

Fernando Pessoa

## **We shall move from private poets to public anthologies.**

We shall move from private poets to public anthologies. Tennyson, as a useless whole, occupies nearly a thousand double-column pages. How much Tennyson will occupy [in] the perhaps less than a thousand simple pages of the future complete English Anthology?

One thing that will happen, unless, with the progress of popular education (democracy) we grow progressively less rational, is the careful sifting, generation after generation, of absolute from relative values. One kind of relative value dies by death — the relative value that is absolute in respect of its own age. (We have spoken of it above). But there is another, and a subtler, kind of relative value — it is the relative value which is absolute out of respect of its own age. A man who, in the eighteenth century, happened, by some unknown mental trick, to write something like bad Tennyson or worse Mallarmé, would be an astonishing phenomenon in his time. He would attract our present historical attention by virtue of that extraordinary departure from his times; he would be called a genius and a forerunner, and he would have the concrete right to both titles. But bad Tennyson or worse Mallarmé would become bad Tennyson and worse Mallarmé as soon as there were a Tennyson and a Mallarmé, and the relative value would be flagrantly relative; it would become historical and not poetical. What would be such a man's position? (in the final scheme of celebrity?) He would have done an easy thing when it was difficult — that is all. But a genius is a man who does a difficult thing, even when it is easy.

The central thing about real great geniuses is that they are not forerunners. The very instance that the word arouses defines the case: that John the Baptist was Christ's forerunner means that he was unimportant in comparison with Christ.

But all our culture and greater latitude of experience both of culture and of sensation will not lead us to make "Lycidas" the forerunning of anything, unless that something be worth far less than "Lycidas". Shakespeare's phrasing is imitable — it is, indeed, very easy to imitate — but Shakespeare's genius is not.

It is curious to see how many great poets (artists) are implicit in earlier lessers; more curious still to distinguish in what cases there has been a mere

forerunning, in what a casual influence. But the essence of a great artist is to be explicit, and what was implicit was only implicit.

There is hardly any, if any, great artist in the world for whom a definite forerunner cannot be found. Each artist has a typical style; yet in almost every case, if not in every one, that typical style was already shadowed in a former artist of no importance. Whether there was a vague influence in the undercurrents of the age, which the first caught vaguely and the second clearly; whether there was a chance inspiration, like an outward thing in the former, which the latter, by direct contact, wakened in his temperamental brain into a definite inner inspiration; whether the two cases were consubstantial — not one of the hypotheses matters, except historically. The genius will be the final product; and he will be as final after as before.

The practicality of our times has had some artistic advantage, especially in literature. No detective story of to-day could be written in the style of "Tom Jones". We have become dramatic (however bad our dramas may be) and wish our novels to be as direct as dramas. This is a natural and a sane exigency. (Such dramas as Bernard Shaw's are survivals of an earlier tendency; they are anything but modern in their delaying thinkingness).

s. d.

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