Timon the Misanthrope

The extremity of both ends

Timon is one of the strangest and most baffling of Shakespeare's tragic heroes. It is true that there is a simple view of his character. It is not altogether wrong, I think; like almost everybody else who has written about the play, I could not help taking it occasionally. But without considerable modification, it is too simple and does not do justice to what the play presents.

This simple view is that of Timon as an extremist. One can put it quite unsympathetically, as does David Cook: "Our untrammeled reaction is surely to feel that at first he is a well-meaning fool and that later his misanthropy, however provoked, is perverse." Or, one can put it benevolently, as did Leigh Hunt, who saw Edmund Kean's romantic portrayal of the role and pointed the moral: "Human nature will allow of no excess, and . . . if we set out in the world with animal spirits which lead us to think too highly of it, we shall be disappointed." Like all Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Timon is a man of emotional excesses; he never gives an indication that he might be able to live on the simple plane on which most men are content to stay or to which they have adjusted. His propensity to strong reactions shows itself in prosperity when, with tears in his eyes, he wishes he could deal kingdoms to his friends; it reaches a fortissimo in the torrents of denunciation and malediction he pours on the Athenians and
the human race. The limitless giver and benefactor becomes a nihilist and boundless hater. What seems more pertinent than to quote, as many critics do, Apemantus's stab at Timon in the memorable dispute the two have in the woods: "The middle of humanity thou never knewest, but the extremity of both ends" (4.3.301-2)?

Yet, if one reflects on the speaker of these lines and his position in the spectrum of humanity, they appear less clearly a key to the character of Timon, let alone to the meaning of the play. Apemantus, who posits himself at the fringe of humanity, is a strange advocate of the golden mean, and the "middle of humanity" is no a priori concept; it depends on what the definer, by his expectation and his experience, has come to believe man is like. It is no virtue at all when the common denominator is very common. Where really is the middle in Athenian humanity when the average is one of depravity?

We need also put in perspective the view of Timon as not one character but as two extreme portraits, the one in swan-white, the other in raven-black. It is true that Timon makes an abrupt volte-face, but it should be said that antithetically baroque contrasts between a tragic hero's earlier and later behavior are indigenous to Shakespeare's tragic art. The calm and composed general Othello becomes a blind slave of jealousy. The valiant and victorious Macbeth proves a bloody murderer. The pillar of the world Antony is, to take the Roman view, a strumpet's fool. All Shakespeare's tragic heroes, in a sense, are discontinuous characters since their behavior patterns change as they react to deeds of shame or horror in their worlds. They all become "new" persons, although sometimes, like Hamlet, they have changed anterior to the play itself. Timon's disruption of personality is distinguished from that of the others mainly by the fact that the two sides of his character or, if one prefers, his two characters are given almost equal emphasis.

Renaissance psychology had no problems in explaining sudden and astonishing metamorphoses of the kind undergone by Shakespeare's tragic heroes including Timon: it attributed them to changes of humor. In terms of humor physiology and psychology, Timon is transformed from the sanguine complexion with its high spirits, joie de vivre, and hearty hospitality into a frenzy of choler, which, like other extreme humoral states, can be described as melancholy, the "melancholy adust" that comes from the burning of the original humor. In his encounter with Apemantus, Timon himself speaks of his "choler" (4.3.369); and both Apemantus and the bandit see the misanthropic Timon as melancholy, the former
diagnosing his illness as due to a "change of future" (4.3.206),
the latter as stemming from want of gold and the desertion
of his friends (404). If they guess wrongly as to the causes,
this does not vitiate their diagnosis of the illness, the symptoms
of which were thought to be well known. Physiologically,
Timon's change is thus parallel to Richard II's or Hamlet's,
a disruption owing to psychic shock and to the development of
a life-harming melancholy. The resemblance of Timon's mis-
anthropy to the behavior of Elizabethan and Jacobean mal-
contents on the stage gave Shakespeare's audience an access
to his transformation and character that the ordinary modern
reader no longer has.

The twentieth-century reader or theatergoer, however,
will hardly be as worried about the discontinuity of Timon's
character as some critics of the past have been. Contemporary
fiction and drama have accustomed us to disrupted charac-
ters who refuse to stay in character and who reject their past
as if it had never existed. All we ask in such psychic revolu-
tions is that their causes are strong enough; and we may
even drop this stipulation if either of the two or both behavior
patterns of the character strike us in some way as demented,
or if the behavior of those around him is demented enough to
make his reaction, strange as it may be by itself, appear normal
by contrast. Modern literature frequently presents us with
variations of such situations that are sometimes so complex
as to make us wonder just where the emphasis is. We have
become much more aware of the shifting lines between nor-
mality and madness and of difficulties in defining these terms.
Those that have been called mad have sometimes proved the
sanest of their time. "What's madness but nobility of soul at
odds with circumstance?", asks Theodore Roethke.

