 12.

[115] Human Immortality, pp. 15-16. [116] Ibid., p. 16.

passing mentions that: "If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish the chief condition of the requisite receptivity."[117] Knight, who sees literary creation as something of a "mystery,"[118] has simply brought the old belief in poetic inspiration up to date.

But there is no need to insist upon Knight's having absorbed his view of poetic creation from William James; he has acknowledged[119] the influence of John Masefield's Shakespeare and Spiritual Life, and there we find much from which Knight has probably drawn; one such statement in that: "Imagination is controlling and using the energy of which we are made. Those who succeed in this have access, through their partial energies, to all energy. The thoughts of these men have the divinity of all energy: they do not die."[120] Recalling Knight's vitalism and spiritualism and remembering his stressing of the sovereignty of the imagination, the eternity that is present in art through its "spatial" qualities, and the immortality-visions he finds present in much poetry, we can see to what degree Knight's views are in harmony with Masefield's. One more quotation from Masefield's book--which originated as the Romanes Lecture for 1924 at Oxford--should prove

---

[117] Varieties of Religious Experience, New York, 1936.

[118] Principles of Shakespearian Production, p. 41.

[119] Prefatory Note to Wheel of Fire, p. ix.

[120] John Masefield, Shakespeare and Spiritual Life, Oxford, 1924.

beyond a doubt the essential agreement between the two men: "Thought and image in these states of energy are one; together they make poetry; that mixture of idea with language that lives."[121] Now Knight has asserted that poetry is a "fusion of the subjective mind with words to create a potent and living utterance."[122] Recalling Knight's insistence that the work of art is a "visionary whole" we can conclude that Knight would subscribe to H. D. F. Kitto's view that "the connexion between the form and the content is so vital that the two may be said to be ultimately identical."[123]

Colin Still's interpretative study of The Tempest, Shakespeare's Mystery Play, appeared in 1921, long before Knight's first work appeared. But the expanded version of this book, The Timeless Theme, was not published until 1936. What distinguishes the later book from its predecessor is the addition of a sweeping critical theory. The application of the theory, which is what Shakespeare's Mystery Play is, thus preceded the formulation of the theory it illustrated by several years. The book is an amazing example of a complete critical theory applicable to all art emerging from an interpretative study of one play, which is merely an example of one literary form in one

---

[121] Loc. cit.

[122] Christian Renaissance, p. 26.

[123] H.D.F. Kitto, Form and Meaning in Drama, London, 1956, p. v.

of the arts. But I am not introducing The Timeless Theme in order to criticize it but rather to point out where G. Wilson Knight's esthetic theory leads when it is carried to its logical conclusion.

In the first place, Still divides all art into two classes: "A work that belongs to the lower type of imaginative art is a 'reflection of realities peculiar to the individual consciousness", while "a work that belongs to the higher type of imaginative art is a 'reflection of realities existing in the universal consciousness."[124] Notice that art as personal expression is the lower kind, while art created by the impersonal imagination is the higher. Recalling Knight's statements (made in The Wheel of Fire and The Christian Renaissance, both of which were published before The Timeless Theme) about the passivity of the artist and his access to eternal spiritual essences we can see that Knight and Still are in substantial if not total agreement in their esthetic theorizing.

Knight's view that a study of the artist's intentions is irrelevant and that the process of artistic creation is largely an unconscious, non-intellectual activity is repeated by Still: "The whole difficulty of this question of 'intentions' lies in the fact that genuine imaginative art is the result of an unconscious process whereby expression is given to perceptions of which the artist may or may not be conscious."[125] I wish to emphasize at this point that

---

[124] Colin Still, The Timeless Theme, London, 1936, p. 6.

[125] Ibid., p. 7.

Still did not necessarily get his ideas from Knight: both men are simply setting up an esthetic that had been stated more or less coherently by the great romantics--Wordsworth, Shelley, but preeminently Coleridge--and reformulated throughout the nineteenth century. I also wish to emphasize again the essential romanticism of all of Knight's theory and practice.

Knight, we may remember, regards art as both a revelation and a mystery; Still writes that "every work of imaginative art, though it may be in intent a revelation, is in effect a mystery."[126] Knight has seen the interpreter's function in relation to literature as being analogous to that of the theologian's with holy scriptures; Still sees the critic of imaginative art as "a reader of riddles."[127] We may also recall Knight's coupling the esthetic experience with the religious (the religious being merely the artistic turned inward); Still states that: "the realities of which a work of imaginative genius is the reflection are precisely those that are contemplated by the artist in the same kind of mystical experience; and his indirect and enigmatical expression of the [work of art], has a close affinity with what the theologians call a religious mystery."[128] Still echoes Knight's view of the interpreter's function when he concludes that: "In this capacity as interpreter, therefore, the critic stands in relation to the artist as

---

[126] Ibid., p. 8.

[127] Ibid., p. 9. [128] Ibid., p. 12.

the Biblical soothsayer stood to the dreamer of dreams. Indeed, the critic of imaginative art is essentially an interpreter of dreams.[129] One last quotation should prove beyond a doubt just how much Still's theory is a paraphrasing of what had already appeared in Knight's work: "In short, all works of art which are the product of imaginative genius are mystical enigmas akin in character and significance to the religious mysteries; and they can be understood and interpreted only by the critic who is himself a mystic and who is capable of the spiritual perception of genius."[130] Thus it is apparent that Still is like Knight even down to the weakest point of his theory, which is his failure to distinguish properly the creative task from the critical one. The total subjectivity of such an esthetic theory, the extreme individualism, the insistence on making the imagination the be-all and end-all, the arrogant or naïve assumption that he, G. Wilson Knight, or he, Colin Still, possesses the requisite Inner Light, and the final plunge into mysticism are shared by these two latter-day romantics. In Chapter IV, where I analyze the last five plays of Shakespeare and Knight's interpretation of them, Colin Still's work on The Tempest will again enter our discussion.

What remains to be discussed of Knight's views of art pertain to his theory of poetic drama, though I shall

---

[129] Ibid., p. 13. [130] Ibid., p. 14.

defer its application to Shakespeare's plays until the next chapter. Each play, Knight claims, should be regarded as "a visionary whole, close-knit in personification, atmospheric suggestion, and direct poetic-symbolism...."[131] Knight is simply claiming for poetic drama the same esthetic qualities that are present, he believes, in all great poetry. The essential meaning of poetic drama, according to Knight in The Wheel of Fire--and here he is referring specifically to Shakespeare--cannot be captured through an examination of its stagecraft. Knight claims that the deeper meaning of poetic drama resides in the poetry, not the drama: "But the dramatic nature of a play's origin cannot be adduced to disprove a quality implicit in the work itself."[132] To Knight, the qualities that differentiate a play from an epic or an ode are important only as "the grammar of dramatic structure" in which the poet expresses his vision.[133]

Though drama is usually taken to be the most impersonal and externalized form of literary art, Knight harks back to the romantics in his insistence that the poet [Shakespeare in this case] is present in a particular dramatic personage: "But in the single figure of Hamlet he has attempted to reflect the totality of his creating mind, and it is in respect of this that Hamlet himself more truly mirrors the personal--that is, the whole--

---

[131] Wheel of Fire, p. 11.

[132] Ibid., p. 13. [133] Loc. cit.

creative mentality of the poet than any one of the other tragic heroes or villains I have noticed in this paper."[134] "This paper" happens to be the essay "Symbolic Personification" in The Wheel of Fire, which is significant for our purposes because it reveals that Knight from the outset of his career saw Shakespeare revealed in his work, though he does distinguish between Shakespeare's "creative mentality," which he sees in Hamlet, and Shakespeare the man.

Knight in his Shakespeare and Tolstoy (1934) attributes religious significance to great dramatic poetry, and deplores the fact that much modern drama has sadly strayed from its religious origin:

> The drama has, indeed, fallen from its high origin. The problem is crucial today, and depends on our understanding of Shakespeare. Whilst Shakespeare's plays are allowed to stand insouciantly regardless of all ultimate questions, then we can safely continue to deny any necessary religious content to the greatest dramatic poetry; since no one will readily deny to Shakespeare at least an honourable place in dramatic history. Once, however, we see Shakespeare is an artist fit to stand by Dante in point of religious apprehension, then the case for the religious message and purpose of the drama becomes unanswerable.[135]

In Principles of Shakespearian Production Knight states that: "Great drama is something more than entertainment. Rather I would call it a ceremony in which actors and audience share in the formal unfurling of some deeply

---

[134] Ibid., p. 255.

[135] Shakespeare and Tolstoy, p. 26.

significant pattern."[136] One can see how Knight is taking drama back to what he regards as its origin in religious ritual: what is the "formal unfurling of some deeply significant pattern" if not a religious ritual? When Knight wonders about the relation of the Shakespearian play to the Christian Mass,[137] he has not only taken modern drama back to what he assumes to be its source but also betrayed his own complete disregard for history.

The action in drama is not, according to Knight, superficial: "it is rather sacramental."[138] This statement is not surprising: Knight has elsewhere claimed that all poetry is ultimately Christian, that poetry is a kind of Incarnation, that poetry reveals spiritual essences and possesses an eternal dimension, and that poetry is prophetic and futuristic. Only one who has an imperfect knowledge of history--both religious and secular--and an almost incredible confusion of purposes could identify art and religion as totally as Knight does. Throughout his work there is every indication that to Knight art has no proper function of its own but serves the same end as religion, a religion of the vaguest, most nebulous, and untraditional kind, a religion that sometimes depends upon a dimension of spiritual essences and at other times on a glorified natural instinct or eroticism.

---

[136] *Principles of Shakespearian Production*, p. 217.

[137] *Ibid.*, p. 232.

[138] *The Burning Oracle*, p. 20.

Sometimes Knight sees poetic drama as a means of expressing deep psychological truths; he at one time refers to "the unveiling and re-expressing of hidden psychic depths that characterize all poetic drama...."[139] But most recently, in The Golden Labyrinth (1962) Knight sees all drama as containing a Nietzschean conflict between Apollo and Dionysus: "Though Apollo remains our ideal, he is perpetually challenged by Dionysus. This is the archetypal conflict from which all our dramatic conflicts derive; and the desired end is union."[140] Knight's later passion for seeing everything in terms of oppositions is evident in his estimate of medieval drama: "The root dramatic conflict of the Middle Ages is the conflict of (i) the sadistic instinct, reflected in the Crucifix and the torments of the Mystery plays; and (ii) the seraphic. We may call it an opposition of power and love."[141] Two more quotations from The Golden Labyrinth should suffice to provide some idea what Knight's most recent theory of drama is; the spiritualistic Knight is apparent in the following: "we discover its [drama's] essence whether tragic or comoedic, in a tension between normal experience and another order of being."[142] In conclusion, Knight sees drama's one purpose as "the marriage of the Dionysian energies of Apollonian forms...."[143]

---

[139] Ibid., p. 49.

[140] The Golden Labyrinth, p. 5. [141] Ibid., p. 39.

[142] Ibid., p. xii. [143] Ibid., p. 392.

In summary, Knight has devised an interpretative method that was objective only in its early application to Shakespeare's plays, where his interest in themes, images, and patterns was dominant. The method is imaginative and subjectivistic in theory, and with the rejection of the critical intellect Knight knowingly forsook the task of criticism for that of interpretation. Knight fails, I believe, to make an adequate distinction between the creation of art and its interpretation: indeed, the task of the interpreter, according to Knight, is the "recreation" of the work of art.

In brief, Knight's "spatial" method is the abstracting of imagery from its context in order to create metaphoric structures that he sees as revealing the spiritual essence of the poem. The structure should, according to Knight, be retained in the mind's eye, though this is manifestly difficult, since poetry--and poetic drama--are temporal arts that reveal themselves in a time-sequence. Moreover, poetic drama is presented in a series of actions, and no matter how symbolic these actions may be, it is extremely difficult to hold them in a static relationship in the mind as the drama continues to unfold.

All great art to Knight is futuristic, prophetic; art he sometimes regards as externalized religion, sometimes as an objectified intuition of eternity, and sometimes as sublimated instinct. Art to Knight is profoundly religious, ultimately even Christian. All art is seen by

Knight as an Incarnation, a union of the spiritual and the material, the temporal and the eternal.

Poetic drama is envisioned by Knight as revealing its deepest secrets through its poetry, not through its plot, character, or stage-worthiness. Poetic drama he finds to be profoundly religious: he sees it as religious ritual in which symbolic characters engaged in symbolic actions speak in symbolic language.

CHAPTER THREE

G. Wilson Knight has developed a theory of interpretation that attributes an essential unity to the whole of Shakespeare's work; but he has not, as I hope to prove later, by any means taken into full account all of Shakespeare's plays; he has not, as I shall try to indicate, obtained equally successful results in applying his interpretative method to the various plays individually; and he has not, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, been consistent in what he believes to be the unifying elements. His earliest Shakespearian interpretations, in Myth and Miracle (1929), were concerned with four of the final plays, Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale, and The Tempest. It is noteworthy that Henry VIII had not yet assumed its later significance in Knight's scheme at this time. These essays were followed by his interpretations of various tragedies in The Wheel of Fire (1930) and by The Imperial Theme (1931), which dealt with the Roman plays.

During the Second World War, Knight published his interpretations[1] of the earlier history plays which he saw as culminating in Henry V, the hero of which is taken to be Shakespeare's ideal king; his story, according to Knight,

---

[1]This Sceptred Isle (1940), Chariot of Wrath (1942), The Olive and the Sword (1944), The Dynasty of Stowe (1945), Hiroshima (1946), Christ and Nietzsche (1948); the dates of composition are, in the order already listed: 1940, 1941, 1940, 1942-3-4, 1945, and 1939.

marks the high point in Shakespeare's plays of British destiny until the appearance of Henry VIII, which Knight claims to be the crowning achievement of Shakespeare's entire work. Knight has said little about the comedies, and what he has found in the early history plays is primarily non-literary, since it is concerned with the application of Shakespeare's supposed view of British destiny to the religious and political problems of today, nor has he said much of the plays as dramatic poetry. Knight's books about the history plays were motivated by the Second World War, when England was fighting for her survival, and possess little literary value.

Knight's best work, I shall try to prove, is the interpretations of the plays beginning chronologically with Julius Caesar and ending with Henry VIII. My inclusion of Knight's estimate of Henry VIII does not mean that I accept his evaluation of the play or that I endorse the position he assigns to this decidedly inferior work in what he refers to as the Shakespeare Progress.

The Crown of Life (1947) is Knight's return to the last plays, and this time Henry VIII is included. The Mutual Flame (1955), a book devoted to Shakespeare's sonnets, possesses little literary value but does reflect the later Knight's preoccupation with homosexuality and spiritualism, and also assigns great importance to the sonnets by claiming them to be central to Shakespeare's work, of great importance to his spiritual development, and possessing important similarities with certain plays.

The Sovereign Flower (1958), like The Crown of Life, is a return to an earlier interest: The Sovereign Flower restates many of Knight's views that had appeared as wartime propaganda based more or less on Shakespeare's history plays. Here again his later estimate of Henry VIII, which first appeared in The Olive and The Sword (1944), is much in evidence; he now thinks it to be the culmination of Shakespeare's life-work, the play in which Shakespeare's early concerns with romantic love and patriotism, which Knight saw as culminating in Henry V, and his later tragic and mystical insights are all finally joined in an esthetically and metaphysically satisfying synthesis that is in essential harmony with Christianity.

At the time Knight wrote Myth and Miracle he had not yet concluded that all of the Shakespeare canon possessed an organic unity objectified in a tempest-music opposition,[2] but he had decided already at this time that there was a Shakespearian progress beginning about the middle of Shakespeare's writing career and culminating in the Final Plays.[3] At this time he saw the plays from Julius Caesar on as falling into three groups; the first is that of the problem plays, where Knight sees "mental division: on the one side an exquisite apprehension of the spiritual--beauty, romance,

---

[2]Though he was already moving in that direction; Cf. p. 23 of Crown of Life, where he writes that "The recurrent poetic symbol of tragedy in Shakespeare is 'storm' or 'tempest'." And on p. 24 of the same book: "The predominating symbols [in the Final Plays] are loss in tempest and revival to the sounds of music."

[3]Crown of Life, p. 9.

poetry; on the other, the hate theme--loathing of the impure, aversion from the animal kinship of man, disgust at the decaying body of death."[4] The second group is that of the tragedies, where Knight sees this dualism being resolved.[5] The third group transcends the tragic intuition with one of immortality.[6] The plays of these three groups, the plays written from 1599 to 1611, Knight in Myth and Miracle finds culminating in The Tempest, which is the conclusion of Shakespeare's spiritual progress.[7] This view recurs in The Wheel of Fire as the fourth of Knight's principles of Shakespeare interpretation. Later we shall find Henry VIII substituted for The Tempest. But at the time Myth and Miracle was written Knight could say that: "The Tempest is at the same time a record of Shakespeare's spiritual progress and a statement of the vision to which that progress has brought him."[8]

We should recall the romantic insistence upon a coherence in Shakespeare's work, a coherence that is given the work by the pattern that the work reveals of the man's spiritual growth. This romantic insistence we found in Dowden, who exemplifies the nineteenth century view of Shakespeare-immanent-in-his-work. Knight is manifesting his essential romanticism--and his kinship with Dowden--when he asserts that: "The progress from spiritual pain

---

[4] Ibid., p. 23. [5] Loc. cit.

[6] Ibid., pp. 23-24. [7] Ibid., p. 26.

[8] Ibid., p. 27.

and despairing thought through stoic acceptance to a serene and mystic joy is a universal rhythm of the spirit of man."[9] It was Dowden who put the Shakespeare of the last plays "on the heights," and Knight keeps him there.

The first element that Knight finds unifying Shakespeare's plays is thus the artist himself, though it is not his individual problems as much as his universal spiritual experience that is evident in the plays. Consequently in The Wheel of Fire, Knight can write of Troilus and Cressida: "The creating mind of the poet seems to have been obsessed in the writing of this play by the concept of time...."[10] This romantic concern with art as process instead of product is also apparent in an essay on Macbeth in the same book: "The Macbeth universe is woven in a texture of a single pattern. The whole play is one swift act of the poet's mind, and as such must be interpreted, since the technique confronts us not with separated integers of 'character' or incident, but with a molten welding of thought with thought, event with event."[11]

It is Knight the romantic's assumption that Shakespeare's spiritual and artistic maturity are more or less coterminous that accounts for his assertion in one of the Lear essays in The Wheel of Fire that the "ghoulish horrors" found in Lear are "the very stuff of the Lear of Shakespeare's

---

[9] Ibid., p. 29.

[10] Wheel of Fire, p. 66. [11] Ibid., p. 141.

youth, Titus Andronicus."[12] Many scholars have pointed out elements in Shakespeare's early work that prefigure elements of his later work, but seeing Titus Andronicus as an immature Lear is probably one of the kindest things that has ever been said for that bloody potboiler, the worst play Shakespeare ever wrote. In The Burning Oracle (1939) Knight maintains that: "Shakespeare's work develops through a reorganizing and repenetration rather than a change of material. In his last period favourite poetic impressions tend to present themselves as dramatic actualities: as persons, or events, or both."[13] Furthermore, in The Crown of Life he states that "Shakespeare is continually at work splitting up and recombining already used plots, persons, and themes, weaving something 'new and strange' from old material."[14]

In an essay in The Wheel of Fire where he compares Tolstoy's spiritual experience with that of Shakespeare, Knight adheres to the romantic view that art is the objectified experience of the artist and that it is the artist himself who provides the principle of unity to his work. After maintaining that "Hamlet inaugurates the period of pained thought in the sequence of Shakespeare's plays,"[15]

---

[12] Ibid., p. 170.

[13] Burning Oracle, p. 55.

[14] Crown of Life, p. 203.

[15] Wheel of Fire, p. 240.

Knight defends the view that Shakespeare's work is a record of its author's spiritual experience: "Now, even though it could be proved that Shakespeare was not suffering from a conscious melancholy during the writing of Hamlet, that he was not in a state of conscious mystic vision when he wrote The Tempest, the significance of the series bounded by these plays would in no sense be impaired."[16] After all, Knight goes on to assert, "they might reflect a previous rhythm of spiritual experience rising from the 'unconscious mind'; or they might be divinely inspired."[17] Knight does not say why the work as a whole must reflect any "rhythm of spiritual experience" at all; but his theory of artistic creation, which we discussed in the last chapter, provides Knight's answer. The creative task, we recall, Knight considers an involuntary, unconscious one in which the intellect's role is a purely negative one. A spiritual essence must be present in all works of art, according to Knight, or it is not art. This spiritual quality is provided by the poet's soul, which the impersonal imagination provides with a material body in the form of words possessing symbolic meanings. Thus the soul-experiences of the poet enter into his artistic creations whether he knows it or not.

Many Shakespeare critics have debated how much of Shakespeare there is in Hamlet and vice versa. Knight at one point in "Symbolic Personification," an essay in

---

[16] Ibid., p. 241. [17] Loc. cit.

The Wheel of Fire, asserts that "in the single figure of Hamlet he [Shakespeare] has attempted to reflect the totality of his creating mind, and it is in respect of this that Hamlet himself more truly mirrors the personal--that is, the whole--creative mentality of the poet than any one of the other tragic heroes I have noticed in this paper."[18]

Knight sees the poet's mind as accommodating a triangular relationship whose members are roughly analogous to mankind, diabolical cynicism, and the divine principle (Posthumus-Iachimo-Imogen and Othello-Iago-Desdemona, for examples): "in the all inclusive statement of The Tempest, the three figures are seen to be three modes of the poet's mind: there Prospero has mastered, and controls, both Ariel and Caliban."[19]

A few more examples should prove conclusively that Knight throughout his work--and not only in The Wheel of Fire and Myth and Miracle, from which I have been quoting--consistently sees the plays as records of Shakespeare's spiritual experiences. In Principles of Shakespearian Production Knight writes that: "Macbeth is, as it were, a solid of which the length may be a Holinshed story but the height a Christian philosophy of grace and evil, and the breadth Shakespeare's own emotional experience."[20] In The Burning Oracle Knight assumes that: "Iago is

---

[18] Ibid., p. 255. [19] Ibid., p. 256.

