

Preface

What follows is fiction masquerading as fact. Or fact disguised as fiction. It really doesn't matter which.

All that matters is what it can teach, if it can teach anything. And *that* only you can decide.

“What you inherit you must earn in order to possess.”

Do you know who John Berryman was? I didn't either. He was an American poet, mid-20th century. Someone on a book jacket described him as "one of the most intelligent Americans of his time." (I'm quoting from memory—I think I'm close—but even if I'm not—just think of this as fiction.) He taught literature (I think) at the University of Chicago, wrote (in my opinion) better essays (especially on other writers) than poems, struggled with alcoholism, spent years in psychoanalysis, and jumped to his death from the "high bridge" over the Mississippi. I don't know where the "high bridge" is, how high it is, or exactly why he jumped, but you get the picture. Why am I bringing all this up here and now, at the very beginning of this book?

Because it was in one of his essays that I first read the quotation that starts the chapter—Berryman quoted it, and attributed it, I think, to T.S. Eliot (a 20th century American/British poet, critic, and Nobel Laureate). But just the other day I came across the quotation, in a slightly longer form, attributed to Goethe, the 19th century poet and playwright often considered the German equivalent of Shakespeare. Eliot liked and respected Goethe, so it makes sense that he would quote him, or paraphrase him. Berryman liked and respected Eliot (though he *loved* Walt Whitman), so it makes sense that he might misattribute the remark to Eliot. And of course, since this can all be taken as fiction, it really doesn't matter, does it? What matters is what we can learn, especially about ourselves.

Why there is no cancer cure.

The Chesterfield Letter

Samuel Johnson's letter to Lord Chesterfield
To The Right Honourable The Earl Of Chesterfield
7th February, 1755

My Lord,

I have been lately informed, by the proprietor of *The World*, that two papers, in which my Dictionary is recommended to the public, were written by your lordship. To be so distinguished is an honour which, being very little accustomed to favours from the great, I know not well how to receive, or in what terms to acknowledge.

When, upon some slight encouragement, I first visited your lordship, I was overpowered, like the rest of mankind, by the enchantment of your address, and could not forbear to wish that I might boast myself *Le vainqueur du vainqueur de la terre*;—that I might obtain that regard for which I saw the world contending; but I found my attendance so little encouraged, that neither pride nor modesty would suffer me to continue it. When I had once addressed your Lordship in public, I had exhausted all the art of pleasing which a retired and uncourtly scholar can possess. I had done all that I could; and no man is well pleased to have his all neglected, be it ever so little.

Seven years, my lord, have now passed, since I waited in your outward rooms, or was repulsed from your door; during which time I have been pushing on my work through difficulties, of which it is useless to complain, and have brought it, at last, to the verge of publication, without one act of assistance ([1](#)), one word of encouragement, or one smile of favour. Such treatment I did not expect, for I never had a patron before.

The shepherd in Virgil grew at last acquainted with Love, and found him a native of the rocks.

Is not a patrons my lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it: till I am solitary, and cannot impart it; ([2](#)) till I am known, and do not want it. I hope it is no very cynical asperity not to confess obligations where no benefit has been received, or to be unwilling that the public should consider me as owing that to a patron, which providence has enabled me to do for myself.

Having carried on my work thus far with so little obligation to any favourer of learning, I shall not be disappointed though I should conclude it, if less be possible, with less; for I have been long wakened from that dream of hope, in which I once boasted myself with so much exultation,

My Lord,
Your lordship's most
humble,
most obedient servant,
SAM. JOHNSON. ([3](#))

The Mathematics of Van Gogh

$$8 \times 3 = 1025.37821$$

Einstein's Insect