

From the Foreword to *This Star of England*

(Coward-McCann, 1952)

 Besides the two authorities that traditionally confront us—the authority of government, which tells us what is incumbent upon citizens of a society, and the other, theological, philosophical, or scientific, which sets forth our genesis and our significance in the universe—besides these, there is still another voice, non-authoritative, personal and potent, which interprets us to ourselves. This is the voice of the artist. It is the great literature, the painting or sculpture, the symphony or concerto, opera or oratorio, which imparts a conviction of truth—of ultimate harmony and meaning—and produces in us a feeling of exaltation.

Often the truths conveyed are ephemeral: they do not endure as patterns of life shift and change. But the work of a few transcends their own era, remains fresh and vital, abiding with us. Of no one is this more strikingly the case than of Shakespeare. The nature of Shakespeare's genius was "such as to exalt the glory of man," to show that the resources of human nature are unfathomable and that the human spirit can be neither explained nor contained by the mean attributes the rationality of our age allows it.

Since his time, the principles of governmental authority, as well as the theological, philosophical, and scientific edifices of thought, have undergone drastic alteration or have been abandoned. Yet Shakespeare's conception of man seems not only to have retained its validity but to acquire added force and illumination with the passage of the centuries. As science progresses and man's stock in himself tends to sink lower in relation to his increasing mastery over his material environment, the prospect is not that the truths bequeathed to us by Shakespeare and a few other superlative artists will be superseded, but that they will be the only certainties we can hold to.

If Shakespeare's appeal is greater today than it has been during the three intervening centuries since his time, the reason may be that our age, like that of Elizabeth, is one of expanding horizons, of speculation in unfamiliar fields, of formidable uncertainties and few signposts. The roving and unconstrained imagination of four centuries ago finds its counterpart in this present age of unstable

values and shattered institutions, as it has not done in all the years between. The man of the Renaissance was an adventurer in a chartless universe, and this is what man has again become in the twentieth century. The directions in which our predecessors in the era of Elizabeth and of the Medicis set forth into the unknown are those whom we have followed: the mould of our civilization took shape in that age of trial and discovery. What we are now was to a considerable extent determined in those formative years of our culture.

All art has a tremendous potency for mankind, none more so than the incandescent creativeness of Shakespeare's genius. It has been observed that Balzac's characters were more typical of the generation that followed him than of the one he depicted; likewise that, after Kipling's best stories had been written, such men as he described began to be encountered in the far places of the world; so that these artists actually created men.

It is not the business of art to follow reality. Reality follows art. When we gaze at a sunset, we do not see it "as it is"—as an amalgam of Copernicus's vision of the earth's revolution round the sun and Max Planck's quantum theory of light. We see it through the eyes of generations of painters and poets who have infused into the spectacle the lofty symbol of aspiration and resignation or the grandeur of celestial harmony. The mathematician cannot postulate his universe without symbols. Without words man cannot think; and without the identification of our emotions which the artist has traditionally given us we could scarcely feel. For it is not only the phenomena of our material abode that art has endowed with significance: art has, through the ages, given us our ideas of ourselves, the intimate and impelling characterizations which we recognize as "true" because they come to life in terms of our common experience. A character in fiction becomes real in proportion as we can see ourselves in him. At the same time, we are real to ourselves in proportion as we recognize ourselves in portrayals of men and women in literature. Inspired by the artist, man creates and re-creates himself. The greater the artist, the more enduring is the conception of man that he provides. There is perhaps no other criterion of supremacy in art.

The pre-eminence of Shakespeare lies in his having achieved a more comprehensive realization of man's potentialities than any other poet has done. He not only created characters, but in a very real sense he created the English race as we now know it. All genuine artists are explorers. They extend the boundaries of our known world, and we others follow, our heritage and our lives enhanced by their vision. Their conception of mankind is fulfilled in time by the culture of which they are the expression; their bright vision becomes a commonplace. Although many a poet has only a transitory influence because, limited to a peculiar set of circumstances, he lacks universality and thus permanent significance, Shakespeare is immortal. The spectacle of his dramas gives us a sense of ultimate realization of essential humanity, as nearly ultimate as we are likely to conceive; gives us, indeed, an apprehension like a god's.

