PART I
Sonnet Form and Sonnet Sequence

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The Value of the Sonnets

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Shakespeare and the Essence of Verse

An artist usually presents a given object or idea in one relationship to other objects and ideas; if he opens his reader's consciousness to more than one frame of reference, he focuses on the object in one of its relationships and subordinates all other relationships to it. The essential action of the artist in creating the experience of an audience is the one that in grammar is made by indicators of relationship like "although," "but," "after," "because," "however." In literature such indicators of relationship tell the reader that he is not in the borderless world outside art where he himself has always to work upon what he perceives, to arrange it around a focal point chosen and maintained by himself. Syntactic organization tells the reader that he is dealing with what we are likely to label "truth," experience sorted, classed, and rated, rather than with "what is true," the still to be sorted data of "real" experience.[1]

The great distinction between the experience of life and of art is that art, by fixing one or more sets of relationships, gives its audience an experience in which objects *are* as they must be to be thought about, in which the audience can see what I have called "truth" without having to hunt it out and pull it out, in which "what is true" and "truth" can be the same. Art presents the mind with an experience in which it is at home rather than one in which it must make itself at home by focusing, stressing, and subordinating. All works of literary art, from the simplest sentence of the simplest mind to *King Lear*, are alike in that they are fixed orderings that place their audiences in an experience ready fitted to the experiencer's manner and means of experiencing.

Such orderings incline to be self-defeating. What we ask of art is that it allow the mind to comprehend – know, grasp, embrace – more of experience than the mind can comprehend. In that case, art must fail because the impossibility of its task is one of

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its defining factors. To state it simplemindedly, we demand that the impossible be done and still remain an impossibility. When an artist focuses his audience's mind and distorts what is true into a recognizable, graspable shape to fit that mind, he not only does what his audience asks but what cannot long satisfy audience or artist just because the desired distortion *is* a distortion. Art must distort; if it is to justify its existence, it must be other than the reality whose difficulty necessitates artistic mediation. It must seem as little a distortion as possible, because its audience wants comprehension of incomprehensible reality itself. We do not want so much to live in *a* world organized on human principles as to live in *the* world so organized. Art must seem to reveal a humanly ordered reality rather than replace a random one. Our traditional values in art exhibit its self-contradictory nature; all the following adjectives, for example, regularly say that the works of art to which they are applied are good: "unified," "sublime," "clear," "subtle," "coherent," "natural." In a style we are likely to value both simplicity and complexity; we ask that a character be both consistent and complex. Above all, what we want of art is the chance to believe that the orderliness of art is not artificial but of the essence of the substance described, that things are as they look when they have a circle around them. We don't want to feel that art is orderly. We want to feel that things are orderly. We want to feel that art does not make order but shows it.

There are as many ways of trying for the contradictory effects of art as there are artists. All of them aim at replacing the complexities of reality with controlled complexities that will make the experience of the orderly work of art sufficiently similar to the experience of random nature, so that the comfort of artistic coherence will not be immediately dismissed as irrelevant to the intellectual discomfort of the human condition. No work of art has ever been perfectly satisfactory. That is obvious. No work of art has ever satisfied the human need to hold human existence whole in the mind. If a work of art ever succeeded perfectly, it would presumably be the last of its kind; it would do what the artist as theologian describes as showing the face of God. All works have failed because the experience they are asked for and give is unlike nonartistic experience. Neither reality nor anything less than reality will satisfy the ambitions of the human mind.

Of all literary artists, Shakespeare has been most admired. The reason may be that he comes closest to success in giving us the sense both that we know what cannot be known and that what we know is the unknowable thing we want to know and not something else. I have tried to demonstrate that in the sonnets Shakespeare copes with the problem of the conflicting obligations of a work of art by multiplying the number of ordering principles, systems of organization, and frames of reference in the individual sonnets. I have argued that the result of that increase in artificiality is pleasing because the reader's sense of coherences rather than coherence gives him both the simple comfort of order and the comfort that results from the likeness of his ordered experience of the sonnet to the experience of disorderly natural phenomena. In nonartistic experience the mind is constantly shifting its frames of reference. In the experience of the sonnet it makes similar shifts, but from one to another of overlapping frames of reference that are firmly ordered and fixed. The kind and quantity of mental action necessary in nonartistic experience is demanded by the sonnet, but that approximation of real

experience is made to occur within mind-formed limits of logic, or subject matter, or form, or sound.

