ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA   
If "Antony and Cleopatra" was written first among the three tragedies in which Shakespeare returned to Plutarch for his source, the writing of it involved the removal of his imagination to a distance that almost staggers measurement. The poet of "King Lear" and "Macbeth" now works freely under a great dome of lighted sky which knows no clouds except an occasional illusory and indistinct one, and which feels no wind beyond the soft one of its own effortless breathing. The world of "Antony and Cleopatra" is so immense that time yawns in it; and this is not because time is going to die as it did in "Macbeth" but because it luxuriates in a sense of perfect and endless health. The mandragora that Cleopatra wants to drink so that she may "sleep out this great gap of time" (1, v, 5) while Antony is away needs scarcely to be drunk in a universe already drugged with a knowledge of its own size. It is all the world that Plutarch knew or that Shakespeare knows as he writes: the Mediterranean world where opulent Africa lies across a gleaming sea from Spain, Italy, and Greece, and where innumerable kingdoms stretch eastward to the horizon. Nor is there terror in such distances. Men are at home in "the wide arch of the rang'd empire," and call each other naturally the most glorious names: "triple pillar of the world," "demi-Atlas of this earth," "senators alone of this great world," "world-sharers," "universal landlord," "sole sir o' the world." There is no terror because there is so much light. When Iras says

*the bright day is done,  
 And we are for the dark,* (V, ii, 193-4)

she is bidding good-by to an afternoon which has been long with life; and the dark for which she is destined seems somehow to have no blackness in it, for the same reason that when Cleopatra utters her command:

*Darkling stand  
 The varying shore o' the world* (IV, xv, 10-11)

we cannot imagine that any cliff or headland has ceased to be luminous even though the sun has burned the great sphere it moves in. Light plays on everything with undiscouraged luxury: on land, on rivers, on islands, and on the sea. We are never far away from the limpid and life-giving element of water, which, rather than forming like dew as it did in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," now spreads a rich iridescent film over the whole of a vast daylight existence. There is of course the sea, and Antony is one who with his sword

*Quarter'd the world, and o'er green Neptune's back  
 With ships made cities.* (IV, xiv, 58-9)

But there is also the Nile, whose "slime and ooze," creative of "flies and gnats" as well as crocodiles, we are kept no less conscious of than we are kept conscious of flowing streams wherein "tawny-finn'd fishes" play, where swan's-down feathers float at full of tide, and from which rise swifts and mallards. It is a world of languid and abundant life which cannot surprise us with news that swallows have built their nests in Cleopatra's sails (IV, xii, 3.4), or that the river of Cydnus fell in love with her barge as it burned on its water.

*The oars were silver,  
 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made  
 The water which they beat to follow faster,  
 As amorous of their strokes*. (II, ii, 199-202)

At night, since night must be, there is nevertheless the moon, whose fleeting terrene visits keep Italy and Egypt flooded with yellow light. And day by day again there is certain to be music—"moody food," says Cleopatra (II, v, 1-2), "of us that trade in love." But it is not music played in a chamber, like the music of "Twelfth Night," or on the lawn of a great lady's estate as in "The Merchant of Venice." It has the dome of the world to fill, so that it plays "far off" while Cleopatra fishes (II,v,11), and runs both through the air and underground when

*the god Hercules, whom Antony loved,  
 Now leaves him.* (IV, iii, 16-7)

Such a world needs a special style, and the play triumphantly provides it. The units of this style, curiously enough, are very brief. Nothing is drawn out as with too little thought we might have expected it to be. The action is broken into as many as forty-two scenes; our attention is constantly shifted from one to another portion of the single scene which is the earth. And so with the speech, the characteristic unit of which is almost breathlessly short. There are no rolls of rhetoric, no attempts to loop the universe with language. This universe is too large to be rendered in anything but fragments, too much alive in its own right to care for extended compliment and discourse. It can be handled only by a process of constantly reassembling its many small parts—moving them about in an always flexible mosaic. For the world of "Antony and Cleopatra" shows its strength in nothing so much as its flexibility. Any part, examined closely, yields the whole, just as any speech, once it is made, escapes into some far altitude of the air without exactly losing itself; in the long run it will count. The action expresses itself in many ripples, like a resting sea. The climate in which Antony and Cleopatra so completely love each other permits them the luxury of little phrases, as if with their breath it panted the tale of its own endless well-being. Accommodating itself to its heroine, it utters itself with a refined sensuousness, opening its lips and pronouncing delicious words in which the light sounds of i, short a, a, st, l, and ing predominate.