It is not that Shakespeare's characters are superhuman: literature abounds in characters of superhuman heroism, superhuman strength, or villainy, and we

find them merely tedious. Shakespeare's men and women are not superhuman but superbly human.

What is absent from Shakespeare is the mediocre, the lifeless, the half-formed, the imperfectly comprehended, the trite, the passive, the mean and the meaningless. What is absent, it might be said, is that which modern writers conscientiously represent and define, on the grounds that life is like that. This is what we imply when we say that Shakespeare's conception of man is a lofty one. For to him it is the essence of man's destiny to encompass a totality of experience and to bear a burden of self-knowledge that marks him a figure of infinite capacity, himself at once the explanation and the mystery of the universe. However else Shakespeare's heroes and heroines, villains and villainesses feel and act, they feel and act greatly, in keeping with an exalted conception of man's fate. In a time like ours when the arts form what has been called a petty conspiracy to debase the stature of man, one finds reassurance in the manifest instinct of our generation to turn to the poet who, above all others, has endowed man with a stature great even in his weakness, transcendent in meaning even in the face of final futility and extinction.

In a way, it may be considered a tribute to the works of this genius that almost from the time of his death the large majority of people have been content tacitly to assume that these works were given to the world like manna. All of a sudden, in the conventional view—or at best after a few years' gestation of a most mysterious kind—the dramas and poems simply appeared, full-panoplied, like Pallas from the brow of Zeus. What was their substance? Why were they written? More than three centuries of critical scholarship throw no light upon these questions. Indeed, such questions seem hardly to have arisen in scholastic minds. What manner of man was he who brought forth the supreme works of literature of our language? "Little," we are told, "is known of the author of the plays"; or, in a shameless imposition upon our credulity, we are given "lives" of Shakespeare which are airy imaginings undisciplined except by a few facts largely irrelevant.

The Elizabethan age was the young manhood of our civilization. It was a time when we awoke to the world around us and took fire from what we saw; a time when, as in the spring, the essences stored beneath the surface through the long medieval twilight rose in all their vigor for the flowering of the Renaissance. It was above all, as we have said the time when the character of our culture took shape. And in no one person was the quality of the age so richly illuminated, so powerfully sustained, as in the author of the poems and dramas of Shakespeare. He was to this Golden Age as the centerpole of a tent to the canvas. The whole literature of the times was elevated through him. Like Aeschylus, in the Golden Age of Greece, he inspired and exceeded his followers. Contemporaneous writers attained to excellence because they shared the stage with him. Without this man's genius, there would have been no such Elizabethan age as we know.

Had his plays and poems been frankly offered as anonymous, no doubt the scholars of subsequent times would have been quick to respond to the challenge and would long since have cleared up the mystery of their origin. The works were, however, published under the name "William Shakespeare," which resembled the

name of an obscure young grain-dealer of Stratford, one William Shaksper (or Shagsper, or Shakspe, or Shaxper, as it was variously written). According to the few meagre records of him which exist, this Shaksper spent some years in London during the period when the dramas were appearing in the public theatres. As a result of this coincidence, generations of school-children have been instructed to believe that the incomparably talented and sensitive genius who wrought the plays out of the tumult of joys, anguish, and intellectual zest to which they bear unmistakable witness, out of a broad learning and experience, out of an intimate familiarity with the whole range of court-life, to say nothing of a jealous and passionate pride of heritage, who contributed more than any other hundred writers to the creation of the language we speak, was a kind of amiable nonentity, nearly unknown to his contemporaries, almost illiterate. We are told that his interest in the literary age he crowned was so slight that after dashing off the plays he returned to the grain business in Stratford and for a period of years paid no further heed to literature, received not a single visitor from the theatrical or literary world, was never referred to, while living, as a writer, was accorded no public comment upon his death; further, that he had never thought it worth while to teach his daughters to read or write, and that he left no book or manuscript in his carefully drawn will. This is the legend we were taught as children to believe, and most of us as adults have been content with it.

