

Biography, Genius, and Inspiration: Clarification of Terms as a Contribution to the Authorship Debate

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The First Entrance to the Work of Art

Although the idea of Shakespeare as a *genius* and an *inspired* author, like many other Romantic concepts, has declined along with the rise of postmodernism, these terms may still be applied to him with complete justification. The following essay will consider what is truly meant by these terms, inquire into the relationship between the concepts of *genius* and *inspiration*, and how they affect our ideas about the biography of an artist, and finally determine whether through these considerations the identity of the writer of the Shakespearean works may be more accurately deciphered. Our inquiry will not be an investigation into lost or unknown facts, but will supply a tangible approach to the man.

In considering the problem of the identity of the writer of the Shakespearean works we regularly encounter the question of whether it is really important to understand this biography, or whether on the contrary the work may be better grasped and evaluated through a formal analysis which ignores extrinsic factors. Naturally we must affirm that the work can be understood in this way. Of course it is possible to read and even converse with a literary work without knowing the biography of an actual author, and sometimes we may even find biography an impediment to unprejudiced inquiry into the work itself. The reader must be allowed to experience directly, because it is false to seek realities or life experiences in an artist's work as he very rarely intends just to retell them in the same way.

The Second Entrance: Art and Artist, Combined

Admittedly we first develop an interest in the author primarily by reading, through which we encounter the man who over time speaks to us through his own work. Whenever we read we are bound — even unconsciously — to establish a relationship with him. Becoming aware of this encounter may reveal new aspects of the work and enable an inner conversation with him, i.e., we may question him, measure him, and weigh our consent with him in our reading — we may even encounter him by (partly) distancing ourselves from him, which is definitely worthy of a mature reader. The work and the impulse of the artist can thereby become understood in a much more profound way.

With this discovery of biography, of the idea of individual creativity, or the concept of historical circumstances, etc., a new portrait of the artist and his works becomes available, and from it we may acquire a new world view. After all the modern investigations of literary biography, and what is now known through the history of the arts, music, and literature, surely we may agree that we would not wish to renounce them for trivial reasons. If we wish to more deeply understand Goethe's, Schiller's, Holderlin's, Van Gogh's, Trakl's, Kafka's, or Celan's art, do we not accomplish this by understanding how much and in what ways their productions and their lived biographies are creatively interfused with one another? Strangely enough, when studying Shakespeare the focus is usually on the Elizabethan times and questions dealing with his biography are often rejected as being unimportant, even inadequate.

The Significance of Biography

Let us consider if we can more precisely clarify what the phrase, "biography of the artist," might mean. It includes the class of extrinsic commonplaces like mother tongue, historical context, education, encounters and conversations, reading experiences, seized or lost opportunities, fulfilled and unfulfilled hopes, open and hidden secrets, and understanding or lack of understanding from fellow human beings. One's biography is formed not only by various individual experiences and circumstances, but also is shaped by the actions, reactions and dispositions of the artist himself — factors which are reciprocally established aspects of the individual and his world. Biography must be comprehended as a way of designing one's life and thus as an indirect *revelation* of a human being.

Naturally, none of these things are squandered in creative work, for writing does not take place in an airless vacuum. For the writer his or her biography is, if put figuratively, like a stone quarry from which with hard labor a stone may be extracted, or even sometimes fall unexpectedly without any effort at all in the writer's lap. What really matters is whether the inherent form of the stone, i.e., the deeper meaning of one's experiences, can be found.

Of course we must also affirm that it is one-sided and incomplete to simplistically derive the literary work from the biography of the artist alone, but it is equally misleading and absurd to extract it from traces of entirely marginal experiences or sufferings.²

Genius

Whether the stone itself becomes meaningful depends upon many other factors. Attention, refinement, awareness, the capacity for empathy and imagination, or for deepening, a flair for apprehending the deeper meaning of portentous events and for grasping the artistic potential of literary figures — all these are capabilities by which the artist shapes or changes themes or motifs, and through which he establishes new cultural trends.

By means of these gifts the artist creates his own world and plot lines, which may often proceed from outward experiences, but can also be obtained independently from them. From the overarching grandness of his natural disposition and under the impetus of his inspiration he appears with the creative force of genius (the idea of “genius” includes both the man and his capabilities). When all is said and done, we should probably admit that the origins of genius are not truly comprehensible. We do know that a genius understands and extends the possibilities of his materials, of which he is freely in charge, and he exercises his own unmistakable style over the transformational possibilities of his discoveries, establishing an unforeseen plenitude and opening an entire new world, if necessary even against resistance, either subjective or objective, or both.

