CHAPTER SIX

THE PROTEAN LANGUAGE OF
THE MAN-MADE WORLD

FINALLY, I come to the style of the play, which might properly have a book to itself. Ever since Coleridge's dictum, that "feliciter audax is the motto for its style comparatively with [Shakespeare's] other works, even as it is the general motto for all his works compared with other poets,"¹ this style has been widely admired, even by those who find in the play an unrelieved record of dissoluteness and corruption. But the style of Antony and Cleopatra is nothing less than the whole Gestalt of the play—the story as it is crystallized out of the welter of materials in Plutarch, its unique sequence of episodes, irrespective of their individual linguistic features, and the changes wrought during the play in the quality of language and action. In this pattern the verbal texture is only a single element; and now we must consider the language, not in every facet of its lush magnificence, as if it were the play itself, but only in so far as it helps to create and reflect the total pattern in which it participates.

That pattern, I have suggested, embodies the transfiguration of life, a process in which the uses of this world are purified and projected freshly in their dynamic essences rather than left behind to become stale and flat. In speaking of the platonizing of the lovers' experience, or of their emergence in a transcendent realm, I have not had in mind a mystical meaning beyond the power of words to convey.² The power of language in Antony and Cleopatra is just that it makes palpable this cosmic realm. All the principal features of the language—the vastness of the imagery, the sublimated abstractness of the diction, the discontinuity of broken syntax in language relating to the person, and the syntactical flow of language that describes the
world—all serve to show that the characters are creating by their action a new, coherent, and protean life that guarantees man's moral freedom and his power to create endlessly a unique identity.

The most striking quality of the imagery is what the late S. L. Bethell called its Brobdingnagian vastness. The characters are given mythic size, and their actions universal importance, by the hyperbole of the language. Antony is repeatedly called a pillar of the world; he in turn keeps addressing Cleopatra as "Egypt." He will let Rome melt for her sake, and she will unpeople Egypt for his. When Maecenas asks Enobarbus to verify the rumor that in Egypt they had eight wild boars roasted whole at a breakfast for twelve persons, Enobarbus replies, "This was as a fly by an eagle. . . . " The boundaries of Rome are called the sides of the world, and the bounty of Antony is called an autumn, as if the seasons, like the kings of Cappadocia and Paphlagonia, were his lieutenants. When Cleopatra appeared in her barge at Cydnus, Enobarbus tells us, there was a gap in nature; and when Antony dies, Cleopatra tells us, the crown of the earth does melt, and our lamp is spent. Again and again the lovers are compared with mythological figures, with the sun and the moon, and with light itself; and these comparisons have no regard for the fixed categories of the traditional doctrine of correspondences. They are eclectic, even sometimes blasphemous, from the point of view of a hierarchically ordered world that might provide the basis for any consistent language of analogy. They show another kind of world, and yet they are not specious nor merely decorative comparisons; they dignify the characters spatially because they are credible in the light of the characters' thought and action in the play.

Closely related in function and effect to this imagery of vastness is a high degree of abstraction in the diction, reinforced by the extreme indirection of the syntax, which serves to transform the lovers' transitory earthly experience into permanent conceptual meaning without negating its source in flesh. A good example of this technique is Philo's opening speech of the play:
Almost all the nouns and adjectives, until the last two lines, are highly abstract, generalized, and non-sensory. Antony is not directly named, and he is not permitted to engage syntactically in the action described; his dotage and his eyes and his heart take the verbs and perform his action for him. That action has the disembodied quality of a perpetual motion. It is not Antony but his eyes that view Cleopatra, and even then not directly: between the eyes and their presumably base object is interposed "the office and devotion of their view," a highly honorific function that is controlled not by a single gesture but in the apparently endless alternation of bending and turning. If the office of eyes is to perform a perpetual devotion, then the object of their view must be reverential; and the suitably abstract and enticing "tawny front" allows us to conceive of Cleopatra as such an object. (Even later in the play, when Antony rails his worst at her, he calls Cleopatra by similarly sublimated names: "A fragment of Gnaeus Pompey's," "false soul," "right gipsy," and "the greatest spot of all thy sex.") The effect of the diction is to purify the conduct described of the sullied flesh that is its medium; the effect of the syntax is to remove and cleanse Antony from the moral taint of that conduct. Thus at the end of the first scene, when Antony's behavior has confirmed Philo's judgment before our eyes, and Demetrius says,