[20] Principles of Shakespearian Production, p. 17.

certainly part of Shakespeare's mind...."[21] And in Chariot of Wrath Knight declares that: "Samson Agonistes reflects Milton's own story as surely as The Tempest reflects Shakespeare's."[22] Furthermore, in The Olive and the Sword Knight finds that in King John "we may notice Shakespeare's early feeling for England's true strength...."[23] It is Shakespeare's own, personal, patriotism that Knight sees in the early history plays, and he asserts that Shakespeare's royalism is most apparent in Richard II.[24] In The Olive and the Sword Knight maintains that: "Here [in Timon of Athens] Shakespeare sets his soul on paper as perhaps in no other work, not even Hamlet."[25] Further proof of Knight's reading a personal view of the poet into his work is the following: "the rights Shakespeare ultimately believes in are only those which themselves derive sanction from this cosmic source, which becomes, at the limit, as with the English king in Macbeth, divine grace."[26] Here Knight is identifying the erotic and the religious instincts, which he ultimately regards as identical with divine grace. Elsewhere it is the crown and the imagination, which he equates, that he identifies with divine grace.

---

[21] Burning Oracle, p. 47.

[22] Chariot of Wrath, p. 83.

[23] Olive and Sword, p. 12.

[24] Ibid., p. 21.

[25] Ibid., p. 48.

[26] Ibid., p. 60.

But when Knight interprets Henry VIII there is little attempt to distinguish the view of G. Wilson Knight from that of Shakespeare (whatever it was): "He [Shakespeare] feels England now as inheriting the great destiny of Rome, with new strength incorporated from the centuries of Christendom."[27] Another quotation from The Olive and the Sword should prove beyond a doubt that Knight has retained an interest in the "intentions" of the artist, in spite of his early repudiation of this fallacy: "but, generally, we can say that Shakespeare is trying to incorporate the full riches of the erotic instinct in a final inviolable integrity."[28] This is another statement made in reference to Henry VIII; we shall notice in the next chapter what Knight is trying to make out of Henry's illicit love.

There is little to distinguish Knight from Dover Wilson when Knight writes that: "The Tempest was planned to capture the essence of his total poetry."[29] [Italics mine] And in The Sovereign Flower Knight is perilously close to seeking the poet's intentions when he writes that: "All Shakespeare's work aims variously at controlling, fighting, or, at the best, using, the 'beast' in man."[30] This is certainly looking at a work of art from the artist's real or imaginary intentions. In the next chapter, where I analyze Knight's interpretation of the last five plays, we shall notice how much of Shakespeare Knight sees in those plays.

---

[27] Ibid., p. 71. [28] Ibid., p. 74. [29] Ibid., p. 96.

[30] The Sovereign Flower, p. 57.

Though he has never applied his interpretative method to the early work of Shakespeare--apart from the history plays, which are not so much analyzed as drama as viewed as pure prophecy of British destiny--Knight in The Sovereign Flower extends his early theory of a Shakespeare Progress to include the entire work of Shakespeare. Knight sees the work of Shakespeare as falling into two sequences, the second more profound than the first. The first sequence begins with the early comedies and culminates in Henry V, the story of the ideal monarch; the second sequence runs from Julius Caesar through Henry VIII, which is to Knight the crowning achievement of Shakespeare's artistic career. In The Sovereign Flower Knight writes that: "This sequence [the early histories] together with the comedies, whose resolving action, always in its way a definition of essential peace, is usually played out across a background of war and civil disturbance, makes up the first half of Shakespeare's work. The second half is a replica of the first, with a similar conclusion."[31]

In a footnote on page 55 of the same book, Knight answers a possible objection that might be asked: Why should Shakespeare repeat himself? Knight handles it in the following manner: "Shakespeare does not so much discover new thoughts in his later work as make changes of emphasis and distribution."[32] One last quotation from The Sovereign Flower should prove conclusively that Knight

---

[31] Ibid., p. 46. [32] Ibid., p. 55.

regards Shakespeare's entire output as forming one coherent whole: "The organic indissolubility of Shakespeare's art may be seen from the way his lifework expands the pattern of a single Shakespearian tragedy: from realism, through impassioned imaginative conflict, to mystic intimations, for of these each tragic hero in turn had his share; and finally, in Henry VIII, a ritual conclusion. Such is the organic harmony, resembling rather the works of nature than the works of man."[33]

Enough examples have been provided of Knight's view that Shakespeare the artist or Shakespeare the recorder of universal spiritual experience was himself a unifying element in his work to permit some generalizations and criticisms. In the first place, Knight has never adequately accounted for Shakespeare the creator of romantic comedy: aside from what he has said of The Merchant of Venice and Twelfth Night in his Principles of Shakespearian Production, he has never attempted to apply his interpretative method to any comedies earlier than the problem plays--Measure for Measure and All's Well That Ends Well--where he is more interested in finding universal religious significances than he is in analyzing the plays as comedies. My first objection, then, is that Knight's Shakespeare is a limited one because he is largely formed from certain of the later plays--Timon, Hamlet, and The Tempest, for examples; this is assuming for the time being that a poet's spiritual

---

[33] Ibid., p. 241.

progress can be recreated from his work. Knight came to the history plays--and this includes Henry VIII--after he had already established a theory that upheld the integrity of Shakespeare's work, a theory that was based upon his close analyses of the last four plays--not counting Henry VIII--, the later tragedies--Timon of Athens, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth--, and two of the problem plays, Measure for Measure and Troilus and Cressida. Knight's essay on All's Well, "The Third Eye," did not appear until the publication of The Sovereign Flower.

The cornerstone of Knight's Shakespearian edifice, Henry VIII, did not assume its crucial position in Knight's published work until the appearance of The Olive and the Sword (1944). In Myth and Miracle, The Wheel of Fire, The Shakespearian Tempest, and even The Christian Renaissance, Knight considered The Tempest as Shakespeare's final, most profound, summarizing, mystical statement. In The Christian Renaissance, Henry VIII is taken by Knight to be a Christian work, but it has not yet displaced The Tempest as the crowning achievement in Knight's scheme of Shakespeare interpretation.

There are two reasons why Knight would exalt Henry VIII in spite of its obvious dramatic deficiencies; one is that it is patriotic. It was in his wartime propaganda that Knight first glorified Henry VIII. The other reason is its ritualistic and religious elements. The play is more a pageant than a drama, and in spite of the unsatisfactory and unsavory character of Henry VIII the play does

end with the king's adultery producing the infant Elizabeth, the great Gloriana. Since Knight throughout his wartime writings was seeking a satisfactory fusion of Church and State--the goodness of the former with the power of the latter--he welcomed the support of a play in which the hero was a king in whose person both the political and religious powers were united. Then, too, the "prophetic" quality of the play would attract Knight, though one wonders how he could find delight in the cheap dramatic trick of making stage-characters prophesy after the prophecy has in point of historic fact already been fulfilled. Moreover, if significantly large sections of Henry VIII are not even Shakespeare's, then an interpretative theory that sees a spiritual progress in pseudo-Shakespearian work is of dubious value. Therefore my second objection to Knight's Shakespeare Progress is his heavy stressing of plays that contain passages of questionable authorship--Pericles, Cymbeline, Henry VIII--and his equally heavy reliance upon Timon of Athens, which perhaps reveals Shakespeare's state of mind but hardly reveals artistic mastery of his subject.

My third criticism is that Knight in his later work simply extracts from Shakespeare the views that he wishes to find there: at one time it is a nationalistic and patriotic Shakespeare. Knight never adequately accounts for the strong anti-nationalistic and anti-patriotic sentiments in Shakespeare; the payment of tribute to Rome at the conclusion of Cymbeline and the character of Falstaff

are two examples. The patriotic Shakespeare Knight conceived during modern England's wartime crisis. At other times--from The Christian Renaissance on--it is a Christian Shakespeare. Knight's repeated admissions that Shakespeare was primarily and pre-eminently a humanist poet do not prevent his continually finding Shakespeare to be profoundly Christian at the core of his work. This Shakespeare he discovers as he himself becomes more preoccupied with religious and metaphysical matters. The objection I raise, then, is that there is more of G. Wilson Knight in the Shakespeare he presents us than the text warrants.

Another possible objection would question the likelihood of finding the artist's spiritual progress recorded in drama, which is much more impersonal than lyric poetry; one could also object to Knight's identifying the author with specific characters. From the romantics on, art--all art--has been considered the proper place for self-revelation. But whether one considers this self to be a purely individual one or a depersonalized one that has undergone spiritual experiences of universal validity, it is somewhat questionable to seek to surprise the individual poet in an impersonal art-form written before the view that art is self-expression had become the dominant literary theory.

There are other elements by which Knight tries to secure cohesion in addition to the recorded progress of Shakespeare's spiritual pilgrimage. I have already in

this chapter indicated that the central thesis of Knight's The Shakespearian Tempest (1932) had been prefigured in his Myth and Miracle (1929). In The Shakespearian Tempest, Knight maintains that "the true Shakespearian unity" consists of "the opposition, throughout the plays, of 'tempests' and 'music'."[34] He goes so far as to assert that: "Tempests are...all-important. Taken in opposition with music they form the only principle of unity of Shakespeare."[35] [Italics mine] Yet later, in Principles of Shakespearian Production, Knight writes that: "Kingship is central to Shakespeare's life-pattern."[36] If one objects that Knight does not here mean to include the whole of Shakespeare's work in his reference to Shakespeare's "life-pattern", let me refer him to The Olive and the Sword, where Knight declares that in Henry VIII, "the two principles of unity in Shakespeare--his tempests and his nationalism--converge...."[37] [Italics mine] One more quotation should suffice; in Laureate of Peace Knight writes that: "Shakespeare's main symbols, corresponding roughly to our two divisions, human and transcendental, are (i) the King, or the Crown, and (ii) Tempests and Music."[38] This should be enough to indicate that Knight has altered his theory, or changed his mind, about the cohering elements in Shakespeare's work.

---

[34] Shakespearian Tempest, p. 1.

[35] Ibid., p. 6.

[36] Principles of Shakespearian Production, p. 221.

[37] Olive and Sword, p. 102.

[38] Laureate of Peace, p. 83.

The music-tempest opposition that Knight finds endemic to Shakespeare's work does not occupy so unvaryingly important a position in all the plays that Knight is justified in asserting that "in the Shakespearian system, we shall be forced to regard either the sea in all its variations or the tempest-music opposition...as fixed; and we shall say that plots are built round tempests--or, to be more exact, round the tempest-music opposition--rather than that tempests are inserted into plots. Plots vary, tempests persist. It is always the same tempest; and indeed, it is continually given almost exactly repetitive phrases in description."[39] It is absurd to make such a generalization applicable to the whole of Shakespeare's work. It is true that in the later plays--some of the tragedies and the final plays--tempests and music are prominent; it is also true that they are loosely associated with chaos and order, evil and good. But to assert that the poet sought plots to build around a tempest-music opposition is patently absurd. This is giving the symbols an independent life of their own, unmodified by the uses to which they are put. The poet is far more likely to have taken tempests, which were traditionally associated with disorder--whether of nature or of man's passions--and music, traditionally symbolizing order--whether a divine one or a natural one--and to have exploited these traditional associations, perhaps giving them additional

---

[39] The Shakespearian Tempest, pp. 15-16.

significances of his own, in order to produce the dramatic or poetic effect desired. Moreover, if, as Knight frequently enough asserts, it is the spiritual experience of the poet himself with which the creative artist starts, then it is no better to assume that music and tempests come first to mind than it is to assume that a plot is invariably the starting point. In the later plays it would be just as easy to maintain that a particular theme--that of reconciliation--is the constant, or that a particular familial relationship constituted the peculiarly symbolic plot that would repeatedly present itself in modified forms to the poet.

Knight finds Shakespeare to be simultaneously a naturalist, a humanist, and a supernaturalist. Shakespeare is variously seen as a great romantic poet of erotic insights, as a fundamentally Christian poet, and as a great humanist poet occupying a sort of _via media_ between supernaturalism and naturalism. Underlying all of this is the assumption on the part of Knight that Shakespeare is a great philosophic poet. In his pamphlet _Shakespeare and Tolstoy_ Knight declares that: "Shakespeare is an artist fit to stand by Dante in point of religious apprehension."[40] The remainder of the chapter will concern itself with Knight's finding Shakespeare a romantic, by which Knight usually means a mystical kind of naturalist; a supernaturalist

---

[40] _Shakespeare and Tolstoy_, p. 26.

whom Knight sometimes sees approaching Christianity; and a humanist whose central concern is man, poised between subhuman and superhuman forces.

At one time Knight emphasizes Shakespeare's preoccupation with immortality, which he sees Shakespeare sharing with Wordsworth; at another time it is Shakespeare's revealing a spiritual pattern of development in his art, which is in accord with an essentially romantic theory of art; at yet another time it is the infinite which enters the Shakespearian drama through love and death, both of which transcend the temporal order of existence.

But there are many more instances in which Knight claims Shakespeare as a romantic. In an essay in The Wheel of Fire, "The Philosophy of Troilus and Cressida," Knight sees the opposing forces, the Greek and the Trojan, as standing for cynical intellect and romantic intuition, respectively.[41] The romantic Knight trying to fabricate a romantic Shakespeare is here evident; Knight declares that: "In the usual Shakespearian fashion, the problem of the main theme--the rational untrustworthiness in conflict with the intuitive validity of romantic sight--is reflected throughout the play."[42] [Italics mine] Now this is an obvious falsification of the play's impact--neither the Greek intellect nor the Trojan intuition is held up for our admiration--and the victory does not go to the "romantic" Trojans. It is true, as Knight maintains, that

---

[41] The Wheel of Fire, p. 48. [42] Loc. cit.

"it is a world of value and vision ruled by murderous and senseless time,"[43] but the policy of Ulysses is better proof against the onslaughts of time than the sentiment of the Trojans. Far from regarding Troilus and Cressida as a defense of romanticism, I should rather think the play a devastating satire upon its self-deceptions and limitations. Whether or no there is a romantic Shakespeare behind this play deploring the harshness of reality, the artist did see clearly what kind of an outcome awaits a contest between intellect and emotion. If Knight had paid more attention to Hotspur and Antony as other Shakespearian romantics who lose to "policy," there would have been less likelihood of his failing to see that Shakespeare was aware of the weaknesses inherent in romanticism.

The powers of cynicism that Knight rightly associates with the Greeks he also associates with his "hate-theme," which he sees as "turbulent throughout most of these plays [Julius Caesar to The Tempest] : an especial mode of cynicism toward love, disgust at the physical body, and dismay at the thought of death; a revulsion from human life caused by a clear sight of its limitations--more especially limitations imposed by time."[44]

It is in this essay on Troilus and Cressida that Knight attributes to Shakespeare "two primary values, love and war."[45] It is puzzling that Knight has never

---

[43] Ibid., p. 71.

[44] Ibid., p. 15.

[45] Ibid., p. 47.

regarded these two values as forming an element of coherence--thematic, this time--in the total work of Shakespeare. Then, too, it is in this essay that Knight not only finds that Troilus and Cressida is "more peculiarly analytic in language and dramatic meaning than any other work of Shakespeare,"[46] but also discovers that "Troilus and Cressida induces and appeals to a consciousness of sensitive poetic activity which is yet not independent of the forms of abstract conceptual thought nor of the close reasoning of the philosopher."[47] Taking our cue from the last word of the preceding quotation, we may observe that Knight in this essay states his view that Shakespeare is a great philosophic poet: this play, he writes, "is an interesting antidote to the commentary that observes no original philosophic thought in Shakespeare."[48]

In the essay "Measure for Measure and the Gospels", also contained in The Wheel of Fire, Knight sees Angelo as evil because he, like the Greeks in Troilus and Cressida, is intellectual rather than intuitive: "Angelo is the symbol of a false intellectualized ethic divorced from the deeper springs of human instinct."[49] Here we can anticipate what is coming in The Christian Renaissance: when Knight goes on in the later work to formulate a Christ-Eros antithesis, we can see that it is Angelo's failure

---

[46] Loc. cit.

[47] Ibid., p. 71.

[48] Ibid., p. 52.

[49] Ibid., p. 89.

to recognize his duty to Eros that leads to his evil-doing. Again we find that Knight interprets a character with the assumption that Shakespeare was a romantic who distrusted the intellect and relied upon the intuition or the emotions. I would not claim that Shakespeare was a rationalist: but I would with just as good reason decline seeing Shakespeare's accepting the imagination, the intuition, or the emotions as an exclusive alternative. The characters in Shakespeare who follow their emotions or who let their imaginations alone direct them are among those who end disastrously. Hotspur, Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, Troilus and the Trojans, all reveal that Shakespeare was aware of the consequences of living lives dictated by romantic qualities.

Othello, like Troilus and Cressida and Measure for Measure, and most of the plays from Julius Caesar to The Tempest, Knight regards as revealing the hate-theme, which, curiously enough, he never proposes as a theme unifying the whole of Shakespeare's work. The hate-theme in Shakespeare Knight generally associates with the intellect, the rejecting reason, cynicism, and Machiavellian policy. Indeed, I readily agree that many of Shakespeare's villains are intellectual--Iago, Edmund, and Richard III, for examples--but the characters in Shakespeare who let their emotions, sentiments, or passions triumph are not treated any more kindly. If there are Shakespearian heroes they are those who, like Theseus, the Duke in Measure for Measure, and Prospero, are able to acquire and preserve a balance

between intellect and passion. In Othello Knight finds the theme to be that of "the cynical intellect pitted against a lovable humanity transfigured by qualities of heroism and grace."[50] Here it is Othello who is a sentimentalist, a man who, Knight concedes, has a "slightly strained emotionalism."[51] Thus Knight believes that there is an opposition in all of Shakespeare's greater plays between the cynical intellect and a romanticized natural goodness; coupling this view with his theory that in artistic creation the negative judgment is totally divorced from the creative imagination, it is easy for us to see how he can conclude his Othello essay by declaring that "we have the spirit of negation set against the spirit of creation."[52]

My objection is not to Knight's seeing an opposition in various plays between intellect and passion--that is certainly present--but rather to his identifying Shakespeare the artist too closely with the romantic heroes. Of course, Knight sees the cynical, intellectual villains as revealing part of Shakespeare's mind or spiritual experience, too; but the general impression one gets from reading Knight's interpretations is that these characters dominated by intellect bear about the same relation to the passionate, romantic mind of Shakespeare as an evil spirit does to the soul of the person whom it is possessing. Knight's own romantic propensities are evident in his own

---

[50] Wheel of Fire, p. 112.

[51] Ibid., p. 117. [52] Ibid., p. 119.

obvious preference for the great romantic characters in Shakespeare--Antony, Othello, and Timon, to cite a few examples.

Another romantic quality in Knight's Shakespearian interpretation is his continually seeking in the play for the soul-experiences, the revelation of the psychological profundities of the characters. In his interpretation of Measure for Measure in The Wheel of Fire, Knight takes one of his intuitive leaps and declares, while interpreting Isabella's defiance to her brother (III. i. 141), that Isabella "knows now that it is not all saintliness, she sees her own soul and sees it as something small, frightened, despicable, too frail to dream of such a sacrifice."[53] This is a kind of inspired guessing, that might be right if one only knew how Shakespeare had Isabella deliver her lines, or, if one objects to this intrusion of the intentional fallacy, how best Isabella might deliver these lines. Making the assumption he does, Knight proceeds to write that: "Isabella, like Angelo, has progressed far during the play's action: from sanctity to humanity."[54] If Knight truly saw the characters of Angelo and Isabella as purely symbolic, or as he states, if "Isabella stands for sainted purity, Angelo, for Pharisaical righteousness, the Duke for a psychologically sound and enlightened ethic"[55] and so on, then there would be no possibility of his visualizing the characters as undergoing a development

---

[53] Ibid., p. 93.

[54] Loc. cit. [55] Ibid., p. 74.

in the progress of the play, or of his divining a very real and human fear in the speech of Isabella; Knight has in this instance--and there are many others--conveniently forgotten his theory of interpretation as he in a very Bradley-like way proceeds to treat Isabella and Angelo as real human beings who experience real emotional crises and who undergo a psychological change as the result of their very real experiences.

Moreover, by claiming that characters in Measure for Measure "stand for" various abstract qualities, Knight is either indicting Shakespeare of artistic failure or else does not understand the nature of drama as Shakespeare wrote it, since Shakespeare never has characters who merely "stand for" something.

Another instance of Knight's attributing a romantic quality to Shakespeare is in his "Macbeth and the Metaphysic of Evil"; in accounting for the pervasive sense of evil in Macbeth Knight writes that: "Macbeth shows us an evil not to be accounted for in terms of 'will' and 'causality'; that it expresses its vision, not to a critical intellect, but to the responsive imagination."[56] This is a direct application of Knight's principle that each play must be regarded as a visionary whole, and his belief that the interpreter's task is to seek the quality of the original poetic experience. It is again apparent that Knight has completely discarded the judgment in favor

---

[56] Ibid., p. 158.

of the imagination, which is, if anything, the most profound change effected in esthetics by the romantics.

Throughout Shakespeare's work Knight finds another romantic preoccupation, the infinite, continually intruding itself. In his essay in The Wheel of Fire on Timon of Athens Knight asserts that: "The contrast between the first and second parts [of Timon] is clearly a contrast of the sense-world and the finite with the spiritual and the infinite."[57] Timon himself becomes a romantic who is "pure passion, a naked rhythmic force, a rush and whirl of torrential energy loosed from any contact or harmony with temporal and confining things."[58] Earlier in the same essay Knight declares that: "Timon is a universal lover, Apemantus a universal cynic."[59] Timon is thus analogous to Othello, Lear, and Troilus, as Apemantus is analogous to Iago, Edmund, and Thersites.

In his essay "Shakespeare and Tolstoy," Knight extends his romantic preoccupation with the infinite to include all the great Shakespearian tragedies: "The grandeur and essential optimism of the true Shakespearian tragedy is due to these two elements: passion and death. And both equally 'bring in the infinite'."[60] Death Knight associates with war and the hate-theme. Love he associates with Shakespeare's erotic intuition. It is puzzling to explain why Knight did not explicitly develop the Mars-

---

[57] Ibid., p. 223. [58] Ibid., p. 222.

