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THE DEPTHS OF UNDERSTANDING

IN using the word "understanding" in the title of this lecture I have in mind the older sense of the word as the greatest power of the mind, an intuitional power to distinguish truth from falsehood and to adapt means to ends; as it is used, for example, in the Book of Job (xxxii. 8): "There is a spirit in man; and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding."

We have had before us from the beginning the question of whether Shakespeare has an actual value in our modern, much advanced life even in its most enlightened and refined aspects. I have a thesis, which I shall by and by state, that seems to offer at least a possible point of departure in the appreciation of Shakespeare's permanent value in the world.

Let us first consider the process of living and learning from the point of view of the quest for truth. We shall not perhaps get very far with it, for truth is a very general word and the systematic quest for truth is the most difficult of man's undertakings. The difficulty I refer to is that truth is often elusive truth, truth disguised, truth malformed by individual and social interests, dismembered and scattered truth such as Milton talks about in *Areopagitica*, truth hidden in masses of contention and controversy, truth which lies beyond the ranges of customary human contemplation, as that of mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology, and their interrelations, the ample and extensive truth that is baffling because of its variety and multiplicity,

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and finally the truth that conceals itself by its very obviousness. One might think the quest for truth too complicated for the ordinary man; but not so, since truth comes easily and sufficiently to a state of simple honesty, often yields to mere naïveté, and its determination is largely dependent on an attitude of mind.

In its wider aspects the quest for truth is an heroic enterprise. "Truth indeed," says Milton in *Areopagitica*, "came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when he ascended, and his Apostles after him were laid asleep, then straight arose a wicked race of deceivers, who, as that story goes of the *Egyptian Typhon* with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good *Osiris*, took the virgin Truth, hewed her lovely form into a thousand pieces, and scattered them to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the careful search that *Isis* made for the mangled body of *Osiris*, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all."

The proposition I wish you to consider is that truth and originality are one. In putting forward a simple statement of this kind I am not sure whether I am announcing a new and probable hypothesis or a mere commonplace, but, at any rate, there is much to support it. What we call originality is not merely new creation or the systematic or accidental discovery of something hitherto unknown. It is a process of redemption as well as creation and it takes cognizance also of mere inertness and of active destruction with its motives, beneficent or malevolent. It is a broader thing than any one of these and is not merely the laying bare of that which is concealed. I believe that no scientist will object to regarding his own greatest feats of originality

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as a full and conscious search for the actual truth. When an investigator has discovered the truth he has brought a new idea into the world; he has been original as truly as any artist in literature or any of the fine arts. The concept of originality as the search for truth satisfies all that my experience has taught me as a scholar, all I have observed of the activities of scholars and scientists. In this sense at least there is no new thing under the sun, since all fabrications must conform to truth in order to be original. I believe, moreover, that this hypothesis will explain the originality of Shakespeare.

In the sense of the discovery of truth Shakespeare has illimitable originality. He is inexhaustible, not only in the revelation of beauty, but in the discovery of truth.

Let us consider a few passages which have to do with action, since they may reveal the originality of which I speak.

Romeo's reply to the cautious friar is as faithful to the nature of true love, as the friar's warning is to worldly wisdom:

Rom. Amen, amen! but come what sorrow can,
It cannot countervail the exchange of joy
That one short minute gives me in her sight:
Do thou but close our hands with holy words,
Then love-devouring death do what he dare;
It is enough that I may but call her mine.

(*Romeo and Juliet*, II, vi, 3-8)

Helena's unsupported resolution as she undertakes her seemingly hopeless quest has nerved the minds and hands of youth throughout the ages:

Hel. Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,
Which we ascribe to heaven: the fated sky
Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull
Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull.

(*All's Well that Ends Well*, I, i, 231-234)

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Life is an uncertain venture, and it is Shakespeare who tells us that our errors may prove blessings:

Ham. And praised be rashness for it, let us know,
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,
When our deep plots do pall: and that should teach us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will,—

(*Hamlet*, V, ii, 7-11)

In this realm of action where is there greater wisdom than in these words:

He's truly valiant that can wisely suffer
The worst that man can breathe, and make his wrongs
His outsides, to wear them like his raiment, carelessly,
And ne'er prefer his injuries to his heart,
To bring it into danger.

(*Timon of Athens*, III, v, 31-35)

The Tempest, although not a drama of action, is yet full of the deepest philosophy of the subject:

Though with their high wrongs I am struck to the quick,
Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury
Do I take part: the rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance: they being penitent,
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
Not a frown further.