Inspiration.....

Inspiration can be translated as “breath” or “breathing in” or “breathing on”; this is not the same as intuition (“prompting”), which is rather directly connected with action or immediately attained certainty. Instead it is nearer to overhearing, the ability to respond to something said in confidence to the reader. We should here definitely consider the experience of the ancients, who it is said believed that their works originated from a muse (both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, for example, begin with an invocation to the Muse or the goddess). Inspiration, in other words, is like an emergence of impulses from barely glimpsed alien spheres, and what he dares extract from it often surprises even the writer himself. But even against his own expectation, he accepts it as belonging to his own being, feels it as an answer to an inner inquiry or mood of which he may not even have been aware. In the process it can work on the ordinary and inconspicuous experiences of the artist to open inner doors; it can make tangible the deepest layers that all superficial experience of the world conceals; finally it can call forth in him new images, sounds, or word coinages. Only such inspiration ultimately raises mere talent to genius. Anyone can have an approximate impression of the effect of the workings of inspiration, for example a musical composition, a painting, a literary work, or landscape or portrait. He may

not only experience the discovery of beauty, but can feel himself approached and spoken to in the work, by which he believes a secret to be mentioned, and which he desires to understand and transmit.

In Our Case the Inspiration of a Poet

Other than music or color, language is the expressive medium of poetic inspiration, basically accessible to everyone, and as a rule tied to our everyday lives. Superficially considered, it is a means of communication, information, and description. However, the poet approaches it — as does every genuine artist his “material” — through a relationship which for him may be an existential one,³ through which he reveals his deeper worldview and individual mode of experience. Verbal inspiration allows him to put into words inner or outer experiences, thoughts or feelings, which rise above the banalities of everyday life, and become articulable through his art. The poet’s inspiration can naturally also lead to an idea or an ideal shape of a theatrical scene or plot, which may possibly appear like a revelation to him.

...Especially With Shakespeare

With some justification one may distinguish *made* from *inspired* art. Made art is characterized by a superficial look at personalities and the need to lecture or instruct others. Inspiration instead expands and overtakes the usual boundaries of the merely *personal*. The British Romantic John Keats (1795-1821) finds in Shakespeare an almost total readiness to draw inspiration from his life experiences, whatever they were, in order to render them in the most highly individuated verbal expression, wrought by “negative capability.” Shakespeare himself is as one who has stepped behind his own work — back into his “negative capability” — in order to create room for his boundless inspiration through the distinctive speech modes of the theatrical arts, his depth of content, elaborate transformation of literary sources and the liveliness of his characters. These inspired creations become for the genius an element of character that naturally also imprints itself on his entire pursuit of his own life. Yet there also lies in him a tendency towards self-surrender or resignation in the spheres of life outside literary self-understanding. Reaching and exceeding the boundaries of everyday life, through his neglect of worldly concerns, he may risk endangering the security of his own existence.

Shakespeare and Goethe...

What can this reconciliation of the roles of genius and inspiration, to which we now add the topic of biographical knowledge, contribute to the discovery of the writer’s identity in the case of Shakespeare? As a proof supporting the view that the player William Shakespeare is the writer of the tragedies and comedies, it is often mentioned that only a man with theatre experience (which Edward de Vere also

had) could produce such great theatrical art. If we accept this as a real biographical inference, we are met with a surprising paradox: Having gone down this path, can we now exclude other such connections or avoid seeking further biographical particularities in the work? We ask: Cannot there also exist, along with “negative capability,”⁴ a wish for nourishment from comprehensive experience and, following from that, a life intensive discovery of impulsive experience and opportunity? Could the writer have sought the full experience and intensity of life, not just to supply the content of his work, but in order to expand and deepen his own capacity to discover the possibilities of life more generally?

It is an indisputable fact that there are many conspicuous correspondences between the life of Edward de Vere and the contents of the entire canon.⁵ We shall concentrate here on one of the central aspects of the collected works, which will lead us to the core of these similarities between life and art. One of the deepest emerging inner struggles pervading the Shakespearean works is the question of reality versus appearance, “to be or not to be,” sense and senselessness. In the comedies we encounter these themes, so to speak, brought forward in a lighter key, fusing reality and dream, confusion with clarity, earnest and play. In *King Lear*, by contrast, we are faced with this question as an inescapable abyss of life. Let us consider the last scene of the play, following the interpretation of Fred Dehenny, but pursuing another track.

