

FROM

# CONJECTURES ON ORIGINAL COMPOSITION

IN A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR OF  
*Sir Charles Grandison*

DEAR SIR,

We confess the follies of youth without a blush; not so, those of age. However, keep me a little in countenance, by considering, that age wants amusements more, though it can justify them less, than the preceding periods of life. How you may relish the pastime here sent you, I know not. It is miscellaneous in its nature, somewhat licentious in its conduct; and, perhaps, not overimportant in its end. However, I have endeavored to make some amends, by digressing into subjects more important, and more suitable to my season of life. A serious thought standing single among many of a lighter nature, will sometimes strike the careless wanderer after amusement only, with useful awe: as monumental marbles scattered in a wide pleasure-garden (and such there are) will call to recollection those who would never have sought it in a churchyard-walk of mournful yews.

To one such monument I may conduct you, in which is a hidden luster, like the sepulchral lamps of old; but not like those will this be extinguished, but shine the brighter for being produced, after so long concealment, into open day.

You remember that your worthy patron, and our common friend, put some questions on the serious drama, at the same time when he desired our sentiments on original, and on moral composition.<sup>1</sup> Though I despair of breaking through the frozen obstructions of age, and care's incumbent cloud, into

CONJECTURES ON ORIGINAL COMPOSITION. *Conjectures on Original Composition* was first published in 1759. The author of the novel *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753) is Young's friend Samuel Richardson, who suggested the essay to Young and helped him revise it before publication.

<sup>1</sup> The "patron" and "friend" is Richardson.

that flow of thought, and brightness of expression, which subjects so polite require; yet will I hazard some conjectures on them.

I begin with original composition; and the more willingly, as it seems an original subject to me, who have seen nothing hitherto written on it: but, first, a few thoughts on composition in general. Some are of opinion, that its growth, at present, is too luxuriant; and that the press is overcharged. Overcharged, I think, it could never be, if none were admitted, but such as brought their imprimatur from sound understanding, and the public good. Wit, indeed, however brilliant, should not be permitted to gaze self-enamored on its useless charms, in that fountain of fame (if so I may call the press), if beauty is all that it has to boast; but, like the first Brutus,<sup>2</sup> it should sacrifice its most darling offspring to the sacred interests of virtue, and real service of mankind.

This restriction allowed, the more composition the better. To men of letters, and leisure, it is not only a noble amusement, but a sweet refuge; it improves their parts, and promotes their peace: It opens a back door out of the bustle of this busy, and idle world, into a delicious garden of moral and intellectual fruits and flowers; the key of which is denied to the rest of mankind. When stung with idle anxieties, or teased with fruitless impertinence, or yawning over insipid diversions, then we perceive the blessing of a lettered recess. With what a gust do we retire to our disinterested, and immortal friends in our closet, and find our minds, when applied to some favorite theme, as naturally, and as easily quieted, and refreshed, as a peevish child (and peevish children are we all till we fall asleep) when laid to the breast? Our happiness no longer lives on charity; nor bids fair for a fall, by leaning on that most precarious, and thorny pillow, another's pleasure, for our repose. How independent of the world is he, who can daily find new acquaintance, that at once entertain, and improve him, in the little world, the minute but fruitful creation, of his own mind?

These advantages composition affords us, whether we write ourselves, or in more humble amusement peruse the works of others. While we bustle through the thronged walks of public life, it gives us a respite, at least, from care; a pleasing pause of refreshing

<sup>2</sup> Lucius Junius Brutus (sixth-fifth century B.C.), the first consul, is said to have put his two sons to death for their participation in a conspiracy.

*Critical Theory since Plato, ed. Hazard  
Adams*

recollection. If the country is our choice, or fate, there it rescues us from sloth and sensuality, which, like obscene vermin, are apt gradually to creep unperceived into the delightful bowers of our retirement, and to poison all its sweets. Conscious guilt robs the rose of its scent, the lily of its luster; and makes an Eden a deflowered, and dismal scene.

Moreover, if we consider life's endless evils, what can be more prudent, than to provide for consolation under them? A consolation under them the wisest of men have found in the pleasures of the pen. Witness, among many more, Thucydides, Xenophon, Tully, Ovid, Seneca, Pliny the younger, who says "*In uxoris infirmitate, et amicorum periculo, aut morte turbatus, ad studia, unicum doloris levamentum, confugio.*"<sup>3</sup> And why not add to these their modern equals, Chaucer, Raleigh, Bacon, Milton, Clarendon, under the same shield, unwounded by misfortune, and nobly smiling in distress?