(*The Tempest*, V, i, 25-30)

Or hear Posthumus in *Cymbeline* on the inferiority of action to restraint:

Kneel not to me:
The power that I have on you is to spare you;
The malice towards you to forgive you: live,
And deal with others better.

(*Cymbeline*, V, v, 417-420)

In final consideration of Shakespeare's philosophy of conduct I ask you to look with me at a passage from *Julius Caesar* which long puzzled me. It is the final speech of Marcus Brutus. Brutus has finally renounced the philosophy

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of the Stoics and has decided to take his own life. He no longer blames Cato "for the death which he did give himself." In a scene of infinite pathos he is bidding farewell to his faithful followers:

Bru. Farewell to you; and you; and you, Volumnius.
Strato, thou hast been all this while asleep;
Farewell to thee too, Strato. Countrymen,
My heart doth joy that yet in all my life
I found no man but he was true to me.

Surely, I said to myself, this is mere rhetoric. Brutus has been deceived, not only by Octavius and Antony, but by Cassius and his other friends as well. But when I read on I discovered the real meaning of his words:

I shall have glory by this losing day
More than Octavius and Mark Antony
By this vile conquest shall attain unto.
So fare you well at once; for Brutus' tongue
Hath almost ended his life's history:
Night now hangs upon mine eyes; my bones would rest,
That have but labour'd to attain this hour.

(*Julius Caesar*, V, v, 31-43)

I saw that in Shakespeare's great philosophy of life the man of pure motives and upright heart cannot be robbed of his glory.

One might go on indefinitely citing passages of urgency, for in the depiction of action Shakespeare is unequalled. Many of his phrases have entered the popular mind as proverbs because of this quality and this alone. Such passages are, "A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a horse!," "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more," and "Lay on, Macduff, And damn'd be him that first cries 'Hold, enough!'" Where can one find a passage so instinct with action as the following from *King John*:

Be great in act, as you have been in thought;
Let not the world see fear and sad distrust

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Govern the motion of a kingly eye:
Be stirring as the time; be fire with fire;
Threaten the threatener and outface the brow
Of bragging horror: so shall inferior eyes,
That borrow their behaviours from the great,
Grow great by your example and put on
The dauntless spirit of resolution.

(V, i, 45-53)

Characteristically Shakespeare's revelations of truth are revelations about living, about character, about human situations. Man, like Lear, "hath ever but slenderly known himself" (I, i, 297), and it is in the revelation of man to himself that Shakespeare's greatest achievements are made. Now, what happens when a man comes to himself? There is no denying the fact that the moment is the greatest moment in life. It may come quickly, easily, and often; but, if it never comes or comes too late, there is trouble in store for that man. The idea that man often comes to himself in a moment has much to commend it. Such is the well-authenticated phenomenon of religious conversion and such also is the frequent experience of falling in love. Some men are never smitten with a consciousness that they are sinners, never bend themselves to repentance, never feel that Christ has taken away the burden of their sin. It is also true that some men never fall in love, and I think that both situations are to be regretted. In order that we may not pass over this point too hastily let me read you a paragraph from Woodrow Wilson's masterly little essay entitled "When a Man Comes to Himself":

It is enough to know that there are some laws which govern a man's awakening to know himself and the right part to play. A man *is* the part he plays among his fellows. He is not isolated; he cannot be. His life is made up of the relations he bears to others—is made or marred by those relations, guided by them, judged by them, expressed in them. There is nothing else on which he can spend his spirit—nothing else that we can see. It is by these he gets his spiritual growth; it is by

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these we see his character revealed, his purpose, and his gifts. Some play with a certain natural passion, an unstudied directness, without grace, without modulation, with no study of the masters or consciousness of the pervading spirit of the plot; others give all their thought to their costume and think only of the audience; a few act as those who have mastered the secrets of a serious art, with deliberate subordination of themselves to the great end and motive of the play, spending themselves like good servants, indulging no wilfulness, obtruding no eccentricity, lending heart and tone and gesture to the perfect progress of the action. These have "found themselves," and have all the ease of a perfect adjustment.