I am full sorry
That he approves the common liar, who
Thus speaks of him at Rome. . . . (I.i.59-61)
that single word "liar" takes back all that the rest concedes, and, paradoxically, we are invited to believe both that Antony is in his dotage and that anybody who says so is a liar.

This stylistic technique is pervasive in the play, and it comes to serve a broader purpose than insulating Antony (and Cleopatra) from such adverse judgments as that of Philo's speech. It transforms the conduct that it describes into an archetypal value by imparting to it an integrity that transcends personal judgments. By the use of metonymy, inversion, infinitive phrases, and passive constructions, the style keeps subordinating the persons to their actions, which are then universalized by the abstractness of the diction. The characters turn up syntactically only as the objects of verbs and prepositions, and as the subjects of the subordinate clauses; they are made to seem the impersonal media through which cosmic forces work on the world:

You are too indulgent. Let us grant it is not
Amiss to tumble on the bed of Ptolemy,
To give a kingdom for a mirth, to sit
And keep the turn of tippling with a slave,
To reel the streets at noon, and stand the buffet
With knaves that smell of sweat... .

... But to confound such time
That drums him from his sport and speaks as loud
As his own state and ours—'tis to be chid
As we rate boys who, being mature in knowledge,
Pawn their experience to their present pleasure
And so rebel to judgment. (I.iv.16-33)

What though you fled
From that great face of war whose several ranges
Frighted each other? why should he follow?
The itch of his affection should not then
Have nick'd his captainship, at such a point,
When half to half the world oppos'd, he being
The meered question. 'Twas a shame no less
Than was his loss, to course your flying flags
And leave his navy gazing. (III.xiii.4-12)

Eros,
Wouldst thou be window'd in great Rome and see
Thy master thus with pleach'd arms, bending down
His corrigible neck, his face subdu'd

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To penetrative shame, whilst the wheel'd seat
Of fortunate Caesar, drawn before him, branded
His baseness that ensu'd? (IV.xiv.71-77)

Sir, I will eat no meat, I'll not drink, sir;
If idle talk will once be necessary,
I'll not sleep neither. This mortal house I'll ruin,
Do Caesar what he can. Know, sir, that I
Will not wait pinion'd at your master's court
Nor once be chastis'd with the sober eye
Of dull Octavia. Shall they hoist me up
And show me to the shouting varletry
Of censuring Rome? Rather a ditch in Egypt
Be gentle grave unto me! Rather on Nilus' mud
Lay me stark-nak'd, and let the waterflies
Blow me into abhorring! Rather make
My country's high pyramides my gibbet
And hang me up in chains! (V.ii.49-62)

Even these passages ostensibly damning the lovers serve to
exalt them. Just as Antony fears that his face will be subdued
to shame, so the characters are repeatedly subdued to those
qualities and actions that, like Rome, are the independent mov­
ing parts of the world embodied in the style. Reputation, shame,
captainship, and baseness, along with all the conduct incarnated
in infinitive phrases, constitute the agents of action. Hence it is
not surprising that in this play the word become, in the sense
of fitting, is frequently used to relate individual persons to these
large conceptual agencies:

Look, prithee, Charmian,
How this Herculean Roman does become
The carriage of his chafe. (I.iii.83-85)

But, sir, forgive me;
Since my becomings kill me when they do not
Eye well to you. . . . (I.iii.95-97)

