

M. H. Abrams, "Natural Genius, Inspiration, and Grace," from *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953; Oxford University Press, 1971)

We may begin with Addison's distinction, which he did not invent, but sharpened and popularized, between the genius who is born—the 'natural genius'—and the genius who is made. Natural geniuses, a class comprising Homer, Pindar, the Old Testament poets, and Shakespeare, are 'the prodigies of mankind, who by the mere strength of natural parts, and without any assistance of art or learning, have produced works that were the delight of their own times, and the wonder of posterity.' The second class of geniuses, differing in kind rather than in excellence, 'are those that have formed themselves by rules, and submitted the greatness of their natural talents to the corrections and restraints of art'; among them are numbered Plato, Virgil, and Milton. With natural genius, Addison associates other concepts which recur as leitmotifs in the critical tradition we are pursuing. Such authors are characterized by 'a natural fire and impetuosity' and 'noble sallies of imagination,' and achieve works that are 'nobly wild and extravagant,' 'sublime,' as well as 'singular in their kind, and inimitable.' They are also subject to inspiration; Pindar, for example, exhibits 'that divine impulse which raises the mind above itself, and makes the sounds more than human.' Finally, Addison illustrates the difference between the natural and the artful genius by the difference between the plants in a natural state, and those in a formal garden:

[Natural genius] is like a rich soil in a happy climate, that produces a whole wilderness of noble plants rising in a thousand beautiful landscapes, without any certain order or regularity. In the other it is the same rich soil under the same happy climate, that has been laid out in walks and parterres, and cut into shape and beauty by the skill of the gardener.⁹

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Behind Addison's thesis, of course, was the ancient question whether a poet is born or made; as Horace said,

Natura fieret laudabile carmen an arte
Quaesitum est.

And very early, inspiration—whether regarded as a celestial or mundane form of madness—was said to be either the constant accompaniment or the actual equivalent of the *ingenium* with which a poet is endowed by nature. 'Hence it is,' according to Aristotle, 'that poetry demands a man with a special gift for it, or else one with a touch of madness in him. . . .'⁷ This conjunction of nature and inspiration became commonplace in the Renaissance. The argument for 'October' in Spenser's *Shepherds Calender* is typical: Poetry is 'no arte, but a divine gift and heavenly instinct not to be gotten by labour and learning, but adorned with both; and poured into the witte by a certain *enthousiasmos* and celestially inspiration.'⁸ In Addison's version, 'genius' has come to signify the integral poet as well as the inborn poetic power, while innate endowment is held to be not only a necessary but (in a certain few cases) a sufficient condition for the achievement of the greatest poetry.

Pope's Prefaces to his edition of Shakespeare and to his translation of Homer's *Iliad* have many points in common with Addison's *Spectator* 160, and proved almost as influential on later theory. Shakespeare is supremely the poet of nature and inspiration, and also (because independent of prior models) a complete original.

If ever any author deserved the name of an *Original*, it was Shakespear. Homer himself drew not his art so immediately from the fountains of Nature; it . . . came to him not without some tincture of the learning, or some cast of the models, of those before him. The poetry of Shakespear was inspiration indeed: he is not so much an Imitator, as an Instrument of Nature; and 'tis not so just to say he speaks from her, as that she speaks through him.

To these ideas, Pope joins the idea of 'felicity,' which in his time, as we shall see in a moment, was almost a technical term of criticism: in his 'sentiments' Shakespeare often exhibits 'a talent very peculiar, something between penetration and felicity.' Pope concludes by comparing the distinction between Shakespearean and 'more finished and regular' dramas to that between 'an ancient majestic piece of Gothic architecture' and 'a neat modern building.'⁹ But in his earlier Preface to the *Iliad*, he had echoed and expanded Addison's parallel between natural genius and a natural landscape. The 'invention' which characterizes all great geniuses is equatable with nature, and 'as in

most regular gardens, Art can only reduce the beauties of Nature to more regularity'; the *Iliad* is compared to 'a wild paradise,' and also to a single item within a garden—a growing tree.