Lear has lost all — his kingdom, his followers, his family and close friends — but of all these the death of his daughter Cordelia weighs most heavily on his heart. Not even a refuge in prison with her remains for him. Lear dies with the knowledge of having failed to recognize real love and in doing so having burdened himself with guilt. Let us directly compare, firstly, these “terrible fear-arousing five minutes of literary history”⁶ with a tragic scene from Goethe’s work, the conclusion of *Faustus*. Faust’s beloved Gretchen has loaded herself down with the most severe guilt over the death of her brother and her mother. Half insane, half seeking atonement, she rejects a flight from the prison and, hoping for the assistance of heaven, faces the sentencing.

Goethe allows Mephisto to interpret this event in the sense, “She is judged.” However, he also modifies this ending, adding a counterpoint: From the invisible deeps he allows a voice to intone, “She is saved.” By this means the harshness of the situation is partly mitigated, and the finality of the tragedy and the suffering is negated. Incidentally, it may be observed, that Gretchen is modeled after Ophelia in *Hamlet*; here also biographical experience, namely reading, recorded deep in him, had even inspired Goethe to write his history of *Doctor Faustus*. In contrast to Goethe, Lear’s experience is so overpowering that no way out of it can be devised. Lear’s identity and existence, the putative order of his world as well as his relationship to it are dissolved altogether. Surprisingly, something else has to be taken into account. Fred Dennehy writes that he had seen “at least half a dozen performances.”⁷ of *King Lear* and that he always left the public theatre stunned, as if the ground had been destroyed underneath his feet. But at the same time he experienced unfeigned exhilaration. The theatre was the place where his soul awoke — entering a primal zone that he had hardly ever otherwise been able to approach.

The fact that both the hopelessness and terror of human existence are revealed on the stage as a genuine human experience and in the highest poetic formulation proves the writer's familiarity with such a situation. Strangely enough this terror seems to be overcome or coped with through the perfect poetic form; we may even sense a kind of elevation, a certainty of being in the face of horror. Thus Shakespeare's art can be experienced deeply; there is not the slightest hint of a constructed, purely intellectual ideality that may obscure the power of experience or the inspirations supplied by life and art.

...and Edward De Vere...

Dare we suppose that the authenticity and the deep honesty of *King Lear* stands not in contrast to the author's biography? Can this and all the other frequently inscrutable Shakespearean dramas have been created not in isolation from his own experiences, but at least partly as an expression of them? Is the authenticity we feel from *Lear* a common mark of both biography and literary work? With de Vere we find, even beyond a factual corroboration, an inner convergence between biography and literary art. The elements of this convergence include his extensive and absorbingly thorough education at Cecil House, his university career, his achievements and high position in the court of Elizabeth I, his extensive travels, his obligation to participate in war, his devoted passion to the drama (even in light of the restrictions and taboos of his class), his association with many contemporary writers, and his extensive patronage of many creative spirits of the Elizabethan age.

His jealousy, guilt, and love liaisons all afforded him a great intensity of life experience. Through the tapestry of his biography is revealed a great ambition for life, a longing for exploring one's own self and widening one's horizons and an urge to fully challenge one's talents; but we see also emotional intensity, not fleeing from the darker sides of one's soul, doubtful internal debate, and emotional explosions. Altogether we certainly do not find a secure or stable ascetic view of existence, but instead a man with contradictory tendencies towards excess and self-sacrifice. Turning back, then, to our previous question, we find it indirectly but completely answered. The quest for a full experience undoubtedly leaves visible signs, balancing against Keats's so-called "negative capability," which through artistic transformation may yield wonderful results, but may equally endanger one's fixed ground of existence. Naturally Goethe, like many other artists, also possessed this "negative capability" to a certain extent, but in contrast to de Vere, he experienced more existential stability due a disposition which he had inherited from his father:

From my father I take my stature,
To live life in earnest,
But from my mother a joyful nature
And my delight in inventing stories.