. . . for vilest things
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish. (II.ii.243-45)

Observe how Antony becomes his flaw,
And what thou think'st his very action speaks
In every power that moves. (III.xii.34-36)
This abstract and sublimated style fittingly stands in the sharpest contrast to the highly concrete style of *King Lear*. There the syntax is straightforward, and the diction is specific and sensory. The intellectual concern of *King Lear* is with the ultimate basis of our moral categories and conduct, and one way in which the play gets down to fundamentals is in the almost physical directness of its style. In Lear’s curses upon his daughters and in his madness, we would normally expect a high degree of concreteness. But in fact we find this concrete diction to be the medium of patient as well as impatient thought throughout the play, in Edmund’s Machiavellian soliloquies, in Edgar’s account of his father’s death, or in Lear’s discourse in the storm before he goes mad:

Thou think’st ’tis much this contentious storm
Invades us to the skin. So ’tis to thee;
But where the greater malady is fix’d,
The lesser is scarce felt. Thou ’dst shun a bear;
But if thy flight lay toward the raging sea,
Thou ’dst meet the bear i’ th’ mouth. When the mind’s free,
The body’s delicate. The tempest in my mind
Doth from my senses take all feeling else
Save what beats there. Filial ingratitude!
Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand
For lifting food to ’t? But I will punish home!
No, I will weep no more. In such a night
To shut me out! Pour on; I will endure. (III.iv.6-18)

These speeches characteristically begin with the abstraction, and then move to pin it down by concrete images. But the images are typically so vivid and direct, like the references here to the encounter with the bear and to the mouth tearing the hand that feeds it, that they make us lose the train of abstract thought and leave us adrift amidst the unsorted shapes of the physical world. The style keeps undermining abstract categories of thought, reflecting and universalizing the progressive collapse of Lear’s mind, and justifying the play’s ultimate concern with the basis in nature for human morality. As against this movement of the style downward into concreteness in *King Lear*,

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the movement in *Antony and Cleopatra* is upward into abstraction, and yet a form of abstraction that does not obliterate the physical. We can see the difference by comparing Lear's "Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand/ For lifting food to 't?" with Cleopatra's "let the water-flies/ Blow me into abhorring." In fact, Cleopatra is also talking about the eating of her own flesh, and she has begun concretely enough by her reference to the Nile's mud and its water-flies; but when she comes to name the deed, she glances off into an image that is conceptual rather than sensory. The movement of the diction from "water-flies" to "blow" to "abhorring" sublimates the physical without denying it; and by this process of its style, *Antony and Cleopatra* keeps hallowing even the most unseemly details of physical life. In this style is wrought the suggestion of immortality that is the play's unique achievement, and its special contribution to Shakespeare's development.

II

It is also possible to distinguish two opposite rhythms made by the syntax, and to suggest a thematic basis for this distinction. On the one hand, there is an extreme abruptness of movement, a jerky discontinuity from phrase to phrase and sentence to sentence, which is produced largely by the syntactical indirections I have described and which serves to isolate consecutive statements, and consecutive speakers, from one another. On the other hand, there are long and flowing movements, beautifully integrated by their rhythms, uniting separate statements, carrying forward from speaker to speaker, and continuously binding up wholes that are greater than the sums of their parts. Here are two pairs of passages, the first illustrating the difference through individual speeches, the second showing the contrasting rhythms in consecutive speeches:

Off, pull off!
The sevenfold shield of Ajax cannot keep
The battery from my heart. O, cleave, my sides!
Heart, once be stronger than thy continent,
Crack thy frail case! Apace, Eros, apace.—
No more a soldier. Bruised pieces, go;
You have been nobly borne.—From me awhile.
I will o'ertake thee, Cleopatra, and
Weep for my pardon. So it must be, for now
All length is torture. Since the torch is out,
Lie down, and stray no farther. Now all labour
Mars what it does; yea, very force entangles
Itself with strength. Seal then, and all is done.
Eros!—I come, my queen.—Eros!—Stay for me.
Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand
And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze.
Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops,
And all the haunt be ours.—Come, Eros, Eros!