[59] Ibid., p. 212. [60] Ibid., p. 245.

Venus dualism as a principle organizing all of Shakespeare's work.

If Knight is capable of asserting that the spiritual patterns of Shakespeare and Byron are similar,[61] that Alexander Pope, who is credited by Knight with having produced a coherent romanticism,[62] has profound affinities with Shakespeare,[63] then it should not surprise us that he should also maintain that: "Shakespeare's art uniquely blends classic dignity with a romantic naturalism,"[64] and that: "You could accuse Shakespeare of an aristocratic romanticism."[65] Knight ends up with a Shakespeare who looks suspiciously like Walt Whitman: "Shakespeare's universe is fundamentally poetical, not philosophical; nor, in our usual but limited sense, exactly dramatic. In it we finally meet no negation, but listen rather to a vast breathing, a rhythmic pulse, the surge and sob of a great ocean...."[66] By the time Knight wrote The Burning Oracle, he had come out with a vitalistic, life-embracing, naturalistic, Whitmanesque Shakespeare: "Though Shakespeare's world is crammed with all kinds of evil, loathing, horror, it is not itself evil, because ordered; and could not have been ordered without first being, all of it, understood

---

[61] Lord Byron's Marriage, p. 38.

[62] Laureate of Peace, p. 46. [63] Ibid., p. 39.

[64] Principles of Shakespearian Production, pp. 107-8.

[65] The Burning Oracle, p. 23.

[66] Ibid., p. 58.

and therefore loved; and could not have been loved if it were not, in essence, vital and therefore good."[67] And in Principles of Shakespearian Production Knight writes that the difference between Shakespeare and Jonson is one "which marks the difference between a mind of quivering creative sensibility and receptivity and one of formalized and rigidly dogmatic intelligence."[68] It is only by accepting what fits his preconceived romantic theory of what Shakespeare is that Knight can arrive at such conclusions.

It would be easy to regard Knight as a "Christianizer" of Shakespeare, if Knight meant by Christianity something more traditional and orthodox. Though Knight's variety of Christianity is somewhat unhistorical and unorthodox, there is nothing very original about it; it is, if one charitably overlooks the many oversimplifications and inconsistencies, a kind of romantic naturalism, a vitalism that rests ultimately on biological drives. Both art and universal--as opposed to erotic--love are merely sublimated instinct. The sovereign imagination working on the animal instincts transcends the natural life-cycles and the limitations of time and produces both art and religion. The imagination would seem to be the regulative principle in Knight's metaphysical system. In spite of the large number of dualisms or oppositions that Knight is continually

---

[67] Ibid., p. 47.

[68] Principles of Shakespearian Production, p. 25.

discussing in his later books, his metaphysical theorizing assumes the ultimate goodness of everything in the universe; the frequency in his writing--the later books especially--of such words as "blending" and "merging" betray the later Knight's spiritualistic belief that there is, finally, no clearcut distinction between the spiritual and the material.

Though Knight is forever talking of the passivity of the creative artist and the artist's access to another "dimension," he never attempts to define this realm of spiritual powers and essences. The artist's insight into this other realm according to Knight, is firmly rooted in his own biological makeup. With Knight's frequent references to psychological profundities, it would seem that this other realm of consciousness is really only our subconscious minds, where the seething passions and primal urges are supposed to originate. The imagination would seem to be the faculty which gives coherence to the otherwise incoherent forces of the Id. Knight the romantic, whose romanticism, like many romanticisms, often lapses into naturalism, is a humanist who would give our subconscious selves their share of recognition and authority. Knight can be considered a humanist because he differentiates man from the rest of the brute creation by his sovereign imagination. Instead of man as essentially a rational animal, Knight finds man essentially an imaginative animal. The other dimension, that of eternity, is passive in Knight's scheme. It would seem to be a static realm of

spiritual essences not dissimilar to that of Plato's Ideas. Christ in Knight's scheme is a universal lover who possesses the "seraphic" intuition and whose love is universal instead of erotic only because he is psychologically an integrated personality who has no desire to fulfill himself on the biological level. When Knight in his later books changes his theory so that art and universal love are the products of homosexuality rather than simply an objectified and sublimated sex-urge, he ends up with the theory that art, religion, and civilization are the products not of frustrated desire but of perverted desire.

Shakespeare, according to Knight, began as a romantic poet but soon developed into a Christian one: "Like Goethe's Faust, Shakespeare's work develops through the romantic ideal to a Christian symbolism."[69] This statement occurs in The Christian Renaissance, but Knight had even earlier indicated Shakespeare's relation to Christianity. In Myth and Miracle, Knight was already relating Shakespeare's insight into a romantic immortality with other, more explicitly religious insights into immortality: "Neither the Book of Job nor the Final Plays of Shakespeare are to be read as pleasant fancies: rather as parables of a profound and glorious truth. The one attempts a statement of the moral purpose of God to man...; the Final Plays of Shakespeare...display plots whose texture is

---

[69] The Christian Renaissance, p. 121.

soaked in the quality of romantic immortality."[70]

But Knight does not see--he never does--Shakespeare as adopting Christian dogma: he always sees Shakespeare as having access to the same mystic truth from which this dogma also springs: "And what are both [Dante's Divine Comedy and Shakespeare's greater plays, Julius Caesar to The Tempest] but reflections in the work of the two greatest minds of modern Europe--children respectively of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance--of that mystic truth from which are born the dogmas of the Catholic Church...."[71] At no time does G. Wilson Knight describe Shakespeare as a Christian apologist; even in Henry VIII, which Knight regards as Shakespeare's most explicitly Christian work, life itself, according to Knight, takes precedence over religious doctrines. In what I regard, and hope to prove in the next chapter, as an unsuccessful attempt to exonerate Henry VIII of any possible guilt arising from his amorous intrigue, Knight writes that "we forgive the King what is a grave lapse causing terrible suffering to the good Katharine, whilst recognizing that his fault is somehow a virtue; that men, or at least kings, cannot live by morals alone; that all ethical rules and religious doctrines are, in the last resort, provisional; that only in creation itself and its inscrutable glories, the glistering might of its purposes and wonder of its achievement, is God

---

[70] Crown of Life, p. 30.

[71] Ibid., pp. 30-31.

finally revealed; in life itself as a sacrament, love its medium and the King its symbol."[72]

If Knight were truly consistent in regarding dramatic personages as purely symbolic characters, then this defense would be unnecessary. This is a superb example of Knight's own rather rhapsodic romanticism and vitalistic gospel. It also refutes the notion that Knight is a Christian apologist. Knight is a kind of mystical naturalist. At no time does he advocate the view that Shakespeare was an apologist for traditional, orthodox Christianity; his view is that by tapping the same sources of power it is only natural that Shakespeare's insights should sometimes reinforce the insights of which Christian dogma is another objectified statement.

Sometimes, however, Knight finds that the poetic atmospheres of particular Shakespeare plays are orthodox; in writing of Measure for Measure he asserts that its "poetic atmosphere is one of religion and critical morality. The religious colouring is orthodox, as in Hamlet."[73] The Duke in Measure for Measure Knight finds to be the upholder of an enlightened ethic which is really the Gospel ethic.[74] Knight at one point regards the Duke as resembling God, just as Prospero does,[75] while later in the same essay the Duke is seen to resemble Jesus in his ethical attitude and actions.[76] In the concluding paragraph of the essay

---

[72] Ibid., p. 317. [73] Wheel of Fire, p. 74.

[74] Loc. cit. [75] Ibid., p. 79. [76] Ibid., p. 82.

Knight declares that "the play must be read, not as a picture of normal human affairs, but as a parable, like the parables of Jesus."[77]

Other plays of Shakespeare are taken by Knight to be visionary statements. Macbeth, Lear, and Antony and Cleopatra Knight compares to Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise.[78] This Dantesque pattern is apparently a favorite of Knight, for he used the same comparison in Myth and Miracle with the later plays of Shakespeare, the Problems, Tragedies, and Myths, and in The Starlit Dome, where he views Coleridge's Christobel, The Ancient Mariner, and Kubla Khan as forming such a group. Lear is also compared to the Book of Job.[79] By viewing plays as parables, allegories and moralities Knight occasionally returns to the nineteenth century habit of extracting moral lessons from art: in writing of Lear Knight states that: "The story of the play indeed suggests that wrongful action first starts the spreading poison of evil; and that sin brings inevitable retribution."[80] But it is only in Measure for Measure and Lear that these lessons are seen operating on the moral level. Usually Knight prefers metaphysics to ethics and morality. Ethics and morality he associates with an excessive concern for character-study, and by denigrating character-study Knight simultaneously placed less value on ethical or moral problems in Shakespeare's plays. The thorough-

---

[77] Ibid., p. 96. [78] Ibid., p. 179.

[79] Ibid., p. 191. [80] Ibid., p. 194.

going naturalism in Lear is sufficient to keep Knight from superimposing a transcendental metaphysical scheme on the play: he has to admit that: "Here the emphasis is everywhere on naturalism," and that "imaginative transcendence grows out of the naturalism, is not imposed on it."[81]

Even Timon of Athens, which some critics have taken to be a Shakespearian cri du coeur, but which few critics have regarded as a great work of art, Knight sees as a parable or allegory[82] which includes within it the substance of Hamlet, Troilus and Cressida, Othello, and King Lear.[83] Moreover, Knight declares that "it includes and transcends them all...."[84] The reason for Knight's extraordinarily high--far too high--estimate of Timon is that it fits a preconceived scheme of Knight's: that of his hate-theme. Since there is more hate--albeit somewhat incoherently expressed--in this play than in the preceding ones, Knight concludes that Timon, in a Christlike gesture, takes on himself all the venom of hate and thus frees Shakespeare's mind from this obsession.[85] After all, Knight visualizes Timon as a Christlike figure possessing universal love.[86] The embarrassing fact that Timon is presented in preeminently humanistic terms, with no reference to any powers beyond the human, does not trouble Knight.

---

[81] Ibid., P. 205. [82] Ibid., p. 220. [83] Ibid., p. 236.

[84] Loc. cit.; elsewhere (p. 253) in the same book, however, Knight writes that "Hamlet, in fact, contains the essence of all these later plays."

[85] Loc. cit. [86] Ibid., p. 212.

His deus ex machina is at hand: he simply invokes the sea, a symbol of eternity. The great convenience of a subjective symbol is here apparent: a symbol can be summoned to free the imaginative interpreter from even the most difficult position. I believe that Knight's essay on Timon illustrates the dangers of employing a preconceived thematic pattern and the weakness or limitation of a too subjective interpretative method.

Poets and dramatic characters Knight frequently describes as Christlike, but on at least one occasion he introduces an extra-literary standard of comparison from the outside: in his "Hamlet Reconsidered" (written in 1947), which appeared in the fourth edition of The Wheel of Fire, Knight writes that "we are judging him [Hamlet] by a very high standard; by the standard, indeed, of Christ."[87] A comparison of the prophetic or apocalyptic preoccupations of this essay published in 1947 with the original essay on Hamlet published in The Wheel of Fire in 1930, "The Embassy of Death: An Essay on Hamlet," will reveal that the later essay has almost nothing to say about Hamlet as literature. An excerpt from the later essay--and this is exemplary of all the later work of Knight--should reveal how far Knight has departed from strictly literary concerns:

> For what is involved [in Hamlet]? No less than the attempt to lift the old revenge-theme, rooted in drama from

---

[87] Ibid., p. 316.

> Aeschylus to O'Neill, rooted too in our ways of life, in our courts of justice and international relationships, indeed, in the very structure of our thought, beyond its stark oppositions; to heave over human affairs from the backward time-consciousness of Nietzsche's avenging mind' into the creative inflow. Such an attempt involves finally the will to fuse Church and State, the Sermon on the Mount with international action; it is a will towards a Nietzschean synthesis, Ibsen's 'Third Empire'."[88]

A brief enumeration of additional Shakespearian characters who are seen as Christ-figures may serve to illustrate to what extent Knight sees Shakespeare as a religious poet; one such figure is Theseus, whom Knight regards as "almost a Christ-figure possessing the Christ-harmony."[89] Elsewhere in The Christian Renaissance Knight asserts that: "Each of our tragic heroes in turn endures a miniature Gethsemane,"[90] and in The Burning Oracle Knight writes that "Portia is almost a Christian symbol."[91] In Principles of Shakespearian Production Knight states that: "Christianity has all the time been implicit in Shakespeare's work: and the two today form a necessary and most futile commentary on each other. Each of Shakespeare's tragic heroes is a miniature Christ."[92]

---

[88] Ibid., p. 325.

[89] Christian Renaissance, p. 44.

[90] Ibid., p. 52.

[91] Burning Oracle, p. 29.

[92] Principles of Shakespearian Production, p. 231.

But even when Knight expressed this view he still did not identify Shakespeare with orthodoxy: "The genius of Shakespeare returned at the last to orthodoxy: but the movement was probably nearer to a natural recognition than an acceptance of revelation."[93]

However, it is in this book that Knight suggested that: "In the world of Shakespearian tragedy this unique act of the Christ sacrifice can, if we like, be seen as central."[94] Knight goes on to make one of his most specific comparisons between Shakespearian tragedy and Christian ritual: "Shakespearian tragedy is a vast tree, splaying out, the Christian Mass we can call its central trunk...."[95] One last quotation from Principles of Shakespearian Production should indicate why the last plays of Shakespeare are doubly important in Knight's scheme, doubly important because they lend themselves both to his romanticism and to his transcendental theorizing: "Shakespeare's final plays celebrate the victory and glory, the resurrection and renewal, that in the Christian story and in its reflection in Christian ritual succeed the sacrifice."[96]

Knight again attempts to relate Shakespeare to Christianity in The Burning Oracle: "Yet the Christian values and sentiments are found often more sensitively and inwardly conceived than by professional propagandists.

---

[93] Ibid., p. 232. [94] Ibid., p. 234.

[95] Loc. cit. [96] Loc. cit.

Friars dominate action, and love, as in Lyly, is religiously haloed."[97] Furthermore, Knight finds that in the matter of human dignity: "Shakespeare is profoundly Christian: though it is important to remember the total acceptance conditioning such integrity. Many passages and many persons, especially Friar Laurence and Cerimon, tone with traditional religion. Moreover, Shakespeare shows properly no conflict of the sexual and the Christian: indeed, Christian sanctities are consistently invoked in the cause of dramatic love: which is, however, conceived as an enduring emotion. His ladies are allied continually with Christian associations. New Testament references and half-conscious reminiscence often witness a coincidence of the human with the archetypal and Christian...."[98] The next quotation from The Burning Oracle should free Knight from the charge of Christianizing Shakespeare, at least as this is traditionally understood: "A relation to the Christ-tragedy is sometimes suggested: but, in a deep sense, always embedded--not so much by direct, or even unconscious, influence, but because the same piece of work is being done according to the laws of the same universe...."[99] The last quotation from The Burning Oracle on Knight's relating Shakespeare to Christianity, will indicate the importance of the final plays in Knight's scheme: "This whole last series corres-

---

[97] The Burning Oracle, p. 29.

[98] Ibid., p. 43.

[99] Ibid., p. 53.

ponds to the tragedies as the resurrection to the crucifixion in Christian belief."[100]

Even when writing of the last plays in The Crown of Life, Knight does not claim Shakespeare as an apologist of orthodox Christianity:

> But a warning is necessary. Though Shakespeare writes, broadly speaking, from a Christian standpoint, and though christianized phraseology recurs, yet the poet is rather to be supposed as using Christian concepts than as dominated by them. They are implemental to his purpose; but so too are 'great Apollo' and 'great nature', sometimes themselves approaching Biblical feeling (with Apollo as Jehovah), yet diverging also, especially later, into a pantheism of such majesty that orthodox apologists may well be tempted to call it Christian too; but it is scarcely orthodox. The Winter's Tale remains a creation of the Renaissance, that is, of the questing imagination, firmly planted, no doubt, in medieval tradition, but not directed by it. There is a distinction here of importance."[101]

Precisely: this quotation, substituting G. Wilson Knight himself for Shakespeare, would be a remarkably apt description of Knight's Shakespearian interpretation or esthetic and metaphysical theories: he uses the words of Christian orthodoxy--Christ, the Incarnation, the Trinity, God--but replaces the traditional concepts underlying these words with meanings from his own peculiar, mystical, vitalistic, naturalistic, romanticism.

---

[100] Ibid., p. 57.

[101] Crown of Life, pp. 96-7.

Shakespeare, according to Knight, is most profoundly influenced by Life itself: "Orthodox tradition is used, but it does not direct; a pagan naturalism is used too. The Bible has been an influence; so have classical myth and Renaissance pastoral; but the greatest influence was Life itself, that creating and protecting deity whose superhuman presence and powers the drama labours to define."[102] A quotation from one of Knight's later books, The Sovereign Flower, should demonstrate that in the last analysis, both Knight's Christianity and his romantic conception of Shakespeare are merely parts of his mystical vitalism: "In both Christianity and Shakespeare you have a central humility and passivity violently creative, radiating action, a process, as it were, of continual incarnation; and both finally reach, through this, the farthest death illuminations of the Western world."[103] Yet Knight's concept of Christianity and his view of Shakespeare do not lapse altogether into naturalism, since man does possess the imaginative faculty, which, coupled with the ability of the poet--found preeminently in Shakespeare--to objectify his spiritual intuitions, distinguishes imaginative man from the brute creation.

Knight's humanism--which is the same as that which he attributes to Shakespeare--rests on the imagination, upon which both art and religion are dependent; Knight

---

[102] Ibid., p. 128 [103] Sovereign Flower, p. 226.

implies this in the following quotation from The Sovereign Flower: "we do Christianity itself little service by regarding Shakespeare's plays as no more than pendants to the religious tradition, since in so doing we inevitably end by slighting that human insight and spiritual penetration through which alone the Shakespearian impact exists and what might be called the corroboration of Christian truth in Renaissance terms is accomplished."[104] "Renaissance," as Knight uses it, implies the freeing of the erotic instinct and the poetic imagination from ecclesiastical control. But in making a case for Knight as a humanist one must reckon with an occasional inconsistency; in The Sovereign Flower Knight at one point refers to "Shakespeare's rooted naturalism and refusal to make any final distinction between man and the rest of God's creation."[105]

There are, however, many statements throughout the published work of Knight that reveal his view that Shakespeare is, as shown in his work, a humanist, though there are also many statements that would make Shakespeare a naturalist or a supernaturalist. In writing of Lear in The Wheel of Fire Knight states that: "The gods here are more natural than supernatural; the good and bad elements in humanity are, too, natural, not, as in Macbeth, supernatural."[106] This can only mean that Shakespeare's work

---

[104] Ibid., p. 251. [105] Ibid., p. 252.

[106] Wheel of Fire, p. 187.

is sometimes naturalistic, sometimes supernaturalistic. And in writing of Timon in the same volume, Knight mentions that: "If this transcendent love can be bodied into shapes and forms which are finite; if the world of actuality and sense does not play Timon false--then humanism can thrive without religion, and an earthly paradise is no deceiving dream."[107] Timon of course fails, but other Christ-figures--Prospero and the Duke of Measure for Measure, for examples--in Knight succeed, indicating that the earthly paradise is regarded as no deceiving dream by Knight, who is continually in his later books making prophets of a paradisiacal future out of various poets.

A series of short quotations, starting with some of Knight's earlier writings and coming down to the present, should prove that Knight has always viewed Shakespeare as variously a naturalist, humanist, and supernaturalist. In The Imperial Theme Knight writes that: "In Shakespeare 'creation' is the result of two blending elements: the divine and earthly."[108] In The Shakespearian Tempest, the author states that "though Shakespeare's world is primarily a world of men, yet his primary symbols, tempest and music, are things unhuman: the one an effect of nature, subhuman; the other reaching out to infinity and speaking divine accents, superhuman."[109] Knight writes in The Christian Renaissance that: "Shakespeare steers a middle

---

[107] Ibid., p. 212. [108] Imperial Theme, p. 57.

[109] Shakespearian Tempest, p. 280.

course. Whereas Dante stresses the divine and Goethe the natural, Shakespeare as certainly stresses the human."[110] A few years later, in Principles of Shakespearian Production, Knight maintained that: "Poetry is metaphoric; its essential purpose to blend the human and the divine. So those poets who aim primarily at God, do so in terms of man; and Shakespeare, speaking with the accents and intricacies of great poetry of man, speaks accordingly of God."[111] In The Burning Oracle Knight declares that: "Shakespeare's stress is primarily on man. His wider universe is naturalistic--a science of elements in ascending grades is sometimes explicit in statement and continually implicit in imagistic management--and angelic hierarchies play a part."[112]

But in Chariot of Wrath Knight asserts that: "Shakespeare's main indictments are levelled against man: faced by the apparent injustice of Providence, he never rises beyond a semi-agnostic accusation of 'the gods'."[113] Moreover, in The Olive and the Sword Knight maintains that: "Shakespeare ultimately has a greater trust in man as man than many a more obviously daring interpreter...."[114] Moving in the other direction, toward supernaturalism,

---

[110] Christian Renaissance, p. 116.

[111] Principles of Shakespearian Production, p. 17.

[112] Burning Oracle, p. 29.

[113] Chariot of Wrath, p. 92.

[114] Olive and Sword, p. 93.

Knight writes in The Crown of Life that: "The Tragedies culminating in Timon of Athens and The Tempest (for man) and Antony and Cleopatra and the remaining Final Plays (for woman) have developed the Shakespearian humanism to its limit, though with no severing of Christian contacts. Here we face the limits of even that, purified, humanism."[115] In Laureate of Peace Knight sees "man dramatically interlocked with a great mesh of natural and cosmic energies, as in Shakespeare."[116]

Yet Knight found in The Sovereign Flower that "the emphasis [in Shakespeare's plays] is not on any intellectual concept, scheme, or system, but is rather, in the way of great poetry, specific, human, and localised, with full dramatic immediacy and contemporary impact...."[117] The final quotation in this series, from The Golden Labyrinth, is reminiscent of Wordsworthian romanticism in its interrelating of man and nature and goes as follows: "All coheres. [In Shakespeare] Man and his society are in close interaffective relationship to nature, to flowers and the seasons, the sea, sun and moon, the cosmos; and also to abysmal evil and to the divine."[118]

Knight's Shakespeare is one who takes man as the nexus of the divine and the natural, as both the Middle Ages

---

[115] Crown of Life, p. 296.