The conventional attribution of the works of Shakespeare has corrupted the judgment and insight of generations. It has misled us as to the whole nature of artistic creation. Solely on the strength of the example Shakespeare has been supposed to afford, we have been prone to believe that the artist may be no more than a pipeline between a source of divine inspiration and a pad of paper, that since his participation is only that of a medium in a séance, all things are possible to him without volition, knowledge, or effort. This fiction corresponds with no valid human experience. It would reduce art to the level of prestidigitation, of pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Yet one must accept it if one is to believe that the dramas of Shakespeare were written by a man who—if he could write at all—could have had no possible experience of what he was writing about, and to whom the point of view from which he wrote would have been foreign to a degree almost impossible for us to comprehend in these days of social fluidity and classlessness.

The identification of the uneducated, unlettered, undistinguished, and virtually unknown Shaksper with the brilliant, highly cultivated, worldly, intuitive genius whose self-portrait emerges unmistakably from the series of nobly born Shakespearean heroes, imposes upon us not merely a misconception of the personality behind the dramas but a misconception of the origins of all artistic production. For, as even the meanest artist knows, there is nothing upon which the creator can call outside himself. What he produces must come from what he contains, and all his prayers will not add to the raw material with which he works one single experience, one element of knowledge, one insight that he has not himself acquired honestly and for the most part painfully in the process of living. There is no help to be sought from any quarter. What he produces is what he is. It is himself that he mines: there is no other source of ore. That is why the task of artistic creation is among the

most exhausting occupations known to man. Joseph Conrad remarked that he had spent twelve hours a day bent over in the hold of a ship under the weight of hundred-pound sacks of wheat, but that this toil was not to be compared with that of writing.

It is, therefore, not only the author of the Shakespearean dramas who has so long awaited recognition. It is all artists. To those who have labored in the bitter void where artistic creation can alone take place, in order to enlarge the world in which our spirits may roam, the least repayment we can make is to disabuse ourselves of the myth that spontaneous generation can occur in the mind of the artist, and to comprehend that his achievement has been wrested from the resistant soil of the experience he has endured and mastered.

Of all Shakespeare's contemporaries of whom we have any record, the least likely to have written the plays and poems was William Shaksper. Thirty-five years ago an English schoolmaster, J. Thomas Looney, having like so many others found it impossible to relate the one to the other, set out with an open mind to try to determine who among all possible candidates *could* have written the plays. On the basis of internal evidence, he first enumerated all the characteristics and qualifications which the author must have had. Against these he measured all the possibilities and inevitably eliminated each—all of them but one. Only one man met the clear specifications. As he pressed his inquiries further, additional supporting evidence came to light. The case, as it progressed, approached ever nearer the irrefutable. The results of this fascinating work of ratiocination were published under the title, *Shakespeare Identified*. The findings contained in that study were, it is evident, unlikely ever to be challenged. However, *Shakespeare Identified*, masterful as was its analysis, left enormous reaches of the subject unexplored.

Since its publication, a vast amount of new evidence has been unearthed, a great part of it as a result of the research which led to the present volume. All of it confirms the initial identification. It would seem fair to say that at last the picture, pieced together from a thousand fragments, each of which fits perfectly beside its neighbors, is now in all essentials complete. In particular the central mystery—why the author of the plays was forced to accept anonymity—is finally explained.

However, the main problem to which this work addresses itself is not the identity of the author, though that is fully established, but the infinitely more extensive and complicated matter of how his personality is revealed in the poems and plays, and how the meaning of innumerable passages—indeed, of whole plays and of the entire sonnet-sequence—which scholars have been content to pass over as enigmatic, is to be found in the dramatist's life and character and those of his renowned contemporaries.

It has been necessary for the writers of this work to reconstruct an era: an era we rightly think of as a Golden Age. Insofar as this has involved them in research so extended that it seemed at times they would never emerge from it, no apology is required. But the time has come when readers are asked also to involve themselves in this undertaking. And at this stage an apology is, indeed, due. Not—in the words of Mr. Snagsby—to put too fine a point on it, the results of this research are of large dimensions. The explanation is that nothing of smaller scope than this book seems to have been possible.