Composition was a cordial to these under the frowns of fortune; but evils there are, which her smiles cannot prevent, or cure. Among these are the languors of old age. If those are held honorable, who in a hand benumbed by time have grasped the just sword in defense of their country; shall they be less esteemed, whose unsteady pen vibrates to the last in the cause of religion, of virtue, of learning? Both these are happy in this, that by fixing their attention on objects most important, they escape numberless little anxieties, and that *tedium vitae*<sup>4</sup> which often hangs so heavy on its evening hours. May not this insinuate some apology for my spilling ink, and spoiling paper, so late in life?

But there are, who write with vigor, and success, to the world's delight, and their own renown. These are the glorious fruits where genius prevails. The mind of a man of genius is a fertile and pleasant field, pleasant as Elysium, and fertile as Tempe; it enjoys a perpetual spring. Of that spring, originals are the fairest flowers: imitations are of quicker growth, but fainter bloom. Imitations are of two kinds; one of nature, one of authors: the first we call originals, and confine the term imitation to the second. I shall not enter into the curious inquiry of what is, or is not, strictly speaking, original, content with what all must allow, that some compositions are more so than others; and the more they

are so, I say, the better. Originals are, and ought to be, great favorites, for they are great benefactors; they extend the republic of letters, and add a new province to its dominion: imitators only give us a sort of duplicates of what we had, possibly much better, before; increasing the mere drug of books, while all that makes them valuable, knowledge and genius, are at a stand. The pen of an original writer, like Armida's wand, out of a barren waste calls a blooming spring: out of that blooming spring an imitator is a transplant of laurels, which sometimes die on removal, always languish in a foreign soil.

But suppose an imitator to be most excellent (and such there are), yet still he but nobly builds on another's foundation; his debt is, at least, equal to his glory; which therefore, on the balance, cannot be very great. On the contrary, an original, though but indifferent (its originality being set aside), yet has something to boast; it is something to say with him in Horace, "*Meo sum pauper in aere*";<sup>5</sup> and to share ambition with no less than Caesar, who declared he had rather be the first in a village, than the second at Rome.

Still farther: an imitator shares his crown, if he has one, with the chosen object of his imitation; an original enjoys an undivided applause. An original may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius;<sup>6</sup> it grows, it is not made: imitations are often a sort of manufacture wrought up by those mechanics, art, and labor, out of preexistent materials not their own.

Again: we read imitation with somewhat of his languor, who listens to a twice-told tale: our spirits rouse at an original; that is a perfect stranger, and all throng to learn what news from a foreign land: And though it comes, like an Indian prince, adorned with feathers only, having little of weight; yet of our attention it will rob the more solid, if not equally new: Thus every telescope is lifted at a new-discovered star; it makes a hundred astronomers in a moment, and denies equal notice to the sun. But if an original, by being as excellent, as new, adds admiration to surprise, then are we at the writer's mercy; on the strong wing of his imagination, we are snatched from Britain to

<sup>3</sup> "With my wife ill, and my friends in danger, and troubled by death, I flee to studies, the single comfort for sorrow." Pliny, *Epistles*, VIII. 19.

<sup>4</sup> "Tedium of life."

<sup>5</sup> "I am poor in my property," that is, poor but not in debt. *Epistles*, II. ii. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Note here the appearance of organic metaphors for the imagination. See M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), especially 201 ff. for their use in Romantic literature.

Italy, from climate to climate, from pleasure to pleasure; we have no home, no thought, of our own; till the magician drops his pen: and then falling down into ourselves, we awake to flat realities, lamenting the change, like the beggar who dreamt himself a prince.

It is with thoughts, as it is with words; and with both, as with men; they may grow old, and die. Words tarnished, by passing through the mouths of the vulgar, are laid aside as inelegant, and obsolete. So thoughts, when become too common, should lose their currency; and we should send new metal to the mint, that is, new meaning to the press. The division of tongues at Babel did not more effectually debar men from making themselves a name (as the Scripture speaks) than the too great concurrence, or union of tongues will do forever. We may as well grow good by another's virtue, or fat by another's food, as famous by another's thought. The world will pay its debt of praise but once; and instead of applauding, explode a second demand, as a cheat.

If it is said, that most of the Latin classics, and all the Greek, except perhaps, Homer, Pindar, and Anacreon, are in the number of imitators, yet receive our highest applause; our answer is, that they though not real, are accidental originals; the works they imitated, few excepted, are lost: they, on their father's decease, enter as lawful heirs, on their estates in fame: the fathers of our copyists are still in possession; and secured in it, in spite of Goths, and flames by the perpetuating power of the press. Very late must a modern imitator's fame arrive, if it waits for their decease.