Shakespeare's most definite study of the normal man who comes to himself is of course Prince Hal, later the great English hero Henry V. Hal's coming to himself is slower, less dramatic than other cases; for Shakespeare has pitted against Prince Hal's reformation Sir John Falstaff, his wittiest and most seductive character. Prince Hal goes back repeatedly to his tavern companies in Eastcheap, and on more than one occasion remembers affectionately "that creature small beer." But when his reformation appears to his kingdom, it is striking and convincing. Shakespeare, for the sake of informing the audience, had had him prophesy at an early time—

So, when this loose behaviour I throw off
And pay the debt I never promised,
By how much better than my word I am,
By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;
And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
My reformation, glittering o'er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.

(*I Henry IV*, I, ii, 231-238)

The famous scene of the rejection of Falstaff in the *Second Part of King Henry IV* has lost something of its original significance because of modern anachronistic sympathy for Falstaff; but the new king was at the parting of the ways and was perhaps in some danger when he made his speech to Falstaff:

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I know thee not, old man: fall to thy prayers;
How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!
I have long dream'd of such a kind of man,
So surfeit-swell'd, so old and so profane;
But, being awak'd, I do despise my dream.
Make less thy body hence, and more thy grace;
Leave gormandizing; know the grave doth gape
For thee thrice wider than for other men.
Reply not to me with a fool-born jest:
Presume not that I am the thing I was;
For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,
That I have turn'd away my former self;
So will I those that kept me company.

(V, v, 51-63)

“Reply not to me with a fool-born jest.” The unuttered jest! The King saw it in Falstaff's eye. What a jest it might have been had King Henry permitted it to come to utterance! Falstaff, thus under fire, could not safely be allowed to speak.

But most of the cases of self-realization in Shakespeare are less normal than that of Henry V. They appear usually under stress of tragedy. To be sure, the act or grace of self-knowledge comes in different ways to different men, and to mark the ways and times seems to have been a thing which engaged Shakespeare's genius. To a hero blinded by pride, self-conceit, or passion the moment of self-revelation often comes too late. In the play of *King Richard II*, a play which has great significance in Shakespeare's development as a writer of tragedy, the mental act of the hero in daring to be himself is reserved until the last few seconds of his life, but is nevertheless clearly marked and convincing. Richard II was a fascinating person, even his enemies feel it, and a sort of sorrow hangs over Bolingbroke as he deposes Richard. Richard II is a poet born, albeit a sentimentalist utterly unable until the very end to see himself as he is and to adapt himself to the inexorable demands

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of actual affairs. In the scene of his death (V, v.) he is represented in soliloquy studying

how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world.

He finds it difficult and shows the great artist's persistent patience when he says,

I cannot do it; yet I'll hammer it out.

The keeper of the prison at Pomfret enters ahead of the men hired to murder Richard. The keeper refuses to taste the food, evidently poisoned, which he has brought, and Richard loses his temper and beats the keeper. Just then Exton with his servants rushes in. Richard cries

How now! What means death in the rude assault?
Villain, thy own hand yields thy death's instrument.

The King snatches an axe from a servant and kills his assailant. He kills another and cries,

Go thou, and fill another room in hell.

Then Exton strikes him down. Thus in the last second of his life Richard II for the first time in all that life strikes an honest blow in his own defense, and we somehow feel that our intuitions have been justified in believing that somewhere in this vain and ineffectual king there was hidden the soul of a man.

The case of Othello's self-realization is somewhat like that of Richard II. He comes to himself too late, although the inimical force was not so much within him as without. Iago has fooled Othello to the top of his bent, and has built up in Othello such a fortress of passion that Othello rejects both his own better judgment and nature and such convincing testimony as that brought to him in the burning

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words of Emilia. He is deaf to the importunate petitions of Desdemona herself, which are very moving; for nobody has ever known better than Shakespeare the passion of one who pleads for his life. Othello, taking on himself the justice of God, the acme of tragic madness in both ancient and modern drama, destroys Desdemona. Then the calm floods of a sane objective world overwhelm him, and he sees what he has done. It is then that he says:

Oth. Behold, I have a weapon;
A better never did itself sustain
Upon a soldier's thigh: I have seen the day,
That, with this little arm and this good sword,
I have made my way through more impediments
Than twenty times your stop: but, O vain boast!
Who can control his fate? 'tis not so now.
Be not afraid, though you do see me weapon'd;
Here is my journey's end, here is my butt,
And very sea-mark of my utmost sail.
Do you go back dismay'd? 'tis a lost fear;
Man but a rush against Othello's breast,
And he retires. Where should Othello go?
Now, how dost thou look now? O ill-starr'd wench!
Pale as thy smock! when we shall meet at compt,
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl!
Even like thy chastity. O cruel slave!
Whip me, ye devils,
From the possession of this heavenly sight!
Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!
O Desdemona, Desdemona! dead!