Shakespeare's multiplication of ordering systems is typically Shakespearean in being unusual not in itself but in its degree. The principle of multiple orders is a defining principle of verse in general. Although "verse" and "prose" are not really precise terms, verse is ordinarily distinguishable from prose in that it presents its materials organized in at least two self-assertive systems at once: at least one of meaning and at least one of sound. Here, as an almost random example, are the first lines of Surrey's translation of the *Aeneid*, Book II:

> They whisted all, with fixed face attent,
> When prince Aeneas from the royal seat
> Thus gan to speak: "O Quene! it is thy will
> I should renew a woe cannot be told,
> How that the Grekes did spoile and ouerthrow
> The Phrygian wealth and wailful realm of Troy.[2]

As the principle of multiple ordering is common to poems at large, so its usual operation is different only in degree from its operation in a Shakespeare sonnet. Where one system tends to pull things together, another tends to separate. In the sample above, the syntax tends to unify and the form to divide. Similarly, in all literature any single system of organization is likely both to unify and to divide. Since not only verse but any literature, any sentence, is a putting together, the very nature of the undertaking evokes an awareness both of unity and of the division that necessitates the unifying. Thus, at the risk of belaboring the evident, the statement *They whisted all, with fixed face attent* is a clear unit of meaning made up of clearly articulated parts. The larger whole of the Surrey passage is similarly a unit made of distinct clauses and phrases. Formal organizations work the same way. The second line looks like the first and rhythmically is pointedly similar, but they are not identical either in appearance or sound. They look and sound as different from one another as they look and sound alike. Inside a line the same unifying and dividing exists. What is on one side of the pause, *They whisted all*, is roughly the same length as *with fixed face attent*, which balances it. Moreover, the fact that they make up a single line is just as active as the fact that they are divided by the pause.

The addition of rhyme to syntactic and metrical organization is the addition of one more independent system of organization. This is Dryden's version of the opening of the *Aeneid*, II:

> All were attentive to the godlike man,
> When from his lofty couch he thus began:
> "Great queen, what you command me to relate
> Renews the sad remembrance of our fate:
> An empire from its old foundations rent,
> And every woe the Trojans underwent[3]

Rhyme also adds another manifestation of the principle of unification and division. Aside from puns, rhyme presents the best possible epitome of the principle. Two rhyming words are pointedly like and unlike in sound, and they pull apart and together with equal force.

Any verse is capable of this kind of analysis. Since what it demonstrates is obvious, there is no need to prolong it. Still, if such analysis is unnecessary in most verse, what it reveals is nonetheless true: verse in general is multiply organized.

Shakespeare and the Sonnet Form – Sonnet 15

Although Wordsworth's "Scorn not the Sonnet" is not a good advertisement for the justice of its plea, the fact that Wordsworth himself wrote sonnets, that he wrote them when nobody else was writing sonnets, that Milton wrote them when almost nobody else was writing sonnets, and that Shakespeare wrote his well after the Elizabethan sonnet vogue had passed suggests that there may be something about the sonnet form that makes it not to be scorned. In an earlier chapter I said that the sonnet form in any of its varieties is simultaneously unifying and divisive. Those contradictory coactions result from its unusually high number of systems of organization. In the limited terms of my thesis that multiplicity of structures is an essence of verse, the sonnet is an especially poetic form. The first line of an English sonnet participates in a metrical pattern (fourteen iambic pentameter lines), a rhyme pattern (*abab*), a trio of quatrains (alike in being quatrains, different in using different rhymes), and an overall pattern contrasting two different kinds of rhyme scheme (three quatrains set against one couplet). I suggest that the concentration of different organizing systems active in the form before any particulars of substance or syntax are added is such as to attract the kind of mind that is particularly happy in the multiple organizations of verse: witness Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth. The different patterns inside the sonnet form pull together and pull apart just as the different patterns do in verse forms less crowded with coherences. The sonnet does what all verse does; it just does more of it.