An original enters early on reputation: fame, fond of new glories, sounds her trumpet in triumph at its birth; and yet how few are awakened by it into the noble ambition of like attempts? Ambition is sometimes no vice in life; it is always a virtue in composition. High in the towering Alps is the fountain of the Po; high in fame, and in antiquity, is the fountain of an imitator's undertaking; but the river, and the imitation, humbly creep along the vale. So few are our originals, that, if all other books were to be burnt, the lettered world would resemble some metropolis in flames where a few incombustible buildings, a fortress, temple, or tower, lift their heads, in melancholy grandeur, amid the mighty ruin. Compared with this conflagration, old Omar lighted up but a small bonfire, when he heated the baths of the barbarians, for eight months together, with the famed Alexandrian library's inestimable spoils, that no

profane book might obstruct the triumphant progress of his holy Alcoran<sup>7</sup> round the globe.

But why are originals so few? Not because the writer's harvest is over, the great reapers of antiquity having left nothing to be gleaned after them; nor because the human mind's teeming time is past, or because it is incapable of putting forth unprecedented births; but because illustrious examples engross, prejudice, and intimidate. They engross our attention, and so prevent a due inspection of ourselves; they prejudice our judgment in favor of their abilities, and so lessen the sense of our own; and they intimidate us with the splendor of their renown, and thus under diffidence bury our strength. Nature's impossibilities, and those of diffidence lie wide asunder.

Let it not be suspected, that I would weakly insinuate anything in favor of the moderns, as compared with ancient authors: no, I am lamenting their great inferiority. But I think it is no necessary inferiority; that it is not from divine destination, but from some cause far beneath the moon: I think that human souls, through all periods, are equal; that due care, and exertion, would set us nearer our immortal predecessors than we are at present; and he who questions and confutes this, will show abilities not a little tending toward a proof of that equality, which he denies.

After all, the first ancients had no merit in being originals: they could not be imitators. Modern writers have a choice to make; and therefore have a merit in their power. They may soar in the regions of liberty, or move in the soft fetters of easy imitation; and imitation has as many plausible reasons to urge, as pleasure has to offer to Hercules. Hercules made the choice of a hero, and so became immortal.

Yet let not assertors of classic excellence imagine, that I deny the tribute it so well deserves. He that admires not ancient authors, betrays a secret he would conceal, and tells the world, that he does not understand them. Let us be as far from neglecting, as from copying, their admirable compositions; sacred be their rights, and inviolable their fame. Let our understanding feed on theirs; they afford the noblest nourishment; but let them nourish, not annihilate, our own. When we read, let our imagination kindle at their charms; when we write, let our judgment shut them out of our thoughts; treat even Homer himself as his royal admirer was treated by the cynic; bid him stand aside, nor shade our composition from the beams of

<sup>7</sup> The Koran, sacred book of Moslems.

our own genius; for nothing original can rise, nothing immortal, can ripen, in any other sun.

Must we then, you say, not imitate ancient authors? Imitate them, by all means; but imitate aright. He that imitates the divine *Iliad*, does not imitate Homer; but he who takes the same method, which Homer took, for arriving at a capacity of accomplishing a work so great. Tread in his steps to the sole fountain of immortality; drink where he drank, at the true Helicon, that is, at the breast of nature: imitate; but imitate not the composition, but the man. For may not this paradox pass into a maxim? viz. "The less we copy the renowned ancients, we shall resemble them the more."

But possibly you may reply, that you must either imitate Homer, or depart from nature.<sup>8</sup> Not so: for suppose you was to change place, in time, with Homer; then, if you write naturally, you might as well charge Homer with an imitation of you. Can you be said to imitate Homer for writing so, as you would have written, if Homer had never been? As far as a regard to nature, and sound sense, will permit a departure from your great predecessors; so far, ambitiously, depart from them; the farther from them in similitude, the nearer are you to them in excellence; you rise by it into an original; become a noble collateral, not a humble descendant from them. Let us build our compositions with the spirit, and in the taste, of the ancients; but not with their materials: thus will they resemble the structures of Pericles at Athens, which Plutarch commends for having had an air of antiquity as soon as they were built. All eminence, and distinction, lies out of the beaten road; excursion, and deviation, are necessary to find it; and the more remote your path from the highway, the more reputable; if, like poor Gulliver (of whom anon) you fall not into a ditch, in your way to glory.

What glory to come near, what glory to reach, what glory (presumptuous thought!) to surpass, our predecessors? And is that then in nature absolutely impossible? Or is it not, rather, contrary to nature to fail in it? Nature herself sets the ladder, all wanting is our ambition to climb. For by the bounty of nature we are as strong as our predecessors; and by the favor of time (which is but another round in nature's scale) we stand on higher ground. As to the first, were they

more than men? Or are we less? Are not our minds cast in the same mold with those before the flood? The flood affected matter; mind escaped. As to the second; though we are moderns, the world is an ancient; more ancient far, than when they, whom we most admire, filled it with their fame. Have we not their beauties, as stars, to guide; their defects, as rocks, to be shunned; the judgment of ages on both, as a chart to conduct, and a sure helm to steer us in our passage to greater perfection than theirs? And shall we be stopped in our rival pretensions to fame by this just reproof? "*Stat contra, dicitque tibi tua pagina, fur es.*"<sup>9</sup> It is by a sort of noble contagion, from a general familiarity with their writings, and not by any particular sordid theft, that we can be the better for those who went before us. Hope we, from plagiarism, any dominion in literature; as that of Rome arose from a nest of thieves?