[116] Laureate of Peace, p. 9.

[117] Sovereign Flower, p. 253.

[118] Golden Labyrinth, p. 66.

and the Renaissance did; in Knight's metaphysical system Shakespeare would appear to have been continually moving toward supernaturalism: in the early plays Knight sees a Shakespeare by and large content with romantic love; in the problem plays there is disgust with the animal nature of man, and the hate-theme prevails; in the tragedies the humanistic Shakespeare is most evident; and by the time Shakespeare reached the final plays the visions of immortality and the symbolically divine music had moved the balance in favor of supernaturalism. It could be, and has been, argued that Shakespeare was primarily a naturalist, a humanist, or a supernaturalist; but to have him all three, simultaneously, as Knight would have him, is difficult to accept. Ignoring all historical or literary explanations for Shakespeare's writing different kinds of plays at different times, and assuming that the spiritual progress of Shakespeare is evident in his plays, Knight can easily assume that the plays variously reveal Shakespeare to be a naturalist, humanist or supernaturalist. He never adds 'opportunist' to these three. He wants a kind of continum from naturalism at one end to supernaturalism at the other in which Shakespeare moves, but he will never admit that at a particular point in time, in a particular period of his writing, Shakespeare was merely a naturalist, purely a humanist, or totally a supernaturalist. All three must be present in the work at all times. Knight sees Shakespeare attaining mystical insights from an erotically-inspired art. Perhaps it is not difficult

for the romanticist Knight to visualize Shakespeare's art as a kind of organic growth rooted in nature, growing through the peculiarly human and eventually touching the supernatural.

Thus we find that the Shakespeare who emerges from Knight's interpretative work is a romantic whose erotic perception eventually outgrew both its naturalistic and humanistic stages though without rejecting them and attained to an insight into the eternal. The Shakespearian universe is one in which the principal opposition is between tempests and music, though nationalism is also taken to be a constant concern of the poet.

The spiritual progress of the poet, which Knight assumes to be revealed in the plays, is generally in the direction of the supernatural, though Shakespeare, according to Knight, gains his visions of immortality from what originated as erotic perceptions; at all times, Knight believes, Shakespeare was primarily concerned with man. Shakespeare is a Christian, by Knight's definition of the term, only insofar as he corroborated the insights of orthodox Christianity with his own mystical visions.

It is significant that Knight's earliest work began with the last plays, and also significant that Henry VIII did not figure prominently in Knight's interpretative scheme until after the growth of his interest in British destiny during the war years. Knight has never dealt at any great length with Shakespearian comedy, the early plays, or even the history plays (with the exception of

Henry VIII), in spite of the many books that interpreted their relation to kingship or nationalism. His greatest success has been with plays of a parabolic, allegorical, symbolic, or mythical nature, of which the last plays are admirable examples. The next chapter will analyze Knight's interpretation of the final five plays. The last plays, which Knight regards as visions of immortality, are crucial to his interpretative scheme for several reasons: 1. they lend themselves best to his "spatial" approach; 2. they have occupied their crucial position in his interpretative scheme since his earliest work and have continued to do so through the present; 3. they show Knight in a classic romantic stance that reveals the eccentricities of his work in embryonic form; and 4. together with his interpretations of the major tragedies, Knight's interpretations of the last plays have had the most profound influence on subsequent Shakespearian interpretation.

CHAPTER FOUR

The final five plays of Shakespeare have generated a great diversity of opinion as to their authenticity, their significance, and their respective merits as works of art. By authenticity one means authenticity of authorship; the first two acts of Pericles, the Jupiter scene of Cymbeline, and various speeches in Henry VIII have all been attributed to other writers. On the other hand, some of those who advocate unity of authorship have posited the theory that Shakespeare returned to unfinished plays of his youth and thus blame the supposedly inferior lines--of Pericles, for example--upon the author's own earlier immaturity of style. Still others accept the genuineness of Shakespeare's work but, following the nineteenth century lead, assume a later decay of Shakespeare's ability, or a later indifference to characterization and dramatic form, usually accompanied by an increased interest in pure poetry, or a later relaxation of effort because of various reasons, such as financial independence and the pleasures of country life.

Critics have also shown a wide range of views about the plays' form. The plays have been seen as little more than Shakespeare's effort to adapt a popular new literary form, the romance, to the stage. They have been seen as Shakespeare's attempt to capitalize on a new dramatic form which Beaumont and Fletcher had originated: the old professional exploiting a form which his young rivals had

first successfully introduced. Those who see Shakespeare exploiting the romance in drama or imitating his younger rivals usually minimize the significance of the last plays. The last plays have been thought to lack the dramatic tension of the great tragedies that preceded them; they have been thought to be little more than "escape" literature.

Though various commentators have argued for the topicality of certain of the last five plays--The Tempest, preeminently--most literary scholars see them as farther removed from actuality than the preceding--A Midsummer Night's Dream the notable exception--and they try in different ways to account for this unreality. Shakespeare is variously seen as returning to pure poetry, his first love; as adopting a literary form, the romance, that is by its very nature unrealistic and undramatic; and, more recently, as deliberately experimenting with symbolism.

Since the romantics The Tempest has been subjected to allegorical interpretations, and from the same time supposedly autobiographical elements have aroused much interest. The Tempest has for a long time been regarded as Shakespeare's final farewell to his art, and Prospero and the poet have been frequently equated. Ariel and Caliban have been subjected to various allegorical interpretations. With no record of Shakespeare's inner life and only the scantiest of his physical existence, there have been virtually no checks upon the imaginative flights of various commentators. Moreover, the intrusion of the supernatural in the final plays lends itself to the symbolic

and allegorical approaches.

The last plays have frequently been remarked upon because of their air of unreality, their serenity or lack of dramatic tension, the poet's creation of characters supposedly inferior to the great comic and tragic characters of the earlier plays, the repeated use of the same romantic plot, the suspected allegorical or symbolic meanings, the suspected autobiographical entent (in The Tempest), and various stylistic differences.

Now Knight's interpretative method is ideally suited to the final plays--indeed, one could perhaps argue that the method was formulated and codified after it had been successfully applied to these plays, with the exception of Henry VIII--and to the great tragedies, but before Knight had taken the trouble to discover whether or not his method was equally applicable to all of Shakespeare. There are reasons for its success. Knight's method minimizes the strictly dramatic elements of the play and concentrates upon the poetry: many critics have remarked upon Shakespeare's apparent concern in the last plays for the purely poetic and his lack of interest in the strictly dramatic. Knight assumes that character is primarily symbolic and only secondarily human. Therefore the rather perfunctory characterization in the last plays is not a flaw but part of the symbolic design. Action, plot, and language are also valued by Knight principally for their symbolism. Thus the repetition of the separation-reunion plot or the use of gnomic utterances fits admirably into Knight's

scheme. The serenity of the last plays becomes in Knight's scheme a mystic intuition of eternity that is no longer caught in the toils of the natural world or the tragically human. The air of unreality becomes the difficulty the poet experiences in objectifying his mystical visions of immortality in dramatic art. Knight accepts the assumption that The Tempest is an autobiographical statement, but it becomes not so much a record of Shakespeare the man as the record of Shakespeare the great romantic artist objectifying his universally valid spiritual experiences in dramatic poetry.

One of Knight's unpublished writings, Thaisa, written even earlier than "The Poet and Immortality", which was printed in The Shakespeare Review in October, 1928, contained Knight's central thesis concerning the last plays.[1] This argument appeared again in Myth and Miracle in 1929. Knight's view is essentially this: the last plays--at first confined to Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale, and The Tempest, but later including Henry VIII--are the culmination of a spiritual progress that began about the middle of Shakespeare's literary career. The final plays, according to Knight, are the inevitable conclusion of a spiritual pilgrimage that had previously passed through the stages of the Problem Plays, which reflect the "sick soul", cynical and disgusted with

---

[1]Perhaps as early as 1927, according to Knight in a letter to me dated 27 February 1964. Thaisa is now in the Shakespeare Memorial Library at Birmingham, England.

natural life; and the great tragedies, which dealt with human destiny in a grand and noble manner. Thus the poet is no longer content with the tragic intuition but is pushing beyond to mystical visions of immortality; the last plays are accordingly regarded as visionary statements that have transcended the natural world or the essentially human and have touched a permanent spiritual realm.

By regarding the last five plays as the culmination of the Shakespeare Progress--with Henry VIII as the crowning achievement--Knight is assuming the greatest significance for the last plays. Instead of failing to continue the tragic vision of the preceding plays the last five plays are seen as transcending them with a mystic vision of immortality. Once Knight assumes that there is such a Progress he is committed to the belief in a continuity and coherence in the whole of Shakespeare's work (at least from 1599 on). Moreover, this assumption also determines Knight's view of the authenticity of certain questionable passages; the later Knight accepts more of the passages of doubtful authorship as genuine Shakespeare than the early Knight did. Furthermore, Knight's estimation of the esthetic merits of the plays is determined by the crucial position he assigns them in the record of Shakespeare's spiritual development. When we evaluate Knight's interpretations of the individual plays we shall observe how highly he valued The Tempest when he thought it the final summary of Shakespeare's artistic career and how extravagantly he valued Henry VIII when he came to see it as the final

synthesis of Shakespeare's central concerns. The fallacy would seem to lie in Knight's assumption that Shakespeare's spiritual progress is coterminous with his artistic progress: what else could account for Knight's high estimates of Timon of Athens and Henry VIII? Knight, who would seem to assume that Shakespeare began with animal spirits, went through the human spirit and on up into the Holy Spirit, would also seem to assume that the more of Shakespeare there is in a play the better the play--again Timon of Athens is an ideal example.

Yet there are many reasons why Knight's method is admirably suited to interpret the last plays. Many have felt the power of the final plays--notably The Tempest and The Winter's Tale--only to find that the conventional methods of interpretation are inadequate to explain it. Realism is obviously not their strength; their historical significance, their topicality, fails signally to explain them; there is no real dramatic tension comparable to that of the great tragedies; and there are certainly more fully developed, more memorable characters in the earlier plays. They are too complex to lend themselves to a straightforward allegorical approach; critics have tried it, especially with The Tempest, only to find there is little agreement in their various allegorical interpretations. However, there are recurring patterns in the plays, notably in Pericles, The Tempest, The Winter's Tale, and Cymbeline; there are recurring themes; the atmospheres are similar; and the note of reconciliation and forgiveness is present

in them all. There are many characters, elements, and situations which lend themselves to symbolic handling. In addition, there are archetypal patterns that have led various interpreters to seek parallels in Christian tradition and pagan mythology. In short, since the last plays suggest in so many ways that their most profound significances lie not on the literal levels--in the story, the action, or the characters--Knight's spatial method is far better suited to interpret these plays than Bradley's method of psychological analysis or the literary historian's concern with influences, which are quite problematical, or topical allusions, which are rather scarce in these plays. The recurring music and tempests do seem to possess symbolic significance in the last plays; Knight was wrong in trying to make them the sole unifying elements of the whole of Shakespeare's work, but they do loom very large indeed in the final plays. Furthermore, Knight's insistence that each play be regarded first as poetry does seem to gain some empirical support in the last plays. How many critics who have attacked the last plays for various inadequacies have, like Lytton Strachey, acknowledged the greatness of their poetry?

Almost all critics acknowledge the remarkable similarities Shakespeare's last plays have to one another--Henry VIII having the fewest resemblances, though there are still enough to group it with the others--but none has been able to explain them better than Knight has through his concentration on the symbolic elements. The

remainder of this chapter will be devoted to Knight's interpretation of the last five plays, each taken individually, and the next chapter will indicate how Knight's success in interpreting the final plays "spatially" has influenced many younger writers to treat Shakespeare's work as poetry, each play symbolically structured and the whole organically coherent.

Knight has suggested, though he has never developed the idea, that *All's Well That Ends Well* was perhaps written even later than *Pericles* and that there are various sililitudes between *All's Well* and the last plays that deserve attention.[2] John Livingston Lowes has speculated that *All's Well* was finally revised somewhere around 1606-1608,[3] which would place it around the probable date of *Pericles*, which is usually taken to be 1608. Knight has an essay on *All's Well* in *The Sovereign Flower*, "The Third Eye," but even there he did not develop the theory that *All's Well* is a late play in many respects similar to the other final plays. Consequently *All's Well* will not be discussed, since Knight's speculations about the play appeared late in his work and have never been developed.

---

[2]Cf. pp. 74 and 127-8 of *The Crown of Life*. Henceforth all references to *The Crown of Life* in this chapter will be incorporated in the text. Any references to this book will be indicated simply by the page numbers in parentheses in this manner: (pp. 74 and 127-8).

[3]G. K. Hunter, Introduction to the New Arden edition of *All's Well That Ends Well*, p. xxii.

The first play to consider, then, is Pericles. In Myth and Miracle Knight points out the obvious similarities between Pericles and The Winter's Tale, and, while conceding that The Winter's Tale is the more perfect work of art, declares that The Winter's Tale "lacks something of the paradisal radiance of Pericles."(p. 16) When Knight published The Crown of Life he inserted a footnote to repudiate his earlier view that The Winter's Tale is the less vital play(p. 17). Knight's coupling of Pericles and The Winter's Tale as similar immortality visions, similar triumphs of the reality of love over the illusion of death, is found scattered throughout his interpretative work.[4] All of these were anticipated in Myth and Miracle, where he asserts that: "Pericles and The Winter's Tale show us the quality of immortality in terms of victorious love welling up in the beautiful plot of loss and reunion."[5]

In his essay on Pericles in The Crown of Life Knight does all he can to minimize the case against the authenticity of the questionable parts--principally the first two acts--of the play. After arguing in the beginning of his essay (pp. 32-4) for the organic wholeness of the story, the imaginative coherence of the early scenes, and the ease with which it fits into the pattern of the later work, Knight moves that we tentatively accept the

---

[4]For example, pp. 189-190 of The Christian Renaissance; p. 55 of The Burning Oracle; and p. 64 of The Olive and the Sword.

[5]Myth and Miracle, p. 21.

questionable passages and see where it leads us. At the conclusion of the essay (pp. 74-5) he attempts to explain away the inferior parts of the play. The bad lines may be due to a bad text or the lack of revision; the use of weaker rhymed passages may be due to the experimental nature of the play; and a copyist or compositor can be blamed. But Knight's own theory is that "the obvious conclusion is that some much earlier play, either of Shakespearian or other authorship, shows through, mainly in the first half, but that it has been so modified by incorporation that we need not, from an interpretative view, be seriously disquieted" (p. 75).

The advantage of Knight's interpretative method--assuming that finding the play a coherent imaginative whole reflecting the poet's spiritual progress is an advantage--is evident in the conclusion, where Knight finds that "the various imagistic correspondences, cutting across divergences of style, knit the narrative into a unity"(p. 75). If Knight is to be able to regard the play as a record of Shakespeare's spiritual development, it is imperative that he minimize any threat to the authenticity, and hence the integrity, of the play: "Whatever we think of certain parts, the whole, as we have it, is unquestionably dominated by a single mind; that mind is clearly Shakespeare's; and Shakespeare's, to, in process of an advance unique in literature" (p. 75).

In his interpretation of Pericles Knight emphasizes those elements which lend coherence to the play. One is

the tempest; another is music. Knight assumes that the play is essentially an extended, enlarged metaphor; the story, Knight believes, is subordinate to the central symbolism: "Being at a loss, he [Shakespeare] chooses a story that gives full rein to his poetic passion for voyages, tempests and wrecks" (p. 36). Moreover, Shakespeare is visualized as aiming to "compose a morality play around his own poetic symbolism as dogma" (p. 36). The play is thus essentially poetry, not drama: "For poetry is now expected to make, rather than to bind and harmonize, the story. The quality which formerly interpenetrated the story now is the story" (p. 36). It is obvious that a play that had frequently been declared weak in plot and dramatic interest has much to gain under an interpretative method that sees the essential unity in image, idea, and event.

Knight, who accepts the integrity or coherence of the whole of Shakespeare's work, very effectively ties Pericles to the plays that preceded and followed it. Pericles' knowledge of the incest of Antiochus and his daughter is compared to Hamlet's knowledge of his mother and uncle's guilt (p. 40). Pericles is compared to Posthumus (p. 47); Simonides' sentiments on honor are likened to those of the King in All's Well (p. 48); the play itself is seen in various ways resembling Timon of Athens (p. 48); the rewarding of Pericles' humility is thought to forecast the fortunes of Cranmer in Henry VIII (p. 51); Cerimon is regarded as both a descendant of Friar Lawrence in Romeo

and Juliet and a forebear of Prospero in The Tempest (p. 54); the whole vision of love triumphant over death is seen to be prefigured in Antony and Cleopatra (p. 57); Dionyza and Philoten are seen to forecast the Queen and Cloten, respectively, in Cymbeline (p. 58); Lysimachus is compared to Bertram in All's Well (p. 60); Marina's curing of Pericles is likened to Helena's of the King in All's Well (p. 63); and so on. Knight builds a remarkably good case for Pericles as a piece of Shakespearian work bound by an extraordinarily large number of likenesses both to the plays that came before and those that came after.

In his analyses of the characters in Pericles Knight is, I believe, less successful. Pericles' experience with Antiochus and his daughter undoubtedly involves a gain in knowledge of evil and the corresponding loss of innocence, but there is no evidence that Pericles has sinned, and consequently there is no action on his part that would deserve the suffering which he experiences. Yet Knight maintains that: "Our hero's adventure is a plunge into sin and death closely associated with ravishing desire. He has not actively sinned, except in giving way to a lustful and cheating fantasy, but the result is immersion into an experience of evil with accompanying disgust and danger. It is a fall in the theological sense" (p. 38). There would appear to be no evidence in the text to justify any conclusion other than that Pericles suffers the fate of mortality simply because he is human. Like Belarius, Prospero, Hermione, Buckingham, and Katharine, Pericles is an innocent

suffering the consequences of others' guilt.

Indeed, the final plays are filled with characters who suffer for sins not their own. In Pericles Marine undergoes ill-treatment at the hands of depraved human beings, Thaisa suffers at the hands of nature, and Pericles himself endures evil both of the moral and natural kinds. In Cymbeline the King is imposed upon by the evil Queen and is the instrument of evil toward Posthumus and his daughter Imogen as well as toward Belarius. Posthumus is reported a noble and worthy, though poor, gentleman whose sense of honor is attacked by Iachimo. In The Winter's Tale Camillo, Paulina, and Mamillius, in addition to Hermione, suffer innocently. Abused Innocence might be regarded as a theme common to all of the last five plays.

It might be argued[6] that the theme of growth from Innocence into Experience is present in all of the last five plays. However, it would be incorrect--and there is no textual warrant--to maintain that Pericles is suffering the universal human experience of growth into knowledge of good and evil. Pericles flees Antiochus for self-preservation and not because of a first shocking awareness of evil:

> Murder's as near to lust as flame to smoke.
> Poison and treason are the hands of sin,
> Ay, and the targets, to put off the shame:
> Then, lest my life be cropp'd to keep you clear,
> By flight I'll shun the danger which I fear.
> (I. i. 139-143)

---

[6]And has been, in "The Tempest" by Derek Traversi. This essay appeared in Scrutiny, XVI (June 1949), pp. 127-157.

Moreover, it is not judging Pericles too precisely to maintain that he can hardly be innocent, i.e., ignorant, of evil if he is capable of interpreting the riddle no matter how ridiculously transparent the riddle is.

Knight's misinterpretation of Pericles is largely due, I believe, to his desire to see Pericles as a kind of Hamlet: "After escaping to Tyre, Pericles is struck down with melancholia. He has had a blasting experience, not unlike Hamlet's, both suffering through knowledge of incest in one they love and falling into a mysterious gloom..." (p. 40). Knight goes on to assert that: "He seems to feel guilt, yet is uncertain how far the offence is his own (I. ii. 92)" (p. 40). Yet Knight completely overlooks several lines in Act I, Scene 2, lines which indicate that Pericles' melancholy is not caused by a brooding sense of sin or evil so much as a noble solicitude for his subjects:

> With hostile forces he'll o'erspread the land,
> And with the ostent of war will look so huge,
> Amazement shall drive courage from the state,
> Our men be vanquish'd ere they do resist,
> And subjects punish'd that ne'er thought offence:
> Which care of them, not pity of myself,--
> Who am no more but as the tops of trees,
> Which fence the roots they grow by and defend them,--
> Make both my body pine and soul to languish,
> And punish that before that he would punish.
> (I. ii. 25-34) [Italics mine]

The fallacy in Knight's conception of Pericles is his viewing Pericles as an introspective and self-centered figure reminiscent of the romantic conception of Hamlet. Pericles is far more external and far more a symbol of the good ruler concerned for the welfare of his subjects than Knight is apparently aware of. Pericles' rank as a Prince is

obviously not in Knight's mind when he writes that "He [Pericles] is at the best 'a country gentleman' (II. iii. 33), regarded rather as is Posthumus in Cymbeline...." (p. 47). It is incredible that Knight should use Simonides' estimate of Pericles in this manner, when the reader or viewer of the play is obviously better informed of Pericles' high rank than Simonides is. It would again appear to be that Knight is over-anxious to link Pericles with other characters of Shakespeare, at one time Hamlet, at another Posthumus. Knight would seem to be carried away by his wide and profound knowledge of the totality of Shakespeare's work and his desire to place Pericles in a significant and coherent sequence. Pericles is better seen--in the first two acts--as an ideal ruler in contrast to the tyrant Antiochus; Pericles himself tells Helicanus, when he is delegating his princely authority to this lord, that

> The care I had and have of subjects' good
> On them I'll lay, whose wisdom's strength can bear it.
> I'll take thy word for faith, not ask thine oath;
> Who shuns not to break one will sure crack both.
> But in our orbs we'll live so round and safe,
> That time of both this truth shall ne'er convince,
> Thou show'dst a subject's shine, I a true prince'.
> (I. ii. 118-124)

In addition to being a parable of Patience[7] Pericles--the first two acts--could also be regarded as a parable of the Good Ruler in Adversity: the first two acts are loaded with explicit moralizing on kingship and tyranny.