*By the fire  
 That quickens Nilus' slime, I go from hence  
 Thy soldier, servant*. (I, iii, 68-70)  
  
 *This common body,   
 Like to a vagabond flag upon the stream,   
 Goes to and back, lackeying the varying tide,   
 To rot itself with motion*. (I, iv, 44-7)

*Think on me,  
 That am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black,  
 And wrinkled deep in time*? (I, v, 27-9)

*How much unlike art thou Mark Antony!  
 Yet, coming from him, that great medicine hath  
 With his tinct gilded thee*. (I, v, 35-7)

*By Isis, I will give thee bloody teeth*. (I, v, 70)

*She  
 In the habiliments of the goddess Isis   
 That day appear'd.* (III, vi, 16-8)

*That which is now a horse, even with a thought  
 The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct,  
 As water is in water*. (IV, xiv, 9-11)

*With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate   
 Of life at once untie*. (V, ii, 307-8)

*This is an aspic's trail; and these fig-leaves   
 Have slime upon them, such as the aspic leaves   
 Upon the caves of Nile*. (V, ii, 354-6)

The speech of any person in the play is likely to spill itself in agreeable gasps, as if it came through gills; and the blank-verse line of the earlier dramas has almost lost its form in the fluid element that surrounds it.

*Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch Of the rang'd empire fall!   
 Here is my space. Kingdoms are clay; our dungy earth alike   
 Feeds beast as man; the nobleness of life   
 Is to do thus, when such a mutual pair   
 And such a twain can do 't*. (I, i, 33-8)

*Nay, pray you, seek no colour for your going,   
 But bid farewell, and go. When you sued 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, 32-9)

*My salad days,  
 When I was green in judgement; cold in blood,  
 To say as I said then! But, come, away;  
 Get me ink and paper.  
 He shall have every day a several greeting,  
 Or I'll unpeople Egypt*. (I, v, 73-8)

*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*. (IV, xiv, 44-9)

Such a style suits lovers who make up as quickly as they have quarreled; the anger of Antony and Cleopatra has a short memory, and pardons succeed curses with little shift of accent

*Courteous lord, one word.  
 Sir, you and I must part, but that's not it;  
 Sir, you and I have loved, but there's not it;  
 That you know well. Something it is I would, --  
 O, my oblivion is a very Antony,  
 And I am all forgotten.* (I, iii, 86-91)

That will do for Cleopatra's text after any altercation; and Antony, who played with half the bulk of the world as he pleased and had superfluous kings for messengers, can humble himself as briefly:

*Fall not a tear, I say; one of them rates  
 All that is won and lost. Give me a kiss.  
 Even this repays me*. (III, ii, 69-71)

Their misunderstandings are waves which there are other waves to check, just as the bits of acting they practice on each other are chopped short because they know that neither can be deceived.

Cleopatra. *Good now, play one scene  
 Of excellent dissembling; and let it look  
 Like perfect honour.* Antony. *You'll heat my blood. No more.* Cleopatra*. You can do better yet; but this is meetly.* Antony*. Now, by my sword,—* Cleopatr*a. And target.—Still he mends;  
 But this is not the best.* (I, iii, 78-83)

This banter is from a queen who is herself a consummate actress, and she knows Antony knows it. Once she fails to see through him, but that is when he is acting for men only and she does not catch the style. As he opens an old vein of oratory arid contrives tremolos for the benefit of certain servitors on the eve of battle (IV, ii) she appeals to Enobarbus who is standing by: "What means this?" Enobarbus puts her off by saying that it is an odd trick of sorrow; Antony is affected by thoughts of the next day. But as the instrument plays on she asks again: "What does he mean?" And Enobarbus, who knows his master even better than she knows her lover, has to confess: "To make his followers weep." It is mere wanton art, an expert's oratory. There is of course a final quarrel and a final attempt at deception, for the play is a tragedy and Cleopatra will not be able to undo her subterfuge of the monument (IV, xiii-xv). Yet even there the established style will prevail, and modify the tragedy. And long before that it will have subdued every item of the action to the tone of its own unique refinement. The drunkenness of the generals on board Pompey's galley (II, vii) is as little gross as the love of Antony and Cleopatra is voluptuous. As wine makes the world-sharers witty, and steeps their senses at last in "soft and delicate Lethe," so love turns the lead of Antony and Cleopatra into gold. Pompey credits the Queen with sultry powers that keep the brain of her lover fuming, but the love we see is light with jest and mellow with amusement. This is because Cleopatra is really queen of her world. When Enobarbus pays her his famous tribute:

*Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale  
 Her infinite variety. . . . She makes hungry  
 Where most she satisfies, for vilest things  
 Become themselves in her,* (II, u, 240-44)

he is placing her in that world which the style of the play is forever creating: a world which is ancient yet not stale, complacent yet still hungry, and as becoming in its vileness as it is cultivated in its virtues. Its infinite variety is a quality of its air, its land, its water, its animals, its clouds, its language, and its people. All are the creation of a style whose imponderable atoms are ever in graceful dance, no sooner combining to produce forms than separating to dissolve them. The next question is whether action is possible in such an atmosphere, and if so, what kind of action.

In one sense "Antony and Cleopatra" is actionless. A world is lost, but it is so well lost that it seems not to have been lost at all; its immensity was not disturbed. The peculiar greatness of this poetry defeats any conceivable dramatic end. Line for line it is perhaps the richest poetry Shakespeare wrote, but the reward it reaps is paradoxical: it builds a universe in which nothing can happen, or at any rate one in which the conflicts and crises of persons cannot be of the first importance. This explains, if it is granted that the gods ordained some sort of greatness for the play, the nakedness of its verbal intensity. The writing has to be wonderful because it is not supported by anything that Aristotle would have called a plot. And it is wonderful. Merely as expression it has that final force which permits many of its passages to stand alone, without the need of a context to recommend them. If they gain from being read in place, the place is an atmosphere rather than an action. The intensity of Hamlet, Othello, Lear, and Macbeth was derived from their respective predicaments; the intensity of Antony and Cleopatra seems to be generated in themselves, and in the poet who is writing their speeches. This will tend to be true of all the plays to come. Shakespeare's last plays contain his richest writing but they are not his best plays. Though Timon, Pericles, Imogen, and Leontes are not surpassed by any of Shakespeare's poets, their stories leave them at a disadvantage. If the disadvantage is less conspicuous in the case of "Antony and Cleopatra," the reason may be that its poetry has come as near as poetry can come to the performing of miracles: the play has lifted itself by its language. This appears most regularly in the passages of praise which glisten everywhere as others like them will glisten through the later dramas. The final poet in Shakespeare is content to be lyrical. Praise becomes with him an occupation in itself. The explanation may be that he now has things to say about humanity which must be said directly; or that he cannot find, in the stories available to him, persons to match his thought; or that his dramatic energies have declined. Whatever the explanation, his lyre labors continually at the task of praise, and labors with regal result. Consider Lepidus on Antony:

*I must not think there are  
 Evils enow to darken all his goodness.  
 His faults in him seem as the spots of heaven,  
 More fiery by night's blackness; hereditary,  
 Rather than purchas'd; what he cannot change,  
 Than what he chooses*. (I, iv, 10-15)

Or Euphronius on Antony:

*Such as I am, I come from Antony.  
 I was of late as petty to his ends  
 As is the morn-dew on the myrtle-leaf   
 To his grand sea*. (III, xii, 7-10)

Or Caesar on Antony:

*The breaking of so great a thing should make  
 A greater crack. The round world  
 Should have shook lions into civil streets,  
 And citizens to their dens. The death of Antony  
 Is not a single doom; in the name lay  
 A moiety of the world*. (V, I, 14-9)

Or Cleopatra on Antony:

*O, see, my women,  
 The crown o the earth cloth melt. My lord!  
 O, wither'd is the garland of the war,  
 The soldier's pole is fall'n! Young boys and girls  
 Are level now with men; the odds is gone,  
 And there is nothing left remarkable  
 Beneath the visiting moon*. (IV, xv, 62-8)

Or Cleopatra on Antony again—and this would seem to be the goal in the play toward which both panegyric and poetry had been striving, for there is no better speech in Shakespeare:

*His legs bestrid the ocean; his rear'd arm  
 Crested the world; his voice was propertied  
 As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends;  
 But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,  
 He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,  
 There was no winter in 't; an autumn 't was  
 That grew the more by reaping. His delights  
 Were dolphin-like, they show'd his back above  
 The element they liv'd in. In his livery  
 Walk'd crowns and crownets; realms and islands were  
 As plates dropp'd from his pocket*. (V, ii, 83-92)