Considerations and questions of this kind are, in fact, posed
by the play. Who is mad is a matter of perspective. Timon,
speaking with the voice of the world, calls Apemantus mad
("furor," 1.2.28). For Apemantus, the earlier Timon is a mad-
man, the later a fool (4.3.223)—a judgment that modern critics
have a way of turning around. Timon's guests at the mock
banquet, Alcibiades in his encounter with Timon in the wood,
and the senators who are mocked by him in their quest for
aid all think that he has lost his wits (3.6.114; 4.3.89-90;
5.1.223-24). And, in a sense, Timon, with his futile gestures
and inveterate hatred, can be called mad. But then, those
who call him so speak with the voice of the world that we
have come to distrust, and Timon's grand defiance of this
world also has a quixotic sanity. If Timon is mad, his world
is madder.

I am running ahead of my story; we must concern our-
theselves further with Timon the philanthropist. We should not
do so, however, without a sense of what he will become; Shakespeare's audience would have been very much aware of his proverbial misanthropy even while he intones his grand hymn to friendship and philanthropy. Shakespeare faced here a dramatic problem: Timon's conversion to misanthropic hate, according to general human standards, is a deterioration; but tragedy also demands an upward movement in the hero; it requires that he learn something, become in some sense greater than he was.

The need for ascertainable growth in Timon would alone have compelled Shakespeare to make the pre-misanthropic Timon into a character less admirable than the personification of generosity enshrined by Wilson Knight. But if Timon is no saint, he is by no means merely an extravagant spender, such as eighteenth-century critics described him when they moralized the play into an exemplum. Johnson's moral that the play is "a very powerful warning against ostentatious liberality" puts the accent quite wrongly and does not do justice to the complexity of Shakespeare's hero. Shakespeare posed him delicately and made him neither a quite sympathetic, if imprudent, idealist nor a glaring prodigal. Timon is an intricate blend of nobility, egotism, and foolishness.

Shakespeare evidently conceived him as rather young. Timon betrays a young man's attitude toward age when he explains the senators' refusal to come to his aid: "These old fellows / Have their ingratitude in them hereditary" (2.2.218–19). When later the poet thinks of appealing once more for his patronage, he speaks of a work dedicated to a young man: "It must be a personating of himself; a satire against the softness of prosperity, with a discovery of the infinite flat­teries that follow youth and opulence" (5.1.33–35). It is signific­ant that the only other character specially designated as young is Timon's bosom friend Alcibiades. He too finds the senators too aged to remember his merits (3.5.93–95). One gains thus the impression of an old Athens that—to use Timon's characterization of the senators—lacks kindly warmth and that grows, like nature, toward the earth, turning against the two prominent young men in order to ruin one financially and drive the other from the city. The aura of youth, however, remains only with the "noble and young" general (5.3.8; 5.4.13). The misanthrope is "full of decay and failing" (4.3.463), and compares himself to an oak stripped of leaves in winter (4.3.266). Oddly Shakespeare seems to have thought of his hero as aging during the play, which cannot be imag­ined as lasting more than a few weeks or, at most, months. We have a difficulty here, if indeed it is a difficulty, analogous to that with Hamlet, who ages from a youthful wooer of Ophelia into the thirty-year-old man of the graveyard scene.
The explanation in both cases is presumably that Shakespeare, indifferent to mathematical calculation, sought to create the impression of the hero’s aging because of his tragic experience. In Timon’s case, this process accentuates the contrast between the hero’s growing toward death and the specious rejuvenation of Athens on a globe that is doomed to wear away, as the painter says in the beginning of the play.

At the outset, Timon emanates a youthful nobility. We are not immediately aware of his shortcomings when he appears on the scene. His first deed is unequivocally noble: he frees Ventidius from debtor’s prison. Ventidius is a man in need, and Timon helps. But his second good deed, the endowing of his servant for marrying the old Athenian’s daughter, generous as it is by itself, is yet fraught with ambiguities of rationale and effect. Timon says of his servant, “To build his fortune I will strain a little, / For ’tis a bond in men” (1.1.146–47). Insofar as he thinks of a bond of loyalty between himself and the servant, this is fine; but since money is the nexus for it, he betrays a habit of thought that is akin to his false friends’ mentality. These will later clamor about “broken bonds” without any regard for human relationships. The father of the bride is quite willing to subordinate his daughter’s happiness to his financial goals: rather than have her marry the indigent servant, he swears absurdly, he will choose his “heir from forth the beggars of the world, / And dispossess her all” (1.1.141–42). Timon should not endorse the old man’s attitude, that of greedy Athens, which buys and ties human relationships through money. But at least he does so with no gain for himself and with the best of motives—well, uneducated motives.