As the sonnet form extends the basic verse principle of multiple organization, so Shakespeare's sonnets reflect and magnify the tendencies of the form itself. In superimposing many more patterns upon the several organizations inherent in the form, Shakespeare marshals the sonnet the way that it was going. Having talked at length about the kind, quantity, and operation of the patterns in which Shakespeare organizes his sonnets, I propose to pull together what I have said and summarize it, but to do so in the abstract would not, I think, be meaningful. Instead, I will take one sonnet, number 15, and use it to make a summary demonstration of the kinds and interactions of patterns in Shakespeare's sonnets generally:

> When I consider everything that grows
> Holds in perfection but a little moment,
> That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows

Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;
When I perceive that men as plants increase,
Cheered and checked even by the selfsame sky,
Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
And wear their brave state out of memory:
Then the conceit of this inconstant stay
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,
Where wasteful Time debateth with Decay
To change your day of youth to sullied night;
And, all in war with Time for love of you,
As he takes from you, I ingraft you new.

On top of the formal pattern (4, 4, 4, 2) is a logical pattern (8, 6) established in the syntactical construction *when/then*. In the first eight lines, which are formally two quatrains and logically an octave, a 2, 2, 4 pattern arises from the three object clauses: [*that*] *everything* . . . (two lines), *that this huge stage* . . . (two lines), *that men as plants* . . . (four lines).

In addition to these three major structures and structuring principles, the nonformal phonetic patterns that operate in the poem are probably literally innumerable. They tend to interact with the other patterning systems in much the same way that the other systems interact with each other: an informal sound pattern will link elements that are divided, or divide elements that are linked, by the formal or logical or syntactical or rhythmic patterns.

Considering the great many words it takes to talk about sounds, it would not be profitable to talk about them here. [. . .] It should suffice here to say that informal sound patterns do what I have said the multiple patterns of the sonnets do generally. The mere fact of their presence adds to the reader's sense that he is engaged in an ordered, coherent, nonrandom, humanly geared experience. They help the poem give a sense of the intense and universal relevance of all things to all other things. The companion fact of their great number helps maintain in the reader an accompanying sense that, for all the artistic order of his reading experience, it is not a limited one. No one of the sound patterns dominates the others over the whole length of the poem; similarly, no one pattern of any kind dominates the whole poem. From moment to moment incidental sound patterns keep the reader aware of the orderliness, the rationality, of the experience, but the principal patterning factor does not stay the same from moment to moment. The multiplication of sound patterns, like the multiplication of structures generally, increases the reader's sense of order, while at the same time it diminishes the sense of limitation that a dominant pattern can add to the limitation inherent in the focusing of the reader's attention on particular subjects in particular relationships. In short, by fixing so many phonetic relationships and by putting a single word in so many of those relationships, Shakespeare overcomes the limitation that order entails. The reader is engaged in so many organizations that the experience of the poem is one both of comprehending (for which order, limit, pattern, and reason are necessary) and of having comprehended what remains incomprehensible because it does not seem to have

been limited. Nothing in the poem strikes the reader as seen only "in terms of." Everything is presented in multiple terms – more as it is than as it is understood.

Shakespeare and the Sonnet Tradition – Sonnet 15

I have said that the peculiarly Shakespearean effect of these sonnets arises in part from a bold extension of a principle basic to verse generally and to the sonnet form particularly. The same can be said about an extension of the basic principle of courtly love in general and the sonnet convention in particular.