Rome was a powerful ally to many states; ancient authors are our powerful allies; but we must take heed, that they do not succor, till they enslave, after the manner of Rome. Too formidable an idea of their superiority, like a specter, would fright us out of a proper use of our wits; and dwarf our understanding, by making a giant of theirs. Too great awe for them lays genius under restraint, and denies it that free scope, that full elbowroom, which is requisite for striking its most masterly strokes. Genius is a master-workman, learning is but an instrument; and an instrument, though most valuable, yet not always indispensable. Heaven will not admit of a partner in the accomplishment of some favorite spirits; but rejecting all human means, assumes the whole glory to itself. Have not some, though not famed for erudition, so written, as almost to persuade us, that they shone brighter, and soared higher, for escaping the boasted aid of that proud ally?

Nor is it strange; for what, for the most part, mean we by genius, but the power of accomplishing great things without the means generally reputed necessary to that end? A genius differs from a good understanding, as a magician from a good architect; that raises his structure by means invisible; this by the skillful use of common tools. Hence genius has ever been supposed to partake of something divine. *Nemo unquam vir magnus fuit, sine aliquo afflatu divino.*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Young refers here to Pope's remark in his *Essay on Criticism*, 135 (see above, p. 279) that Virgil discovered the imitation of nature and of Homer to be the same.

<sup>9</sup> "Your page stands against you and says to you that you are a thief." Martial, *Epigrams*, I. lv. 12.

<sup>10</sup> "No one was ever a great man without some divine inspiration."

Learning, destitute of this superior aid, is fond, and proud, of what has cost it much pains; is a great lover of rules, and boaster of famed examples: as beauties less perfect, who owe half their charms to cautious art, learning inveighs against natural unstudied graces, and small harmless inaccuracies, and sets rigid bounds to that liberty, to which genius often owes its supreme glory; but the no-genius its frequent ruin. For unprescribed beauties, and unexampled excellence, which are characteristics of genius, lie without the pale of learning's authorities, and laws; which pale, genius must leap to come at them: but by that leap, if genius is wanting, we break our necks; we lose that little credit, which possibly we might have enjoyed before. For rules, like crutches, are a needful aid to the lame, though an impediment to the strong. A Homer casts them away; and, like his Achilles, "*Jura negat sibi nata, nihil non arrogat*,"<sup>11</sup> by native force of mind. There is something in poetry beyond prose-reason; there are mysteries in it not to be explained, but admired; which render mere prose-men infidels to their divinity. And here pardon a second paradox; viz. "Genius often then deserves most to be praised, when it is most sure to be condemned; that is, when its excellence, from mounting high, to weak eyes is quite out of sight."

If I might speak farther of learning, and genius, I would compare genius to virtue, and learning to riches. As riches are most wanted where there is least virtue; so learning where there is least genius. As virtue without much riches can give happiness, so genius without much learning can give renown. As it is said in Terence, "*Pecuniam negligere interdum maximum est lucrum*";<sup>12</sup> so to neglect of learning, genius sometimes owes its greater glory. Genius, therefore, leaves but the second place, among men of letters, to the learned. It is their merit, and ambition, to fling light on the works of genius, and point out its charms. We most justly reverence their informing radius for that favor; but we must much more admire the radiant stars pointed out by them.

A star of the first magnitude among the moderns was Shakespeare; among the ancients, Pindar; who (as Vossius tells us) boasted of his no-learning, calling himself the eagle, for his flight above it. And such geni as these may, indeed, have much reliance on their own

native powers. For genius may be compared to the natural strength of the body; learning to the super induced accouterments of arms: if the first is equal to the proposed exploit, the latter rather encumbers, than assists; rather retards, than promotes, the victory. "*Sacer nobis inest Deus*,"<sup>13</sup> says Seneca. With regard to the moral world, conscience, with regard to the intellectual, genius, is that god within. Genius can set us right in composition, without the rules of the learned; as conscience sets us right in life, without the laws of the land: this, singly, can make us good, as men: that, singly, as writers, can, sometimes, make us great.