(*Othello*, V, ii, 259-281)

From this and from his last great speech one knows that Othello has looked into the eyes of Amaranth and seen himself as he really is.

Hamlet is relatively slow in coming to himself, for the effort to know himself is long protracted and, although it arrives too late to save his life, it arrives in time to save his honour for the ages. The case of Lear is like that of

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Truly, in Lear's case, the hunter is home from the hill, and is prepared to rest, to leave God's world to God, and to die.

One of the most striking cases of this profound dramatic revelation of truth is in the tragedy of *Coriolanus*. It is not in this case a revelation of character only, but of situation, although the character of the hero is also illuminated. Because of his obdurate, although noble, pride and in spite of his priceless services to the state, Coriolanus has been driven into exile. He has been outrageously and ungratefully treated and has gathered into his hands the weapons of vengeance. He has joined the Corioli, his country's enemies, and Rome is at his feet. The great ones of Rome have begged him to show mercy. Menenius Agrippa, who has been as a father to him, has also failed to make him stay his hand and has turned broken-heartedly away. Even the wretched tribunes of the plebeians have groveled before his threat. Last of all there appear his mother, his wife, and his son. They furnish the real motive for the withdrawal of his forces. The usual way of looking at the event is to regard it as an act of ultimate patriotism, but it is more than that. Shakespeare himself may have been uncertain as to the nature of the man. The speech of Aufidius at the end of the fourth act seems to indicate that he was:

First he was

A noble servant to them; but he could not
Carry his honours even: whether 'twas pride,
Which out of daily fortune ever taints
The happy man; whether defect of judgement,
To fail in the disposing of those chances
Which he was lord of; or whether nature,
Not to be other than one thing, not moving
From the casque to the cushion, but commanding peace
Even with the same austerity and garb
As he controll'd the war; but one of these—
As he hath spices of them all, not all,
For I dare so far free him—made him fear'd,

So hated, and so banish'd: but he has a merit
 To choke it in the utterance. So our virtues
 Lie in the interpretation of the time:
 And power, unto itself most commendable,
 Hath not a tomb so evident as a chair
 To extol what it hath done.
 One fire drives out one fire; one nail, one nail;
 Rights by rights falter, strengths by strengths do fail.
 (IV, vii, 28-55)

Certainly Aufidius is puzzled, although he sees that Coriolanus has a merit "to choke it in the utterance." Probably Shakespeare was puzzled also, but, when he came to write the scene of the interview between Coriolanus and his mother, he arrived at a triumphant solution. When Coriolanus has heard the plea of Volumnia, the castigations of her tongue make him see the doom that fate, circumstance, and human error have involved him in.

Vol. Say my request's unjust,
 And spurn me back: but if it be not so,
 Thou art not honest; and the gods will plague thee,
 That thou restrain'st from me the duty which
 To a mother's part belongs. . . .

Come, let us go:
 This fellow had a Volscian to his mother;
 His wife is in Corioli and his child
 Like him by chance. Yet give us our dispatch:
 I am hush'd until our city be a-fire,
 And then I'll speak a little.

Cor. O mother, mother!
 What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,
 The gods look down, and this unnatural scene
 They laugh at.

(V, iii, 164-168, 177-185)

The voice that Coriolanus has heard is not the voice of the Roman matron Volumnia only. It is also the voice of motherhood in the wide catholic sense and the voice of race. What is man but blood and bone, the product of generation? The ultimate truth revealed, it seems to me, is that man be-

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longs with his kind. To reject wife and son and mother is to reject self, and by so great a man as Coriolanus this was not possible. Coriolanus by this experience was compelled to realize himself in the widest sense of the words.

The idea that it is necessary that a man should come to himself is both universal and profound, and, as we have seen, Shakespeare is a supreme exponent of that idea.

He teaches us, to begin with, that all men have a self to come to. He is so impartial in his application of the principle that it may be said that he has no mere pawns on his chessboard. Even his messengers, rustics, servants, and ordinary citizens have personality. He writes about kings and noblemen, to be sure, but these characters are not the only ones into whom he has breathed the breath of life. All of his people are alive, even the lowest and most casual; and, on the contrary, it may be said that his kings are merely men. Whatever they may think about themselves and whatever attributes they may receive from their flatterers, the fact remains that in Shakespeare's world royal nature is human nature.