More than a writer in any other genre, a sonneteer depends for his effects on the conjunction or conflict of what he says with what the reader expects. Like the basic courtly love convention from which it grew, the sonnet convention is one of indecorum. Its essential device is the use of the vocabulary appropriate to one kind of experience to talk about another. The writer talked about his lady and his relation to her as if she were a feudal lord and he a vassal, or as if she were the Virgin Mary and he a supplicant to her. A witty emphasis on the paradoxically simultaneous pertinence and impertinence of the writer's language and stance to his subject matter is of the essence of the convention. The lady was not a deity or a baron, but she was virtuous, powerful, beautiful. In all stages of its development, the courtly love tradition relies upon a reader's sense of the frame of reference in which the writer operates and the writer's apparent deviation from that pattern in a rhetorical action that both fits and violates the expected pattern.

By the time the first Italian and French sonnets were written, the conventions of courtly love were traditional, and a decorum, albeit a decorum of indecorum, was firmly established for aristocratic secular love poetry. Followers of Petrarch wrote to be judged on their success in introducing variations within a narrow and prescribed space, using set vocabulary and subject matter. To be appreciated, the sonneteer presupposed an audience whose presuppositions he could rely on. An audience for a sonnet had to be able to recognize a new surprise in a convention of long established paradoxes.

Perhaps the poems most typical of all the rhetorical actions of courtly love writers are those which exploit the apparently inexhaustible surprise of returning the language of religion to religious subject matter inside the courtly love and sonnet conventions. Dante did it in the thirteenth century; Donne did it in the seventeenth. A good example is this sonnet which George Herbert sent home to his mother from Cambridge:

> My God, where is that ancient heat towards thee,
> Wherewith whole showls of *Martyrs* once did burn,
> Besides their other flames? Doth Poetry
> Wear *Venus* Livery? only serve her turn?
> Why are not *Sonnets* made of thee? and layes
> Upon thine Altar burnt? Cannot thy love
> Heighten a spirit to sound out thy praise
> As well as any she? Cannot thy *Dove*
> Out-strip their *Cupid* easily in flight?

Or, since thy wayes are deep, and still the same,
Will not a verse run smooth that bears thy name?
Why doth that fire, which by thy power and might
Each breast does feel, no braver fuel choose
Than that, which one day Worms may chance refuse?[4]

Exaggerated predictability and surprise, pertinence and impertinence, are in the nature of the convention; and all the devices I have talked about have a common denominator with the more grossly effective conjunction of frames of reference in the earliest courtly love poetry, in Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, and in such collisions of value systems as that between the last line of this Sidney sonnet and the rest of the poem:

It is most true, that eyes are form'd to serve
The inward light: and that the heavenly part
Ought to be king, from whose rules who do swerve,
Rebels to Nature, strive for their owne smart,
It is most true, what we call *Cupid's* dart,
An image is, which for our selves we carve;
And, fooles, adore in temple of our hart,
Till that good God make Church and Churchman starve.
True, that true Beautie Vertue is indeed,
Whereof this Beautie can be but a shade,
Which elements with mortall mixture breed;
True, that true Beautie Vertue is indeed,
And should in soule up to our countrey move:
True, and yet true that I must *Stella* love.[5]

Sometimes, as in the following sonnet from *Arcadia*, the whole effect of a poem will depend upon a reader's familiarity with the genre being so great that for an instant he will hear only the poet's manner and not his matter:

What length of verse can serve brave *Mopsa's* good to show,
Whose vertues strange, and beuties such, as no man them may know?
Thus shrewdly burdned then, how can my Muse escape?
The gods must help, and pretious things must serve to shew her shape.
Like great god *Saturn* faire, and like faire *Venus* chaste:
As smooth as *Pan*, as *Juno* milde, like goddesse *Isis* faste.
With *Cupid* she fore-sees, and goes god *Vulcan's* pace:
And for a tast of all these gifts, she borowes *Momus'* grace.
Her forhead jacinth like, her cheekes of opall hue,
Her twinkling eies bedeckt with pearle, her lips of Saphir blew:
Her haire pure Crapal-stone; her mouth O heavenly wyde;
Her skin like burnisht gold, her hands like silver ure untryde.
As for those parts unknowne, which hidden sure are best:
Happie be they which well beleeve, and never seeke the rest.[6]