I say, sometimes, because there is a genius, which stands in need of learning to make it shine. Of genius there are two species, an earlier, and a later; or call them infantine, and adult. An adult genius comes out of nature's hand, as Pallas out of Jove's head, at full growth, and mature: Shakespeare's genius was of this kind; on the contrary, Swift stumbled at the threshold, and set out for distinction on feeble knees: his was an infantine genius; a genius, which, like other infants, must be nursed, and educated, or it will come to naught: Learning is its nurse, and tutor; but this nurse may overlay with an indigested load, which smothers common sense; and this tutor may mislead, with pedantic prejudice, which vitiates the best understanding: as too great admirers of the fathers of the church have sometimes set up their authority against the true sense of Scripture; so too great admirers of the classical fathers have sometimes set up their authority, or example, against reason. "*Neve minor, neu sit quinto productior actu fabula*,"<sup>14</sup> So says Horace, so says ancient example. But reason has not subscribed. I know but one book that can justify our implicit acquiescence in it: and (by the way) on that book a noble disdain of undue deference to prior opinion has lately cast, and is still casting, a new and inestimable light.

But, superstition for our predecessors set aside, the classics are forever our rightful and revered masters in composition; and our understandings bow before them: but when? When a master is wanted; which, sometimes, as I have shown, is not the case. Some are pupils of nature only, nor go farther to school: from such we reap often a double advantage; they not only rival the reputation of the great ancient authors, but

<sup>11</sup> "He says that the laws are not created for him, and he claims everything [for himself]." Horace, *Art of Poetry*, above, p. 70.

<sup>12</sup> "To neglect money is sometimes the greatest gain." *Adelphi*, 215-16.

<sup>13</sup> "Sacred is the god dwelling in us."

<sup>14</sup> "The play should be neither shorter nor longer than five acts." Horace, *Art of Poetry*, above, p. 71.

also reduce the number of mean ones among the moderns. For when they enter on subjects which have been in former hands, such is their superiority, that, like a tenth wave, they overwhelm, and bury in oblivion all that went before: and thus not only enrich and adorn, but remove a load, and lessen the labor, of the lettered world.

"But," you say, "since originals can arise from genius only, and since genius is so very rare, it is scarce worthwhile to labor a point so much, from which we can reasonably expect so little." To show that genius is not so very rare as you imagine, I shall point out strong instances of it, in a far distant quarter from that mentioned above. The minds of the schoolmen were almost as much cloistered as their bodies; they had but little learning, and few books; yet may the most learned be struck with some astonishment at their so singular natural sagacity, and most exquisite edge of thought. Who would expect to find Pindar and Scotus, Shakespeare and Aquinas, of the same party? Both equally shew an original, unindebted, energy; the *vigor igneus*, and *caelestis origo*,<sup>15</sup> burns in both; and leaves us in doubt whether genius is more evident in the sublime flights and beauteous flowers of poetry, or in the profound penetrations, and marvelously keen and minute distinctions, called the thorns of the schools. There might have been more able consuls called from the plow, than ever arrived at that honor: Many a genius, probably, there has been, which could neither write, nor read. So that genius, that supreme luster of literature, is less rare than you conceive.

By the praise of genius we detract not from learning; we detract not from the value of gold, by saying that diamond has greater still. He who disregards learning, shows that he wants its aid; and he that overvalues it, shows that its aid has done him harm. Overvalued indeed it cannot be, if genius, as to composition, is valued more. Learning we thank, genius we revere; that gives us pleasure, this gives us rapture; that informs, this inspires; and is itself inspired; for genius is from heaven, learning from man: this sets us above the low, and illiterate; that, above the learned, and polite. Learning is borrowed knowledge; genius is knowledge innate, and quite our own. Therefore, as Bacon observes, it may take a nobler name, and be called wisdom;<sup>16</sup> in which sense of wisdom, some are born wise.

But here a caution is necessary against the most fatal of errors in those automaths, those self-taught philosophers of our age, who set up genius, and often, mere fancied genius, not only above human learning, but divine truth. I have called genius wisdom; but let it be remembered, that in the most renowned ages of the most refined heathen wisdom (and theirs is not Christian) "the world by wisdom knew not God, and it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save those that believed."<sup>17</sup> In the fairyland of fancy, genius may wander wild; there it has a creative power, and may reign arbitrarily over its own empire of chimeras. The wide field of nature also lies open before it, where it may range unconfined, make what discoveries it can, and sport with its infinite objects uncontrolled, as far as visible nature extends, painting them as wantonly as it will: but what painter of the most unbounded and exalted genius can give us the true portrait of a seraph? He can give us only what by his own or others' eyes, has been seen; though that indeed infinitely compounded, raised, burlesqued, dishonored, or adorned: in like manner, who can give us divine truth unrevealed? Much less should any presume to set aside divine truth when revealed, as incongruous to their own sagacities—is this too serious for my subject? I shall be more so before I close.

Having put in a caveat against the most fatal of errors, from the too great indulgence of genius, return we now to that too great suppression of it, which is detrimental to composition; and endeavor to rescue the writer, as well as the man. I have said, that some are born wise; but they, like those that are born rich, by neglecting the cultivation and produce of their own possessions, and by running in debt, may be beggared at last; and lose their reputations, as younger brothers' estates, not by being born with less abilities than the rich heir, but at too late an hour.