Shakespeare's subordinate characters are full of what Coleridge calls "a lively intellect." Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* is a broadly realized character, a poet and a swordsman as well as a true friend and a loyal gentleman. The Nurse in that play is no copy of an actual woman. She is an independent creation. She is admirably generalized as a nurse. She has the garrulity of old age, the arrogance of ignorance, the snobbishness of a privileged servant in a great family, the grossness of her trade with its petty vices, and the lack of principle which arises from a career of servility. Coleridge calls attention to the fact that, like all uncultivated persons, she supports her famous memory by recalling visual circumstances. But there is a blending force

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at work in her beyond these typical qualities. Shakespeare has entered sympathetically into her mind and heart and synthesized her as an actual person.

Thus Shakespeare's poetry, like all poetry and like religion, generalizes while it individualizes. The aim of both is to perfect nature, for the similarities of men are greater than their differences. Infinite new combinations of general human qualities together with individual markings, the whole vivified by sympathetic imagination—this seems to be the recipe for humanity as Shakespeare depicts it. His characters are thus idealized realities, and this, as I should like to suggest, is the conception of man that may be gathered from both Plato and Jesus.

The faculty of imagination is not limited by time and space or by high and low, nor is there any ultimate justification for such barriers in a world where man's life is a span and where differences among men are so inconsiderable that, with a little remoteness, they disappear from sight like the corrugations on the skin of an orange. But, although this diminishes the importance of individual peculiarities among men, it does not diminish the importance of the individual human life, but, on the contrary, by ironing out social and temporal differences, it increases the substance of each human life by making it a part of humanity. Jesus saw that the world must have a gospel for all mankind, because all mankind matter equally in the eye of God.

Shakespeare, long before Ibsen, saw his ordinary people as human beings, so much so that he has been mistakenly called democratic. What he saw was not that all men have an equal right to rule in the state—that is a later idea—but that even common people are human beings capable of love, wisdom, bravery, self-sacrifice, and shrewd good sense, each with a feeling of personal pride as truly as any king or any

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modern man in a free country. Ordinary people are not principals in Shakespeare's plays and only rarely do they come into the focus of interest; but, like all men in life, they are likely to do so at any moment. I often think of the offended dignity of Dogberry, who has just been called an ass:

Dog. Dost thou not suspect my place? dost thou not suspect my years?
O that he were here to write me down an ass! But, masters, remember that I am an ass; though it be not written down, yet forget not that I am an ass. No, thou villain, thou art full of piety, as shall be proved upon thee by good witness. I am a wise fellow; and, which is more, an officer; and, which is more, a householder; and, which is more, as pretty a piece of flesh as any is in Messina; and one that knows the law, go to; and a rich fellow enough, go to; and a fellow that hath had losses; and one that hath two gowns, and every thing handsome about him. Bring him away.
O that I had been writ down an ass!

(*Much Ado About Nothing*, IV, ii, 76-90)

I think also of the First Citizen who characterizes Coriolanus and all his class and all my class when he says of Coriolanus, "he pays himself with being proud." I recall that mere First Servant in *King Lear* who sacrifices his life in pure humanity endeavoring to protect old Gloucester against the plucking out of his eyes. "Come," he says to the brutal Cornwall, "and take the chance of anger." And among like instances I recollect the soldier Scarus in *Antony and Cleopatra* to whom Antony says, "Thou bleedst apace," and who replies,

I had a wound here that was like a T,
But now 'tis made an H.

(IV, vii, 6-8)

Common men in our times and in all times may be like that man, and we do well not to select our heroes too long in advance.

Since Shakespeare's people, all of them without exception, are so vividly human and since Shakespeare was so

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perspicacious in his discovery of truth about the nature of man, there comes up for expression one more thought, perhaps the most important of all, before I close. If it is true that all men and women, irrespective of rank or class, education, opportunity, or any of the accidents that mark us out as singular, have a genius which may be awakened, a self which may be realized, is it not fair and proper that we should resolve to find ourselves and to occupy our original relation to the universe? I warn you that this is the ethical thought of the Renaissance; but we cannot escape our heritage, and it is folly to let the better part of it lie hidden, a prey to moth and rust. Shall our estates lie long in chancery while we live dependent and in relative poverty? We can hardly escape the conviction, for ourselves and for our country, that

Men at some times are masters of their fates:

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,

But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

(*Julius Caesar*, I, ii, 139-141)

HARDIN CRAIG.



