CHAPTER - VII

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that Coleridge's contribution to Shakespearian criticism is of radical importance. Coleridge imparted a new direction to English Shakespearian criticism so as to enable it to move on to unchartered paths. He brought a new perspective to bear on Shakespeare's works. His criticism of Shakespeare's characters can be accepted as fundamental to our understanding of the underlying patterns in Shakespeare's plays. In order to understand its relevance both in absolute and relative terms, it is necessary to approach it in the context of the work of his predecessors and contemporaries. For only in such a context can we realize how inadequate the assumptions underlying the critical approach of the preceding age had been.

Coleridge's criticism is valuable not only for the particular perceptions but also because it constantly refers to certain general principles or organising insights. His philosophical probings put an end to eighteenth century rationalist-empiricist interpretation of Shakespeare's plays based on the neo-classical theoretical framework. It is difficult to accept Rene Wellek's opinion:

Coleridge disconcertingly wavers between a psychological and an epistemological foundation for such an analysis. It is the same basic uncertainty we shall find elsewhere, the same conflict between the tradition of empirical psychology and the dialectics of the German idealists.¹

As a matter of fact, Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare is based on philosophical foundations that mark a

complete departure from the Cartesian epistemology which had left little room for the mind to act creatively and from the Hobbesian psychology that had rendered imagination or fancy a prisoner of what Kant called the Sensuous Manifold. Moreover, in his assertion of the freedom of mind, Coleridge (and Wordsworth, too) had already discovered on his own the possibilities inherent in "Neo-platonic philosophy, and therefore he was not entirely indebted to Kant and other German idealists.

Coleridge's criticism opens up possibilities of much detailed comparative and developmental study of Shakespeare's plays for the twentieth century. In fact, much modern criticism of Shakespeare, in one way or the other, derives its penetrative power from the intuitive insights of Coleridge, coupled with his philosophical speculations. His criticism becomes all the more important since the variety of critical schools, concepts and methodologies has given birth to a number of critical approaches ranging from the psychological to the symbolic, from the thematic to the imagistic, from the historical to the poetic, all in some direct or indirect manner deriving from Coleridge. In spite of the complexity of the scenario, Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare helps us to resolve certain basic issues involved in the study of the plays.

In our age of varied approaches to Shakespeare, Coleridge is often criticized -- sometimes directly but more frequently in terms of a critique of A.C. Bradley. The early twentieth century emphasis upon the nature and function of imagery was a result of the approach that a work of dramatic art should be studied in terms of its texture. All the considerations that are not immediately intrinsic to it must be ignored. This approach to Shakespeare's work (ie., via its imagery) was at
one stage regarded as entirely novel and revolutionary. Critics like Caroline Spurgeon, Wilson Knight, Derek Traversi and L.C. Knights were regarded as having completely supplanted Bradley's psychological study of character, and hence by implication Coleridge too, since he was considered to be the founder of the psychological approach. Apart from the fact that the sole emphasis upon imagery has its own limitations and cannot be regarded as the be-all and end-all of criticism, it was little realized that Coleridge was the forerunner, if not the actual founder, of this particular kind of study. Throughout his lectures, the study of imagery, puns and the verbal texture of plays (along with what may be called the atmospherics of the plays, their "world", so to say) receives ample attention. (Incidentally, even Bradley pays attention to imagery. Vide Shakespearean Tragedy, pp. 336-7).

Coleridge is also criticized for his ignorance of Elizabethan psychology and philosophy. Although it is true that Coleridge's historical knowledge was limited, he was not at all unaware of the relevance of the historical viewpoint while studying Shakespeare. In fact, he was amongst the first to have realized the need for a historical study of Shakespeare's plays. The approach as such could, however, be developed only in the twentieth century owing to greater historical study in our times. He saw that the form of Shakespeare's plays is largely and in the ultimate analysis, determined by the historical context and that to understand the meaning of

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Shakespeare's plays is to study the circumstances in which they were created. As we have already seen, his defence of Shakespeare's judgement with reference to the unities, his vindication of Shakespeare against the charge of immorality are all sufficient testimony to his awareness of the need for studying Shakespeare's plays in the context of their historical conditions. All the more important, he intuitively anticipated, and in a way tried to resolve, the twentieth century controversy between, on the one hand, the historical school of critics who say that the rootedness of a work of art in its ethos should be the main object of attention; and the formalist critics, on the other, who believe that only those structural and textual features of a work of art which are independent of the environing circumstances are worthy of attention. Coleridge seems to have resolved the controversy when in one of his lecture notes, he points out the paradoxical nature of a work of art, its union of opposites:

Poetry in its essence [is] a universal spirit, but which in incorporating itself adapts and takes up the surrounding materials and adapts itself to existing circumstances what it cloaks itself in, it glorifies, like a plant dependent on soil for many things, yet still retaining its original form. Essentials, therefore, and accidents are the two grounds of judgement.\(^3\)

According to Coleridge, universality is important but locatedness of a work of art, i.e., its circumscribing aspects cannot be overlooked. Poetry should be studied in relation to its historical context but attention should also be paid to form and texture, since art is rooted in history but at the same time transcends it.