Knight is correct, I believe, in finding Pericles' adventures a kind of parable of human fortune: "We are

---

[7]Cf. J. F. Danby, Poets on Fortune's Hill, pp. 101-2.

watching something like a parable of human fortune, with moral import at every turn" (p. 52). Or, as he suggests on p. 70; "Pericles might be called a Shakespearian morality play."

Knight is more successful in his estimate of Cerimon, who is rightly compared to Friar Lawrence, Prospero, and even Timon (p. 54). Cerimon, does, as Gower says at the end of the play, represent "the worth that learned charity aye wears," but the play does not quite justify Knight's finding Cerimon "an almost superhuman figure living out a truth expressed throughout the New Testament..." (p. 55). Cerimon could more easily be called "allegorical" than "superhuman"; indeed, Gower's catalog of virtues and vices at the close of the play would seem to substantiate the view that the various characters in the play are much like the allegorical figures in morality plays.

Marina is regarded by Knight as at once a symbol and a real girl; on p. 62 of The Crown of Life she is "art incarnate," and three pages later Knight writes that "there is nothing inflexible, inhuman, about Marina: she remains at every instant a natural girl." This formidable paragon of virtue, this tremendously talented girl, who preaches divinity in a bawdy house, is hardly a "natural girl"; she is, as the character Gower indicates at the conclusion, a figure representing virtue and chastity.

There are primarily three things that Knight is eager to prove in his interpretation of Pericles: the

first is that the play is itself coherent, an organic entity with "running coherences of idea, image, and event" (pp. 70-1). The second is that the play is a part of a larger whole; in other words, that it fits into the Shakespeare Progress. The third is that the play, in common with the other last plays, of which Pericles is the first, possesses transcendental meaning. We have found that by continually comparing the characters, images, and situations in Pericles with those of other plays by Shakespeare Knight succeeds in linking the play with the rest of Shakespeare's work. By concentrating on themes and images and subordinating action to imagery and character to symbolism Knight can not only conclude: "His [Shakespeare's] imagery, his poetry, dictates the action" (p. 57), but that it is thoroughly organic as a play (p. 70).

Having established to his own satisfaction that Pericles is coherent in itself and part of a larger organic whole, Knight differentiates the play from its predecessors by mentioning that "the structural elements in Pericles are not all new; but the treatment gives them fresh, and explicitly transcendental meaning" (p. 72). Knight rests his case, naturally enough, on the following things: Cerimon's reviving of Thaisa, which he regards as "the key-incident that unlocks the whole range of Shakespeare's later work" (p. 57); the association of birth and tempest (p. 59); Marina's possessing knowledge both of the art of music (dancing and singing) and of design (weaving and sewing), which Knight relates to eternity (p. 64) (music

because of its supernatural symbolism and the arts of a spatial nature because of their supposed permanence); the employment of a direct theophany by Shakespeare (p. 67); and the child of royal birth, whose origin Knight associates with the supposed origin in eternity of the soul of the child as one finds it recorded in Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" (p. 72). The following quotation summarizes the elements that Knight has stressed and the conclusion that he draws from their significance:

> It is accordingly not strange that art, as such, should be given greater emphasis than hitherto; in stage-conception, ceremonious procession (as of the tourneying knights) and ritual quality; in dumb-show; in monumental inscriptions, and metaphors; in musical accomplishment (Pericles' and Marina's; in Marina's dancing and decorative needlework. The arts least emphasized in Shakespeare, the static arts of design, assume a new prominence, giving us the exquisite descriptions of Marina in monumental terms. Shakespeare's drama is aspiring towards the eternal harmony and the eternal pattern (p. 73). [Italics mine]

This paragraph is an excellent example of Knight's "spatial" method of interpretation in practice. Notice the emphasis on the spatial arts--though Knight is constrained to admit that they occupy a very small place in most of Shakespeare's works--and their identification with eternity, or a permanent, eternal structure. Note too the stressing of art, ritual, ceremony, and metaphor; the play is taken by Knight to be "Shakespeare's total poetry on the brink of self-knowledge" (p. 73). The play becomes a quasi-religious ritual, in which symbolic personages engaged in symbolic actions speak symbolic language.

After all, Knight finds various personages symbolic--Cerimon and Marina, for examples--the action he finds forming a significant pattern (pp. 73-4); and the gnomic utterances of the characters are best understood as symbolic language (p. 74). The play, in short, is regarded as a parable of human fortune that is simultaneously a myth of immortality.

There are certain objections that one can raise to Knight's interpretation of Pericles. He fails to take into account the great thematic difference between the first two acts and the last three. The first two acts are filled with moralistic statements about kingship and tyranny. The Pericles of the first two acts is moving in a moralistic atmosphere while the last three acts--with the exception of Gower's epilogue--show a Pericles who is totally at the mercy of Fortune or Providence, in either case powers beyond human control. But Knight makes a strong case for the homogeneity of the play.

A more serious objection is Knight's tendency to read the characters, actions, imagery, and themes in terms of what Shakespeare wrote in other plays. There are similarities, for example, between Pericles and Hamlet, or Cerimon and Timon, or Marina and Helena, but when Knight pushes the comparisons too far he falsifies the play under consideration. In trying to link Pericles with the rest of Shakespeare's work the things that distinguish this play are obscured or overlooked. Where else does one find a moralizing chorus comparable to Gower? Knight is really

violating his ostensible belief in the integrity and individuality of each separate work of art.

There is really no way of refuting Knight's reading of transcendental meanings into Pericles--or any other of the last plays, for that matter. One can only state that there is no positive indication in the play that Shakespeare saw any vision of immortality beyond the perpetuation of oneself through art or progeny, and of the two the natural way appears to have the poet's favor, though nature and art seem somehow to be identified in The Winter's Tale and The Tempest. As in All's Well, the future in all of the last plays lies with the younger generation, Marina and the not-so-innocent Lysimachus, Perdita and Florizel, Miranda and Ferdinand, Imogen and Posthumus, and the infant Elizabeth. In all of the plays the innocence and purity of the young girls is a constant. The strength lies with these paragons of virtue. For all the supernatural trappings of the last plays--and these trappings are all rather conventional: Shakespeare is no myth-creating Blake--it is nature that is deified, though it is a refined rather than a savage one.

In summary, Pericles presents us with a humanistic-naturalistic Shakespeare rather than a supernaturalistic one. The reviving of Thaisa and the reunion of Pericles with Thaisa and Marina is not supernatural since there is no real resurrection; the power that Cerimon has is, like that of Helena in All's Well, ultimately natural rather than supernatural. With the peculiarly strong reverence for

nature and the presence of chaste young women possessing great abilities and strength of character, one could almost see the last plays as Shakespeare's approximation to the reference for the great mother earth-goddess that Robert Graves finds preceding in time the later patriarchally-oriented gods. Moreover, it is Diana of Ephesus who is the presiding deity of Pericles.

In interpreting The Winter's Tale Knight is not faced with the urgent task of defending its authenticity, since the only part of the play whose authenticity has been seriously questioned is Time, the chorus, who appears only once in the play, at the beginning of Act IV. Knight's essay in The Crown of Life, "'Great Creating Nature': An Essay on The Winter's Tale," is perhaps the best of his essays on the last plays and has been anthologized.[8]

Following the same procedure he used with Pericles, Knight rather effectively ties The Winter's Tale to the rest of Shakespeare's work, especially the great tragedies, this time doing less violence to the play's own integrity. Some examples should suffice to indicate how thoroughly Knight established the play's relationship with the earlier works. The supreme love-value Knight finds reminiscent of Desdemona in Othello (p. 79); the play with which Knight seems most desirous to relate The Winter's Tale is Macbeth: the jealous imaginings of

---

[8]Leonard F. Dean, ed., Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism, New York, 1957, pp. 378-410.

Leontes Knight compares to the nightmarish thoughts of Macbeth (p. 82); the unreality of evil he sees as common to the two plays (p. 82); the unmotivated evil of Leontes is likened to that of Hamlet, Iago, and Macbeth (p. 84); the tyranny of Leontes is juxtaposed with that of Richard III and Macbeth (p. 86); the opposition between the child and the powers of darkness is shown to be present in both The Winter's Tale and Macbeth (p. 91); Leontes' treatment of Paulina is compared to that of Lear with Kent (pp. 87-8); the Shepherd's remark on the behavior of young men between 16 and 23 recalls to Knight the character Thersites (p. 98); and the spring-and-winter relation in the play is seen as reversing that of Love's Labour's Lost (p. 100).

The Winter's Tale, like Pericles, is not merely a rehashing of old material but rather a more profound reworking of what had been handled in a lyric or tragic way earlier; for example, Knight finds that: "Leontes is more complex than Othello as a study of jealousy and more realistically than Macbeth as a study of evil possession" (p. 96). Moreover, Knight asserts, "we find Leontes marking an advance in Shakespeare's human delineation: the poetic and philosophic overtones of Hamlet, Lear and Timons are compressed into a study as sharply defined as the Nurse in Romeo and Juliet and as objectively diagnosed as Ford, Malvolio, and Parolles" (p. 96). Both of these claims are excessive, and again I believe it is because of Knight's being overly eager to prove that the last plays are not only of a piece with the early work of Shakespeare but also an

advance over it. Knight quotes some comic passages showing Autolycus bilking the Clown to support his assertion that "far from relaxing, Shakespeare's art is, on every front, advancing" (p. 102).

Knight also indicates many things "The Winter's Tale has in common with the other four final plays. Here again a few examples should serve. The narrative is similar to that of Pericles (p. 76); the tormented rhythms are compared to those of Cymbeline (p. 83); Hermione's is justly likened to Katharine in Henry VIII (p. 93); the morality-interest is present, as in Pericles (p. 96; and the obvious similarity between the Florizel-Perdita and Ferdinand-Miranda loves is indicated (p. 108).

Here too Knight is more successful in establishing the coherence of the individual play. One cohering element which Knight emphasizes very heavily is the progress of Leontes' spiritual development. Knight, we recall, did violence to the text in attributing to Pericles a loss of innocence and a sense of sin; but in The Winter's Tale Leontes is so obviously responsible for his own and the others' suffering that Knight is perhaps justified in asserting that "Leontes sins and endures a purgatory of guilt" (p. 76). Whether Leontes ever achieves a true repentance, however, is questionable.

Knight regards the reviving of Thaisa as the central event in Pericles, and in The Winter's Tale the crucial event is taken to be what Knight refers to as the resurrection of Hermione (p. 76). All the rest of the play leads up to

this event. The play's progress, according to Knight, in three stages: the tragic, the pastoral, and the ritualistic, a mixture of the earthly and the transcendental that centers about the resurrection of Hermione (p. 76 and 113-128). Thus a transcendental event is taken to be a binding force in the play.

For the purpose of proving the play's organic integrity Knight also utilizes various thematic oppositions that have been found in the play. For example, he mentions the opposition between maturity and death and birth and resurrection (p. 76); the simplicities of Bohemia contrasted with the luxuries of Sicilia (p. 77); the innocence of youth versus the sin-consciousness of maturing (p. 77); and art and nature, both ultimately seen as parts of "great creating Nature" (p. 105). All of these thematic dualisms tend to unify the play.

Imagery occupies a decidedly subordinate position in Knight's interpretation of all of the last plays. When the events and characters themselves are regarded as symbolic it is perhaps less necessary to seek for symbolic imagery. Even the music-tempest symbolism assumes a minor role in Knight's interpretation of The Winter's Tale. The tempest is here a manifestation of unbridled nature in its savage aspect (p. 98), and music again enters as a symbol of the supernatural at the "resurrection" of Hermione in opposition to the tempest (p. 124).

We have already found that Knight assumes the supreme symbolic importance of Hermione's restoration. Another event

of great significance is the famous conversation between Polixenes and Perdita, where they discuss art and nature; this Knight regards as "a microcosm of our whole drama" (p. 105). A few statements should illustrate the symbolic or allegorical meanings Knight assigns to various characters. At one point Knight maintains that: "Mamillius stands before Leontes as Truth confronting Error" (p. 80). At another Paulina is found to represent "the pure Christian conscience, together with common sense" (p. 88). Apollo is found to be "both a nature-deity and transcendent," to be at once "the Greek Apollo and the Hebraic Jehovah" (p. 92). Elsewhere Paulina is "repentance incarnate" (p. 95). Autolycus is seen as "spring incarnate" (p. 100).

Shakespeare has succeeded better in The Winter's Tale than in Pericles in fusing the human and allegorical aspects of his characters, and Knight is also, for the most part, more successful in interpreting the characters. However, there are weaknesses in his handling of the characters. The most serious and significant is his over-estimation of Leontes. Leontes is neither a Macbeth nor an Othello, though Knight finds him more complex and profound than either. At times Knight relapses into Bradleyism by providing psychological reasons for Leontes' actions: in accounting for Leontes' tirade against Paulina, Knight writes "by a transition well known to psychologists [Leontes] tends to deny vehemently the name of tyrant, whilst seeing in his opposite, Paulina, the exact evil really lodged against himself (p. 86). If characters are primarily if

not purely symbolic and not subject to realistic standards, then why provide a psychological mechanism to account for Leontes' action?

Knight also fails to stress the comic element in the early scene of Leontes' jealous rantings: Knight will only admit that "it is almost comic" (p. 86); but he hastens to add that there is not "one atom's less of tragic intensity" (p. 86). Moreover, with all the allegorical meanings that he finds in Paulina, Knight never does justice to the shrewishness of the woman whose husband declares that "When she will take the rein I let her run;/But she'll not stumble" (II. iii. 51-2). Paulina is indeed virtuous, but in a rather formidable though humorous, strong-willed way.

Nature is rightly placed at the center of the play, though Knight is not content to leave Apollo a mere nature-deity but insists upon making him transcendent (p. 92), a symbol of the Hebraic Jehovah (p. 92). Furthermore, there are many other instances of Knight's attempting to relate The Winter's Tale to Christianity. Knight calls our attention to Paulina's orthodox Christian phraseology (p. 87); Paulina is said to represent the "pure Christian conscience" (p. 88); the close association of nature and human childhood are found to have Christian affinities (p. 89); Paulina's speech (II. iii. 97ff.) Knight regards as "deeply Christian" (p. 91); and there are frequent references to the New Testament, with Hermione's "resurrection" being the climax of the play, a symbol of the triumph of life over

Death which points to the New Testament.

In his interpretation of The Winter's Tale Knight tries to prove the same three things that he attempted in his interpretations of Pericles: the coherence of the play itself; the place of the play in the Shakespeare Progress; and its transcendental nature, the difference between the last five plays and the preceding ones. The first of these three was perhaps the easiest, since few have ever seriously questioned the coherence of the play, except for the 16-year time lapse between the first two acts and the last three and the geographical shifts; both of these problems, of time and of space, do not threaten the integrity of the work as a question of authorship would. They are more a matter of dramaturgy than of poetry, and it is the latter that Knight insists upon stressing more heavily.

Roughly a third of the essay on The Winter's Tale is devoted exclusively to the transcendental element, which is centered around the restoration of Hermione in the last act. Knight's whole case for the immortality myth, the eternity-vision, rests on an insecure foundation. How can one who has never died be resurrected? Shakespeare does not question the finality of death in his last plays, as Knight seems to think. When Simonides or Mamillius dies he stays dead. Hermione does not die--she is simply separated from her husband, just as Thaisa was from Pericles, or Imogen from Posthumus. Reunion or restoration, but not resurrection or rebirth. It has frequently been pointed

out that reality versus false appearance is a constant preoccupation of Shakespeare, especially in the last plays. If this is so, then perhaps Shakespeare also carefully distinguishes between real and imagined death. Mamillius, Simonides, Cloten, and the wicked Queen all remain dead; Shakespeare has not resurrected them. Nor can one object that only bad people die: Simonides was a good man, and Mamillius is even regarded as Innocence personified.

Knight sees eternity symbolized in both nature and art, which he finds ultimately one (p. 105). Knight himself never seems able to choose between nature and eternity: "Is the miracle a transfiguration of nature or wholly transcendental?" (p. 117); and on p. 118 he goes on to maintain that: "The implications of 'eternity' are semi-transcendental in attempt to define that unmotivated power behind the mystery of free generation in nature and in art; indeed, implicit in freedom itself" (p. 118). The Winter's Tale, Knight decides, is "hammering on the threshold of some extraordinary truth related to both 'nature' and 'eternity'" (p. 120). In Pericles it was Marina who possessed artistic skill, and in The Winter's Tale it is Julio Romano who has this "uncanny eternity-imitating, skill" (p. 121). Ultimately Knight would seem to choose a deified nature, hardly distinguishable from pantheism; he concludes the essay in the following manner:

> That drama, however, by its very enigma, its unsolved and yet uncompromising statement, throws up--as in small compass did the little flower-dialogue too--a vague, numinous, sense of mighty powers, working

> through both the natural order and man's religious consciousness, that preserve, in spite of all appearance, the good. Orthodox tradition is used, but it does not direct; a pagan naturalism is used too. The Bible has been an influence; so have classical myth and Renaissance pastoral; but the greatest influence was Life itself, that creating and protecting deity whose superhuman presence and powers the drama labours to define (p. 128).

We can recall from an earlier discussion of Knight's theories of art and interpretation that his metaphysic is ultimately a romantic variety of vitalistic naturalism. The general vagueness of what Knight means by "eternity" or "immortality" coupled with his deceptive use of orthodox terminology could well lead the casual reader to assume that Knight is reading an orthodox Christian interpretation into the last plays. But nothing could be farther from the truth: Knight's interpretation rests on a rather incoherent and inconsistent romantic, sentimental, naturalism.

Knight correctly emphasizes the importance of the scene in Act IV where Polixenes and Perdita discuss art and nature (pp. 104-5). The two would appear to be discussing a nature that generates an art which is natural rather than artificial. One could say that the art that improves upon nature is itself art created by nature. Had Knight been content to see Shakespeare in the last plays poised between humanism (art) and naturalism (procreation), ultimately choosing a perfected nature that transcends both the artificiality of civilization and the harshness of uncultivated rustic simplicity, and seeking to synthesize the innocence of nature and the wisdom of

civilization, then perhaps Knight would be closer to the essence of the last plays. It is when trying to drag in the infinite that Knight falsifies facts by making Pericles atone for a sin he never committed or Hermione be resurrected from a death she never died. One could argue for a humanistic-naturalistic Shakespeare on the basis of his living in the Renaissance, in a Protestant country, and one could argue for his preoccupation with art and nature on the basis of what he elsewhere wrote--in the Sonnets, for example. In conclusion, Knight's interpretation of The Winter's Tale is a brilliant one full of perceptive insights, but it is vitiated by his straining after transcendental meanings. Shakespeare in the last plays would seem to be revealing a cosmic harmony, but there is no positive proof that he ever saw a supernatural order transcending nature.

The importance that G. Wilson Knight attaches to the Vision of Jupiter in Cymbeline can be gauged by the length--35 pages--of the second part of the essay (pp. 168-202), which is devoted exclusively to defending its authenticity. Knight lays heavy stress on the significance of the various theophanies which occur in the final five plays; consequently, he harks back to earlier plays in an effort to support his contention that theophanies are not interpolations by inferior writers but rather an integral part of the Shakespeare Progress. Knight defends the authenticity of the Vision in its entirety and tries to prove

that it is an example of a normal Shakespearian technique.

Knight concludes that the atmosphere of the play leads inevitably to the Vision: "The Vision of Jupiter certainly occurs in a work saturated with religious suggestion" (p. 179). Moreover, Knight asserts, "the gods are even more frequently mentioned [in Cymbeline] than in King Lear" (p. 179). Knight therefore concludes (p. 183) that: "The Vision is exactly in tone with the play's theological impressionism."

Knight's method of defending the authenticity of the Vision of Jupiter is, first of all, to prove that it is an integral part of the play in which it occurs. The second line of defense is to prove that it is in harmony with what occurs in the earlier plays and with what transpires in the other late plays. With the first line of reasoning Knight tries to establish that the Vision is an integral part of the play so that he can conclude that "in rhythm, vocabulary, sentiment and purpose the speech is Shakespearian" (p. 195). The rhythm and vocabulary he defends on pp. 193-5. Knight argues that the solemnity of the death-imagery (pp. 168-171), the recurrence of the nature-imagery (pp. 173-4), the art-imagery which he sees as "shading into thoughts of eternity" (p. 175), and so on, all culminate in the Vision of Jupiter. The frequent references to the gods (p. 179) are also used to support Knight's view, though when he mentions that such references even exceed those in King Lear (p. 179) one is tempted to reply that perhaps they are also as naturalistically

conceived as in Lear. Knight's argument, however, for the Vision's being an integral part of the play is very well reasoned, though one might not agree with him when he assumes affirmative answers to the following questions: "Is it possible that twentieth-century scholarship is merely attributing to Shakespeare its own dislike of the visionary and the supernatural? And that its stylistic judgements merely reflect that dislike?" (p. 196).