Elsewhere, when Timon scatters his gifts among his sycophantic friends, our primary impression of his nobility is superseded by one of his blindness and foolishness. His economic imprudence is here accompanied by psychological and moral failings. That he is careless in the administration of his estate we are apt to hold least against him, although it probably struck Shakespeare’s contemporaries as a violation of his obligation and trust as a landholder. But that he gives to flatterers and sycophants is a serious human failing. By allowing and encouraging the tribute of his friends and assenting to the honor they bestow upon him for his material giving, he accepts in effect their system of valuing. This is obvious even in the way he hands out his rewards and signs of affection. In order to urge a horse admired by one of his guests on him, he says that “no man / Can justly praise but what he does affect” (1.2.212–13) —that things can be admired disinterestedly does not seem
to occur to him. Even if we take the remark as a socially
determined way of being gracious in generosity, it uncom-
fortably reflects the acquisitive principles of Athenian
society. Yet, it must also be said that as much as he mouths
these principles, he has not adopted the harmful practices
with which they are accompanied, particularly the acquisi-
tion of possessions at another's expense. He does not realize
that his old-fashioned belief that giving is sweeter than re-
ceiving clashes with the greed and worship of fortune
around him.

The ideas of the philanthropic Timon are a hodgepodge of
idealism and the commonplaces of his (or rather Shake-
speare's) age. He is not even an extreme and reckless lover
of mankind and boundless optimist. He shows once that he
is aware, at least in a commonplace way, that evil exists in
Athens and the world. In one of his first utterances, as he is
offered the portrait by the painter, he says:

The painting is almost the natural man:
For since dishonour traffics with man's nature,
He is but out-side; these pencill'd figures are
Even such as they give out.

(1.1.160–63)

Timon's remark on the unpleasant truth beneath human
appearances is casual, uttered without realizing its potential
terror, just like the painter's remark on the world that wears
itself down as it grows; yet it is powerfully ironic. The kinetic
metaphor "traffic" establishes an association with the venal-
ity of Athens; only a few lines later the word occurs with
triple emphasis as Apemantus wishes that traffic, the mer-
chant's god, will confound the merchant (236). Since the
portrait surely depicts Timon, there is a particular irony in
Timon's comment: if the portrait is by its nature innocent,
dishonor in the form of commercial corruption has subtly
affected the sitter.

Timon evidently believes that the "natural man" evoked
by the idealization of art symbolizes the inhabitant of the
golden world unspoiled by the traffic of the modern age.5
Traditional Christianity with its deeper pessimism has al-
ways denied this claim of man's essential goodness. It
should be noted that even for Timon actual man is not uncondi-
tionally good; his remark betrays a passing dark thought
since it suggests that acquired evil may be in the men around
him. A lesser dramatist than Shakespeare might not have
dared to give such a notion to a figure of benevolence like
Timon; in fact, in Shadwell's adaptation, it is given to Ape-
mantus, for whom, however, it is too charitable. With his
remark on the existence of evil in the world, contradicted as
it is by his acting as if he were in a paradise of innocence and goodness, Timon shows himself just a little less grandly idealistic, a little more human in the sense of being prone to error in spite of better knowledge than he would otherwise be. Consequently, his awakening to the real evil that surrounds him does represent mental growth. Whatever one may think of Timon the misanthrope, he is not a gullible spender and repeater of commonplaces; his hatred is formed and informed by bitter experience.

The pre-misanthropic Timon is too individualistic and too human to resemble the stereotype of the prodigal except in a few superficial features. He is certainly quite different from the morality figure of Prodigality in The Contention Between Liberality and Prodigality (1602) or the Theophrastian character of the Unthrift in Joseph Hall’s Characters of Virtues and Vices (1608), both of which are crude and profligate. Timon’s prodigality is not self-degrading, and it is debatable where his generosity ends and his prodigality begins. The prodigality, to a large degree, is an outgrowth of his warm and sensuous nature; but this nature, unfortunately, is not subject to the control of reason. In this respect, Timon’s first banquet of friendship is highly revealing. As a celebration of friendship, it evokes the shadow of the Platonic banquets celebrated in the Renaissance; but even without Apemantus’s cutting remarks, we would know how very much this celebration lacks substance. In fact, the banquet resembles the opposite of Platonic ones, the banquets of sense with their dangerous allurement to the appetities, such as emblems and moral poems characterized them.

This concept is given iconographic emphasis by the masque that is Timon’s “own device” (1.2.146). Cupid, the presenter, labels the show as intended to gratify the senses:

The five best senses acknowledge thee their patron, and come freely to gratulate thy plenteous bosom.
There, taste, touch, all, pleas’d from thy table rise;
They only now come but to feast thine eyes. (119–23)

Perhaps this acknowledgment should be imagined as a dumb show in which Cupid leads the senses, with the sense of sight, the noblest, first, and with the other four bowing to it. Even in the most generous interpretation, what is fed by the masque is not the philosophic mind but the eye; likewise the banquet itself gratifies merely the senses. Moreover, the entry of the Amazons for the masque brings a dissonance, heightened by Apemantus’s obscenity. What Timon presumably intends with the device of Cupid and the Amazons is to present the reconciliation of opposites; what he produces is ominously discordant: when blind love leads warlike femininity, disaster is
likely to result. The masque demonstrates Timon's sensual extravagance, an ingredient in the societal disorder satirized by Apemantus. At the same time, the banquet and masque, as much as they show Timon's shortcomings, betray also his simple, childlike desire for a good and harmonious life—an urge aesthetically and morally far more pleasing than the realistic calculations of his ironhearted friends who live in the age of gold.