“To live life in earnest” means to weigh things up when pursuing goals and to maintain a necessary distance to inner and outer influences, which may unsettle or endanger one, especially when trying out one’s faculties or giving way to one’s inclinations — faculties de Vere definitely lacked, for he exposed himself to all dangers, going to the utmost extremes. His death in 1604 remains clouded. Having been lamed in a 1583 street feud, he had squandered his own resources, and now lived by the support of his wife and his annual court stipend, with only a few surviving friends. At the end of his life de Vere bears similarity to Lear — one who, having fallen from a former great fullness of life, has now encountered the approaching boundary of life’s conclusion, that “undiscovered bourne, from which no traveller returns” (*Hamlet*, 3.1.80). He may well have felt himself an outcast, and we even gain the impression of a stumbler, excluded from the world of glamorous entertainments at the court, for which he felt such an abiding passion. We must resist the temptation to firmly establish this concurrence or primarily explain or interpret his works from such biographical coincidences; however, it would be equally wrong to overlook the striking existential nearness in de Vere’s life to the core of the Shakespearean plays and sonnets. Let us become receptive to a writer who reveals himself through his works not as one who writes about life but as one who writes out of deep experience.

...and three Other Authorship Candidates...

Might we also find in the lives (or works) of the three other authorship candidates aspects that can be assessed as counterparts to the genius-inspiration discussion implying similar chances and risks? Let us consider the three most probable candidates in light of this question.

From everything that we know about the Stratford player William Shakespeare, or *Shakspere* as he spelled his name, we gain the impression of a man who vigorously pursued any prospect of financial success. He married early and became, like de Vere (by his first wife), the father of three children. Although he relocated from Stratford to London, where he became a member of a theatrical troupe, there is no evidence that he was an actor. Members of an Elizabethan dramatic troupe pursued various occupations, including but not limited to being actors. He acquired shares in the Globe Theatre and came to make money by various business interests. He did so well that in 1597, at the age of 33, nineteen years before his death, he purchased the second best house in Stratford, where he later was able to pass several years of leisure after retiring from writing.

Compared to the downwardly mobile de Vere, his dynamic development, from petty small-holder to leisurely bourgeois, constitutes an entirely contrasting life-arc to de Vere’s. And this raises a pertinent question: Where is the content, the inner substance, in Shakespeare’s life? His last will and testament, a crabbled ranking and meticulous division of all his goods, evokes an impression of abundant superficiality. From his life we solely have evidence about his everyday practices, which do not reveal any visible connection to his artistic production. Until some

is given there is also no mandatory reason to believe that any further revelation of facts will reveal it. So the traditional makeshift maneuvers us into imagining Shakespeare going through the world (London) with his particularly wide-open eyes, and receiving the impulses for his creations straight from received observation of the lives of others, but never accessing his own experience as a source of creative inspiration.

Might the scientist Francis Bacon inhabit this domain of experiential inspiration? Naturally he possesses the comprehensive and thorough education observable in the work of Shakespeare. Yet this does not solve the whole riddle. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes novels, gives a tip against Bacon's authorship, which should be taken seriously. In his poem, "Shakespeare's Exposition," Holmes considers the claim that Bacon had written the Shakespeare works, but rejects it because of the poor quality of Bacon's own poetry, which Doyle found neither inspired nor a work of genius.⁸ Doyle also considered it absurd to think that a genius would be able to jump here and there from mediocre to inspired work. Even if the work flows as from a spring, it does not mean that an author can turn on or off his inner participation at will. One might also ask whether the natural historian Bacon, with his close involvement with the outer world of rational speculation, would be likely to achieve Shakespearean depths, or if he could inhabit the supernatural world depicted, for example, in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The last deed of Bacon's life was to attempt to determine if a frozen hen would remain preserved for a longer time if placed outdoors and stuffed with snow. As a result he acquired and eventually succumbed to pneumonia, from which he died.

And Christopher Marlowe? For him an answer is less easy to find. It is still unresolved whether he faked his own killing in a tavern brawl, or his capital indictment caused his judicial execution, or whether he actually was murdered. The lack of clear answers to these questions may allow different options for interpretation. One can pursue an inexhaustible series of subsequent questions, for example whether Marlowe's work already reveals a tendency to follow the patterns which appear — supposedly at a later time — in the Shakespearean works. Many readers, however, perceive that in spite of some similarities and common passages the characteristic style of Marlowe's work is quite distinct from Shakespeare's. Moreover Marlowe's plays are lacking in the kinds of creative wordplay that are a definite characteristic of our writer's work.