Knight also succeeds in relating the theophany in Cymbeline to those in the other last plays, though his effort to link it with supernatural events in the earlier plays is, I believe, less successful. He likens it to Queen Katharine's vision in Henry VIII (p. 168), to the appearance of Diana in Pericles (p. 185), and to the felt presence of Phoebus-Apollo in The Winter's Tale (p. 185). Knight links Cymbeline with the remaining final play, The Tempest, when he makes reference (p. 190) to the masque where Juno, Ceres, and Iris appear. Thus all of the last five plays have been joined by their theophanies, counting the presiding deity of Apollo in The Winter's Tale as a quasi-theophany. After tying in Cymbeline with the other last plays Knight concludes that: "Surely the necessity of our Vision is now apparent. If we reject it, Cymbeline is left, alone in this group, without any striking transcendental moment" (p. 191). Furthermore, Knight maintains (p. 191), "nearly all Shakespeare's greater works have their transcendental, or semi-transcendental scenes: the Ghost in Hamlet, the Cauldron-scene in Macbeth (with Hecate and

the Apparitions), the weird tempests continually, as in Julius Caesar and King Lear, the mysterious music in Antony and Cleopatra. Pericles and The Winter's Tale have their powerful tempests, but Cymbeline no active tempest-symbolism outside the Vision; its massed effect is one of sombre assurance; but surely something similar is needed." Yet we notice immediately that one of these, the Cauldron-scene, is also of dubious authenticity (Knight thinks otherwise; Cf. The Shakespearian Tempest, Appendix B), and none of the examples, with the exception of Lear, perhaps--though even there the tempest is certainly more symbolic of savage nature than of anything transcendental--occupies the central position that Knight finds the theophanies occupying in the last plays. In addition, it is at once apparent that, with the exception of the vision of Katharine in Henry VIII, the theophanies in the last plays all involve classical pagan deities, not ghosts or witches. Furthermore, these classical deities can all--again excepting Katharine's vision--be more or less identifies with aspects of nature: Diana not only with virginity but also fertility; Apollo with the life-giving sun, Neptune with the ocean; Zeus with the overarching heavens and cosmic order in general; and Juno, Ceres, and Iris with their respective realms. On the other hand, one could also argue that they were taken in the conventional way: as ready-made symbols to be employed poetically without reference to any transcendental categories of the interpreter's imaginings. Observing Knight's defense of

the Vision of Jupiter we again find that he has employed his method of arguing for the integrity of the individual play and relating that play to the rest of Shakespeare's work. This method we have already found Knight using in his analyses of Pericles and The Winter's Tale; we shall again find him employing it in his interpretations of The Tempest and Henry VIII.

Let us turn, then, to Knight's handling of the themes and characters in Cymbeline. Knight finds Cymbeline unrivalled for the complexity of its plot, excelling both Pericles and The Winter's Tale with which it shares many of the same themes (p. 129). Plot and event would seem to predominate over imagistic effect and atmosphere (p. 129). Moreover, in spite of the many unrealistic features which the play shares with the other past plays--excepting Henry VIII--and with the romance in general, Knight regards Cymbeline as primarily a history play (p. 129). The play is seen as uniting Shakespeare's two principal historical interests, the Roman and the British (p. 130).

The main national interest, according to Knight, involves Cymbeline's refusal to continue paying tribute to Rome (p. 134). This raises the question of patriotism, which is undoubtedly present: Cloten and his wicked mother are both patriotic, as is Posthumus, and yet Imogen, Pisanio, and the final decision of Cymbeline all seem to favor subservience to Rome. Whether Rome is to be construed as classical or ecclesiastical is uncertain; when one recalls the great prestige that classical Rome had in Renaissance

Europe it would perhaps be wiser to assume that it is classical Rome. In any event, it is not contemporary Rome, since that is associated with decadence and its depraved representative Iachimo.

There is also the theme of jealousy, manifested by Posthumus, whom Knight finds, as do most commentators, colorless and lacking a "core to his personality" (p. 140). Then, too, there is the theme of British manhood, also represented by Posthumus, engaged in a struggle with continental intrigue (p. 143). The pattern that Knight finds emerging involves "(i) British mangood being led to (ii) sexual disintegration by (iii) foreign and especially Italianate intrigue" (p. 147). Not content with keeping the pattern on this level, Knight brings in the metaphysical by asserting that: "Posthumus defends not merely a single lady, but Britain's soul-integrity" (p. 148). But the plot for the most part pits British manhood against Italian cunning (p. 149). Central to the play, however, is the union of Rome and Britain (p. 165).

Typical of Knight's interpretative method are the symbolic meanings he assigns to the various characters. The Queen is "cruelty incarnate" (p. 130); she "personifies the ugly thing Posthumus suspects in Imogen" (p. 131); Posthumus represents British manhood (p. 138), British strength (p. 141), and the "unknown soldier" (p. 146); he personifies the union of British and Roman virtues (p. 142); Iachimo becomes the symbol of "continental intrigue, showiness, and superficial refinement" (p. 143); and Jupiter

becomes God (p. 201), Jehovah (p. 202), and kindly Providence (p. 202).

What remains to be discussed of Knight's interpretation of Cymbeline is the transcendental significance that he finds in the play. Strangely enough, Knight believes that this new intuition of immortality in the past plays helps Shakespeare in his task of creating fully-realized characters; praising--excessively, I believe--Shakespeare's realization of the character of Iachimo, whom he somewhat oddly finds surpassing both Iago and Edmund, Knight writes that "as so often, Shakespeare's last work presents, if anything, an advance in human delineation; as though the new intuition of transcendence accompanies a newly concrete awareness of man" (p. 142). One could cite many examples to the contrary: Cymbeline, Posthumus, Belarius, Henry VIII, Leontes, Florizel, Pericles, Prospero, all of whom have been found dramatically deficient for various reasons. If, on the other hand, one takes into account the conventional and therefore acceptable unreality of figures of the romance-tradition, then the validity of Knight's statement is still dubious. The flaw in Knight's estimate of the characters in the last plays is his seeing too much of the tragic figures of the great tragedies in the romance figures of the last plays. This, in turn, is because of his desire to link the last plays with the preceding tragedies in order to prove that the final plays are the consummation of Shakespeare's work, a consummation that he finds surpassing the tragic intuition by substituting for it a vision of immortality.

Knight again emphasizes the notion of a resurrection; he does so by asserting that: "Imogen's revival makes contact with the resurrections of Thaisa and Hermione" (p. 170). Now Hermione was not dead and Thaisa was revived by Cerimon's power over nature; and Imogen is obviously never dead, as Shakespeare takes pains to indicate: Cornelius in an aside informs the audience that he does not trust the Queen with poisons but instead gives her something which

> Will stupefy and dull the sense awhile;
> Which first (perchance) she'll prove on cats
> and dogs,
> Then afterward up higher: but there is
> No danger in what show of death it makes,
> More than the locking up the spirits a time,
> To be more fresh, reviving.

Knight acknowledges (p. 156) that Imogen never really dies, but yet he treats her semblance of death as the real thing, real enough for him to take her revival as an approximate resurrection. Shakespeare appears to have kept a sharp distinction between apparent death and real death, but Knight again fails to observe this.

When Knight visualizes the royal boys Guiderius and Arviragus as approaching Nietzsche's "integration of gentleness and power" (p. 163), one of the preoccupations of the later Knight is evident. In the same paragraph Knight betrays his own essential romanticism when he finds that the royal boys reveal hints of "some order of human being in embryo, to which the nearest analogies in our literature are the youthful heroes of Coleridge's Zapolyta and Keats' Otho the Great; with one sad miscarriage of

attempt in Wordsworth's Excursion" (p. 163).

Knight places a heavy burden of significance on Cymbeline: "young Britain receives, through Posthumus, the blessing and protection of great Jupiter, the guardian deity of ancient Rome" (p. 164). It need hardly be repeated that one of the conveniences of symbolism is its accommodation of whatever construction the interpreter wishes to place on it. One could--and it has been done--just as easily argue that the whole play is symbolic of the pro-Catholic sentiment of Shakespeare and that the payment of tribute to Rome was symbolic of his allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church, the figure of Jupiter representing the Pope.

The extraordinarily high claims that Knight makes for the last plays are evident when he writes that "as Pericles and The Winter's Tale assimilate and negate tragedy, so Cymbeline transmutes former dramas of victorious war into a strangely paradoxical harmony of war-negating peace, wherein the victor in fine humility acknowledges the loser's right" (p. 166). It is only through a total disregard for the genre of the romance and an insistence upon an integrity of the whole of Shakespeare's work that takes precedence--and sometimes rides roughshod--over the integrity of the individual play that Knight can make such a claim. An assertion of this kind rests upon the assumption that there is a continuous development of artistic and spiritual progress, more or less coterminous, and that the "spatial" method of interpretation can define it with scientific precision.

In conclusion, Knight finds Cymbeline to be "this vivid revelation of a kindly Providence behind mortality's drama," and "our one anthropomorphic expression of that beyond-tragedy recognition felt through the miracles and resurrections of sister-plays and reaching Christian formulation in Henry VIII" (p. 202). Knight's whole approach to the last plays is summarized in the concluding statement (p. 202) of his essay on Cymbeline: "Only through a careful study of the harmonies, minute and massive, of Shakespeare's world can the full authenticity of these crowning works be established." Without the establishment of this authenticity, his whole theory collapses. Knight's interpretations are usually thorough, occasionally profound, sometimes penetrating, often brilliant, but seldom discriminating.

The Tempest has long been regarded as both an autobiography of its creator and a play extraordinarily rich in symbolic suggestion. Since this play has not had either its authenticity or its internal coherence seriously questioned, Knight is free to devote his attention to relating the play to the rest of the Shakespeare Progress and to loading the play with parabolic, symbolic, transcendental, and futuristic meanings. The play has been so diversely interpreted that Knight's interpretation of it is perhaps initially less novel than his interpretations of the other final plays. However, as Knight develops his interpretation he reveals his own romanticism, his view of Shakespeare's

romanticism, his theory of poetry, his later preoccupations (Nietzsche's blending of power and grace and the bisexual theory of artistic creation, for examples), his belief in the primacy of the imagination, and even a somewhat extravagant and altogether fanciful view that The Tempest foreshadows British destiny.

The essay on The Tempest in The Crown of Life (pp. 203-255) is divided into four parts. The first part (pp. 203-223) is a very elaborate and impressive effort to prove that the final plays--The Tempest preeminently--are the summation or culmination of all the preceding artistic efforts of Shakespeare. The first part of the essay, then, is a brilliant cataloguing of characters, themes, images, and events from every single play and poem that Shakespeare is generally acknowledged to have written. It is an excellent example of Knight's spatial method at work, revealing at once both its strength and weakness. The strength lies in the large number of correspondences in character, plot, theme, moral, event, and image that Knight marshals as evidence of a coherence unifying the totality of Shakespeare's output. The weakness lies in an ignoring of the fact that many of the things that are found recurring in Shakespeare's work are so conventional, so universal, that one could just as easily argue that the plays of other playwrights are Shakespeare's on the basis of likenesses in theme, plot, character, moral, and image that they employ. By hauling in, because of superficial similarities, parts of works that are put to greatly different uses in their respective plays Knight does violence to the integrity of the plays individually.

Poetry itself is regarded by Knight as the subject of The Tempest: "Shakespeare [in The Tempest] has no objective story before him from which to create. He spins his plot from his own poetic world entirely, simplifying the main issues of his total work--plot, poetry, persons; whittling off the nonessential and leaving the naked truth exposed. The Tempest, patterned of storm and music, is thus an interpretation of Shakespeare's world" (p. 204). Moreover, Knight maintains, "The Tempest will be found peculiarly poor in metaphor" because "this play is itself metaphor" (p. 224).

The Tempest Knight sees as both a myth of creation (p. 226) and a myth of the national (British) soul (p. 255). Throughout his essay Knight is at pains to emphasize that the play is not so much a subjective record as an artistic one: "What is generally called a man's spiritual autobiography is accordingly less important than his artistic autobiography. Such an autobiography is The Tempest" (p. 225). Furthermore, Knight goes on to state: "The total result is nearer self-transcendence than self-reflection; while in throwing himself as creator on to the screen, and showing himself at work in creative activity and control, the poet constructs a myth of creation in its wholeness and universality" (p. 226).

In his essay on The Tempest in The Crown of Life Knight mentions (pp. 226 and 230) Colin Still, whose Shakespeare's Mystery Play (1921), later revised and reissued in an expanded form under the title The Timeless Theme (1936),

harmonizes, by and large, with Knight's own interpretation. Knight and Still agree that The Tempest is a myth that rests upon an archetypal pattern that has presented itself to the great creative artists throughout human history. Colin Still writes that The Tempest not only presupposes but actually demonstrates that "there is one universal tradition underlying all religious and semi-religious concepts."[9] Knight concurs (p. 226), stating that "A myth of creation woven from his total work by the most universal of poets is likely to show correspondences with other well-authenticated results of the racial imagination." Knight, like Still, sees The Tempest as an account of the spiritual redemption of man. Knight, however, finds Still's application of his thesis that the pattern of The Tempest is the same as that of pagan initiation rites to be somewhat forced: "Still's centre of reference is less in the poetry than in a rigid system of universal symbolism deliberately, but quite legitimately, applied to it" (p. 230).

Colin Still roughly equates Prospero with God: "Prospero may be regarded as the counterpart of the hierophant, or iniating priest. But in the wider scheme he figures as the prototypal Supreme Being."[10] Knight, on the other hand, at one point asserts that: "Prospero is somehow more than poet yet less than God" (pp. 230-1).

---

[9]Colin Still, Shakespeare's Mystery Play, p. 205.

[10]Ibid., p. 202.

There are many other things that Knight finds Prospero symbolizing. Prospero is seen as "a composite of many Shakespearian heroes" (p. 204); and though Knight concedes that he is "less warm, less richly human, than most of his poetic ancestors" (p. 208), he is nonetheless seen as "controlling, not merely a Shakespearian play, but the Shakespearian world" (p. 208). Furthermore, Knight concludes: "He is thus automatically in the position of Shakespeare himself, and it is accordingly inevitable that he should often speak as with Shakespeare's voice" (p. 208). Prospero is regarded as the artist (p. 210); as a reflection of Shakespeare himself (p. 220); as one aspect of Shakespeare (the others being Ariel, Caliban, and Miranda) (p. 223); as being all mind (p. 232); as a symbol of the Renaissance "as it takes form in alliance with Puritan instinct and under Elizabethan guidance" (p. 242); as a god-man or god-in-man (p. 242); as a character who is both "the adventure of Renaissance discovery and the majesty of Renaissance intellect" (p. 243); as "the eternal artist rejected by the society his art redeems" (p. 243); as "the great composer whose implements are natural forces and whose music is the music of creation" (p. 243); as " a close replica of Christ" (p. 253); as "Plato's philosopher-king betrayed by a Machiavellian 'policy'" (p. 254); and finally, as a symbol of British colonizers "impelled by political or religious tyrannies to follow their soul-cravings across the sea and there work out the controlled magic of personal integration" (p. 255).

Other characters are no less symbolically--or fancifully--interpreted. Ariel is variously regarded as the agent of Prospero's purpose (p. 210); art; man's free imagination liberated after centuries of penance under ecclesiastical control (p. 228); the aspect of life seen most clearly by Shelley (p. 232), "a boy-figure in whom grace and power blend," "bisexual, like Shelley's hermaphrodite, or perhaps, rather sexless, with the indeterminacy of art" (p. 233); that which touches charity, "like poetry, too, which takes us to the brink of grace" (p. 234); nature in its ceaseless variety (p. 234); poetry, "as it would be were its melodies to step from literature into life" (p. 235); music incarnate (p. 235); dramatic art; and England's "inventive and poetic genius variously concerned with the tapping and use of natural energy" (p. 255).

Caliban symbolizes both the animal aspect of man and brainless revolution (p. 211); he "derives from all bad passion" and "combines the infra-natural evil of Macbeth with the bestial evil of King Lear" (p. 211); he is simultaneously man, savage, ape, water-beast, dragon, semi-devil (p. 212); he is the physical as opposed to the spiritual and earth and water as opposed to air and fire (p. 212); he is "process incarnate", the "eternal quality of creation, of time itself" (p. 240); and he is a "study of creation's very inertia and retrogression in laborious advance" (p. 240).

The remaining symbolic figures of the play can be quickly listed, since Prospero, Caliban, and Ariel are by far the most important figures in Knight's scheme. Prospero

is the artist and like Christ; Caliban is matter both poetic and physical, the brute creation, and sexual instinct; and Ariel is the imagination. Thus the three members of Knight's trinity, the natural, the human, and the supernatural, are all present. Alonso and his party are simply an assortment of more or less guilty people (p. 212). Stephano is "a burlesque of the power-quest," a parody of "the essential absurdity of tyrannic ambition" (p. 218); Ferdinand and Miranda are virtuous youth who illustrate humility, innocence, faith and purity (p. 220). The island itself is seen both as nature (p. 247) and as "some new dimension of awareness" (p. 251).

The play is visualized as having a purgatorial purpose (p. 217), though there are few characters--and they minor--who are capable of undergoing a purgatorial process. Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio, Trinculo, Stephano, and Caliban--all are forgiven by Prospero; and yet it is dubious whether there has been any purgation of guilt, unless perhaps of Alonso, who seems, however, more concerned throughout the play over the loss of his son than over his own guilt. Antonio, who never really repents, is forgiven by Prospero in the following manner: "I do forgive thee,/ Unnatural though thou art!" (V. i. 78-9); Prospero realizes that he is unregenerate:

> For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother
> Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive
> Thy rankest fault; all of them; and require
> My dukedom of thee, which, perforce, I know,
> Thou must restore" (V. i. 130-134).

If one takes Prospero as a symbol of God, Providence, or Christ, the statement that Sebastian makes when Prospero hints at his knowledge of his treachery (V. i. 126-129) is perilously close to the unforgivable sin; he says in an aside "the devil speaks in him" (V. i. 129), thus indicating that he is still unregenerate. One can conclude then that whatever regenerative process has been set in motion is, oddly enough, found in the person of Caliban:

> I'll be wise hereafter,
> And seek for grace (V. i. 294-5).

Knight himself, however, doubts whether there is a true reformation on the part of Antonio (p. 213).

It is obvious that there is no event in the play precisely analogous to the revival of Thaisa, the restoration of Hermione, and the awakening of Imogen, unless perhaps it is Prospero's preservation of the ship and its crew and Alonso's son Ferdinand, whom his father thought dead. Knight does not strain to find a resurrection in his essay on The Tempest, though he does refer to the saving of the ship (pp. 221 and 231) and the reference that Prospero makes to his potent art being able to open graves and awaken their sleepers (p. 221). Nevertheless, Knight concludes, Prospero's speech (V. i. 52, 57) "forms a recapitulation of Shakespeare's artistic progress from tempest-torn tragedy to resurrection and music" (p. 221).

The Tempest is, along with the rest of the plays of Shakespeare, regarded by Knight as a parable (p. 221). In addition, the play is taken to be a prophecy of British

destiny, and the fourth part of the essay (pp. 253-255) is concerned exclusively with this matter. Aside from the intrusion of Knight's theory of art, the bisexual theory, and the strained comparisons with the New Testament, Nietzsche, and various romantics (Shelley, Wordsworth, Blake), the weakest part of the essay is, I believe, not in the various symbolic significances Knight finds in Ariel, Caliban, and Prospero so much as in this nationalistic coda that he adds to the essay. In summary, Knight finds the play to be a visionary statement of British destiny: the island is England; Prospero is "her in-ruling political instincts, of which her first colonial adventures and the Puritan revolution were active examples" (p. 255); Ariel becomes "her inventive and poetic genius variously concerned with the tapping and use of natural energy" (p. 255); and Caliban, strangely, becomes "her colonizing, especially her will to raise savage peoples from superstition and blood-sacrificing taboos and witchcraft and the attendant fears and slaveries, to a more enlightened existence" (p. 255). Moreover, Knight adds, without the symbolic figure of Miranda exerting her influence on British destiny, perhaps "our ten-thousands-years-hence historian would not have been born" (p. 255). Thus the play becomes "a myth of the national soul" (p. 256).

This of course is sheer fancy on the part of Knight; there is no reference to British destiny in the play. This is somewhat fanciful an interpretation that has no warrant whatsoever in the text. One might argue that the major

weakness of Knight's interpretation of The Tempest is his trying to force on the play his usual transcendental significance, i.e., that it is a myth of immortality. Yet Knight devotes surprisingly little of the essay to this. Throughout most of the essay he is far more intent on proving that the play is capable of sustaining an interpretation that sees the play as Shakespeare's summarizing commentary on his art, and the relation of this art to nature. Knight visualizes a romantic Shakespeare who eventually comes to write a work of art about nothing other than the artistic process itself. Thus Shakespeare, like many of the romantics, is seen in The Tempest writing poetry about poetic creation.

At the time he wrote Myth and Miracle Knight had apparently not yet come to consider Henry VIII as Shakespeare's crowning achievement. But by the time The Crown of Life appeared it had assumed a commanding position in Knight's Shakespeare Progress; the very length of the essay--"Henry VIII and the Poetry of Conversion" is the longest (81 pages) in the book--indicates the importance that Knight assigns to this play. Knight's three-point interpretative method is employed again: he argues for the authenticity and coherence of the play against those who would assign various scenes and speeches to Fletcher or others; he links the play with Shakespeare's earlier work; and he finds transcendental significances in the play.

Part I (pp. 256-272) of the essay is devoted, for the

most part, to establishing the authenticity of the play in its entirety by showing that the various passages that have been thought spurious all have counterparts in the earlier plays of Shakespeare. Part II (pp. 272-296) is primarily concerned with discussing the falls of Buckingham, Wolsey, and Katharine, interpreting the three characters, and indicating that they all have antecedents in Shakespeare's earlier plays. The falls are seen by Knight as the summation of Shakespeare's tragic intuition (p. 296): "There is nothing in Shakespeare more remarkable than these three similar falling movements, of Buckingham, Wolsey, and Queen Katharine. The two first conform to the two main types of Shakespearian tragedy involving (i) betrayal and (ii) the power-quest; while the Queen sums all Shakespeare's feminine sympathies. The Tragedies culminating in Timon of Athens and The Tempest (for man) and Antony and Cleopatra and the remaining Final Plays (for woman) have developed the Shakespearian humanism to its limit, though with no severing of Christian contacts. Here we face the limits of even that, purified, humanism"(p. 296).