Many a great man has been lost to himself, and the public, purely because great ones were born before him. Hermias, in his collections on Homer's blindness, says, that Homer requesting the gods to grant him a sight of Achilles, that hero rose, but in armor so bright, that it struck Homer blind with the blaze. Let not the blaze of even Homer's Muse darken us to the discernment of our own powers; which may possibly set us above the rank of imitators; who, though most excellent, and even immortal (as some of them are) yet

<sup>15</sup> "Glowing energy" and "heavenly origin."

<sup>16</sup> *The Advancement of Learning*.

<sup>17</sup> I Corinthians 1:21.

still but *dii minorum gentium*,<sup>18</sup> nor can expect the largest share of incense, the greatest profusion of praise, on their secondary altars.

But farther still: a spirit of imitation hath many ill effects; I shall confine myself to three. First, it deprives the liberal and politer arts of an advantage which the mechanic enjoy: In these, men are ever endeavoring to go beyond their predecessors; in the former, to follow them. And since copies surpass not their originals, as streams rise not higher than their spring, rarely so high; hence, while arts mechanic are in perpetual progress, and increase, the liberal are in retrogradation, and decay. These resemble pyramids, are broad at bottom, but lessen exceedingly as they rise; those resemble rivers which, from a small fountainhead, are spreading ever wider and wider, as they run. Hence it is evident, that different portions of understanding are not (as some imagine) allotted to different periods of time; for we see, in the same period, understanding rising in one set of artists, and declining in another. Therefore nature stands absolved, and our inferiority in composition must be charged on ourselves.

Nay, so far are we from complying with a necessity, which nature lays us under, that, secondly, by a spirit of imitation we counteract nature, and thwart her design. She brings us into the world all originals: no two faces, no two minds, are just alike; but all bear nature's evident mark of separation on them. Born originals, how comes it to pass that we die copies? That meddling ape imitation, as soon as we come to years of indiscretion (so let me speak), snatches the pen, and blots out nature's mark of separation, cancels her kind intention, destroys all mental individuality; the lettered world no longer consists of singulars, it is a medley, a mass; and a hundred books, at bottom, are but one. Why are monkeys such masters of mimicry? Why receive they such a talent at imitation? Is it not as the Spartan slaves received a license for ebriety;<sup>19</sup> that their betters might be ashamed of it?

The third fault to be found with a spirit of imitation is, that with great incongruity it makes us poor, and proud: makes us think little, and write much; gives us huge folios, which are little better than more reputable cushions to promote our repose. Have not some sevenfold volumes put us in mind of Ovid's sevenfold channels of the Nile at the conflagration? "*Ostia*

*septem/Pulverulenta vacant septem sine flumine valles.*"<sup>20</sup> Such leaden labors are like Lycurgus's iron money, which was so much less in value than in bulk, that it required barns for strongboxes, and a yoke to draw five hundred pounds.<sup>21</sup>

But notwithstanding these disadvantages of imitation, imitation must be the lot (and often an honorable lot it is) of most writers. If there is a famine of invention in the land, like Joseph's brethren, we must travel far for food; we must visit the remote, and rich, ancients; but an inventive genius may safely stay at home; that, like the widow's cruse,<sup>22</sup> is divinely replenished from within; and affords us a miraculous delight. Whether our own genius be such, or not, we diligently should inquire; that we may not go abegging with gold in our purse. For there is a mine in man, which must be deeply dug ere we can conjecture its contents. Another often sees that in us, which we see not ourselves; and may there not be that in us which is unseen by both? That there may, chance often discovers, either by a luckily chosen theme, or a mighty premium, or an absolute necessity of exertion, or a noble stroke of emulation from another's glory; as that on Thucydides from hearing Herodotus repeat part of his history at the Olympic games: had there been no Herodotus, there might have been no Thucydides, and the world's admiration might have begun at Livy for excellence in that province of the pen. Demosthenes had the same stimulation on hearing Callistratus; or Tully<sup>23</sup> might have been the first of consummate renown at the bar.

Quite clear of the dispute concerning ancient and modern learning, we speak not of performance, but powers. The modern powers are equal to those before them; modern performance in general is deplorably short. How great are the names just mentioned? Yet who will dare affirm, that as great may not rise up in some future, or even in the present age? Reasons there are why talents may not appear, none why they may not exist, as much in one period as another. An evocation of vegetable fruits depends on rain, air, and sun; an evocation of the fruits of genius no less depends on externals. What a marvelous crop bore it in

<sup>18</sup> "Gods of lesser classes."

<sup>19</sup> Drunkenness.

<sup>20</sup> "Its seven mouths dusty and empty, seven valleys without streams." *Metamorphoses*, II. 255-56.