Timon's notion of friendship too combines idealism and foolishness. His eloquently wrongheaded hymn to friendship is worth quoting here at some length:

O no doubt, my good friends, but the gods themselves have provided that I shall have much help from you: how had you been my friends else? Why have you that charitable title from thousands, did not you chiefly belong to my heart? . . . O you gods, think I, what need we have any friends, if we should ne'er have need of 'em? They were the most needless creatures living should we ne'er have use for 'em, and would most resemble sweet instruments hung up in cases, that keeps their sounds to themselves. Why, I have often wish'd myself poorer that I might come nearer to you. We are born to do benefits; and what better or properer can we call our own than the riches of our friends? (1.2.86–101)

The idea of basing friendship on need (an idea that Timon does not actually practice) runs counter to classical and Renaissance conceptions of friendship. Cicero's *De amicitia*, the Renaissance primer on friendship, decried utility in selecting friends and declared that friendship is not cultivated because of need (14.51). It is true that Timon aspires to a harmony of friendship such as the moralists thought it necessary for the *concordia* of society. Yet, as Plutarch pointed out in his essay "On Having Many Friends," harmony can be achieved only by the similarity of the instruments, and their congruence demands careful selection and testing. Plutarch warned here and in "How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend" against choosing hypocrites and parasites. If I may be anachronistic, Timon would have done well to read these essays (if it is true that reading forms character). Shakespeare presumably did read them; at any rate, he and his audience were familiar with the basic principles of friendship as understood by his age. Shakespeare's image makes an additional ironic point when Timon likens his friends to cased instruments: these particular specimens do keep their true sound to themselves.

Timon is, however, on better theoretical grounds when he insists on the equality of friends. In *De amicitia* (19.69), Cicero stipulated that friendship must be based on an acceptance of essential equality, even if one friend is superior to the other in rank or status. When Timon's guests arrive for the banquet and compliment each other on the order of precedence, he decries all etiquette:
Nay, my lords, ceremony was but devis’d at first
To set a gloss on faint deeds, hollow welcomes,
Recanting goodness, sorry ere ’tis shown,
But where there is true friendship, there needs none.

(1.2.15-18)

It is possible that even this mild egalitarianism was too much for the conservatives in Shakespeare’s audience, who saw in the violation of degree the breakdown of all order and a trend toward the “democracy” they distrusted. They might have looked upon Timon as one of those who babbled like Jean Bodin’s Utopian leveler:

If then society between man and man cannot be maintained without friendship, and that the nurse of friendship is equality, seeing there is no equality but in popular state, of necessity that form of commonwealth must be best in the which a natural liberty and justice is equally distributed to all men without fear of tyranny, cruelty, or exaction, and the sweetness of the sociable life seems to draw all men to the felicity which nature has taught us.

Not so, said Bodin, and pointed at the disorders in the Athenian state when it practiced democracy. Experience disproved the levelers: “the equality they seek doth ruin the grounds of love and amity, the which can hardly subsist among them that are equal.”

But Timon’s dream, after all, does not go quite so far, and his decrying of mere ceremonial politeness echoes the ring of sincerity of Henry V’s soliloquy on “idle ceremony.” In any case, Timon does not provide an apology for, or defense of, degree—the specious courtesy of Timon’s friends is not a remnant of an old-fashioned sense of hierarchy and order but rather betrays their uneasiness about the order of precedence in the shifting world of values to which they pay tribute. It masks competition and strife. By contrast, ill-conceived and wrongheaded as some of Timon’s ideas of friendship are and imprudent as he is in the choice of his friends, his emotional tribute to the ideal of friendship recalls the old dream of the brotherhood of man, of a Utopia in which, as in More’s, men have everything in common. It is an imaginative dream that raises Timon far above his realistic friends and, with all his faults, gives him a certain splendor. If Timon’s strength and attraction lie in his emotional commitment rather than in the depth of his thought, as much could be said about other tragic heroes of Shakespeare, notably Othello, Antony, and Coriolanus.

It is Antony most of all whom Timon resembles. He has the Roman general’s penchant for charismatic utterances. Timon’s sentence “Methinks I could deal kingdoms to my friends, / And ne’er be weary” (1.2.219-20) could easily
have been spoken by Antony. We have the paradoxical feeling in hearing Timon utter these lines that we have so often with him. True, it is economically foolish for a private man to assume such royal posture, and he is touched with hubris. Yet, the gesture is grand; and if it proves his recklessness, he is at least nobly reckless. Like Antony, Timon is a big magnetic man who courts disaster. His portrait, as executed by the painter, projects grace and a compelling power:

How this grace
Speaks his own standing! What a mental power
This eye shoots forth! How big imagination
Moves in this lip!

