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Literary Riches

Where does poetry come from, art or inspiration? Are poems works of skill, craft and graft or the instinctive progeny of genius; well-wrought urns or divine revelations? Or maybe there is another, less exalted explanation. Perhaps wealth and family connections trump talent and effort as the true wellsprings of literary production. Recent research by Cambridge sociologist Diane Reay found that 'meritocratic fallacies of upward mobility' in the media, politics, and higher education obscure how UK universities are still overwhelmingly middle- and upper-class spaces. A 2020 report authored by Professor Katy Shaw of Northumbria University confirmed that:

> The under-representation of British working-class writers in UK publishing has been identified as a major challenge by international publishing houses including Penguin Random House and Hachette UK, and also by the British and Scottish governments.

Yet this argument over where great writing comes from is not new. Baxter Hathaway, the eminent twentieth-century historian of poetics, called the question of poetry's origin the 'perennial debate' of literature – and it began with the Greeks.

Plato's concept of ἐνθουσιασμός (enthusiasmous) asserted the 'divine inspiration' behind poetry, and the philosopher branded poets 'inspired madmen'. This was no compliment, though. In fact, Plato's obsession with the irrationality of poetry (which bordered on madness itself) recurred throughout his work, in the *Ion*, *Phaedrus*, *Apology*, *Meno* and *Laws*. No surprise, then, that in Book X of his *Republic*, a furious Plato banished poets from his intellectual utopia. For as well as being 'ruinous to the understanding' because they are 'thrice removed from the truth', poems for Plato were thoroughly irrational, and had no place in a perfectly logical state governed by philosopher-kings. When this line of thinking was revitalised in the Neoplatonic Latin culture of the Italian Renaissance,

enthusiasmous became *furor poeticus* ('divine fury'). Crucially, though, *furor poeticus* shed the irrational baggage of Plato's critique, clearing the path for a valorisation of poetic madness that the Greek philosopher would certainly have abhorred.

Marsilio Ficino, the head of the Accademia Platonica in Florence, wrote in his *Platonica theologia* (1482) that man is 'a sort of God' and a 'semi-creator'. But it was poets especially who possessed godlike powers of invention. In a letter entitled '*Poeticus furor a Deo est*' ('Poetic frenzy is from God'), Ficino argued that 'great poems are not the invention of men but gifts from heaven', since poets are 'inflamed by God's presence'. Ficino's fellow humanist, Cristoforo Landino, in the preface to his massive 1481 commentary on Dante's *Divina Commedia* (1320), said that 'The Greeks said that poet comes from that word *piin* [A Byzantine word corresponding to the classical *poiesis*]: which is a middle term between '"to create", which is appropriate to God, when from nothing he brings something forth into being, and "to make", which is said of men in every art when they compose something out of matter and form.'

By the middle of the sixteenth century, this doctrine had travelled north, eventually becoming a commonplace in English poetics. Henry Dethick's *Oratio in laudem poëseos* ('Oration in Praise of Poets' c.1573), for example, locates the 'origin of this thing most divine' not in 'the learning of letters' but 'divine breath'. In the early seventeenth century, Caleb Dalechamp insisted that 'the ability of poets is not acquired by human industry or art, but is infused by a certain divine inspiration and heavenly influence'.

Against the theory of divine inspiration is the idea of poetry as art, that is, the highly skilled mimetic craft of 'a gifted person', as Aristotle put it in his *Poetics* – and not Plato's 'inspired madman'. The *Poetics* was little known in antiquity, and only survived thanks to a translation by the Cordoban scholar Ibn Rushd and commentaries by other Muslim thinkers such as Ibn Sina, al-Kindī and al-Fārābī. The work became central to Renaissance literary theory following its rediscovery in the later Middle Ages. It is perhaps fitting, then, that the most impassioned English Renaissance critique of Platonic *enthusiasmous* comes from another long-lost treatise on poetics. William Scott's *The Model of Poesy* lay dormant in the archive of Sir Henry Lee for over 400 years after it was composed in 1599. It was

donated to the British Library in 2005 and edited by Gavin Alexander for Cambridge University Press in 2013. Scott rejects the Neoplatonic idea of poetry in quite shocking terms:

> I ask, then, is this instinct, fury, influence, or what else you list to call it, is this, I say, divine seed infused conceived in the mind of man in despite of nature and reason, as you would say by rape? Surely they will confess no.

For Scott, poetry is unthinkable without 'reason and art': it cannot 'be shaped and fed without the strength and vigour of our reasonable nature' or 'set and disposed, without the industrious midwifery of reason'. Scott represents an extreme rationalist poetics, in which poetry is a pure 'instrument of reason', as the scholar Michael Hetherington put it in a recent study. But the *Model of Poesy* fails to question the ancient terms of the divide between inspiration and industry as the source of poetry. Greater insight into the 'perennial debate' comes from poets themselves and writing that reflects on the historical and material origins of poetic production.

William Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (probably co-written with Thomas Middleton c.1606 but first published in the First Folio of 1623) is rarely performed today, being overshadowed by plays written around the same time, especially *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. But *Timon*, the story of a generous Greek nobleman who lavishes fellow citizens (including writers) with gifts but receives nothing from them in his time of need, is very much concerned with literary theory. It is one of only two Shakespeare plays featuring a character explicitly named 'Poet' (the other being *Julius Caesar*, in which Cinna the Poet falls victim to a baying mob's contempt for poetry). Set in Athens, the opening of *Timon* sees the philosopher Apemanthus tell the Poet, 'Thou liest', invoking Plato's accusation in the *Republic* that poets are 'false'. The Poet then intervenes in the 'perennial debate', claiming that his poem for Timon is 'A thing slipped idly from me':

> Our poesy is as a gum which oozes
> From whence 'tis nourished. The fire i'th' flint

> Shows not till it be struck, our gentle flame
> Provokes itself [...].

Here is the idea of divine inspiration, presenting poetry as a 'flame' that 'provokes itself', an origin that requires nothing of Scott's 'industrious midwifery of reason' and verges on Neoplatonic enthusiasmous. But when the Painter enters the scene to talk shop with his friend, the Poet reveals a different origin of his work.

> *Painter.* When comes your book forth?
> *Poet.* Upon the heels of my presentment, sir.

The Poet's book will emerge, he reveals, as soon as he curries favour with and gains the financial support of the wealthy Timon through literary dedication ('presentment'). The anachronistic use of 'book' tells us that this exchange has something to say about early modern English poetic production. Karl Marx highlights two of Timon's speeches, noting that 'Shakespeare excellently depicts the real nature of money [...]. It is the common whore, the common procurer of people and nations'. Read historically as an allegory of Elizabethan patronage, we might say that Shakespeare 'depicts the real nature of' early modern literary production and money's central role as the 'procurer' of poetry. In *Das Capital,* Marx again refers to *Timon* to illustrate how 'just as in money every qualitative difference between commodities is extinguished, so too for its part, as a radical leveller, it extinguishes all distinctions'. Yet here Marx has it wrong. Money, and the hierarchy of social and economic power that its uneven distribution produces, is precisely what maintains 'all distinctions' between poet and patron, in Timon's Athens as in Shakespeare's London. Exploiting the jobbing writer's dependence on aristocratic favour and finance for comic effect, Shakespeare's play undermines the Poet's *causa sui* account of creativity with the grubby reality of poetic production. Patronage, money, and flattery are the true 'nourish[ers]' of poetic invention.

Had he lived to see *Timon of Athens*, Shakespeare's fellow poet Edmund Spenser is unlikely to have seen the funny side. As the scholar Richard McCabe says, Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) presents

a thoroughly 'despairing' account of the 'dislocation' and 'cultural displacements of [the poet's] craft'.

The *Calender* was published anonymously and its reflections on poetry, patronage and the 'perennial debate' are distributed among several *personae*. One such mouthpiece, Immeritô, delivers an opening address to 'his book':

> Goe little booke: thy selfe present,
> As child whose parent is vnkent.

Here 'unkent' means unknown, which points to its author's anonymity, but also raises the question of the origin of poetry: what is its parentage? From where does it spring? The Neoplatonist Dethick had used the word 'parent' to describe the divine progeniture of poetry in his *Oratio in laudem poëseos*. Through 'E.K.', another persona in the *Calender*, Spenser rehearses the doctrine of divine inspiration, in which poetry is:

> no arte, but a divine gift and heavenly instinct not to bee gotten by laboure and learning, but adorned with both: and poured into the witte by a certain ἐνθονσιασμὸς [enthusiasmos] and celestial inspiration.

However, in an epistle to Spenser's close friend Gabriel Harvey, E.K. insists that the poet's 'wittinesse in deuising, his pithinesse in vttering', his ability to move between 'pastorall rudenesse' and 'moral wiseness, his dewe obseruing of Decorum euery where' and the 'framing [of] his words' are to be commended. In the Renaissance, 'framing' was firmly linked to material craftsmanship and artisanal skill, particularly glassmaking and picture framing, but also other hands-on technical trades. So, in praising Spenser's 'knitting of [words] so short and intricate', and advertising the *Calender* as 'well grounded, finely framed, and strongly trussed vp together', E.K. presents the Aristotelian position: poetry as craft, a highly skilled, even quasi-material artform closer to *tékhnē* than divine madness.

But Spenser, like Shakespeare, sets up the lofty 'perennial debate' between inspiration and industry only to undercut it. In the October

eclogue of the *Calender*, the impoverished poet, Cuddie, laments to his friend, Piers:

> I haue pyped erst so long with payne,
> That all mine Oten reedes beene rent and wore:
> And that my poore Muse hath spent her spared store,
> Yet little good hath got, and much less gayne.

