Fernando Pessoa

SHAKESPEARE — Shakespeare was initially more vain than proud;

Shakespeare was initially more vain than proud; at the end of his life — or, at least, of his writing life — he became more proud than vain. It is easy to conjecture why: he was unappreciated; what appreciation he had was more insulting than to be enjoyed, for where he was rated well he was not rated high, and, thinking and knowing himself (for this must have done) the greatest genius of his age, he yet saw how whatever appreciation was shown him bulked small in view of the admiration in which Jonson was held, and others smaller than Jonson, and how appreciation no smaller than shown to him was shown to Daniel, to Webster, who knows if even to the Mundays, ("our best plotter"), the Heywoods and the Days. His vanity was necessarily shaken by this, if not abolished altogether; and the tendency to depression fatal in a temperament of which neurasthenia is a component must have achieved the transformation.

Pride is the consciousness (right or wrong) of our own worth, vanity the consciousness (right or wrong) of the obviousness of our own worth to others. A man may be proud without being vain, he may be both vain and proud he may be — for such is human nature — vain without being proud. It is at first sight difficult to understand how we can be conscious of the obviousness of our worth to others, without the consciousness of our worth itself. If human nature were rational, there would be no explanation at all. Yet man lives first an outer, afterwards an inner, life; notion of effect precedes, in the evolution of mind, the notion of the inner cause of effect. Man prefers being rated high for what he is not, to being rated half-high for what he is. This is vanity's working.

As in every man the universal qualities of mankind all exist, in however low a degree of one or another, so all are to some extent proud and to some extent vain.

Pride is, of itself, timid and contractive; vanity bold and expansive. He who is sure (however wrongly) that he will win or conquer, cannot fear. Fear — where it is not a morbid disposition, rooted in neurosis — is no more than want of confidence in ourselves to overcome a danger.

When therefore Shakespeare's vanity gave way to pride, or, better, when the mixture of much vanity and some pride which was initial in him gave way to a mixture of scant vanity and some pride, he was automatically dulled for action, and the neurasthenic element of his character spread like a slow flood over the surface of his hysteria.

The outward intellectual sign of vanity is the tendency to mockery and to the abasement of others. He only can mock and delight in the confusion of others who instinctively feels himself not amenable to similar mockery and abasement. The earlier part of Shakespeare's work is full of "gulls"; of derision of some figures. He takes part with some of his creations against others (...).

This declined towards the end of his written work. Humour supplanted wit. Humour is no more than the consciousness that what is laughable is akin to ourselves. It is born of the opposite of both vanity and pride, that is to say, of humility, of the sense, rational or instinctive, that at bottom we are no more than other men. Humour, if it had a philosophy, would be deterministic. The effect

pride he had in checking his vanity, the further checks on that vanity from inappreciation and the insuccess in higher things liberated more and more Shakespeare's humour.

His very pride could not grow because inappreciation dulls pride itself, if pride be not overweening and temperamental, as it was, for instance, in Milton, who, though not very vain, had nevertheless more vanity than he would have liked to have been aware of.

(Let us admire, yet never idolise. And if we must idolise, let us idolise truth only, for it is the only idolatry that cannot corrupt, since what idolatry corrupts is truth, and the idolatry of truth is therefore the only one which cannot corrupt (stands self-spended?)

Only an overweening and temperamental pride can resist constant inappreciation; some doubt must creep into the mind as to whether its sense of its own worth is really valid. The introspective mind has so often seen its Junos turn out to be clouds that it cannot be shaken in the assurance of so naturally misleading a thing as a man's appreciation of himself.

Inappreciation. — There are things in Shakespeare which a lower Elizabethan might have written in a happy moment; these were surely appreciated. But these are the lesser part of Shakespeare; if he had written but them, he would have been a man of talent, of great talent perhaps, as he essentially was, a man of genius. In so far as he was, not an Elizabethan poet, but Shakespeare, that is to

say, in so far as he was what we now admire him essentially for having been, he is sure to have been unappreciated. Those flashes of intuitive expression which in a cluster of words gather the scents of a thousand springs, those sudden epithets that flash down into the abysses of understanding, these, which are our daily astonishment and the reading over of which cannot pall their novelty nor sear their freshness, must have fallen flat on contemporary minds, for it is in these that Shakespeare, like genius itself, was "above his age". How can an age understand or appreciate what is, by definition, above it? Much of the best he wrote will have been taken for rant, nonsense or madness. We may rest assured that, if we could call up Jonson from the shades and ask him for examples of that (Shakespeare's) want of art (...), we would be surprised to hear him cite, among things which are perchance rant, many of the jewels of Shakespeare's greater verse.

Yet, as there is an intuition of understanding just as there is one of conception, one as rare and as flash-like as the other, once or twice some of the higher spirits of the age must have caught a sudden glimpse of the transcendency. This would be the worse for the appreciation of the author. Nothing so harms a man in the estimation of others than the sense that he may be their better. To the general and constant sense that he is not their superior there is added the occasional suspicion that he may be, and inappreciation, colourless in itself, takes on the hue of envy, for men envy by supposition, who admire only under certainty. Hesitation as to whether a man may be our better is as unnerving an hesitation as to whether something disagreeable may happen to us; we hope not, but we hope uncertainly. And, as we thereby fear the more the event we half-fear, we, in the other case, dislike the more the man we almost admire. In both cases, we dread the possibility of certainty more than the certainty itself ("we know not if we must admire").