The author of the Shakespearean dramas and the great age in which he lived fitted like hand and glove. Each took character from the other; and to understand the one you must understand the companion-piece. The dramas themselves are rich and complex as are few other works of human artistry: the bafflement of generations of scholars bears witness to that. Many of them are three plays in one, each veridical on its own level, as will be shown. Finally, the personality of the creator is no less profound, manifold, and fascinating than the plays. There are, thus, three elements to be examined: the man, the works, and the times; and the relations of each element to the other two have required exploration. The task of bringing to light all that has been obscured beneath the accumulated sedimentation of three centuries' neglect and misunderstanding is not one of a month or of a year. It was not intended by the man responsible for the initial concealment that the work should be done at all. The poet masked behind the name, "Shakespeare," though like Ariel he commanded the spirits of the air, was helpless, as may now be seen, against those earthly powers whose high interests demanded that his authorship of the poems and dramas be unknown. There has, thus, been more than the accident of neglect to be overcome. There has been the studied purpose of those in a position to enforce their will against the dramatist both during his lifetime and after his death.

The author of *King Henry the Fifth* himself, seeking to "cram within this wooden O the very casques that did affright the air at Agincourt," could not have felt one-tenth so abashed as have the writers of this volume who, doubting that justice could ever be done in the compass of a single book to this most strange and exciting story in all the literary history of the English-speaking world, have yet "dared on this unworthy scaffold to bring forth so great an object." The book, then, is not a large one. These matters are relative. It is a small one. And it is for this that apologies are owed.

To whom is it addressed? It is believed that all readers of Shakespeare will find that the story of the author's life will open up new worlds, as it has to those who have recorded it here. Surely some of the Shakespearean scholars will be sufficiently pure in heart to accept the revelation of the truth, painful wrench though the readjustment may at first be. To these, in a gesture of comradeship and a common, inspiring purpose, this study is offered; and to the coming generation as well, in the hope that its members will carry the work of exploration farther and find much to add which is illuminating.

And there is one other to whom it is addressed in dedication. There is the poet who, with the freedom from the limitations of the factual that rewards the artist for his anguish and toil, was able to frame his own dying plea for recognition and the immortality of his good name, for which his spirit yearned, in poignant lines to the friend surviving him:

O God, Horatio! what a wounded name,
 Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me.
 If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
 Absent thee from felicity awhile,

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.

Perhaps it will not be taken as an impertinence if the writers of this account think of it as offering some amends, however inadequate, to the tragic, sublime, and superlatively human figure of Edward de Vere himself.

Our world is full of tumult. The man of the Renaissance “would not”—to speak in Conrad’s phrase—“understand the watchwords of our day, would gaze with amazed eyes at the engines of our strife.” By contrast with our century, we may look back upon the period to which Edward de Vere gave the loftiest expression in the products of his heart and mind and in himself as a man, as “small time.” So be it:

. . . but in that small most greatly liv’d
This Star of England.

C. O., Jr.



C.O., Jr., was the cryptonym of Charlton Ogburn, Jr., subsequently the author of *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth and The Reality* (1984). His parents, Charlton Senior (1882-1962) and Dorothy (1890-1981), were themselves Oxfordians of some distinction. In 1952 C.O., Jr. was asked by his parents to write the introduction to their forthcoming *This Star of England*, a book denounced by Columbia Professor O. J. Campbell, in a thoroughly revealing oxymoron, for possessing a “specious plausibility....likely to mislead the non-specialist reader.” During the 1940s and 1950s, Campbell, a scholar of some distinction on his own account, also took up the cause to slay the Oxfordian dragon. We felt it timely to reprint some of the ideas in C.O. Jr.’s original 1952 essay on genius, creativity, and imagination. This issue of *Brief Chronicles* is dedicated to the honor of this remarkable man, C.O., Jr. — and his remarkable parents.