(1.1.30–33)

The description fits a Titian or a Rubens better than the usual mediocre product of the Renaissance English portrait painters, and the commendation the poet gives the painting sounds indeed like a paraphrase of Titian’s motto “Natura potentior ars”: it “tutors nature” and is “livelier than life” (37–38). Whatever the actual portrait is like, its function is in part to reflect Timon’s projection of himself into a world that, by his imagination, becomes an expression of his will.

Even the senator who is the first to reclaim the money he has lent to Timon and who expects him to succumb pays an implicit tribute to his charisma when he coins the memorable phrase that Timon “flashes now a phoenix”:

I do fear,
When every feather sticks in his own wing,
Lord Timon will be left a naked gull,
Which flashes now a phoenix.

(2.1.29–32)

Though the intention is derogatory, the phoenix image conveys some notion of glamor and rarity; it suggests the mysterious fire flashing from the legendary bird’s eyes, and it corroborates the description of the “mental power” that “shoots forth” from the eyes of Timon’s portrait.

This image has still other associations. Its basic pattern is actually the Aesopian fable of the borrowed feathers of the crow. Shakespeare had no reason to like this fable since in 1592 Robert Greene had used it against him, calling him “an upstart crow beautified with our feathers.” Its moral application was to expose pride, and in the de casibus tradition, Fortuna was often described as pulling the feathers of her former favorite. It must have been used quite commonly for financial failure due to extravagance; Gerald de Malynes wrote in 1601 that in these times of economic upheavals some men who had the appearance of substance were “like Aesop’s jay, clad in the feathers of other birds, which being
discovered and stripped of all for a reward are thoroughly sored and turned from their scarlet gowns into black threadbare cloaks." But Timon is no ugly crow or garish jay. He characterizes himself as a more attractive bird when he says that he is "not of that feather to shake off / My friend when he must need me" (1.1.103-4)—the contrast between him and his friends who do not lend money upon "bare" friendship is glaring. Timon at least has a potential, a capacity for true friendship; and in this context, the phoenix image applied to him may have reminded some in Shakespeare's audience of the proverb that "a faithful friend is like a phoenix."

Possibly, the image may also have suggested to some in this audience the medieval Christian symbol of the phoenix as Christ; the immortal bird's rebirth from its ashes was thought to be symbolic of the Resurrection. If so, I do not think that they would have considered Timon to be another Christ. The play gives no warrant for this; critics who have elevated Timon to Christ status have fallen prey to the paradoxical lure of his personality and misunderstood Shakespeare's dramatic strategy. It is true that Timon is placed in situations that resemble Christ's: when Apemantus at the first banquet characterizes Timon's guests as Judases and when, at the second, Timon chases his calculating friends from the hall somewhat as Christ ejected the moneylenders from the temple. But surely a wealthy man who is infected by the materialism of his time, eats up the flatteries of his friends, and closes his eyes to the evil around him is an odd candidate for the role of Christ. Besides, Timon has some quite ordinary human foibles and prejudices. He shows a young man's attitude toward old age when he attributes the senators' ingratitude to their ossification. Rather than displaying a Christ-like patience, he becomes sometimes irritated about minor matters. He is annoyed with Apemantus for refusing his invitation and, on first learning of his financial stress, accuses the steward of having falsified his accounts. If nothing else, Timon's latent propensity to hatred, which breaks out later, should eliminate him as a Christ surrogate.

If we look closer at the Christ parallels, they show up as partial analogues only. This weakness invades even the strongest parallel, Apemantus's sarcastic comment during the first banquet:

O you gods! What number of men eats Timon, and he sees 'em not! It grieves me to see so many dip their meat in one man's blood; and all the madness is, he cheers them up too. (1.2.39-42)

Undoubtedly Apemantus's is an allusion to the Judas betrayal.
an allusion later supported by the stranger’s question, “Who can call him his friend / That dips in the same dish?” (3.2. 67–68). Before taking Apemantus’s words as sacramental, however, it is wholesome to realize that a second and different biblical analogue runs through the banquet scene: Ecclesiasticus 12–13, with its warning against trusting friends in prosperity and engaging in false charity by entertaining the proud and rich. The Timon-Alcibiades exchange, which hinges on “pitched” and “defiled” (224), would evoke Ecclesiasticus 13:1: “He that touches pitch shall be defiled with it, and he that is familiar with the proud shall be like unto him.” Apemantus’s words about sharing the same dish with an alleged friend are apt to have evoked also the advice of Ecclesiasticus 13:7 not to befriend the rich and powerful who shame the poor in their meat until they have “supped” them twice or thrice. Thus the image turns cannibalistic, and cannibalistic images were customarily applied to usurers in Shakespeare’s time. Like other such images, it is inseparable from animal imagery; to Dr. Johnson it suggested a pack of hounds being rewarded with the blood of animals they have killed in a hunt. As an animal image, it suggests the kind of moral warning of Ecclesiasticus 13:20 that the poor are the meat of the rich as the wild asses are those of the lion.