Coleridge was, perhaps, too well aware of the fact that the study of these elements is not an end in itself. His

concern was, therefore, with the totality of Shakespeare's plays or with the meaning that a particular Shakespearian play unfolds. Coleridge realized the integrity of Shakespeare's vision which cannot be expressed by fragmentary or partial approaches. Their integrity and depth can only be realized if we understand the basic patterns inherent in the plays. In his search for meaning, therefore, Coleridge transcended not only character approach but analysis of other elements as well.

Thus, the tendency of the twentieth century critics to consider themselves as writing in reaction to the Coleridgean tradition, is not fair. In stead of reaction, we may prefer to call it a gradual process of evolution and growth. Many critics who have moulded and shaped the direction of twentieth century Shakespearian criticism owe much to Coleridge. His interest in Shakespeare as a poet of comprehensive philosophic vision was carried on in the twentieth century too. The critics have realized Shakespeare's ability to translate his philosophic vision into dramatic terms. The problem has been approached by different critics in various ways.

Apart from Gervinus in the nineteenth century Germany who imitated Coleridge in his concern with the philosophical implications of Shakespeare's plays, Bradley too, followed the path of Coleridge in some essential ways. In his lectures, Bradley attempted to define the moral world as conceived by Shakespeare. Although at places he studied Shakespeare's plays through character analysis taking them out of their context and asking questions about them which were not intended to be raised by the dramatist, yet, like Coleridge, he also conceived

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5 Bradley, op. cit.
Shakespeare as a philosophical poet. R.G. Moulten\(^6\) applies Coleridge's principle of the organic unity of a work of art and approaches each play independently so as to judge it as a unique work of art in terms of its meaning. His primary interest was in the story in which he found Shakespeare's moral themes to be implicit.

Coleridge's influence can be traced in critics like G. Wilson Knight\(^7\) whose main concern was with symbols and images. He analysed Shakespeare's plays in terms mainly of their Christian symbolism. Like Coleridge, Knight too was interested in Shakespeare as a poet of comprehensive philosophic vision. In the Introduction to *The Wheel of Fire*, he isolates two aspects of drama, viz., spatial and temporal. According to Knight, the temporal aspects like plot and character are important, but primary to our understanding of Shakespeare is the spatial element by which Knight means the status of a piece of dramatic art as an expanded metaphor. It also includes the total impression or mood created by a play. This impression of totality cannot be realized by those critics who are interested in temporal aspects alone. According to Knight, it is the poetry of Shakespeare's plays which includes within it all other elements of drama and gives an impression of totality. Thus, like Coleridge, Knight looks for a pattern around which each play can be organized and tries to find out the unifying themes of Shakespeare's plays. He also shares Coleridge's assumption about the unity of a work of art and the importance of the analysis of meaning for its understanding.

L.C. Knights has reacted strongly against the historical critics and emphasizes the point that historical circumstances

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\(^6\)R.G. Moulten, *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* (Oxford, 1885).
\(^7\)G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, op. cit.
cannot overshadow and undermine the importance of universal elements in a work of art. Although he advocates the use of a method of close textual analysis, yet he considers Shakespeare's plays as embodiment of an evolving view of life. Knights's main concern is with the moral themes in Shakespeare's works, the recurring pattern of involvement with experience. His favourite terms, "maturity", "openness to life and experience", "approximation to basic rhythms of existence", etc. remind us of similar concerns in Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare. Knights's perception of Hamlet's "clouded vision", for example, makes us recall Coleridge's suggestion that we are not to identify ourselves wholly with Hamlet and that Claudius is not always to be viewed through Hamlet's eyes.

Similarly Heilman, who is basically concerned with imagistic verbal patterns, tries to determine the moral themes which give unity to Shakespeare's plays. The set of paradoxes in King Lear, for instance, leads to a unity of vision which in its ethical and moral concerns is essentially Coleridgean.

John Vyvyan considers Shakespeare's plays as allegories of Platonic philosophy. Though Vyvyan's schematised interpretations of the plays sound forced and unconvincing, the idea that Shakespeare creates parallels with Platonic philosophy would certainly have struck a sympathetic chord in

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9 R.B. Heilman, This Great Stage : Image and Structure in 'King Lear' (Baton Rouge, La., 1948); Magic in the Web : Action and Language in 'Othello' (Lexington, Ky., 1956).
Coleridge's mind in view of the fact that the latter too chose to describe Shakespeare's vision of love in *Romeo and Juliet* in Platonic terms.

We may conclude by saying that some of the most important tendencies in the post-Coleridgean criticism of Shakespeare -- the nineteenth century German concern with central ideas (Gervinus), Bradley's psychological and philosophical approaches, the older kind of historicism in the 'thirties of the present century (Tillyard, Craig) and the poetic-symbolic-imagistic school of the same years (Wilson Knight and the *Scrutiny* critics) -- all ultimately and in varying degrees go back to the Shakespearian criticism of S.T. Coleridge and have their roots in the poetics of which he was the progenitor.
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