With Marlowe, questions abound. Did he supply all the additional works, even those published under the name "Shakespeare," also from his subsequent life, which he spent in exile? Was he lucky in his "afterlife," or did he prioritize themes of exclusion? Did he have access to a library through which he continued his education and remained current after 1593? Was he in danger of being discovered? The answers to these questions remain entirely speculative. We know nothing concrete.

...and Edward de Vere again...

While we can construct connections between life and work for these three well-known alternative candidates only through creative leaps, in de Vere's life and developmental trajectory we discover many elements which fit the Shakespearean works like a key in a lock. With considerable justification we may then answer our original question as follows: The deep authenticity of *King Lear* and other works springs from a life that is stamped by an unconditional devotion to existential experience, regardless of consequence, and correspondingly marked by a life and creative process which gave license to desire for deepest inspiration. In his will to see through reality and appearance, to disrupt the illusory distinction between inner and outer experience and take his readers to the margins of existence, he reproduces these themes in his works. Thus we are given the outstanding result of a life transcending borders, revealing us the victory over the world of appearance in the frame of a kaleidoscope of human emotions.

...and the Reader

We have examined the question of the identity of the author independent of many lines of inquiry and carefully considered various aspects of the problem scholars scrutinized, which often stood in the background, but which nevertheless are implicated in the deep contents and genesis of the work. Traces of the inner participation of the author with his creations bring the work closer to us, allowing access to an appreciation for the deep inspiration, for the power of genius and a biographical framework can keep our relationship with him creatively fluid. Such an approach enables us to see in the writer of the Shakespearean works one of or even the first modern artist –wrestling with his own existence as his art is a possibility of self-expression which cannot easily be brought in harmony with his own life.

Endnotes

- ¹ This article originally appeared in *Spectrum Shake-speare*, Stuttgart 2013, 28-40. It is here translated from the German by Roger Stritmatter and Elke Brackmann.
- ² Shortly before the release of the film *Anonymous* Thomas W70 posted an essay (on: www.freitag.de/community/blogs/thomas-w70/wer-schrieb-shakespeares-werke), in which our position is confirmed: "It was especially my intensive research on Goethe that made me realize that in order to produce great art the excessive exploitation of one's personal experience, even more than education and the command of literary skills, is relevant. In his conversations with Eckermann Goethe keeps criticizing young writers, blaming them for dealing with topics that were beyond their horizon. This, according to Goethe, is not a problem with minor issues, but if central topics are not based on personal experiences, their works are doomed to failure.... This is overwhelmingly true of nearly all leading 19th and 20th century authors, whose biographies are well documented. This does, however, not imply staring at the naked realities only. Of course, Goethe did not commit suicide as a young man and Thomas Mann did not die in Venice. What really matters is that one's life experiences and constellations may often take on threatening dimensions or escalate for the sake of dramatic clarity or become idealized or elated."
- ³ From the lyric poet Reiner Kunze come the following lines from his small poem, "The Writer in Exile," which of this deep connection (between "material" and existential reflection) furnish some comprehension: "but who knows, what this means, that 'one's life depends on a word.'" The Russian lyricist Jossif Brodsky also expresses the feeling to which Kunze alludes, namely that language itself employs the poet as a tool to develop itself: for him speech was its own being, the impulses of which the writer might obtain access. We find confirmation of this from other areas of art: the painter Emil Nolde, for example, tells us that the "colors loved his hand."
- ⁴ Fred Dennehy in his essay "King Lear's End: What Remains," *die Drei*, January 2013, coined this term (22).
- ⁵ The attack by pirates on his return trip from Italy to England appearing also in *Hamlet*; the comparison of Polonius in *Hamlet* and William Cecil, Oxford's father-in-law, the street battle in *Romeo and Juliet* recalls the circumstances of de Vere's lameness. On the exceptionally copious connections between de Vere's life and the Shakespearean works, see William Farina, *De Vere as Shakespeare: An Oxfordian Reading of the Canon*, McFarland, 2006.
- ⁶ See Dennehy, 20.
- ⁷ Dennehy, 20.
- ⁸ See for a discussion Richard Ramsbotham, *Who Wrote Bacon?: William Shakespeare, Francis Bacon and James I, a Mystery for the 21st Century*. London: Temple Lodge Publishing, 2004.