The function of the analogues to the Christ story is not to enhance Timon’s moral quality but to lower that of his friends by emphasizing their disloyalty. If the figure of the phoenix suggests Christ, it is to intimate that what his friends are doing is not merely a stripping bare of a man but also a kind of crucifixion. We are thus teased into considering the events in a somewhat different light. True, Timon is no Christ, but he is still the only one in his circle who is generous and has faith in others. Would not his friends seek to exploit and ruin him just as well if he were more Christ-like, if he were indeed Christ? And would not a man who sought to apply Christian ethics in this society be destroyed as much as is Timon? An even more disturbing question: would not any man who did so be destroyed in any society?

Both as a philanthropist and as a misanthrope, Timon is a man of large and, in their effect on others, futile gestures. His ideas always exceed his means. He wants to give kingdoms to his friends but settles for bankruptcy. His later attempt to invoke cosmic powers for the destruction of mankind is absurd in view of his inability to shock anyone except a bandit, and not even him permanently. But if everything that Timon does is impractical, the same could be said about greater idealists in human history who have revolted against the utilitarian attitude and the self-interest of their societies.
Timon’s projection of himself beyond reality creates a measure of the smallness and insignificance of the others. His idealism shows up their materialism, his financial recklessness makes their selfish computations more glaring, his emotional desire for friendship brings out their callous commercialism, and his cosmic expansiveness throws their lack of concern into relief.

Granted Timon’s expansive nature and his solipsistic self-projection, his change to misanthropy, though dramatic and spectacular, is not so surprising. As R. Swigg says, with an accent more unsympathetic than mine, “His misanthropy is a logical extension of his philanthropy, and blown up in size.” Leigh Hunt put it more positively: his misanthropy is due to “an unexpected and extreme conviction of the hollowness of the human heart.” One could call this an eudaimonistic pessimism since it is a reaction to a too optimistic view of life and man. Timon’s feeling of joy and elation, of happiness among his friends, gives way when his illusion of their goodness is shattered and they, whom he regally entertained and overwhelmed with gifts, become merciless creditors. His nausea turns into universal hatred. If it is argued that the “ordinary” ingratitude of Timon’s friends is not a serious enough cause for such a change, the argument betrays a rather complacent attitude about human wickedness and about violations of basic social mores and codes. Timon is justified in conceiving this ingratitude as symbolic of general human evil rather than as a commercial meanness restricted to one time and place. The Renaissance moralists, for whom ingratitude was one of the greatest human vices, would have felt likewise. And so surely do we. Such an act threatens the whole notion of community and presages atomistic chaos. We must expect a violent reaction to this threat from a man of Timon’s temper and idealism; he whose conception of friendship was high, falls deep. Should Timon take ingratitude as less than monstrous, he would abandon whatever residual value lies in his benevolence; he would deny what he and we felt ennobled him and what he imagined ennobled his friends. His total rejection and all-encompassing hatred prove that, as much as his concept of friendship is flawed and he himself beset with contradictions, his earlier inclusive love is yet rooted in his soul deeply enough to lead to a loss of his desire for living.

It is undeniable, I think, that through his hatred Timon grows in intellectual acumen. His pessimistic thoughts are more probing, if fierce and violent, than his optimistic ones; and his gestures, although equally useless in their effect on the Athenians, are more sweeping and impressive. The mock
banquet is better designed than the banquet of sense, and it is its ingenious antithesis. Instead of the music of oboes, we hear the harsh sound of the trumpet; instead of sentimentality, there is mockery; instead of Cupid leading the absurd Amazons, Nemesis drives out the parasites. The food does not flatter the senses now: the lukewarm water does not delight the taste; the smoke lacks the beguiling odor of delicate meats; the hardness of stones hurts the sense of touch. Nor are the eyes delighted by a masque; rather, the societal disorder is caricatured by the topsy-turvy flight of the guests. The mock banquet, like the earlier masque, is again Timon’s device, but this time he firmly controls its symbolism.

It is natural for us to wish that Timon would achieve some greater self-knowledge, some understanding beyond the recognition of the folly of his giving. Dramatically, this is unthinkable. No self-knowledge in the humanistic sense can occur since it would require of Timon a recognition that he lacked temperance; after this an outbreak of misanthropy would be impossible. Nor does the moral frame established by Shakespeare make us expect Timon to gain such knowledge: temperance presupposes measure and norm, and the play does not provide these; there is no character that is not in some manner corrupted or corruptible. Timon’s reactions cannot be viewed as a deviation from definite human standards; the play presents no such standards, and if we supply them, we do so at our peril. Given the world in which Timon lives, his reaction, even if startling in its singularity, is not exactly indecorous or outrageous.