(IV.xiv.37-54)

Nay, pray you seek no colour for your going,
But bid farewell, and go. When you su'd staying,
Then was the time for words. No going then!
Eternity was in our lips and eyes,
Bliss in our brows' bent, none our parts so poor
But was a race of heaven. They are so still,
Or thou, the greatest soldier of the world,
Art turn'd the greatest liar.

(I.iii.32-39)

Eros. Nay, gentle madam, to him! comfort him!
Iras. Do, most dear Queen.
Char. Do? Why, what else?
Cleo. Let me sit down. O Juno!
Ant. No, no, no, no, no!
Eros. See you here, sir?
Ant. O fie, fie, fie!
Char. Madam!
Iras. Madam, O good Empress!
Eros. Sir, sir!
Ant. Yes, my lord, yes! He at Philippi kept
His sword e'en like a dancer, while I struck
The lean and wrinkled Cassius; and 'twas I
That the mad Brutus ended.

(III.xi.25-37)
Cleo. Have you done yet?

Ant. Alack, our terrene moon
Is now eclips'd, and it portends alone
The fall of Antony!

Cleo. I must stay his time.

Ant. To flatter Caesar, would you mingle eyes
With one that ties his points?

Cleo. Not know me yet?

Ant. Cold-hearted toward me?

Cleo. Ah, dear, if I be so,
From my cold heart let heaven engender hail,
And poison it in the source. . . .

(III.xiii.153–160)

Whether one favors light or heavy pointing of the text, there is nevertheless a striking contrast between the staccato-like abruptness of movement in the first passages in each pair, and the orchestrated continuity of movement in the second passages. Neither of these rhythms is used exclusively in a particular kind of situation or for a single thematic purpose. But there is certainly a characteristic use of the broken rhythm to depict the characters, especially Antony, in those moments both of deepest anguish and of highest fulfilment when they are most alone in the world. We find this rhythm in Antony's self-recrimination after the defeat at Actium, in his celebration of the land victory, and, as in the passage cited above, in his reception of the false news of Cleopatra's death. The discontinuous style is the mode in which he relates himself, "so lated in the world," to those large cosmic forces that impersonally make him their instrument; it is his way of encompassing both his virtue and his flaw. The discontinuous speech is an extension of that general discontinuity in action and characterization that I have described; it shows Antony first suffering and then transfiguring the two worlds of public and private values, without denying the integrity of either one.

The other rhythm, which keeps integrating musically the most disparate qualities, is conspicuous in passages where the
characters speak of their relationships with one another, as in Cleopatra's speech cited above, or where they are describing each other, as in Enobarbus' famous description of Cleopatra's barge or Cleopatra's paeans to Antony after he is dead. Third-person discourse is necessarily more remote than first-person, and less susceptible to the broken immediacy of the individual character's negotiation with life. Here its large inclusive rhythms also provide a stabilizing framework for the staccato drift of the broken style. And in combination with those characteristics of the diction that I have described, the flowing rhythm serves to measure and articulate the transcendent realm of experience that is the final locus of the play's action. It helps to engender that platonized cosmic structure which now replaces the ordered hierarchies of the doctrine of correspondences in the earlier plays I have discussed.