In another sense "Antony and Cleopatra" has all the action it desires and deserves. There is as much drama in the deaths of its hero and heroine as there can be in the deaths of two persons who lived, at least while we knew them, without illusion; or lived, it may be more accurate to say, in the full light of accepted illusion. Change is a fairy toy for Theseus in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” and for Macbeth it is a glowing terror. For Antony and Cleopatra it is what must be expected, and they have seen so much of it that more cannot surprise them. The changeableness of life is the only thing that does not change; they know this, and to that extent cannot be touched. Their love has been too thoroughly tested to be shaken now. It is founded on its own fact, and on the humorous knowledge they have of each other.

Shakespeare put their case perfectly in his 138th sonnet:

*When my love swears that she is made of truth,  
 I do believe her, though I know she lies... .  
 O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,  
 And age in love loves not to have years told*.

Yet not quite perfectly. either. Each knows the other to be a liar and ultimately does not care if this is so; but one of their pastimes is telling their years. Their days are past the best. and they know this as well as Enobarbus knows that Antony is an old lion (III, xiii, 95), or as well as Caesar knows, or think he knows rival is an old ruffian (IV, i. 4), Antony’s remark that both of them has something mingled with their younger brown (IV, viii, 19-20) is only a courteous reference to the white hairs he elsewhere takes to himself (III, xi, ts)., And Cleopatra is content with the boast:

*Though age from folly could not give me freedom,   
 It does from childishness*. (I, iii, 57-8)

As lovers go, then, they are old. That is why they can do without illusion—or, better still, why they know what to do with it. They prefer each other's untruth to any truth that has yet to be tried. This does not make them easy material for tragedy. It makes t indeed the most intractable material of all; for tragedy works with delusions, and they have none. They would seem to have been cut out for comedy, and indeed there is much comedy here. Only a supreme effort at writing keeps the play on its tragic keel, even then it must do without the sense in any line that death is terrible. Tragedy counts, both in its hero and in us, upon the fear of death for its great effects. But these lovers, far from fearing death, embrace it as a third lover. Enobarbus says of Cleopatra: "I do think there is mettle in Death, which commits some loving act upon her, she bath such a celerity in dying" (I, ii, 147-9). He is satirical, and refers to the actress who puts on shows of death in order to hold her lord. But his intelligence has penetrated to the symbol which Antony no less than she will employ to express an ultimate passion. "I'll make Death love me," swears Antony as he prepares for battle (III, xiii, 193), and as he falls on his sword he elaborates the image:

*I will be  
 A bridegroom in my death, and run into 't  
 As to a lover's bed*. (IV, xiv, 99-101)

Cleopatra, however, gives it its most sophisticated form:

*The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch,  
 Which hurts, and is desir'd*. (V, ii, 298-9)

Antony is a great man, but his dimensions do not express themselves in drama. The play, such as it is, pauses while his praise is sung by Lepidus, by Euphronius, by Caesar, and again and again by Cleopatra. He deserves that such things should be said of him, but we must not expect to see them exemplified in act. They are often negative things: there are not enough evils to darken his goodness, his death is not a single doom, nothing is left remarkable since he is gone, his bounty had no winter in it. And there is a further negative:

*Who tells me true, though in his tale lie death,  
 I hear him as he flamed.* . . .  
 *Speak to me home, mince not the general tongue*. (I, ii, 502-9)