Shakespeare provided Timon with an awakening from ignorance, which is not the same thing as humanistic self-knowledge, but which entails a total self-change. The discoveries Timon makes are intellectually and dramatically impressive enough not to be wafted aside, vexing as they may be for the optimistic believer in humanity. The program for the change comes appropriately at the beginning of the fourth act as demarcated in this study. At the end of the third act, Timon strips himself naked (an outward manifestation of his emancipation) and asks that his hatred grow to include all mankind. From now on, he is totally alienated from society, and he sees nothing in man, even himself, but villany:

Therefore be abhorr’d
All feasts, societies, and throngs of men!
His semblable, yea himself, Timon disdains.

(4.3.[4.1.] 20–22)

Since Timon’s alienation includes self-alienation, it implies some recognition of his responsibility or, better, of his com-
plicity in the failure of mankind. This self-view is in con-
formity with his misanthropy; it is a kind of self-knowledge,
although we may shudder at the pessimistic implication it
contains.

On the limited subject of the reasons for the corruption of
society, Timon sees now very clearly, and his acuity grows
as his thoughts circle around it. As Winifred Nowottny has
pointed out, a development of thought, even if in staccato
fashion, is traceable through his soliloquies. It leads to his
forcefully stripping off the old hypocrisies. He visualizes now
a world in which all patterns have broken up so irrevocably
that further confusion is the only possibility and destruction
the only warranted action. He calls for the subversion of all
order, the dissolution of loyalty, piety, and human fellowship,
the disappearance of family feelings, the disintegration of
households, and the perversion of offices:

    Piety and fear,
    Religion to the gods, peace, justice, truth,
    Domestic awe, night-rest and neighbourhood,
    Instruction, manners, mysteries and trades,
    Degrees, observances, customs and laws,
    Decline to your confounding contraries;
    And yet confusion live!

(4.1.3.715–21)
This is the end of one phase of Timon's development. We
should not separate it by an act division from what goes be-
fore.

Timon's next soliloquy, the first in the wood, takes a some-
what different tack. He now assails the myth of order as a mere
smokescreen that hides the subservience to Fortune. Men lack
respect for real superiority; their distinctions are not based
on merit. "Degree" is due merely to fortune: "Raise me this
beggar, and deny't that lord, / The senators shall bear con-
tempt hereditary, / The beggar native honour" (4.3.4.1. 9–
11). This soliloquy leads up to Timon's finding the gold and
with it to his denunciation of the metal as the agent and symbol
of the world's disarrangements. Timon is now in the last phase
of his misanthropy, which is characterized by the increased
vehemence of his rhetoric. His curses breathe an apocalyptic
horror; they demand the disintegration of the whole cosmic
fabric from the smallest unit, the family, to the largest, the
universe.

Admittedly, the development I have sketched is not
straight-line. Timon strikes some apocalyptic notes early, and
strands of the older theme of the falsity of the myth of order
are still woven into his later speeches of annihilation, as, for
instance, when Timon insults the Athenians in their own
hypocritical idiom and invites them to hang themselves on his tree “in the sequence of degree, / From high to low throughout” (5.1.207–8). But generally there is a growing violence of themes and language. Timon’s curses and maledictions surpass in intensity and comprehensiveness even Lear’s raging in the storm, their nearest rival. The kinetic and cosmic images of these speeches carry Timon from an anti-human to a superhuman stance; they overwhelm the mind with a style that is livelier than life. To use the convenient term, they are baroque.

The critic who recognized this style in *Timon* (although he did not expressly call it baroque) was Peter Ure, and it made him uncomfortable. Of Timon’s misanthropic speeches, Ure said:

> The extraordinary inclusiveness of his condemnation of all human and animal life and of all Nature is a thing for wonder and dismay. We contemplate him with amazement because he goes so far; but after a while the amazement palls, just as the magnified creatures of Dryden’s heroic plays—“as far above the ordinary proportions of the stage, as that is beyond the words and action of common life”—at first make us gasp and stretch our eyes, but later begin to languish before our desire that they should do more than parade their excess.  

But these speeches do more than parade their over-advertised excess, and amazement and discomfort are not the only reaction we have to them. For one thing, they disturb us sufficiently to make us ask the question of how to cope with them. L. C. Knights, for instance, ponders why “the speeches of disgust and vituperation addressed to mankind at large are extraordinarily powerful, yet at the same time distorted and excessive,” and he rightly adds that “the problem is how to take them.” Knights’s answer to this question, namely, that we must attribute them to Timon’s flawed humanity, strikes me as a less significant critical reaction than his realization that there is a problem. An earlier critic, Swinburne, whose ear was more attuned to infuriated raptures, said that “in the great and terrible fourth act of *Timon* we find such tragedy as Juvenal might have written when half deified with the spirit of Aeschylus.” And Timon’s speeches have made others think of Isaiah. One reason surely that they are so powerful is that they belong to a tradition of unpleasant observations about man to which we would like to close our ears but which we cannot deny to be at least partially true. They are harsh and grating, but the prophet’s trumpet has never sounded pleasant to those whom he calls. The Athenians disregard the trumpet and find Timon diseased; somehow we feel that we should not react in the same manner,
since Timon’s disease has a way of making their self-proclaimed sanity look ill.

