

Fernando Pessoa

Genius is insanity made sane by dilution in the abstract,

Genius is insanity made sane by dilution in the abstract, like a poison converted into a medicine by mixture. Its proper product is abstract novelty — that is to say, a novelty that conforms at bottom to the general laws of human intelligence, and not to the particular laws of mental disease. The essence of genius is inadaptation to environment; that is why genius (unless it be accompanied by talent of wit) is generally incomprehended of its environment; and I say “generally” and not “universally” because much depends on the environment. It is not the same thing to be a genius in ancient Greece and in modern Europe or the modern world.

Shakespeare was unknown as a genius in his time, for the loud though posthumous praises of Ben Jonson are no more than the loud language of the time, devoid of meaning and applied by the same Jonson to men of whom no one to-day knows anything — that Lord Mounteagle of whom he says that he “stood the master-mind” (no less) in that time, or the very James I.

Shakespeare was admired in his time as a wit, not as a man of genius. How could he be admired as a man of genius? It was the creator of Falstaff that could be understood; the creator of Hamlet could not be. If the anti-Stratfordian greges had ever taken the trouble to notice this, many absurd comparisons with the praise given to Jonson or to other men of their time would have been rendered impossible.

Shakespeare is the example of great genius and great wit linked to insufficiency of talent. He is as supreme in the intuition that constitutes genius and in the quickness of strangeness that constitutes wit as he is deficient in the constructiveness and the co-ordination which constitute talent.

Milton is the example of the union of great genius and great talent. He has the intuition of genius and the formative power of talent. He had no wit; he was, in fact, a pedant. But he had the pedant’s firm, though heavy, will.

Wordsworth, for instance, is the example of pure genius, genius unallied to talent or to wit. Whereas Shakespeare, however imperfect in the “whole” some of his works may be, is never tedious and never mean; whereas Milton, however dull he may be, is never low, Wordsworth, when his genius deserts him, falls beneath meanness and below dullness (. . .)

s. d.

“Erostratus”. in Páginas de Estética e de Teoria Literárias. Fernando Pessoa. (Textos estabelecidos e prefaciados por Georg Rudolf Lind e Jacinto do Prado Coelho.) Lisboa: Ática, 1966: 184.