<sup>21</sup> According to false tradition, Lycurgus, the Spartan law-giver (ninth century B.C.), abolished gold and silver currency and substituted iron.

<sup>22</sup> I Kings 17:16.

<sup>23</sup> Cicero.

Greece, and Rome? And what a marvelous sunshine did it there enjoy? What encouragement from the nature of their governments, and the spirit of their people? Virgil and Horace owed their divine talents to heaven; their immortal works, to men; thank Maecenas and Augustus for them. Had it not been for these, the genius of those poets had lain buried in their ashes. Athens expended on her theater, painting, sculpture, and architecture, a tax levied for the support of a war. Caesar dropped his papers when Tully spoke; and Philip trembled at the voice of Demosthenes: and has there arisen but one Tully, one Demosthenes, in so long a course of years? The powerful eloquence of them both in one stream, should never bear me down into the melancholy persuasion, that several have not been born, though they have not emerged. The sun as much exists in a cloudy day, as in a clear; it is outward, accidental circumstances that with regard to genius either in nation, or age, "*Collectas fugat nubes, solemque reducit.*"<sup>24</sup> As great, perhaps, greater than those mentioned (presumptuous as it may sound) may, possibly, arise; for who hath fathomed the mind of man? Its bounds are as unknown, as those of the creation; since the birth of which, perhaps, not one has so far exerted, as not to leave his possibilities beyond his attainments, his powers beyond his exploits. Forming our judgments altogether by what has been done, without knowing, or at all inquiring, what possibly might have been done, we naturally enough fall into too mean an opinion of the human mind. If a sketch of the divine *Iliad* before Homer wrote, had been given to mankind, by some superior being, or otherwise, its execution would, probably, have appeared beyond the power of man. Now, to surpass it, we think impossible. As the first of these opinions would evidently have been a mistake, why may not the second be so too? Both are founded on the same bottom; on our ignorance of the possible dimensions of the mind of man.

Nor are we only ignorant of the dimensions of the human mind in general, but even of our own. That a man may be scarce less ignorant of his own powers, than an oyster of its pearl, or a rock of its diamond; that he may possess dormant, unsuspected abilities, till awakened by loud calls, or stung up by striking emergencies, is evident from the sudden eruption of some men, out of perfect obscurity, into public admiration,

on the strong impulse of some animating occasion; not more to the world's great surprise, than their own. Few authors of distinction but have experienced something of this nature, at the first beamings of their yet unsuspected genius on their hitherto dark composition: the writer starts at it, as at a lucid meteor in the night; is much surprised; can scarce believe it true. During his happy confusion, it may be said to him, as to Eve at the lake, "What there thou seest, fair creature, is thyself."<sup>25</sup> Genius, in this view, is like a dear friend in our company under disguise; who, while we are lamenting his absence, drops his mask, striking us, at once, with equal surprise and joy. This sensation, which I speak of in a writer, might favor, and so promote, the fable of poetic inspiration: a poet of a strong imagination, and stronger vanity, on feeling it, might naturally enough realize the world's mere compliment, and think himself truly inspired. Which is not improbable; for enthusiasts of all kinds do no less.

Since it is plain that men may be strangers to their own abilities; and by thinking meanly of them without just cause, may possibly lose a name, perhaps a name immortal; I would find some means to prevent these evils. Whatever promotes virtue, promotes something more, and carries its good influence beyond the moral man: to prevent these evils, I borrow two golden rules from ethics, which are no less golden in composition, than in life. 1. Know thyself; 2dly, Reverence thyself: I design to repay ethics in a future letter, by two rules from rhetoric for its service.

1st. Know thyself. Of ourselves it may be said, as Martial says of a bad neighbor, "*Nil tam prope, proculque nobis.*"<sup>26</sup> Therefore dive deep into thy bosom; learn the depth, extent, bias, and full forte of thy mind; contract full intimacy with the stranger within thee; excite and cherish every spark of intellectual light and heat, however smothered under former negligence, or scattered through the dull, dark mass of common thoughts; and collecting them into a body, let thy genius rise (if a genius thou hast) as the sun from chaos; and if I should then say, like an Indian, worship it, (though too bold) yet should I say little more than my second rule enjoins, (viz.) reverence thyself.

<sup>24</sup> "Drives away the gathered clouds, and brings back the sun." *Aeneid*, I. 143.

<sup>25</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IV. 468.

<sup>26</sup> "Nothing so near, yet so far from us." *Epigrams*, I. lxxxvi. 10.



That is, let not great examples, or authorities, brow-beat thy reason into too great a diffidence of thyself: thyself so reverence, as to prefer the native growth of thy own mind to the richest import from abroad; such borrowed riches make us poor. The man who thus reverences himself, will soon find the world's reverence to follow his own. His works will stand distinguished; his the sole property of them; which property alone can confer the noble title of an author; that is, of one who (to speak accurately) thinks, and composes; while other invaders of the press, how voluminous, and learned soever, (with due respect be it spoken) only read, and write.