Like his predecessors, Shakespeare plays openly on his reader's expectations about the sonnet convention in poems like sonnet 130 (*My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun*) and in the bawdy conclusions of sonnets 20, 144, and 151. Shakespeare's dark lady is traditionally cited as contrary to the traditional beloved, but the very impropriety of a technically unattractive and morally vicious beloved is a consistent enlargement on the standard rhetorical principle of the convention; and, whatever other significance there may be, certainly addressing love sonnets to a man is an all but predictable extreme of courtly love technique. Shakespeare's surprises, like Dante's, Donne's, and George Herbert's, come from going farther in the direction natural to the convention.

Although Shakespeare exploits the reader's expectations in the largest elements of the sonnets, similar smaller plays on the reader's expectations about syntax and idiom are more numerous. Moreover, their effects are more typical of the general rhetoric of the sonnets. Where both the traditional clashes of contexts in courtly love poetry, and Sidney's sudden shifts in clearly distinguished systems of value call attention to themselves, the comparable actions in the syntactical fabric of sonnets like number 15 do not fully impinge on the reader's consciousness, and so do not merely describe inconstancy but evoke a real sense of inconstancy from a real experience of it. In sonnet 15 the reader is presented with the subject, verb, and direct object of the potentially complete clause *When I consider everything that grows*. The next line continues the clause and requires an easy but total reconstitution of the reader's conception of the kind of sentence he is reading; he has to understand *When I consider* [*that*] *everything that grows / Holds in perfection but a little moment.* The kind of demand on the reader made syntactically in the first two lines is made in lines 11 and 12 by a nonidiomatic use of the common construction "debate with":

> . . . wasteful Time debateth with Decay
> To change your day of youth to sullied night. . . .

Having newly learned to understand *with* as "in the company of," the reader is forced by the couplet to readjust his understanding when essentially the same idiom appears in a variation on its usual sense, "fight against":

> And, all in war with Time for love of you,
> As he takes from you, I ingraft you new.

Just as the reader's mind moves from one to another formal or logical or phonetic structure, it also moves back and forth among metaphoric frames of reference. The terms in which the speaker presents his meaning, the "things" of the poem, are from a variety of ideological frames of reference, and the reader's mind is in constant motion from one context to another. Like all the other stylistic qualities I have talked about, the variation and quick change in the metaphoric focus of the sonnets presents in little the basic quality of courtly love and sonnet convention.

The first active metaphor of the poem, *grows*, carries a vaguely botanical reference over into line 2, whose substance lends itself to overtones of traditional floral expressions of the *carpe diem* theme. The overtones would have been particularly strong for a reader accustomed to *perfection* in its common Renaissance meaning, "ripeness":

> When I consider everything that grows
> Holds in perfection but a little moment

Line 3 begins a new object clause, logically and syntactically parallel with the first. That parallelism helps the reader accept the new theatrical metaphor as an alternative means of simply restating the substance of the first clause. Moreover, the theatrical metaphor continues and reinforces the *watcher–watched* relationship established first in line 1 for the speaker and what he considers, and fully mirrored when line 4 introduces a new metaphor, the secretly influential stars, which are to the world-stage roughly as the powerless speaker was to the mortal world in line 1:

> That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows
> Whereon the stars in secret influence comment

The tone of the quatrain is matter-of-fact as befits a declaration so simple and so obviously justified that it is a subordinate prologue to the statement proper. That the matter-of-fact tone withstands coexistence with three distinct metaphors would be remarkable if each new metaphor were not introduced into the reader's mind as if it were already there.