Whether it is only the sense of inappreciation that plays like a gloom over the darker tragedies of Shakespeare's maturity, it is impossible to ascertain; but it is not likely that such inappreciation should have stood alone in the causation of the melancholy that shows directly in *Hamlet* that trickles through the phrases of *Othello* and of *King Lear* , that, here and there, twists, as if following the contortion of the suffering mind, the very wording of the supreme expressions of *Antony and Cleopatra* . Inappreciation itself unfolds into several depressive elements. We have first inappreciation itself, secondly the appreciation of lesser men, thirdly the sense that, some effort like that of other men — the learning of one, the connections of another, the chance, whatever it might have been, of a

third one, might have conquered the difficulty. But the very genius that causes the initial inappreciation dulls the mind to the activities that could counteract it. The poor and proud man, who knows that he would be less poor if he could but beg or humble himself, suffers no less from his poverty, not only from the better status of men less proud or more fortunate, but also from the impossibility of begging as they or stooping as they to what frees them from a similar poverty. There is then a revolt of the man against his own temperament; doubt sets in towards himself, and, as the poor and proud man may ask himself whether he is not rather unskilled in the things of practice than too proud to descend to them, or whether his pride be not the mask to himself of his incompetence for action, the inappreciated man of genius may fall into doubt whether his inferiority of practical sense is not an inferiority in itself and not only the negative side of a superiority, the defect of a merit which could not exist without that defect.

Shakespeare's case was patently worse. He had stooped the same arts as the lesser men that stood higher than he, as the still lesser men that stood as high as he or very little below him. He had done the same hackwork as they, without having been worn for that hackwork. He had altered and arranged alien plays, and (whatever he may have thought of that, for it is possible he may have repugned that less than we imagine, being both used to it and interated in the environment of that activity, he surely cannot have adapted himself to those conditions to the insane extent of thinking he was thereby doing justice to his great genius or in the right place of action for the possibilities of his mind. By doing what lesser men were naturally doing he had become himself, outwardly at least, a lesser man. Not only had he not revealed himself by thus stooping to the common drudgery; he had masked himself the more. For the learning, which was part of Jonson's credit with the public, he had, as we have seen, neither appetence nor patience; possibly he even had not time; and he had not received it in early youth, when it is imposed and not sought. From the establishment of influential connections, a humble condition possibly, a lack of disposition certainly, debarred him. To pushing his way among equal, by the social craft of mutual praise and the like, the pride he had, though not great, was too great, and it would have grown against the attempt, and gathered a fictitious force in the misuse (?).

He had possibly triumphed and made his way materially, in so far as money was concerned. That also, though agreeable in itself — whatever its exact degree might have been — , must have figured as an ironic comment in the margin of his inappreciation. To fail to be known justly as a poet is not compensated by

just success as a shopkeeper.

Shakespeare is the greatest failure in literature, and it is perhaps not too much to suppose that he must have been, to a great extent, aware of it. That vigilant mind could not have deceived itself as to this. The tragedy of his unsuccess was but the greater by the mixture with the comedy of his success.

All these are but modes and shapes of the inappreciation which he felt. But the depression of spirit, the dulling of the will, the sickening of purpose, which the sense of inappreciation caused, must have made themselves felt on other lines than the direct work for which his mind felt itself born. The will which was dulled for writing must have been dulled also for other ways of action. The depression of spirit must have had outlets other than the figure of Hamlet and the phrasing of the greater Tragedies. The sickening of purpose must have discoloured his life, as it paled his poems and his plays. And the joys untasted, the activities uncared for, the tasks avoided and remitted and hurried away must have recoiled, in their mental effect, upon the depression that engendered them and made greater the dispiritedness which was their cause.

To this extent we may justly and confidently go. What else there was, foreign to this, to radicate that depression we cannot now determine; if there were anything. What outward events of an untoward nature can have impinged on that depressed mind, it is useless to try to investigate. Thus much, however, we may say: that those events must have existed. If they had not, the expression of that dispiritedness would have been, not the verbal and psychological content of the Tragedies, but nothing at all. Depression leads to inaction; the writing of plays is, however, action. If may have been born of three things: 1) the need to write them — the practical need, we mean; 2) the recuperative power of a temperament not organically (only) depressed, reacting, in the intervals of depression, against depression itself; 3) the stress of extreme suffering — not depression, but suffering — acting like a lash on the cowering (?) sadness, driving it into expression as into a lair, into objectivity as into an outlet from self, for, as Goethe said, "action consoles of all."

The presence of all three factors can be predicted. The need to write these plays shows in the intensity and bitterness of the phrases that voice depression — not quiet, halfpeaceful, somewhat indifferent, as in the *Tempest* , but restless, sombre, dully forceful. Nothing depresses more than the necessity to act when there is no desire to act. — The recuperative power of the temperament, the great boon of Shakespeare's hysteria, shows in the fact that there is no lowering, but a heightening, of his genius. That part of that is due to natural growth,

need not, and cannot, be denied. But the overcuriousness of expression, the overintelligence that sometimes even dulls the edge of dramatic intuition (as in Laertes' phrases before mad Ophelia) cannot be explained on that line, because these are not peculiarities of growth of genius, but more natural to its youth than to its virile age. They are patently the effort of the intellect to crush out emotion, to cover depression, to oust preoccupation of distress by preoccupation of thought. — But the lash of outward mischance (no one can now say what, or how brought about, and to what degree by the man himself) is very evident in the constant choice of abnormal mental states for the basis of these Tragedies. Only the dramatic mind wincing under the strain of outer evil thus projects itself instinctively into figures which must utter wholly the derangement that is partly its own.

s. d.

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