In talking about the world made by the style in *Antony and Cleopatra*, it is impossible to separate the diction, imagery, syntax, and rhythm. All converge to persuade us of the existence of a cosmic realm that is coherent and yet fluid, seamless in its continuity despite the fragmented discontinuity of the human life that it incorporates, and protean in its capacity for enlargement. This world can best be defined by contrast to the world incorporated in the style of the history plays, where we began. In the familiar language of correspondences in those plays, the concrete imagery, the straightforward syntax, and the regulated rhythms present us with a series of fixed analogies among the various hierarchies of being—angels, men, fish, birds, and so on—with their corresponding systems of conduct.³ In each category every member has his place, and it is the meaning and purpose of his existence to fulfill his place with conduct proper to his kind. The ethical business of King Richard and Prince Hal is to earn their identification by analogy with the estridge, the dolphin, the sun, and with God. They are to achieve their fullness of being by making their scheme of life on earth a replica of the prior scheme laid down in heaven, by imitating on earth the heavenly categories, as Prince Hal indicates in his soliloquy:
Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That, when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted, he may be more wond'red at,
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.

(I Henry IV, I.ii.221-27)

That imagery and syntax is characteristic of the history plays, and it makes a world of correspondences in which there is no immediate access from one category to another, no transcendence, but only earthly fulfilment for those who sustain the cosmic analogies each within his own hierarchy of being. Each man is challenged to embody in himself the accurate reflection of some immutable otherworldly category. Each is asked to make some particular word into flesh.

The final effect of the language and syntax in Antony and Cleopatra is almost the reverse of this. This style implies no foreordained heavenly scheme. Rather it keeps abstracting the stunning variety of human experience into a series of otherworldly categories, which are then linked together by the shaping power of the rhythm. Here the intense and dutiful feeling for “degree” is relaxed, to make room for an exuberant yet controlled affirmation of “plenitude.” Instead of imitating some prescribed otherworldly scheme, each man is now invited to make his own, to transmute his particular flesh into some perfect and original word. The presence of this cosmic world is pervasive in the play, and cannot be illustrated by single quotations. All the elements of style that I have mentioned help to give it substance. Here I should like to add a list of passages that imply in one way or another the protean continuity between a character’s conduct and the readiness of the cosmos to conform its hospitable categories to these unique human achievements.

Again and again in the play, the characters worry about falling away from, not “bias of nature,” some prior external category, but themselves, in all their internal definition:

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THE PILLAR OF THE WORLD

I'll seem the fool I am not. Antony
Will be himself. (I.i.42-43)

Sir, sometimes when he is not Antony
He comes too short of that great property
Which still should go with Antony. (I.i.57-59)

I shall entreat him
To answer like himself. If Caesar move him,
Let Antony look over Caesar's head
And speak as loud as Mars. By Jupiter,
Were I the wearer of Antonius' beard,
I would not shav't to-day! (II.ii.3-8)

Not he that himself is not so; which is Mark Antony. He will to his Egyptian dish again. Then shall the sighs of Octavia blow the fire up in Caesar, and, as I said before, that which is the strength of their amity shall prove the immediate author of their variance. Antony will use his affection where it is. He married but his occasion here. (II.vi.132-40)

Strong Enobarb
Is weaker than the wine, and mine own tongue
Splits what it speaks. The wild disguise hath almost
Antick'd us all. What needs more words? Good night.
Good Antony, your hand. (II.vii.127-31)

Had our general
Been what he knew himself, it had gone well. (III.x.26-27)

Let that be left
Which leaves itself. To the seaside straightway! (III.xi.19-20)

It is my birthday.
I had thought t' have held it poor; but since my lord
Is Antony again, I will be Cleopatra. (III.xiii.185-87)

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Already in these passages, the definition of the self is related to something beyond, to Mars or to “that great property”; and there is another group of passages in which that relationship becomes explicit. This includes the already cited references to Antony’s becoming “the carriage of his chafe” and becoming his “flaw,” as well as the following:

Experience, manhood, honour, ne’er before
Did violate so itself.

(Ill.x.23-24)

I have offended reputation—
A most unnoble swerving.

(Ill.xi.49-50)

O love,
That thou couldst see my wars to-day, and knew’st
The royal occupation! Thou shouldst see
A workman in’t.

(IV.iv.15-18)

The death of Antony
Is not a single doom; in the name lay
A moiety of the world.