Parallel syntax and parallel relationships suggest equation between the two object clauses – an equation which gives the reader a sense that what is both new and separate from the first two lines is at the same time neither new nor separate. In short, the physics of the quatrain's substance are the same as those of its rhyme scheme. The three metaphors pull both apart and together. The stars in line 4 are both new to the poem and have been in it covertly from the start. Probably only a mind as pun-ready as Shakespeare's own could hear the echo of Latin *sidus*, *sider-*, "star," in *consider*, but for any reader the act of imagining *this huge stage* presupposes the vantage point of the stars; the reader is thinking from the heavens, and, when the stars themselves are mentioned, their propriety is immediately further established because the stars comment, like critics at a play.[7]

Just as such an incidental sound pattern as *cheerèd and checked* emerges (from *perceive* and *increase*) into dominance and then submerges again (in *sky* and *decrease*) into the music of the whole, so the substance of the poem slips into and out of metaphoric frames of reference, always in a frame of reference some of whose parts pertain incidentally to one of the other metaphors from which and into which it moves.

> When I perceive that men as plants increase,
> Cheerèd and checked even by the selfsame sky,
> Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
> And wear their brave state out of memory

At the beginning of quatrain 2, *plants increase* returns the botanical metaphor to clear prominence. The next line, *Cheerèd and checked even by the selfsame sky*, pertains very well to a growing plant (*Cheerèd* – smiled upon – *and checked* – restrained, held back, by the vagaries of the weather), but the primary syntactical object here is *men*, and *Cheerèd and checked* suggests the theatrical metaphor, particularly in the second half of the line, when the encouragement and rebuke turn out to be given *by the selfsame sky* that has earlier been audience to the shows on the huge stage.[8] In line 7, *Vaunt* confirms the metaphoric dominance of boastful, strutting actors, but in the phrase that follows, *youthful*, which pertains directly to men (actors), is coupled with *sap*, a word from the botanical frame of reference to which *youthful* applies only figuratively, and which itself is only metaphorically descriptive of the humors of men: *Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease*. *At height* is metaphorically applicable to the careers of men and the performances of haughty actors, and it is literally descriptive of a plant at its full growth, but the context to which *height* more usually belongs is astronomy (its context in sonnet 116). The phrase *at height decrease* confirms an earlier suggestion of the sun's passage across the sky or of the waxing moon – a suggestion that does not conform logically to the other use of astronomical metaphor, but that does persist throughout the quatrain. At the end of line 5, *increase* pertained obviously to *plants*. Its noun-meaning "fruit of the harvest," appears prominently in sonnets 1 and 11 which precede this one in the 1609 sequence; here, however, astronomical senses of *increase* also pertain. The *OED* reports Renaissance uses of the noun form of *increase* to mean "the rising of the tide . . . the advance of daylight from sunrise to noon; the waxing of the moon," and cites Renaissance examples in which forms of *decrease* indicate the negative of all three astronomical senses of *increase*. In this context *at height decrease* suggests the waning of the moon (taking *at height* figuratively to mean "fullness"), the descent of the sun (taking *at height* literally, and *decrease* to mean the decline of daylight from noon to sunset), and a tidelike ebbing of once *youthful sap*.

The last line of the quatrain, *And wear their brave state out of memory*, brings back the actors strutting in their finery, but its juxtaposition with *at height decrease* and the vague, cosmic immensity of *out of memory* give the line a majestic fall more appropriate to the descent of the sun than the perseverance of a player king. The reader's experience of this line is a type of his experience of this sonnet and the sonnets in general. The line is easy to understand, but it would be hard to say just what it says or how it says it. *Wear* in combination with *their brave state* says something like "wear their fine clothes." Following on *at height decrease*, *and wear* has reference to movement in space (*OED*, s.v. *Wear*, v. 21), and so, still under the influence of *Vaunt*, the half line says: "continue to advance in their pomp and finery." Thus, when he comes upon *out of*, the reader is likely to take it spatially (as in "out of the country"). On the other hand, *out* is in the same line with *wear* and *brave state*, and so leads the reader's understanding into a context of wearing out clothes, a context that is an excellent metaphor for the larger idea of the decay in time of everything that grows. The syntax of the line presents *memory* as if it were a place, but its sense makes it capable of comprehension only in terms of time. In common idiom "out of memory" refers to the distant, unseen past; but in *wear their*

brave state out of memory the reference must be to the unseeable future. The statement of the octave takes in everything that has grown, grows, or will grow, and the multiple reference made by the conflict between standard usage and the use of *out of memory* in this line allows the reader an approximation of actual comprehension of all time and space in one.