We may well wonder about the effect of Timon’s curses and prophecies on Shakespeare’s audience at a time when the English were turning into a nation of prophets and the literature that dwelled on man’s misery and wickedness was increasing in volume and intensity. This question becomes even more intriguing when we consider that the two pessimistic sources of the Timon story, Barckley’s Discourse and Boaistuau’s Theatrum Mundi belonged to this tide. Timon was not merely a strange character in them but also a kind of prophet of the human sickness unto death. Boaistuau, in particular, saw the signs of the world’s deadly disease everywhere; the wickedness of man as well as the destructiveness of natural forces signaled the coming end. The world was generally assumed to be anthropocentric; if man, the microcosm, decayed and declined, the macrocosm had to do so perforce, and therefore the eschatological writers discerned signs of the decay en masse in both. They generalized that man was idle, drunken, luxurious, riotous, ambitious, proud, greedy, atheistic, and deceitful; he violated the sabbath, worship, suffered priests to be deaf and blind to their flocks, let usurers extort money from their fellow men, rebelled against lawful authority, and so forth. Concomitantly, the writers saw numerous signs of natural decay: soaring of the seas, trembling of the earth, eclipses, unnatural births, ugly monsters, and what not. The variously calculated six thousand years of the life of the earth were thought to be running out, and the apocalypse was approaching. As Thomas Draxe wrote in The General Signs and Forerunners of Christ’s Coming Judgment (1608), the last signal had appeared; this signal, “yet in motion and not perfectly fulfilled but to continue unto the world’s end, is the vanity, corruption, and abuse of the creatures, which has continued from Adam’s fall and doth and shall increase by degree unto the consummation of all things.”

Timon’s repeated addresses to nature, which are reminiscent of Lear’s raging in the storm and echo his call for the spilling of nature’s germens, derive like these their teleological and cosmological significance from the belief in the interconnected decay of man and nature. Timon’s speeches abound with a cosmic imagery, which, as we shall see later, belongs to the context of Renaissance cosmological pessimism and apocalyptic prophecy. In the fearful climate in which this pessimism flourished, Timon’s curses and apostrophes to nature must have had a topical ring and disturbed the audience in a manner similar to that of the incessant blasts of the apocalyptic preachers. Timon must have looked
to them like an ancient antecedent of the preachers of gloom and doom in their midst, perhaps a false preacher to some, a man with an inkling of the truth to others.

There was then a particular relevance to Timon's last words, his invitation to the Athenians to come to his grave, that we can no longer altogether capture:

Thither come,
And let my grave-stone be your oracle.
Lips, let four words go by and language end:
What is amiss, plague and infection mend!
Graves only be men's works and death their gain;
Sun, hide thy beams, Timon hath done his reign.

(5.1.217–22)

The word oracle provides a reminder that Timon is an ancient Greek; but the prophecy itself has a pseudo-biblical rhythm, and its content has a sufficient similarity to what the Christian predictors in Shakespeare's time were saying to have struck Shakespeare's audience by its resemblance. The "four words" that are to go by evoke the four horsemen of the apocalypse and in general the magic number four associated with apocalyptic prophecies. Plague and infection, as Timon wishes them on mankind, were taken as signs of the decay of the world and God's wrath toward mankind, as for instance by Boaistuau, who thought the element air in the service of this wrath "so pernicious to human kind when it putrifeth and corrupteth that the most part of pestilences and infections take their original and beginning from their very author [i.e., the air]." The apocalyptic tracts of Shakespeare's time prophesied a darkening of the earth at the Last Judgment in the manner of Timon's demand that the sun hide its beams; as Christ had said, "And immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened and the moon shall not give her light and the stars be shaken" (Math. 24:29; cf. Mark 13:24, Luke 21:25). The latter analogy, as has not escaped commentators, could be interpreted as Timon's casting himself in the role of a pseudo-Christ; but Christ himself spoke here as a prophet and in the language of prophecy.

We, whose apocalyptic fears are generally confined to the threats that are created by man, such as pollution and the hydrogen bomb, and that are therefore, we hope, subject to man’s control, cannot quite feel the topical urgency that Timon's words had to the Jacobean. But we too respond in some manner to the incantatory tone of the curse and the vision of annihilation. Aware as we are, here and elsewhere, of Timon's impotence to turn any of his visions into reality, we still cannot quite free ourselves from the atavistic power of his curse. It is through the magic of his language that
Timon exerts this power; yet with nihilistic logic he seeks the end of all language, and he stills his own.

In the final analysis, it is the magic of language Shakespeare bestowed on Timon that gives us the feeling that Timon’s descent into misanthropy marks a growth of his powers and has the aspect of an ascent. Unable as he is to move the Athenians, he casts a spell over us. His awesome eloquence affirms his human power even in his inhuman phase; we dare not say that it affirms his human greatness.