This is the difference between those two luminaries in literature, the well-accomplished scholar, and the divinely-inspired enthusiast; the first is, as the bright morning star; the second, as the rising sun. The writer who neglects those two rules above will never stand alone; he makes one of a group, and thinks in wretched unanimity with the throng: incumbered with the notions of others, and impoverished by their abundance, he conceives not the least embryo of new thought; opens not the least vista through the gloom of ordinary writers, into the bright walks of rare imagination, and singular design; while the true genius is crossing all public roads into fresh untrodden ground; he, up to the knees in antiquity, is treading the sacred footsteps of great examples, with the blind veneration of a bigot saluting the papal toe; comfortably hoping full absolution for the sins of his own understanding, from the powerful charm of touching his idol's infallibility.

Such meanness of mind, such prostration of our own powers, proceeds from too great admiration of others. Admiration has, generally, a degree of two very bad ingredients in it; of ignorance, and of fear; and does mischief in composition, and in life. Proud as the world is, there is more superiority in it given, than assumed: and its grandees of all kinds owe more of their elevation to the littleness of others' minds, than to the greatness of their own. Were not prostrate spirits their voluntary pedestals, the figure they make among mankind would not stand so high. Imitators and translators are somewhat of the pedestal kind, and sometimes rather raise their original's reputation, by showing him to be by them inimitable, than their own. Homer has been translated into most languages; Aelian tells us, that the Indians, (hopeful tutors!) have taught him to speak their tongue. What expect we from them? Not Homer's Achilles, but something,

which, like Patroclus, assumes his name, and, at its peril, appears in his stead; nor expect we Homer's Ulysses, gloriously bursting out of his cloud into royal grandeur, but an Ulysses under disguise, and a beggar to the last. Such is that inimitable father of poetry, and oracle of all the wise, whom Lycurgus transcribed; and for an annual public recital of whose works Solon enacted a law; that it is much to be feared, that his so numerous translations are but as the published testimonials of so many nations, and ages, that this author so divine is untranslated still.

But here, "*Cynthia aurem/Vellit*,"<sup>27</sup> and demands justice for his favorite, and ours. Great things he has done: but he might have done greater. What a fall is it from Homer's numbers, free as air, lofty and harmonious as the spheres, into childish shackles, and tinkling sounds! But, in his fall, he is still great—

Nor appears  
Less than archangel ruined, and the excess  
Of glory obscured.<sup>28</sup>

Had Milton never wrote, Pope had been less to blame: But when in Milton's genius, Homer, as it were, personally rose to forbid Britons doing him that ignoble wrong; it is less pardonable, by that effeminate decoration, to put Achilles in petticoats a second time: how much nobler had it been, if his numbers had rolled on in full flow, through the various modulations of masculine melody, into those grandeur of solemn sound, which are indispensably demanded by the native dignity of heroic song? How much nobler, if he had resisted the temptation of that gothic demon, which modern poesy tasting, became mortal? O how unlike the deathless, divine harmony of three great names (how justly joined), of Milton, Greece, and Rome? His verse, but for this little speck of mortality, in its extreme parts, as his hero had in his heel; like him, had been invulnerable, and immortal. But, unfortunately, that was undipped in Helicon; as this, in Styx. Harmony as well as eloquence is essential to poesy; and a murder of his music is putting half Homer to death. *Blank* is a term of diminution; what we mean by blank verse, is, verse unfallen, uncursed; verse reclaimed, reenthroned in the true language of the gods; who never thundered nor suffered their Homer to thunder, in rhyme; and therefore, I beg you, my friend, to crown it with some

<sup>27</sup> "Apollo plucks my ear," Virgil, *Eclogues*, VI. 3-4.

<sup>28</sup> *Paradise Lost*, I. 592-94.

nobler term; nor let the greatness of the thing lie under the defamation of such a name.

But supposing Pope's *Iliad* to have been perfect in its kind; yet it is a translation still; which differs as much from an original, as the moon from the sun. "*—Phoeben alieno jusserat igne/Impleri, solemque suo.*"<sup>29</sup> But as nothing is more easy than to write originally

<sup>29</sup> "He had ordered Phoebe to shine with another's light, the sun with its own." Claudian, *Against Rufinus*, l. 9-10.

wrong; originals are not here recommended, but under the strong guard of my first rule—know thyself. Lucian, who was an original, neglected not this rule, if we may judge by his reply to one who took some freedom with him. He was at first, an apprentice to a statuary; and when he was reflected on as such, by being called Prometheus, he replied, "I am indeed the inventor of new work, the model of which I owe to none; and, if I do not execute it well, I deserve to be torn by twelve vultures, instead of one."