The last six lines of the sonnet are more abstract than the first eight, and the three metaphors become more separable from each other, from a new metaphor of warfare, and from the abstract statements that they figure forth. In line 10 the beloved is set before the speaker's sight in a refrain of the theatrical metaphor; in line 12 the astronomical metaphor appears overtly in a commonplace; in the last line *ingraft* brings the botanical metaphor into a final statement otherwise contained entirely in the metaphor of warfare:

> Then the conceit of this inconstant stay
> Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,
> Where wasteful Time debateth with Decay
> To change your day of youth to sullied night;
> And, all in war with Time for love of you,
> As he takes from you, I ingraft you new.

After the experience of the octave, the experience of the sestet is a clear awareness of the simplicity hidden in a great – a lifelike – complexity of relationships. The couplet describes a facile and fanciful triumph over time. The reader's experience of it, however, is the justified culmination of a small but real intellectual triumph over the limits of his own understanding.

The Value of the Sonnets

A formulated idea – written down, ordered, settled, its elements fixed in permanent relationship to one another as parts of a whole – accentuates its reader's incapacity to cope fully with what is outside the description. Like a fort, any statement presupposes, and so emphasizes, the frailty of the people it serves. Wordsworth made the point more cheerfully and in specific praise of the sonnet:

> Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
> And hermits are contented with their cells;
> And students with their pensive citadels;
> Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
> Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
> High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
> Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
> In truth the prison, unto which we doom
> Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,

> In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
> Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
> Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
> Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
> Should find brief solace there, as I have found.[9]

The many different patterns that exist in any sonnet by virtue of its form make it seem crowded or, if that word has irremediably derisive connotations, full. Shakespeare's enlargement of the number and kinds of patterns makes his sonnets seem full to bursting not only with the quantity of different actions but with the energy generated from their conflict. The reader has constantly to cope with the multitudinous organizations of a Shakespeare sonnet; he is engaged and active. Nonetheless, the sonnets are above all else artificial, humanly ordered; the reader is always capable of coping. He always has the comfort and security of a frame of reference, but the frames of reference are not constant, and their number seems limitless.

The solace to be found in a Shakespeare sonnet is brief indeed, but it is as great a solace as literature can give – the feeling that the weight of liberty is not too much. That is a remarkable achievement for a reader and for the writer who gives it to him. I think it is that achievement which readers acknowledge when they praise Shakespeare's sonnets.

Notes

1 It might be argued that, strictly speaking, no experience is completely unorganized, since, by definition, experience implies a perceiver who in various ways shapes the raw materials, whatever they are, which provide the ingredients of any perception. But even if, philosophically speaking, the disjunction between organized and unorganized experience is false, it nevertheless remains valid to speak of degrees of organization and to distinguish as sharply as I have done between the highly organized world of art and the comparatively shapeless world of everyday existence. Whether or not this difference is one of degree, it is so great as to warrant speaking of it for critical purposes as if it were a difference in kind.

2 *Poems of Henry Howard Earl of Surrey*, ed. F. M. Padelford (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1920).

3 *The Poetical Works of John Dryden*, ed. George R. Noyes (New York: Macmillan, 1908), p. 536.

4 *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 206.

5 *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. William A. Ringler, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 157.

6 *Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, p. 12.

7 Moreover, in the pattern in *s* and *t* that runs across both lines, *stars*, the fourth syllable of line 4, alliterates with *stage* in the same metrical position in line 3.

8 "Cheer" has a specifically theatrical meaning for a modern reader that it did not have for Shakespeare, but, even though it did not yet refer to shouts of applause, "cheer" did have the general meaning "encourage," from which the later meaning presumably developed.

9 *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, rev. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 199.