(V.i.17-19)

Finally, there are passages that seem to delineate the empty cosmic categories waiting to be filled up by the achieved selfhood of the characters; passages that imply the existence of a platonic world beyond appearances, but a fluid, dynamic world, rather than a static set of fixed categories:

Why, sir, give the gods a thankful sacrifice. When it pleaseth their deities to take the wife of a man from him, it shows to man the tailors of the earth; comforting therein, that when old robes are worn out, there are members to make new.

(Lii.167-72)

You shall find there
A man who is the abstract of all faults
That all men follow.

(Liv.8-10)
Every time
Serves for the matter that is then born in't.

(II.ii.9-10)

To be call'd into a huge sphere and not to be seen to move in't, are the holes where eyes should be, which pitifully disaster the cheeks.

(II.vii.16-19)

Ant. Be a child o' th' time.
Caes. Possess it; I'll make answer.

(II.vii.105-6)

All these passages produce a considerable range and diversity of effects. They are far from exhibiting the consistency among themselves that is characteristic of the world made by the style in the history plays. But that is because the cosmic world they embody is so much less schematic than that of the earlier plays. If the common elements in these passages are less obvious, they are no less structural in the play than what are in fact the clichés of the earlier cosmic imagery. The pervasive implication here is that man does not imitate but generates the forms of otherworldly perfection. It is as if each man's qualities, when he is truly himself, are projected in idealized form upon a transcendental screen, so that the cosmos keeps incorporating the world, instead of the world imperfectly imitating the cosmos. By the conduct of his life each man tailors his otherworldly garments, whose names are "experience," "manhood," "reputation," and "honour," instead of "sun," dolphin," and "estridge." Each man is expected simply to be his own best self, and not to rend those garments which he himself has made.

Thus "that great property/ Which still should go with Antony" is nothing we might have anticipated by reading a political treatise listing the qualifications of a Renaissance king serving as God's steward in the world. In the history plays and King Lear, Shakespeare paid his full respects to all such kingly properties but found them inadequate to fulfil a completely human, and hence vulnerable, life in the world. The great property to which Antony aspires is simply the ability
to wear his own beard and not shave it, to act out in the world those qualities of experience, manhood, and honor that are attributed to him because he had already acquired them and not because they are prescribed by a code. Antony and Lepidus have been “call’d into a huge sphere” by something more immediate and personal than the accidents of birth or of local politics. By their conduct they have made that sphere their own; and, once having done so, they must now move in it, and fill it up with themselves. In the history plays the histrionic self-deception of the protagonists is related to the existence of externally sanctioned roles to be played. But whereas those protagonists were obligated from without to perform their public roles, these Roman characters are responsible from within to be themselves and not to fall into either role-playing or its substitute, self-deception. Whereas it was incumbent upon the English hero to imitate the sun, the Roman must not let himself be antick’d by the wild disguise.

Just as the cosmic world of Antony and Cleopatra is flexible enough to afford each man a “huge sphere” that is truly his own, it also allows for a continuous reshaping of its own contours. If at any moment it asks of each man that he keep himself within himself, it recognizes that from moment to moment a man's accumulated experience may transform him, and project into the world a new ingredient of manhood. The act of self-creation, unlike that of conforming to a prototype, never ends; and its endless flux and movement are represented in the play by Antony’s great cloud speech, which comes closer than any other passage to incorporating all the characteristic features of the style I have described:

Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish;
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
A tower'd citadel, a pendent rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon't that nod unto the world
And mock our eyes with air. Thou hast seen these signs;
They are black Vesper's pageants.
That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct
As water is in water.