Part III (pp. 297-318) is taken up with the King, Anne Bullen, Cranmer, the crowd, and whatever elements in the play Knight associates with life as opposed to death, comedy as contrasted with tragedy, the comic and tragic elements uniting in Henry VIII (p. 306): "We attend diversely two views of human existence; the tragic and religious as opposed by the warm, sex-impelled, blood; the eternities of death as against the glow and thrill of

incarnate life, of creation. These two themes meet in the person of the King" (p. 306). Part IV (pp. 318-329) is Knight's interpretation of the play as an example, like the other last plays, of a religious ritual celebrating Shakespeare's transcendental humanism. In Part V Knight develops his theory that the play is at once a vision of British destiny and a vision of eternity or immortality. Knight here summarizes his belief that Henry VIII is the ultimate statement of Shakespeare's art: "Henry VIII binds and clasps this massive life-work into a single whole expanding the habitual design of Shakespearian tragedy: from normality and order, through violent conflict to a spiritualized music, and thence to the concluding ritual. Such is the organic unity of Shakespeare's world" (p. 336).

One of the things that distinguishes Henry VIII from the other four final plays is its peculiar dependence on recent English history; Knight, of course, takes Cymbeline also to be primarily a historical play, though he interprets it not only as a statement of British destiny but also as a vision of immortality. Henry VIII is taken to be a marriage of the temporal and the eternal (p. 334), the Christian and the royalistic (p. 328), and at once a vision of eternity and a prophecy of British destiny (pp. 332-334). Yet there is a problem here that is not present in any of the other four final plays, not even Cymbeline: recent historical personages such as Henry VIII are poorly suited to romantic or mystic ends. Furthermore,

if one chooses Henry VIII as the nexus for the temporal and the eternal, the eternal is likely to be dragged down to the level of the sensual or subordinated to "policy," since Henry VIII does not possess the requisite sensitivity to either moral or metaphysical matters to prove satisfactory. In short, we know too much about the real Henry VIII for him to serve as a successful symbol.

The play does seem, however, to have been designed as a statement of British destiny, and Henry VIII is, incredible as it may seem, apparently presented for our approval, as a symbol of kingship that rules both spiritually and temporally. Shakespeare apparently endorsed kingship and seems to have regarded kings as divinely appointed, but Henry VIII is sadly lacking in the moral sensitivity that one usually finds in Shakespeare. There are many bad kings--Richard II, Richard III, King John, Macbeth, for examples--in Shakespeare's plays, but nowhere except in Henry VIII does Shakespeare blithely ignore the distinction between the man and the symbol of authority. In Henry VIII the author is peculiarly silent about the sins of the King and his being the cause of suffering in Katharine, who is as innocent as Hermione or Imogen. Moreover, one could charge that Henry VIII was a poor ruler in allowing Buckingham to be summarily executed on a trumped-up charge. Wolsey is of course presented as being behind the divorce of Henry VIII and the destruction of Buckingham, but Wolsey is not in favor of Henry's marriage to Anne Bullen and realizes that his own downfall

is because of his opposition to it:

> There was the weight that pull'd me down. O Cromwell!
> The king has gone beyond me: all my glories
> In that one woman I have lost for ever (III.ii.407-9).

Earlier, when the Lord Chamberlain and the Duke of Suffolk are discussing Henry VIII's scruples about his marriage to Katharine, the following exchange occurs:

> Chamberlain. It seems the marriage with his
> brother's wife
> Has crept too near his conscience.
> Suffolk. No; his conscience
> Has crept too near another lady.
> (II. i. 15-17)

But nowhere in the play does anyone charge Henry VIII with lust, greed, or duplicity. Buckingham, Katharine, and Wolsey all remain loyal to their King to the end.

What then, are some possible reasons for Henry's being chosen as the symbol of both secular and religious sovereignty with no serious charge at any time being made against his lack of character? The most obvious is it would have been foolhardy for a playwright to be too honest about a recent predecessor of the present monarch.

Another possible reason is that the author of Henry VIII was merely endorsing Anglican protestantism: Henry VIII was the originator of the Church of England as an instrument of national policy; if the playwright wished to endorse the Church of England and repudiate Rome--and such things as the fall of Wolsey and Henry's reference to the "dilatory sloth and tricks of Rome" would seem to indicate a rather conventional bias in favor of the Erastian Church of England--then he would have to present

an idealized portrait of Henry VIII. The entire play reads like a eulogy of Tudor nationalism, and thus it is most natural that Henry VIII should be presented in a favorable light. The author of the Prologue, in choosing to write about Henry apparently knew that there was a popular, perhaps tolerant, but certainly not lofty, estimate of Henry VIII that might militate against the serious and solemn atmosphere he wished to develop. He begins the Prologue by declaring that

> I come no more to make you laugh: things now,
> That bear a weighty and a serious brow,
> Sad, high, and working, full of state and woe,
> Such noble scenes as draw the eye to flow,
> We now present."

A few lines later he warns that one should not hope to see "a merry, bawdy play" (line 14), which could very well refer to the Henry of popular conception. One serious flaw, then, is that the near-contemporary, sensual Henry VIII was not suited to serve as a symbol in a prophetic or parabolic play. The bland acceptance of the amoral Henry VIII seems a sad conclusion to a dramatic career. The religion and royalism that one encounters in Henry VIII smack suspiciously of the rather close identification of God and country that is found so distressingly frequent in modern nationalism. King Henry VIII reads more like propaganda put to a practical end than it does a vision of immortality or a prophecy of later British destiny.

To return to Knight's interpretation of Henry VIII: Knight too is aware of the objections that one might raise to Henry VIII's being a successful symbol of secular

and religious authority. Knight writes that "Only through a sympathetic humour and that most difficult of humilities, intellectual charity, that wide trust in creation which our raucous crowd scenes so clearly assert, and of which such humour is a reflection, can we forgive the King what is a grave lapse causing suffering to the good Katharine" (p. 317). Knight is quite right, I believe, in his assumption that Henry VIII is the central figure who "dominates absolutely" (p. 307); and he is also correct when he maintains that "King Henry is the one king in Shakespeare in whom you cannot dissociate man from office." This is because the man is completely swallowed up by the office; it is King Henry VIII, the Head of the Anglican Church, the Prime Exponent of English Nationalism, and the Father of Elizabeth that one encounters in the play, not the greedy, lecherous, treacherous historical Henry VIII. The major difference between the Henry VIII that the author of the play presents us and the Henry VIII that the interpreter visualizes lies in the additional symbolic significances that Knight finds in Shakespeare's Henry VIII. The Henry VIII of the play is rather conventional, little more than the historical instrument used to break England free from Rome and continental domination and to sire Elizabeth. The Henry VIII that emerges from Knight's interpretation of the play is at once a nobler, more humane, and more prophetic figure.

Knight claims that Henry "has, if not spiritual understanding, yet clear spiritual sympathies" (p. 307),

that Henry is characterized by "an eminently human kingliness" (p. 308), that Henry is, "like everyone here, religious" (p. 307), that the King is "autocratic, but constitutionally minded and just" (p. 308), and that "his account of how his doubts suggested that his lack of a male heir was to be referred to Providential displeasure makes a convincing blend of conscientious scruple and practical expediency which rings true" (p. 310). Yet later, after treating Henry VIII in a Bradley-like way, Knight writes that "as a man, he is far from faultless; and yet 'as a man' he does not exist" (p. 312). Quite true: then why spend so much space (pp. 306-318) defending his character and motives?

What remains of our discussion of Knight's interpretation of Henry VIII is the transcendental significance he finds in it. Knight states that: "We meet a similar attempt to realize a transcendental humanism to that in other late plays, though in terms of contemporary and national symbolism rather than individual persons, and with an expansion of romantic love to international amity (already heralded in Cymbeline). As once in The Tempest, we are pointed to a reality compared to which the old fictions are no longer unbelievable (pp. 321-2). Where has there ever really been an emphasis on individual persons in the final plays? One could more readily advance the view that in the last plays there is a negation of personality and an attempt to find the solution to tragedy in a cosmic order or a humanity that is seen continually renewing itself

with progeny. For "romantic love" in the above quotation one should read "erotic love". The protagonists in all the last plays are not seen as personalities in their own rights so much as links in a natural process which is forever renewing itself in a new generation. Even Henry VIII is primarily important because he is the father of Elizabeth. Shakespeare never identifies his cosmic order, his destiny, or Providence, with the Christian God, except in Henry VIII, where the identification is unsatisfactory because it is really little more than a conventional equating of Tudor despotism with Divine Providence that reaches its consummation in Elizabeth.

Like the other final plays Henry VIII is, according to Knight, primarily a ceremonial ritual: "Ritual is our true protagonist" (p. 326), and "Ritual characterizes not only our tragic, but also our more buoyant scenes" (p. 327). The coronation is found to be at once royalistic and Christian (p. 328). The crowds found in the play are considered part of the ritual and are given a mystic significance by Knight; after quoting a passage (IV. i. 69ff.) about the crowd present at Anne's coronation Knight declares that

> The crowd is now a single, mystic body, wherein all those stern moral and possessive sexual severities that have for so long tormented the Shakespearian universe are, momentarily, dissolved, with no man able to claim his own wife, all personal relationships being annihilated. Here is our opposite extreme to the poetry of individuality, of personality, of the 'I'; instead we face a greater communal 'we', with direct New Testament analogies. We are in a beyond-war, beyond-ethic, millenium, the 'old time' of human antagonisms being past. (p. 329)

This is a rather profound meaning to extract from the statement that "No man living/ Could say, 'This is my wife', there; all were woven/ So strangely in one piece," which is just as easily and certainly more probably interpreted as simply meaning that the press was so great that the people were packed together like sardines.

Knight's finding the play a vision of Elizabethan England (p. 331) is, I believe, correct. However, it is a far more conventionally, far more mundanely conceived vision than Knight takes it to be. And Knight may be right that: "In laying his final prophetic emphasis on a child Shakespeare follows a long tradition, Vergilian and Christian" (p. 331). One could, perhaps, argue that the treatment of Henry VIII, the absence of any condemnation of his evil character, harks back to the Old Testament, where many of the presumed antecedents of Christ, who were of unsavory character, were nonetheless treated without critical comment. Then, too, the Old Testament often treats various characters in a most summary way, apparently indicating that all they counted for was to beget a later and more significant figure in a line of descent. The best thing that the poet says about Henry VIII is that he produced Elizabeth.

The references to Elizabeth as the Phoenix and the employment of other mystic or religious terms Knight takes to indicate (p. 334) that in Henry VIII "the temporality is shot through with eternal meaning, and immortality." It is a sheer act of faith on the part of Knight when he

reasons (p. 336) that the prophecy at the end of the play cannot be confined merely to Elizabeth and James.

In conclusion, Knight's interpretation of Henry VIII suffers through its failure to take into account the literary tradition of Shakespeare's time and the topicality--in this play crucial--of its concern. The play is a conventional presentation of the Tudor progress which culminated in Elizabeth. Henry VIII was a poor but necessary choice for the symbol of kingship. The play fails partly because Henry VIII was a historical figure about whom we know too much, partly because the partisanship of the author dulled his moral sensitivity, partly because there is no real dramatic tension--the aristocracy (Buckingham), the Roman Catholic Church (Wolsey) and the injured though innocent wife (Katharine) all tamely submit to Henry VIII, the triumphant personification of Tudor destiny--and partly because the whole subject of the Tudor myth was already a hackneyed one. There is an element in the play, suggested in the Prologue, that is reminiscent of the morality: the play is designed to show "how soon this mightiness meets misery" (1.30).

In summary, Knight has taken pains in his interpretations of each of the last five plays to defend the authenticity of the parts of dubious authorship; he has attempted to prove the integrity of each of the plays, stressing their running coherence of idea, image, and event; he has argued for their close relationship with all

of the preceding work of Shakespeare; he has maintained that collectively they are the final step in the Shakespeare Progress, and that Henry VIII is the crowning achievement of all of Shakespeare's work; and he has discovered a transcendental meaning common to all five plays. All of these plays are seen as visions of immortality, not so much as visions of life-after-death as visions of life triumphant, as myths of creation itself.

The "spatial" method is employed throughout these interpretations: in proving the coherence of the whole of Shakespeare's work Knight has extracted images, ideas, events, and characters to make his point. The "vertical" dimension is found in the last five plays to consist mainly of theophanies, which Knight stresses heavily; and of references to the arts--that of design in Pericles, sculpture in The Winter's Tale, the poet's own art in The Tempest, the elaborate stage directions for the Vision of Jupiter in Cymbeline, and the elaborate ritual ceremonies of Henry VIII.

The plays are all seen as emphasizing forgiveness and reconciliation, and Henry VIII is taken to be profoundly Christian. The restoration of the lost--Hermione, Imogen, Thaisa--and the saving of the ship in The Tempest, are regarded more or less as resurrections, Hermione and Thaisa being heavily stressed.

British nationalism is found to be suggested in Cymbeline and The Tempest, and explicitly stated in Henry VIII. In Cymbeline and The Tempest Knight's finding such

a message is somewhat fanciful, while in his interpretation of Henry VIII he gives it more prophetic significance than it deserves.

All of the last five plays Knight takes to be intimately concerned with art, which is, after all, a kind of creation, its permanence suggesting eternity. Knight considers The Tempest to be at once a summary of Shakespeare's artistic progress, an autobiography of the artist, an expanded metaphor (the tempest), and a work woven not out of reality but out of art.

Each of the final plays Knight considers a parable dominated by symbolic characters, actions, and language. The ritualistic elements in the plays he regards as an indication both of the religious and the artistic concerns of the poet. The characters, images, and events of the last plays are regarded as summaries or restatements of all the characters, images, and events of all the preceding plays of Shakespeare, though the handling in the final plays is thought to be different. Knight interprets the final plays as visionary statements which transcend the earlier erotic and tragic intuitions of Shakespeare; though both the love and hate themes of the earlier periods are found in all of the last plays. What kind of an immortality Knight sees Shakespeare as visualizing is never quite clear: he never accepts the naturalistic explanation that Shakespeare is pointing to immortality in progeny; nor does he ever state that Shakespeare is, in a Yeatsian manner, establishing a case for the eternity of art. It remains a kind of nebulous vitalism--at one time immortality

is referred to as life or life triumphant while at another it becomes a myth of creation. Knight would seem to be contemplating a kind of cosmic order indistinguishable from Destiny or Providence, though it is impossible to regard Knight's interpretations as Christian in any orthodox sense of the term. The frequent references to Wordsworth's Immortality Ode and to various other poems by the great romantics does not so much clarify his conception of eternity as reveal the essential romanticism of Knight, as well as the romanticism of his Shakespeare.

The soundness of Knight's interpretative method is sometimes questionable. Pulling images, characters, events, and ideas out of context is of dubious value. The violence he sometimes does to the integrity of the individual play in his effort to tie it in with preceding plays is also a fault. Then, too, Knight's grasping after metaphysical significances--straining after examples of resurrection in the cases of Hermione and Imogen, to cite one instance--shows a disregard for the integrity of the text. A refusal to consider the traditional symbolic meanings which were already assigned to certain characters, images, or events before the time of Shakespeare is another weakness; Shakespeare undoubtedly took many associations ready-made--those of music and tempests, perhaps--and did not necessarily forge them all afresh in the smithy of his own soul. The last objection is related to the preceding one, and primarily concerns Knight's interpretation of Henry VIII; a closer knowledge of the conventional contemporary treatment

of the Tudor myth would perhaps have restricted Knight's apocalyptic envisionings somewhat. Yet one cannot disprove many of Knight's conclusions, since they are questions of one mind extracting more symbolic meaning from a play than another will allow. We are faced with the fact that Knight's interpretations are largely imaginative ones.

The large degree of success that Knight does realize in his interpretations of the last five plays is largely due to their parabolic nature, their ritualistic quality, and the great symbolic significances that one finds in them. In spite of the extravagance of some of his metaphysical flights Knight has established a strong case for the complete genuineness of the last plays, for their having many strong affiliations with the earlier work, for their having enough likenesses to constitute a group to themselves, and for their being profoundly symbolic statements. But the question of what they are symbolic of, and the question of what kind of a mind is reflected in them, are still open. Knight has done more, perhaps, to establish their literary value--though valuation as such is never his concern--than many of the more orthodox scholars who could see nothing but a period of serenity, a falling off of dramatic skill, or a Shakespeare eager to exploit a literary form only recently adapted to the stage.

CHAPTER FIVE

G. Wilson Knight has exerted a powerful influence on other Shakespearian scholars and critics, mainly through The Wheel of Fire, though his Myth and Miracle and The Crown of Life, in which Myth and Miracle later appeared, are also influential. Much of Knight's influence has been unacknowledged because of his growing preoccupation with metaphysics; this concern was present from the outset--Myth and Miracle was subtitled "An Essay on the Mystic Symbolism of Shakespeare"--but when Knight began to assume the prophet's role he lost much of the sympathy that had been accorded the author of The Wheel of Fire, a book which had so neatly undermined the position of A. C. Bradley and J. M. Robertson.

Many younger scholars have followed the lead of Knight in substituting the study of symbols for that of character. Among the writers who owe a debt to Knight are several who were affiliated with the so-called Scrutiny school of criticism. J. F. Danby, Henri Fluchère, L. C. Knights, A. A. Stephenson, F. C. Tinkler, James Smith, J. C. Maxwell, and D. A. Traversi all wrote essays on various plays of Shakespeare for Scrutiny and all are primarily concerned with symbol or theme and study the plays as poems rather than drama.

This is not to claim that Knight alone revolutionized contemporary Shakespeare studies, or to assume that Knight is solely responsible for providing the critical assumptions

underlying recent Shakespeare scholarship. Knight himself acknowledges the influence of J. Middleton Murry, John Masefield, William James, and even A. C. Bradley, the man whose work he is usually thought to have repudiated. Moreover, Knight did not originate the contemporary preoccupation with imagery, since Caroline Spurgeon's work was appearing at the same time as his own. Nor did Knight first point to the archetypal patterns that have been found in literature, since Maud Bodkin was already applying the findings of Jung and Frazer to literary study. The acknowledged influences indicate that Knight is a romantic of a spiritualistic and psychological orientation; much of the metaphysical matter in Knight's work indicates either a congeniality of outlook between Knight and Murry or an unfortunate influence of Murry upon Knight. Masefield and William James also reveal where the younger Knight perhaps acquired some of the metaphysical notions that have been present throughout his work. Though Knight rejected Bradley's excessive emphasis upon character-analysis he did not reject some of the romantic assumptions implicit in Bradley's work.

Knight assumes--as did Bradley--that each play has a peculiar atmosphere. Unlike Bradley, Knight finds that image, theme, and action are as important as character in determining this atmosphere. Unlike Bradley, Knight does not regard character as central and dominant, dictating the action and language. Like Bradley, and all the post-Coleridgean romantics, Knight feels that there is a coherence

uniting all of Shakespeare's work and that there is a record of Shakespeare's mental development expressed in the plays.

Though Knight is commonly associated with the analysis of imagery and the extraction of various parabolic, metaphysical, or apocalyptic meaning from such analysis, he has actually been as concerned with symbolic character, symbolic action, and symbolic theme as he has with symbolic imagery. The abstraction of themes from the plays in order to establish their significance was not a new thing with Knight, for F. C. Kolbe, and, even earlier, R. G. Moulton, had sought to capture the essence of a play by finding the dominant theme. R. G. Moulton had also anticipated Knight's "scientific" interpretative method with his "inductive" method.

The originality of Knight's contribution, then, is not so much in the formulation of new principles of literary criticism or the creation of an altogether new method of interpretation as it is in the application of recent findings--the importance of imagery, the existence of themes not expressed solely in terms of character, the presence of archetypal patterns only noticed after the discoveries of modern psychology and anthropology--to the second half of Shakespeare's career. At the time <u>The Wheel of Fire</u> first appeared no one had yet analyzed the great tragedies of Shakespeare in terms of recent developments in literary, psychological, or anthropological theory.

Nor is Knight's reassessment of the final plays

altogether original. J. Middleton Murry in Countries of the Mind (1922) and Discoveries (1924) had more or less repeated Strachey's estimate of the last plays, but in Heaven--and Earth (1938) and in Shakespeare (1936) Murry had evidently changed his mind and come to view the plays as symbolic presentations of a spiritual rebirth. Now the two last-named books appeared long after Knight's Myth and Miracle (1929), but in Murry's To the Unknown God (1924) he had already referred to The Tempest as "the most perfect prophetic achievement of the Western mind,"[1] and had gone on to assert that "as Shakespeare is prophetic of the last, modern era of the Western consciousness, Christ was prophetic of the whole epoch, of which this last modern era is the culminating part."[2] Yet Murry never developed these insights himself, he never related the last plays to the totality of Shakespeare's work, and he never attempted to include Henry VIII with the other four final plays.

Other contemporary scholars besides the Scrutiny writers have taken their cue from Knight, especially those who have written upon the final plays. Theodore Spencer in his Shakespeare and the Nature of Man (1942) sees the last plays as symbolic visions of rebirth in which the poetry dominates. Like Knight, he finds the final plays--thematically, at least--summarizing the course of Shakespeare's work as a whole.[3] There is no way of finding whether various

---

[1] J. M. Murry, To the Unknown God, London, 1924, p. 185.

[2] Ibid., p. 191.

[3] T. Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, New York, 1945, pp. 222-3.

contemporary Shakespearian scholars whose findings resemble Knight's but who, like Spencer, do not acknowledge a debt to Knight, were or were not influenced by Knight; they have, however, come to accept a view of the last plays that Knight was largely instrumental in establishing. Another example of a contemporary scholar whose work seems to have been influenced by Knight's findings is S. L. Bethell. In his The Winter's Tale: A Study he limits himself to The Winter's Tale, though he intends his argument to extend to everything from Pericles to The Tempest.[4] Bethell too is largely concerned with symbolism, myth, and archetypal patterns, though he arrives at a conclusion somewhat at variance with Knight's. Bethell finds Shakespeare a Christian humanist, in the orthodox sense of the term. Knight, however, had already made reference to the possible hint of the Pauline doctrine that the Christian life on earth is a resurrected life,[5] and yet Bethell, when he suggests this,[6] does not seem cognizant of this fact. Bethell makes no mention of Knight's work in his book.

Kenneth Muir has written a book on the last plays which bears some strong resemblances to Knight's work. Muir in his Last Periods of Shakespeare, Racine, and Ibsen visualizes the last plays as symbolic poems illustrating redemption and forgiveness. Muir, unlike Spencer and Bethell,

---

[4] S. L. Bethell, The Winter's Tale: A Study, p. 20.