A work of this kind seems like a mighty tree which rises from the most vigorous seed, is improved with industry, flourishes, and produces the finest fruit. . .¹⁰

The various ideas associated with natural genius posed a number of problems to eighteenth-century critics which require our consideration:

(1) *Poetic inspiration*. Inspiration (or, in its Greek form, 'enthusiasm') is the oldest, most widespread, and most persistent account of poetic invention. If we compare the various forms in which the doctrine has been presented over the centuries, we find a recurrent area of agreement amid differences. Where poets and apologists for poetry largely agree is in their description of the facts of an extraordinary experience to which at least some poets are susceptible while composing; where they differ is in the theory they adduce to explain these facts.

The experience of poetic inspiration is said to differ from normal ideation in possessing some or all of these four characteristics: (a) The composition is sudden, effortless, and unanticipated. The poem or passage springs to completion all at once, without the prior intention of the poet, and without that process of considering, rejecting, and selecting alternatives which ordinarily intervenes between the intention and the achievement. (b) The composition is involuntary and automatic; it comes and goes at its own pleasure, independently of the will of the poet. (c) In the course of composition, the poet feels intense excitement, usually described as a state of elation and rapture, but occasionally said to be racking and painful in its initial stages, though followed by a sense of blissful relief and quiescence. (d) The completed work is as unfamiliar and surprising to the poet as though it had been written by someone else.

The earliest and most tenacious theory adduced to explain these phenomena attributed the poem to the dictation of a supernatural visitant. All good poets, Socrates told Ion the rhapsode, in a dialogue whose pervading irony escaped many later readers, 'compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed.' 'God himself is the speaker, and . . . through them he is conversing with us.'¹¹ The Hebrew singers claimed that they kindled to communicate the word of God: 'I kept silent, yea even from good words. . . And while I was thus musing, the fire kindled and at last I spoke with my tongue.' Later tradition assimilated the pagan doctrine of inspiration to the 'mysteries' of Christian faith; and in the Renais-

sance, when the attribution of secular poems to Apollo and the muses had largely become a transparent fiction of the sonneteer, the tradition of Holy Writ remained more vital.¹³ Robert Herrick's 'Not Every Day Fit for Verse' is worth quoting because it so neatly summarizes the facts claimed for inspired composition.

'Tis not ev'ry day, that I
Fitted am to prophesie:
No, but when the Spirit fills
The fantastick Pannicles:
Full of fier; then I write
As the Godhead doth indite.

Thus enrag'd, my lines are hurl'd
Like the Sybell's, through the world,
Look how next the holy fier
Either slakes, or doth retire;
So the Fancie cooles, till when
That brave Spirit comes agen.

The theory of a supernatural afflatus, it will be noted, fulfills all the requirements of a good hypothesis; it is simple, intelligible, and comprehends all the facts. That the poem is dictated to the poet by a visitor from without accounts for its spontaneity, involuntarism, and unfamiliarity; that the visitor is divine accounts for the accompanying ecstasy. But animistic hypotheses, assigning mental phenomena to the will of a supernatural being, passed out of favor in the latter seventeenth century. Any recourse to 'enthusiasm' in that age was dangerous, because it suggested the claim of disorderly religious zealots to have private access to God. In addition, the sensationalist theory of mind, with its reliance on the mechanical motions and combinations of conscious, mirror-like images, afforded no place either for the mysterious facts or the supernatural theory of inspiration. Thomas Hobbes hailed Davenant's attack on the poet's claim to be inspired, and wondered why a man, 'enabled to speak wisely from the principles of nature and his own meditation, loves rather to be thought to speak by inspiration, like a Bagpipe.'¹⁴ Most importantly, the notion that some poetry is spontaneous was out of harmony with the Horatian tradition that poetry, although requiring native talent, is in practice a laborious and formal craft. In 1576 Castelvetro insisted that the notion of divine frenzy had originated in an ignorance of the art of poetry, and had been fostered by the vainglory of poets; to write a poem of real value, the poet must work deliberately, must '*sapere il perchè*.'¹⁴

By the eighteenth century, the Horatian point of view had been reinforced by the rationalism of French neo-classicists and had largely lost the Platonic coloring with which it had been endowed by Renaissance critics. Johnson was skeptical toward Gray's notion that he could not write but 'at happy moments,' and toward Richardson's report of the dependence of Milton's poetic faculty upon 'an *impetus* or *oestrum*.'¹⁵ According to Reynolds, only they who never look beyond the finished product to the 'long labour and application of an infinite number and infinite variety of acts' which went into its making, will conclude that an art can be achieved 'by those only who have some gift of the nature of inspiration bestowed upon them.'¹⁶