My good knave Eros, now thy captain is
Even such a body. Here I am Antony;
Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave.
I made these wars for Egypt; and the Queen—
Whose heart I thought I had, for she had mine,
Which, whilst it was mine, had annex'd unto't
A million moe, now lost—she, Eros, has
Pack'd cards with Caesar and false-play'd my glory
Unto an enemy's triumph.
Nay, weep not, gentle Eros. There is left us
Ourselves to end ourselves. (IV.xiv.2-22)

Here is a profoundly tragic sense of mutability, of the fickleness of Fortune and the fatal deceptiveness of life. The syntax and rhythm of the last eleven lines, in which words, phrases, and clauses are dislimned into one another, reflect the blurring and instability of experience that lead naturally to the idea of suicide. But there is another dimension of feeling communicated in which the mutability of experience becomes a condition of its vitality and deceptiveness and instability the signs of an infinitely protean continuity of existence. In the world of Prince Hal's soliloquy the sun stood still, temporarily obscured by "base contagious clouds," waiting to be hitched to the doctrine of correspondences. In Antony's world it is the clouds and not the sun that give structure to life, not by standing still but by their continuously changing shapes. The dissolving of one "visible shape" into another becomes part of a progression whose corporeal and transcendental elements are coextensive, a progression in which the world may be transcended only because it has not been rejected for the safety of Lear's prison but rather has been accepted in all the perishability of its many possible shapes. In this progression suicide is robbed of its sting; it becomes an act of innocence, creative rather than destructive. It is an inevitable moment in that continuing transformation of Antony's visible shape, from "strumpet's fool" to "pillar of
the world” to “fire and air.” All means of transformation, after all, are necessary to those who partake of immortality.

For the language goes as far as language can in creating for the characters that immortality which I attributed to them at the beginning of this book. The cosmic language I have described is a continuous outgrowth of the dramatic action, not a superimposed ideological blueprint. It is a conceptual realization, from moment to moment and from one pillar of the world to another, of the quality and progress of the lovers’ experience. The style itself is an aspect of that process by which first Antony and then Cleopatra stop defining their experience by the fixed categories called Rome and Egypt, and begin to move back and forth in order to unify public and private values. Their ability to make this connection, to live their Egyptian life after the high Roman fashion, earns them transcendence, an ascent from “Nilus’ slime” to the realms of fire and air. And it completes the unfinished business of King Lear. Mr. Danby claims that in King Lear Shakespeare delivers his final message that the Good Man must have a Good Society, that until society can become good, even the transfigured Lear must be protected from it. But now I think Shakespeare enables us to see in Antony how man, in achieving whatever goodness lies within his portion, may simultaneously transcend and transfigure the Bad Society. By accepting his own and the world’s imperfection, by refusing to hide from himself in self-deception or from the world behind walls, poor fork’d Antony is enabled to fly about with the goodness that is his unconfined and unprotected, sometimes shrinking into effeminacy and sometimes enlarging into magnanimity. Goodness, after all, has an infinite need to renew itself, whatever the risk; and it has an infinite capacity for changing its visible shape.

From the beginning of the play Antony has, of all the characters, the largest stock of experience, manhood, and honor; and yet, from the beginning we have a powerful feeling that only he among the characters is alone in spirit, endlessly beset and endlessly responsive to a deep feeling for the contingency of experience. He is tortured, vacillating, confused, unwittingly
moving in his true direction. Yet he feels himself “so lated in the world” that he has lost his way, for his society offers him no room, no comfort, no coherent emblems of conduct marked upon its pillars. When he earns Octavia’s love, she deserts him; when he earns that of Cleopatra, she betrays him. Every way he turns is blocked, until he feels himself “shot . . . into the abysm of hell,” where he loses himself in order to find himself. When the ambiguities and instabilities of his experience have thrown him back upon his innermost self, he finds the power to generate that visible shape in which, if he must, he becomes his flaw. In that graceful shape he achieves for himself, and bequeaths to Cleopatra, a joyous exuberance, which transfigures death itself. His world has forced him to find himself; in rising to his occasion and becoming the generous author of himself, he nurtures and transcends his world.