[5] Cf. pp. 76 and 119 of The Crown of Life.

[6] Bethell, p. 74.

refers to Knight's contribution.[7] Muir assumes the coherence of the totality of Shakespeare's work and, like the Knight of Myth and Miracle, regards The Tempest as the natural culmination of the plays of the final period. The last plays are, according to Muir, parabolic art. Muir sees the last plays as expressing a faith on the natural goodness of man when not corrupted by society.

E. M. W. Tillyard wrote a book on the last plays which incorporated the conclusions of Knight and others without the courtesy of acknowledgment. Tillyard's Shakespeare's Last Plays, which has nothing new to say, sets out to prove that the last plays are the final phase of the tragic pattern, the last step in a regenerative process. Knight had anticipated this discovery, and receives for his pains the statement in Tillyard's book that Knight and D. G. James had overstressed the importance of Pericles.[8]

Another contemporary writer who shows the influence of G. Wilson Knight or an agreement with his findings is Patrick Cruttwell in his The Shakespearian Moment. Cruttwell, like Knight, sees the last plays as symbolic poems; and, like Knight, he sees the last plays as combining symbolism and stark realism. There is frequent mention of symbolic patterns and transcendental meanings as integral parts of the poetry, and of the plays as symbolizing a fine balance of Church and State, achieved for a brief time in the Anglican

---

[7]Muir, Last Periods, pp. 48, 50-1, 60.

[8]Tillyard, p. 24.

Settlement under Elizabeth. All of these matters were stressed by Knight in his work on the last plays. Moreover, Knight had already interpreted Mamillius as a symbol of innocence, and Cruttwell repeats this,[9] without acknowledgment. Though Roy Walker does not admit to having referred to Knight's essay on Macbeth before the writing of his own The Time is Free, he does acknowledge the similarity between their findings and the encouragement that he personally had received from Knight.[10]

Except for The Wheel of Fire, which many writers have praised and acknowledged as a major influence, and The Crown of Life, which has even received praise from some of the editors[11] of the New Arden Shakespeare, few of the remaining books by Knight have won favorable comments. And there are several reasons for this. The most important reason, which is also the greatest objection to his work, is Knight's metaphysical speculations. Knight insists upon using philosophical terminology and upon treating Shakespeare as a great philosophical and religious poet. Other reasons which have alienated many of the more orthodox scholars are his refusal to relate the plays to their age

---

[9]Cruttwell, p. 102.

[10]Walker, p. xii.

[11]Cf. Frank Kermode, Introduction to the New Arden edition of The Tempest, London, 1962, pp. lxxxiii-lxxxv; F. D. Hoeniger, Introduction to New Arden Pericles, 1963, p. lxxxi; and J. M. Nosworthy, Introduction to New Arden Cymbeline, 1960, pp. xxxiv-xxxvi.

and his regarding the plays as mystical compositions instead of plays. An objection to Knight's method is his disregard for the context from which he extracts images or ideas in order to make a comparison. When Knight employed this method only with Shakespeare's plays which he knew intimately, there were some murmurings of dissent, but when he went on to abstract symbols from vastly different writers, writing in different genres in dissimilar ages and putting their images and ideas to divergent uses, then his spatial method lost what support it had gained.

When Knight began to assume the prophet's role--already in The Christian Renaissance--and tried to relate Shakespeare to Christianity it was obvious that he had passed beyond the bounds of literary study. The later decay of Knight's critical powers is not, strictly speaking, a decay so much as a misapplication or abuse of abilities. Knight seems to place Shakespeare at the center of his metaphysical system and to compare or relate all the other literary figures he discusses to this center. Only by assuming this to be so can one understand how Knight could write that "The Dunciad is Pope's Inferno, his Macbeth,"[12] or that "Byron's poetic interests are, like Shakespeare's, at once subjective, personal, social, political, naturalistic, and cosmic,"[13] or that "Shakespeare and Byron are our two greatest masters of tragedy."[14] The writers that

---

[12] The Burning Oracle, p. 180. [13] Ibid., p. 286.

[14] Ibid., p. 291.

Knight selects to study in his The Burning Oracle, which illustrates well Knight's preoccupation with extra-literary concerns, are not chosen because of any profound likeness of either form or content but because, according to Knight, "each of the writers discussed in my book has felt himself a national prophet."[15] From The Christian Renaissance on Shakespeare was all but identified with Christ in Knight's scheme. It was not long before G. Wilson Knight was offering his own gospel to the world; in Christ and Nietzsche Knight enumerates the four pillars upon which his own somewhat eccentric wisdom rests: "The four pillars upholding my present effort towards a reconstruction of Christianity are Shelley's Defense of Poetry, Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra, Shakespeare's Timon of Athens, and Pope's Essay on Man."[16] A more bizarre selection of more diverse figures is hard to contemplate.

Knight came to visualize himself not only as a seer of the transcendental but also as a prophet of British destiny. The books of Knight which are at once the worst and the dullest are those which he wrote on Shakespeare's message to England at war. Most of this one can ignore, but the disturbing thing is that Knight's esthetic sensitivity was not proof against the temptation to revaluate Shakespeare's work on the basis of a play's national "message". This seems actually to have happened in the case of King Henry VIII.

---

[15] Loc. cit. [16] Christ and Nietzsche, p. 231.

Another weakness is the re-appearance in Knight's later Shakespearian work of certain nineteenth century romantic views. One of these is his attempt to get at the artist's intentions. Another is his assigning a moralistic motive to the artist's work. A third is his reading of the author as person in his work. In The Wheel of Fire, where Knight was formulating his principles of interpretation, he repudiated these three things. Knight of course would answer all three of these objections by replying that it is the poet's intentions as poet that he seeks, that it is the metaphysical significance and not the moralistic purpose he aims at, and that it is the universal spiritual experience of the poet and not the personalistic autobiography that he is trying to reconstruct. However, when he states that Shakespeare has a message for England and for modern civilization, that Shakespeare's work is designed to control the beast in man, and that Shakespeare is revealed in Hamlet and Timon, he would seem to be relapsing into nineteenth century habits of thought.

Knight is a symbolist whose symbolism sometimes approaches allegory, though he never becomes an orthodox Christian humanist like S. L. Bethell, R. W. Chambers, or R. Battenhouse. Knight recognizes the naturalistic elements in Shakespeare, as do J. F. Danby, Geoffrey Bush, and Theodore Spenser; and he acknowledges the humanistic elements, as A. P. Rossiter and H. B. Charlton do; but he also sees a transcendental element, particularly in the last plays. When Knight visualizes a Christ-Eros or Apollonian-Dionysian

cleavage in contemporary Western civilization he parts company with the orthodox apologists; Knight's work never descends to the pedestrian task of "Christianizing" Shakespeare, though this descent is prevented at the price of eccentricity.

Much of the eccentricity in Knight's work is strongly reminiscent of John Middleton Murry. Like Murry, Knight is a romantic; like Murry, Knight attempts to make a prophet of Shakespeare; like Murry, Knight attempts to extract a metaphysical system from Shakespeare's work; like Murry, Knight embraces a vitalistic gospel that is ultimately a glorified naturalism. Like Murry, Knight has made much of the last plays of Shakespeare, though Murry's work is much more derivative and much less thoroughly worked out than Knight's. The imagination occupies essentially the same position in Murry's scheme that it does in Knight's. Murry too was enthused with metaphoric language. Both Knight and Murry see the contemporary Christian Church in need of regeneration. Both Knight and Murry hold low opinions of the literary historians and philogists. Both Knight and Murry hold high estimates of Antony and Cleopatra, though for different reasons. Knight considers it a victory of love, the infinite value, over tragedy; Murry also sees it as a love-victory, but he values Antony and Cleopatra even more highly than The Tempest because he finds it is a solution in terms of the real world, while The Tempest is not.[17] Much of what scholars have objected to

---

[17] Discoveries, p. 39.

in Knight's work is evidently derived from Middleton Murry.

Without metaphysical pretensions Knight would resemble J. F. Danby or D. A. Traversi; Danby does not acknowledge Knight's influence while Traversi does, though not to Knight's satisfaction. Knight wrote a letter to the Scrutiny editors which appeared in the Winter 1949 issue (Vol. XVI, pp. 323-7). In this letter he not only protested J. F. Danby's alleged plagiarizing from The Imperial Theme, The Wheel of Fire, and The Shakespearian Tempest but also Traversi's alleged lifting of ideas from The Crown of Life. The material Danby plagiarized from The Imperial Theme Knight maintains, appeared in Danby's Scrutiny essay on Antony and Cleopatra (Sept. 1949, pp. 196-213); the things which Knight finds Danby appropriating from The Wheel of Fire and The Shakespearian Tempest were incorporated in Danby's book, Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature (1949). Knight charges that Traversi's unacknowledged debt is for certain ideas he incorporated in his Scrutiny essay (June, 1949) on The Tempest. Knight complains that there are limits to the unacknowledged appropriating of ideas, which are reached when "those influenced, to quote an amusing reviewer of The Crown of Life, 'crib' with one hand what they 'crab' with the other!"[18] There are other controversies in which Knight has engaged over the question of unacknowledged literary debts.[19] It is

---

[18] Knight, "Correspondence," Scrutiny, XVI, p. 326.

[19] The Kenyon Review, Winter 1948; RES, Oct. 1946; TLS, 14 Sept. 1946; 26 Oct. 1946; 21 April 1950; and The Listener, 7 July 1949.

an open question whether the various writers whose works resemble Knight's in their approach and, to a lesser degree, their conclusions, have actually lifted material from his books; but it is an undoubted fact that the scholarly climate of opinion which now welcomes analyses of symbolic works, and thus encourages these writers, is largely one of Knight's creating. The assumptions that Shakespeare's drama is poetry, that there are valid principles of poetic organization other than character in Shakespeare's plays, and that the final plays are great symbolic poems, all owe much of their present acceptance to G. Wilson Knight.

Knight's contribution to literary study possesses the strength and weakness of all post-Coleridgean romantic criticism. His interpretative work is romantic principally because it places the stress upon the sovereign, synthesizing imagination. This imagination he sometimes associates with the Crown and sometimes with divine grace. The imagination according to Knight includes an element of love. Knight applies the imagination both to the creation of art and its interpretation and fails to make an adequate distinction between the active creative task and the passive contemplation of the work of art. Each interpretation is a re-creation of the work of art, and thus the interpreter enters into an active partnership with the creative artist. In The Sacred Wood T. S. Eliot discusses various kinds of "imperfect" critics, and one of these kinds is the impressionistic critic who neither creates a work of

art nor evaluates someone else's, but instead produces something that is neither art nor criticism. This, essentially, is what Knight does.

The romantic Knight conceives a Shakespeare who is also romantic. The romanticism of Knight's conception of Shakespeare is evident in the following ways. In the first place, Shakespeare is seen as undergoing a series of spiritual experiences which are assumed to be recorded in his art. Knight at times protests that it is Shakespeare's artistic progress in which he is interested, but more often it is his psychological or religious progress. Moreover, certain characters--principally Timon and Hamlet--are visualized as peculiarly exact records of Shakespeare's own mind. In the second place, the whole concept of a coherence uniting not only each individual play but also all of the plays into one total organic structure is a legacy of the romantics.

In the third place, Knight shares with the romantics their propensities for finding transcendental significance in art and for putting art to metaphysical tasks. Witness Knight's interpretations of the last plays. Knight's tendency to view art as religious ritual was present from the outset. From the time of Myth and Miracle, where Wordsworth's Immortality Ode and Dante's Paradiso were compared to Shakespeare's last plays, an element of romantic religiosity was present in Knight's work. Like the romantics Knight is continually bringing in transcendental categories: art itself becomes an Incarnation, a marriage

of the temporal and eternal. The last plays become myths of immortality; this immortality is revealed both in the imagery (that of music and art), the events (the "resurrections") and the characters (the innocent younger generations). Knight is continually seeking religious certainty through art; art itself in Knight's scheme becomes externalized religion.

Shakespeare's career is envisioned as beginning with the praise of romantic (erotic) love, passing on to the tragic intuition (the "hate"-theme challenging the love-theme), and eventually culminating in the triumph of a death-negating transcendental love. In the problem plays hate predominates; in the tragedies love begins to right the balance again. These three stages correspond respectively to the romantic comedies; the problem plays and tragedies; and the final plays, the myths of immortality. The final period does not so much ignore or deny either the erotic or the tragic as fulfill or transcend them with a vision of eternity. Thus the last plays, in Knight's estimation, become not a series of anticlimaxes after the great tragedies but instead the greatest and most profound statements of Shakespeare's artistic career.

Though the later work of Knight shows an unfortunate schematization (the Power-Love dichotomy, for example) which results in the abstracting of images for the purpose of erecting a metaphysical scheme, the influence of Knight upon Shakespearian scholarship has been salutary. Knight helped to destroy the ossified academic approaches toward

the study of Shakespeare's plays and to introduce a more adventurous spirit in their interpretation. Much of the revolutionary shift in approach to the tragedies and final plays, away from character-study, dramaturgy, and literary history, and towards the essentially poetic and the symbolic, was effected by G. Wilson Knight.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. WRITINGS OF G. WILSON KNIGHT

1. Books and Pamphlets

Atlantic Crossing. London, 1936.

The Burning Oracle. London, 1939.

Byron and Hamlet. Manchester, 1962.

Byron's Dramatic Prose. University of Nottingham, 1953.

Chariot of Wrath. London, 1942.

Christ and Nietzsche. London, 1948.

The Christian Renaissance, rev. ed. New York, 1962.

The Crown of Life, corrected reprint. London, 1961.

The Dynasty of Stowe, 2nd ed. London, 1946.

The Golden Labyrinth. London, 1962.

Hiroshima. London, 1946.

Ibsen ("Writers and Critics" series). London, 1962.

The Imperial Theme, 3rd ed., corrected reprint. London, 1961.

The Last of the Incas. The University of Leeds, 1954.

Laureate of Peace. New York, 1955.

Lord Byron: Christian Virtues. New York, 1953.

Lord Byron's Marriage. New York, 1957.

The Mutual Flame. London, 1955.

Myth and Miracle. London, 1929.

The Olive and the Sword. London, 1944.

Principles of Shakespearian Production. New York, 1936.

Shakespeare and Tolstoy (The English Association Pamphlet No. 88). London, April 1934.

The Shakespearian Tempest, 3rd ed. London, 1953.

The Sovereign Flower. London, 1958.

The Starlit Dome, enlarged ed. London, 1959.

This Sceptred Isle. Oxford, 1941.

The Wheel of Fire, 5th rev. ed. New York, 1958.

2. Articles

"Byron as Poet," Essays in Criticism, IX (January, 1959), 87-93.

"Colman and Don Leon," Twentieth Century, CLIX (June, 1956), 562-573.

"A Communication," The Kenyon Review, XI (Winter, 1949), 172.

"Correspondence," Review of English Studies, XXII (October, 1946), 325.

"Lawrence, Joyce and Powys," Essays in Criticism, XI (October, 1961), 403-417.

Letter to the editors of Scrutiny, XVI (December, 1949), 323-327.

"Lyly," Review of English Studies, XV (April, 1939), 146-163.

"Macbeth and the Metaphysic of Evil," The Hibbert Journal, XXVIII (October, 1929), 328-342.

"The New Interpretation," Essays in Criticism, III (October, 1953), 382-395.

"The Road to Samarkand," The Wind and the Rain, (Winter, 1944), 93-103.

"The Scholar Gypsy: An Interpretation," Review of English Literature, VI n.s. (January, 1955), 53-62.

"The School of Knight," Essays in Criticism, IV (October, 1954), 430-431.

"Scrutiny and Criticism," Essays in Criticism, XIV (January, 1964), 32-36.

"Shakespeare and Byron's Plays," Shakespeare Jahrbuch, Band 95, (1959), 82-97.

"The Style of Othello," The Fortnightly Review, CXXV n.s. (April, 1929), 508-521.

"Timon of Athens and its Dramatic Descendants," Review of English Literature, II (October, 1961), 9-18.

"Who Wrote Don Leon?," Twentieth Century, CLVI (July, 1954), 67-79.

B. SECONDARY SOURCES

Alexander, S. Space, Time, and Deity. 2 vols. London, 1920.

Bethell, S. L. The Winter's Tale: A Study. London, 1947.

Boas, F. Shakspere and his Predecessors. London, 1910.

Bodkin, M. Archetypal Patterns in Poetry. London, 1934.

Bradley, A. C. Oxford Lectures in Poetry. London, 1919.

--------. Shakespearean Tragedy. New York, 1949.

Bridges, R. The Influence of the Audience on Shakespeare's Drama, Vol. X, Collected Essays. London, 1927.

Bush, G. Shakespeare and the Natural Condition. Cambridge, 1956.

Campbell, L. B. Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes. New York, 1952.

Chambers, E. K. The Elizabethan Stage. 4 vols. Oxford, 1961.

--------. Shakespeare: A Survey. London, 1955.

Charlton, H. B. Shakespeare: Politics and Politicians (The English Association Pamphlet No. 72). London, April, 1929.

--------. Shakespearian Comedy. New York, 1938.

--------. Shakespearian Tragedy. Cambridge, 1948.

Clark, C. Shakespeare and the Supernatural. London, 1931.

--------. A Study of Shakespeare's 'Henry VIII'. London, 1938.

Clemen, W. The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery. London, 1963.

Cruttwell, P. The Shakespearean Moment. London, 1954.

Curry, W. C. Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns. Baton Rouge, 1937.

Danby, J. F. Poets on Fortune's Hill. London, 1952.

--------. Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature. London, 1949.

Dowden, E. Shakspere: His Mind and Art. New York, 1918.

Fluchère, H. Shakespeare. London, 1953.

Frye, N. "The Argument of Comedy," Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Leonard F. Dean. New York, 1957.

Frye, R. M. Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine. Princeton, 1963.

--------. "Recognition in the Winter's Tale," Essays on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama in Honor of Hardin Craig, ed. R. Hosley. Columbia (Missouri), 1962.

Halliday, F. E. Shakespeare. New York, 1961.

--------. Shakespeare and his Critics. London, 1949.

Halliday, W. R. The Pagan Background of Early Christianity. London, 1925.

Harbage, A. As They Liked It. New York, 1947.

--------. Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions. New York, 1952.

Harrison, G. B. Shakespeare at Work: 1592-1603. Ann Arbor, 1958.

James, D. G. Scepticism and Poetry. London, 1960

James, William. Human Immortality. Boston, 1898.

--------. The Varieties of Religious Experience. New York, 1936.

Kirschbaum, L. Character and Characterization in Shakespeare. Detroit, 1962.

Kitto, H. D. F. Form and Meaning in Drama. London, 1956.

Knights, L. C. An Approach to 'Hamlet'. Stanford University, 1961.

--------. Explorations. New York, 1947.

--------. Poetry, Politics and the English Tradition. London, 1953.

--------. Some Shakespearian Themes. Stanford University, 1960

Kolbe, Mgr. F. C. Shakespeare's Way. London, 1930

Lawrence, W. W. Shakespeare's Problem Comedies. New York, 1960.

Leavis, F. R. "The Criticism of Shakespeare's Late Plays. A Caveat," Scrutiny, X, 339-345.

Lessing, G. E. Laocoön, London, 1930.

Lewis, W. The Lion and the Fox. London, 1927.

Masefield, J. Shakespeare and Spiritual Life. Oxford, 1924.

Moulton, R. G. Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist. Oxford, 1906.

--------. Shakespeare as a Dramatic Thinker. New York, 1907.

Muir, K. "Changing Interpretations of Shakespeare," The Age of Shakespeare, ed. Boris Ford, pp. 282-301. London, 1955.

--------. Last Periods of Shakespeare, Racine, and Ibsen. Wayne State University, 1961.

Murry, J. M. Countries of the Mind. New York, 1922.

--------. Discoveries. London, 1930.

--------. Keats and Shakespeare. London, 1935.

--------. Shakespeare. London, 1936.

--------. To the Unknown God. London, 1924.

Nicoll, A. Shakespeare. London, 1961.

Nietzsche, F. The Philosophy of Nietzsche. New York, 1954.

Noble, R. Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge. London, 1935.

Ralli, A. A History of Shakespeare Criticism. 2 vols. New York, 1959.

Rossiter, A. P. Angel With Horns. New York, 1961.

Royds, T. F. Virgil and Isaiah. Oxford, 1918.

Schücking, L. L. Character Problems in Shakespeare's Plays. London, 1922.

Shakespeare Criticism, 1919-1935, ed. A. Ridler. London, 1962.

Sherriff, R. C. Journey's End. London, 1929.

Spencer, T. Shakespeare and the Nature of Man. New York, 1945.

Spengler, O. The Decline of the West, transl. by C. F. Atkinson. New York, 1927.

Spurgeon, C. F. E. Shakespeare's Imagery. New York, 1936.

Stephenson, A. A. "The Significance of 'Cymbeline'," Scrutiny, X. 329-338.

Still, C. Shakespeare's Mystery Play. London, 1921.

--------. The Timeless Theme. London, 1936.

Strachey, L. "Shakespeare's Final Period," Books and Characters, pp. 51-69. New York, 1922.

Tillyard, E. M. W. Shakespeare's Last Plays. London, 1951.

Thorndike, A. H. The Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher on Shakespere. Worcester (Massachusetts), 1901.

Tinkler, F. C. "'Cymbeline'", Scrutiny, VII, 5-19.

--------. "'The Winter's Tale'", Scrutiny, V, 344-64.

Tolstoy, L. "Shakespeare and the Drama," Recollections and Essays, Vol. 21, pp. 307-383. London, 1937.

Traversi, D. A. "The Last Plays of Shakespeare," The Age of Shakespeare, ed. Boris Ford, pp. 257-281. London, 1955.

--------. Shakespeare from Richard II to Henry V. Stanford University, 1961.

Vyvyan, J. The Shakespearean Ethic. London, 1959.

Walker, R. The Time is Free. London, 1949.

Wilson, J. D. The Meaning of 'The Tempest'. Newcastle, 1936.

Wordsworth, C. Shakespeare's Knowledge and Use of the Bible. London, 1880.