Here, poetry is framed as gruelling labour, imaged in Cuddie's 'payne' and his 'Oten reedes [...] rent and wore'. Cuddie then nods to divine inspiration in the form of his 'Muse', which is 'poore' and 'spent'. More important than either, however, is patronage: the financial 'gayne' the poet lacks, receiving only a 'sclender prise' for his 'dapper ditties'. Faced with Cuddie's despair, Piers cries 'O pierlesse Poesye, where then is thy place?' meaning 'Where can poetry find a home?' but also 'Where is poetry going to come from now?' Like Shakespeare, Spenser questions the simplistic duality of the 'perennial debate' by emphasising the economic factors that constrain literary production. But they do so in profoundly different ways, Shakespeare with banter, Spenser with bitterness. Why? An explanation lies in the divergent professional fortunes of the two poets.

Shakespeare was hugely successful as an actor, writer and shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men in his early career, and went on to enjoy royal favour following James I's accession and the establishment of the King's Men in 1603. Spenser, though, incurred 'a mighty Peres displeasure' for an unsympathetic portrait of William Cecil, Lord Burghley in *Mother Hubberds Tale* (1578). Whether or not Spenser, as Ben Jonson put it, died 'for lack of bread', his earning power was nothing compared to Shakespeare's, whose company, as the scholar Richard Dutton notes, was 'able to make the very substantial sums we presume that they did at the Globe because the court protected them and gave them very significant privileges'. Spenser never secured favour at the English court, failed to win patronage among either the Old English or Anglicised Gaelic aristocracy during nearly twenty years in Ireland, and none of his works appear to have been commissioned by a benefactor.

In some ways, then, Spenser represents an opposite career trajectory to

Shakespeare. With its author having experienced professional frustration, the lash of authority, and an ignominious exile, it is no surprise that the *Calender*'s vision of poetic production is altogether bleaker than the humorous account in *Timon*, which was written three years after Shakespeare had gained royal patronage. Both poets demonstrate how English literature, perhaps more so than English poetics, engaged critically with the 'perennial debate' inherited from the Greeks via the Italian Neoplatonists. Two of the most important English literary theorists, for instance, subscribed to the view of the poet as a divine creator without much critical reflection. George Puttenham, in *The art of English poesie* (1589), reflected: 'It is therefore of Poets thus to be conceiued, that if they be able to deuise and make all these things of them selues, without any subiect of veritie, that they be (by maner of speech) as creating gods.' Philip Sidney agreed, arguing in his profoundly influential work *An apologie for poetrie* (1595) that:

> [O]nely the Poet, disdayning to be tied to any such subiection, lifted vp with the vigor of his owne inuention, dooth growe in effect, another nature, in making things either better then Nature bringeth forth, or quite a newe formes such as neuer were in Nature.

Is it surprising that neither Puttenham, who enjoyed a substantial dowry after marrying, and later received a pension from Queen Elizabeth, nor Sidney, who was born into a powerful aristocratic family, mention the financial pressures on the professional writer? In contrast, and by broadening the debate to include a more materialist account of poetry's origins, Shakespeare and Spenser show how money, patronage and nepotism are as important to literary production as inspiration or graft.

The 'perennial debate' lives on today, though we are more attuned to the realities of literary production. Writing in the *London Review of Books* in 2020, John Lanchester relates how 'A *Maigret* novel came on [Georges] Simenon like an illness: he would feel the pressure of an idea building to a point where he had no choice but to write it'. For Simenon, each novel was apparently 'a delirium, a sweatbox, a spell trapped on a desert island', says Lanchester, and 'during the hack period of his early twenties, he would

work every day until he had written eighty typed pages. Then he'd throw up.' Simenon, who used seventeen pen names and churned out over 500 novels, certainly sounds like one of Plato's 'inspired madmen'. On the other hand, the massive expansion of 'creative writing' courses in the last twenty years appears to affirm the Aristotelian notion of poetry and fiction as disciplines learned like any other.

When we consider the socio-economic backgrounds of writers today, however, we see once again that Shakespeare and Spenser were closer to the mark than Plato or Aristotle. A 2022 report by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) found that 80% of journalists came from upper-class backgrounds or had connections in the industry (the figure was 72% in 2016).

When we consider the socio-economic backgrounds of writers today, however, we see once again that Shakespeare and Spenser were closer to the mark than Plato or Aristotle. *Creative Majority*, an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) report published in 2021, confirmed that the UK's creative industries 'are dominated by those from wealthier backgrounds', who can afford to hone their talents without needing to make a living. To take an example from one industry: a 2022 report by the National Council for the Training of Journalism (NCTJ) found that 80% of journalists came from upper-class backgrounds or had connections in the industry. The problem is getting worse – the figure was 72% in 2016. Writers working today without family connections or inherited wealth face similar challenges to early modern poets like Spenser and Shakespeare. These two professional authors of varying fortunes trouble the neat polarisation of Platonic and Aristotelian answers to the 'perennial debate'. Their answer? Money talks.