

**REMARKS ON THE SONNETS OF
SHAKESPEARE; WITH THE SONNETS.
SHOWING THAT THEY BELONG
TO THE HERMETIC CLASS OF WRITINGS,
AND EXPLAINING THEIR GENERAL
MEANING AND PURPOSE**

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Remarks on the Sonnets of Shakespeare; With the Sonnets. Showing That They Belong to the Hermetic Class of Writings, and Explaining Their General Meaning and Purpose by William Shakespeare

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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SONNETS OF SHAKESPEARE.

CHAPTER I

HERMETIC writing is a species of painting ; and as no artist upon canvas can be permitted to interpret his own picture, so no artistic hermetic writer can be allowed to translate into didactic statements the meaning of his own scripture or writing. It would be disgraceful for a painter to label a picture "this is a horse," to guard against its being mistaken for some other animal ; and so, in like manner, if an art-writer, like Dante or Goethe, were to set about interpreting his own writings, it would be proof that his labors had fallen short of their object.

But while this is true with respect to the artist himself, it is entirely proper for a critic to discuss

and explain or exhibit, the meaning of artistic labors in any of the fields of art, painting, music, sculpture, architecture, or literature.

The highest performances of art reach far beyond the ordinary judgments of man, and remain, for most people, like mountain-tops, to which they are often compared (as Mounts Sinai, Horeb, and Calvary), almost inaccessible, where, nevertheless, the atmosphere is always serene, like a beatified soul in the presence of God.

Such performances of art seem to call for the labors of a subordinate class of persons, who are not artists themselves, but who have attained to such discernment in art as to enable them, as it were, to stand between the every-day life of the general current of men, and the higher expressed developments of genius, and by pointing out the scope or inner meaning of great works of art, make them appreciable to those who have not had their attention turned to them.

Such appreciation, however, would be impossible if there were not something in common between the highest order of genius, and the subtle pervadings which bind all mankind in a brotherhood as fixed as the everlasting principles of truth.

There are so many forms of hermetic writing in the world, that it is next to impossible to give any definition by which they may be distinguished. It may indeed be asserted that they all aim to illustrate life; and life may therefore be said to be the secret of all that class of writings; but no one, by this sort of statement, can be at once placed in a condition to enter into the true sense of the writings themselves, since to do this a knowledge of the secret is necessary; and who can lay claim to that knowledge without subjecting himself to the charge of arrogance and presumption?

Here the story of the philosopher occurs to us, who, being asked what God is, requested a day to think before answering, and then another, and another day, finally acknowledging that the more he thought of the question, the more difficult he found it to answer.

So is it with life. It is in us and around us, visible in myriad forms, but in itself invisible; and who can say he knows what life is? It is presupposed in both the question and the answer any one may give, and this, too, whether the answer be affirmative or negative—whether we assume to define it, or, confounded with a sense

of the mystery, we deny all knowledge of it. We cannot hide ourselves from it; it is with us in our hopes and our fears, in our joys and our sorrows.

When we fully appreciate the difficulties of the problem, the question may insinuate itself into the mind, that is, into our sense of life, May not one answer serve for both questions,—what is God, and what is Life?

And just here a student of this subject may be in a fair position for inquiring into some of the forms in which hermetic writers have treated their subject, and especially the Sonnets attributed to Shakespeare; and now we declare it to be our purpose to show something of the meaning of those exquisitely beautiful, but still more wonderful Sonnets.

The question has long been agitated, as to whom those Sonnets were addressed; but no modern editor, with whose labors we are acquainted, appears to have considered for a moment that they belong to the class of hermetic writings having a profoundly mysterious sense, and no one seems to reflect that perhaps they cannot be explained or understood from any merely literal point of view. The efforts

of all of the critics appear to have been to discover to whom, as a person, the Sonnets were addressed; and the general opinion has been, that it was a young Earl, the Earl of Southampton. This opinion was recently strongly urged in the April number of the London Quarterly Review for this year (1864). We think we can show, beyond the possibility of a doubt, that this solution of the problem presented in the Sonnets is entirely untenable; and this shall follow as a necessary inference from the exhibition we propose to make of the real object addressed, and we will show this from the Sonnets themselves.

That the Sonnets present a problem, as yet unsolved, not only appears from the article on Shakespeare and his Sonnets in the Review just named, but from the many discussions to be found in the various editions of the poet's works whenever the editors have anything at all to say on the subject. Thus, in a recent edition, the editor remarks, "If we could once discover the true solution of that *enigma* which lies hidden in the Sonnets attributed to Shakespeare, we might perhaps learn much that is now mysterious in the history of his life."*

* Hazlitt's edition.

another place the same editor gives the opinion, that "his (Shakespeare's) Sonnets were probably among his earliest productions; but when they were written, where, and to whom they were addressed, and of whom they discourse, are all matters of mystery."

In the explanation we propose to make of the mystery, it is not denied but that many of the Sonnets have all the appearance of having been addressed to persons, sometimes to a man, and then again to a woman; and if this class of Sonnets stood alone they would not invite a mystical interpretation; but as they are found in a collection embracing a considerable number which cannot be understood as addressed to persons, while, at the same time, they admit of a decisive interpretation from what may be called the mystical theory, which may also without violence be applied to those apparently addressed to persons, it may properly be contended that the latter class are mystical also.

Love is a generic word, and we understand very well that the love of God is not only consistent with the love of man, but always includes and presupposes it; for which reason it is best figured under some special form of the love of man or woman.