He does not trade in untruths. We learn much from such negatives, but we learn it directly, through lyric statement while the action rests. His delights were dolphin-like, they show'd his back above the element they liv'd in—the movement there goes on outside our practical vision, in a remote kingdom by the sea of metaphor. Nothing more interesting was ever said about any man, but it has to be said, it cannot be shown. Antony is finally ineffable, and Shakespeare has the tact to let him tower alone. Bounty, as the first half of "Timon of Athens" proves, is not a dramatic virtue; nor is there any attempt in this play to make it seem one, though the suicide of Enobarbus (IV,vi) states it powerfully, and Cleopatra's encomium is majestic in its range. The virtues of Antony cannot be dramatized because they are one virtue and its name is magnanimity. Actor though he is and orator though he has been, at his best he shows his back above the element he lives in. He can be moved to anger, jealousy, and pride, he can laugh within a minute after he has raged, he can be a man of forty moods; yet our last vision is of one whose spirit has grown stationary. For all his shrewdness Enobarbus does not see what has happened. He speaks of "a diminution in our captain's brain" (III, xiii, 198), but he is wholly wrong. There has been an expansion, not a contraction. Great as is the world of Roman thoughts, and Caesar reveals the limit of that greatness, Antony has found a greater world—one whose soft sky is of infinite size, and one where thoughts melt into one another as water does in water. A soothsayer warns Antony to keep space between himself and Caesar (II, iii, 23), but the space is already there. The discomfort Antony feels in Caesar's presence is based on more than political rivalry between an old lion and a young fox; it is based on an inability to tell Caesar or any other man why Egypt is so attractive. The reason is Egypt's air, which cannot be felt until it is withdrawn; when it must be found and breathed again, for a full breath cannot be taken in any other. Antony grows until he occupies the whole of Egypt's and Cleopatra's air. And his final act of occupation is his death—which, if it withdraws him from us, leaves us an exact equivalent in the greatness of that air.

Cleopatra's dimensions express themselves on the other hand with an excess of drama—in many little plays rather than in one that is round and single. She comes at us in waves, each of which breaks before it reaches us, but the total number of which is great and beautiful. She is fickle, she is spoiled—

*Pity me, Charmian,  
 But do not speak to me*— (II, v, 118-9)

she is vain, she is cowardly, she is incorrigibly unserious; yet she is a queen "whom everything becomes" (I, i, 49). Antony says that, and he means it even of one who is "cunning past man's thought"; her cunning becomes her too, and the holy priests bless her when she is riggish (II, ii, 244-5). For her variety is infinite; she perfectly expresses the elasticity of Egypt's air. Antony's immobility measures its amount, but its quality can be fingered only in her, She is mercury, she is changeable silk, she is a serpent of old Nile whose movements are too many to count. The messenger's description of Octavia is nicely calculated for the woman to whom it is delivered:

*She creeps;  
 Her motion and her station are as one;  
 She shows a body rather than a life,  
 A statue than a breather*. (III, iii, 21-4)

Cleopatra is not like that; she is a breather, and her life is still more fascinating than her body. It is her life that makes her love so interesting. "There's beggary in the love that can be reckon'd" (I, i, 15)—Antony has learned this from her, and from the boundless air of Egypt. She teaches him even while she tortures him; that is why he can forgive her the long, ghastly effort to die which her lie about the monument imposes upon him (IV, xiv). His pleasure in her alternates with pain, and in fact the play deals more with the pain than it does with the pleasure. But between the lines we read that he could have endured as much again from one whose behavior has never been what Octavia's is, "holy, cold, and still" (II, vi, 131). Cleopatra is too seldom at rest to be easily understood; we shall never be sure, any more than Antony would have been sure, what her intentions were with respect to the treasure she withheld from Caesar (V, ii, 138-92), and whether her decision to die was inspired by loathing for Roman triumphs or by love for the "husband" to whom death would bin her. When the basket of asps arrives she announces to her people:

*My resolution’s plac’d, and I have nothing  
 Of woman in me; now from head to foot  
 I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon   
 No planet is of mine.* ( V, ii, 238-41)

Yet her demeanor in dying has no marble in it. She is still all mercury and lightness, all silk and down. "I have immortal longings in me" is said with a smile at the expense of the rural fellow who has just gone out wishing her joy of the worm and insisting that its bite is "immortal"; she must have on her robe and crown before she feels the loving pinch of death; when Iras precedes her in death she pretends to worry lest Antony's first kiss in heaven be wasted on another woman; she saves enough breath to call Caesar "ass unpolicied," and spends the last of it in likening the immortal worm to a baby at her breast. Charmian, surviving her a moment, echoes "ass unpolicied" with "lass unparallel'd," and bothers to straighten her mistress's crown before she dies. The scene is great and final, yet nothing in it seems to be serious; and the conversation between Caesar and his train when they come in concerns a spectacle that is pretty rather than painful.

*She looks like sleep,  
 As she would catch another Antony  
 In her strong toil of grace.* (V, ii, 349-51)

The strength of Cleopatra has never appeared more clearly than in the charm with which she yields herself to death. Her greatness cannot be distinguished from her littleness, as water may not be defined in water.