Many eighteenth-century poets, however, continued to lay claim to inspiration in polished couplets, and asked divine assistance in invocations which were hardly less pure formulas than the 'Hail, Muse! et cetera' with which Byron opens a canto of *Don Juan*. And in the main, even the more rigid theorists admitted the existence of inspiration, but in their brisk and business-like way, insisted that it be subject to the control of judgment, decorum, and the rules. 'Though his Discourse,' Rapin had said, 'ought in some manner to resemble that of one inspired; yet his Mind must always be serene, that he may discern when to *let his Muse run mad*, and when to govern his Transports.'¹⁷ Some critics, accepting the facts of inspired composition, specifically substituted a natural for a supernatural hypothesis to account for their appearance. Alexander Gerard's discussion is especially interesting because it undertakes to give a detailed psychological explanation of enthusiasm—'a very common, if not an inseparable attendant of genius'—without violating the assumptions of the associationist theory of mind.

When an ingenious track of thinking presents itself, though but casually, to true genius, occupied it may be with something else, imagination darts alongst it with great rapidity; and by this rapidity its ardour is more inflamed. The velocity of its motion sets it on fire, like a chariot wheel which is kindled by the quickness of its revolution. . . Its motions become still more impetuous, till the mind is enraptured with the subject, and exalted into an extasy. In this manner the fire of genius, like a divine impulse, raises the mind above itself, and by the natural influence of imagination actuates it as if it were supernaturally inspired. . . By elevating and enlivening the fancy, [enthusiastick ardour] gives vigour and activity to its associating power, enables it to proceed with alacrity in searching out the necessary ideas. . .¹⁸

Here are the traditional facts of inspiration, but explained now in exclusively mechanical terms of space, time, and motion: the more than usual

speed of the motion of associated ideas accounts for the suddenness and seeming spontaneity of the composition, while the mechanical phenomenon of friction serves, very handily indeed, to explain its fire and ecstasy.

To establish a contrast, we may glance ahead fifty years to Shelley's discussion of the same literary phenomena. Peacock's *Four Ages of Poetry* came to Shelley's hand while he was in the process of reading Plato's *Ion*, and he had earlier recommended to Peacock himself the discussion of poetic madness in the *Phaedrus*, by way of antidote to 'the false and narrow systems of criticism which every poetical empiric vents' in this age.¹⁹ In his 'Defence of Poetry,' Shelley insists that valid poetic composition is uncontrollable, automatic, and ineffably joyous. 'A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry."' It is 'an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study'; when they come, the evanescent visitations are 'elevating and delightful beyond all expression.' Shelley echoes the ancient theory concerning 'the visitations of the divinity in man,' and like earlier Neoplatonists, suggests also that poetic inspiration is to be identified with the blissful contemplation of the sempiternal Forms. But then, after his wont, he shadows forth a third hypothesis, this time naturalistic, according to which inspiration is an empirical phenomenon of the mind itself:

For the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure.

And he goes on to introduce a parallel between the inventive process and embryonic growth.

A great statue or picture grows under the power of the artist as a child in the mother's womb; and the very mind which directs the hands in formation is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the gradations, or the media of the process.²⁰

Though he starts with the Platonic facts, Shelley ends with a theory which is not in Plato. An inspired poem or painting is sudden, effortless, and complete, not because it is a gift from without, but because it grows of itself, within a region of the mind which is inaccessible either to awareness or control. The 'birth and recurrence' of poetry, he says again, 'have no necessary connexion with the consciousness or will.' And as he re-formulates the matter in a letter written that same year:

The poet and the man are two different natures; though they exist together they may be unconscious of each other, and incapable of deciding upon each other's powers and efforts by any reflex act.²¹

The concept of a compartmentation between the creative and the conscious mind, the description of inspired invention in terms of gestation and growth—these are not unusual in Shelley's generation, but are remote from the earlier interpretations of inspiration either as a ghostly dictation or as a matter of psychic heat and celerity. To trace the emergence of such ideas during the preceding century, we must look to certain speculations conducted in a radical spirit, outside the main course both of Horatian criticism and of associationist psychology.