Paul W. Bruno

Kant's Concept of Genius

Its Origin and Function in the Third Critique

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Introduction

The time had come when people were starting to speak of genius on the soccer field or in the boxing ring, although there would still be at most only one genius of a halfback or great tennis-court tactician for every ten or so explorers, tenors, or writers of genius who cropped up in the papers. The new spirit was not yet quite sure of itself.

from Robert Musil's The Man Without Qualities *(1952)*

This is a study regarding genius. It does not endeavor to identify those who deserve the lable genius, nor is it intended to help those who want to identify those who should be named to some millennial list of the top one hundred geniuses of the century. The work is, rather, an attempt to uncover the philosophical roots of a term that is commonplace in Western languages today. Specifically, this study proposes to examine the roots of the word "genius" as they relate to one of its major early articulators, Immanuel Kant. While the uncovering of the philosophical roots of genius will take some labor, we can more readily say that the roots of this study grew out of questions regarding the artist.

Nowadays, the question can certainly be posed, "What is this word genius that is thrown around so lightly and habitually?" As the epigraph quoted above from Ulrich, the narrator of Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* suggests, there is a great deal of confusion surrounding the word in its common usage. As any Chicagoan can recall, it was not uncommon to read in the sports page that Michael Jordan was a genius.[1] A recent graduate of the University of Iowa's masters program in creative writing described the program to me as a place one could go "to find her genius." This usage, though curious,

are blithely accepted because a general understanding of the word genius suffices in conversation. It is only, perhaps, with observations like Ulrich's that certain questions are raised.

The popular usage of genius suggests some implicit understandings about the word. Foremost, as the frequent references to Michael Jordan as a genius suggest is the that the word connotes someone in possession of surpassing greatness in his field of work. Related to that belief is that the thought that greatness is something that cannot be taught—one hears this in comments about Jordan's "transcendent skills," or "God-given ability." Also accompanying the popular characterization of genius is what we will call the "eccentricizing" of the genius. This phenomenon may be in accordance with popular American depictions of the artist in general, but it especially throws light on our understanding of genius. Consider movies like *Pollock*, *Amadeus*, *Crumb* or *Shine*. Each is a biographical account of an artist and each tends to emphasize the more sordid details of its heroes' existences. These details are seen as evidence that this artist and that genius are somehow different from the rest of us, exceptional as they are. But, one just has to see an episode of Jerry Springer to realize that it is not just a "genius" like Woody Allen who runs off and marries his stepdaughter. Or, one need only look at the extensive statistics on alcoholism to realize that it is not just writers who claim among their ranks a preponderance of alcoholics. The portrait of the brooding, self-absorbed poet is also popular. Even if William Styron is correct in saying that depression seems to affect poets at a greater rate than people in other professions, we should also note that Styron views depression as an inhibitor to producing poetry. In sum, popular depictions of the artist seem to have twisted around Gustave Flaubert's dictum, "Be quiet and normal in your daily living so that you can be violent and original in your work." In the hands of an institution like Hollywood, we might otherwise hear, "Be violent and obnoxious in your daily living so that you will be violent and original in your work." In recent times we have moved to the conception of the artist as the temperamental creator rather than the artisan—the careful, technically proficient producer.

If anyone has ever had the chance to study Renaissance art, he would have learned that most artists, like other tradesmen, belonged

to guilds, and that those artists who were in particular demand often had patrons who sponsored their work. To be sure, many artists struggled to make a living, and patrons, whether popes or aristocrats or wealthy barons, were not always the types of men to whom one wanted to be indebted. Nevertheless, a sort of commercial arrangement was obtained, and artists like other tradesmen found their work in the midst of the commerce of their city. This is not particularly remarkable, until one considers how different the life of an artist is today. As a matter of course, guilds for artists no longer thrive like they once did, commissioned work is not a widespread commercial practice, and in popular consciousness, there seems to have been a separation between an artisan, with its connotations of craftsmanship, and the "artist" (Art with a capital A is sometimes used to denote this understanding of art and the artist[2]), understood as a self-expressive creator of original works.

This shift was precipitated by several changes, but perhaps the one that protrudes from the rest is the change in the way in which imagination is conceived, in both cognition and creative enterprises. As Mary Warnock points out in her *Imagination and Time*, René Descartes set up a problem for Western philosophy that challenged philosophers for many years. The imagination was introduced to try and overcome the separation of subject and object. If the world is made up of *res cogito* and *res extensa*, how then does the thinking subject get outside of himself to the objects around him? The imagination takes on an increasingly important role in responding to this question. In fact, though Warnock may be overstating it a bit when she writes that "[w]e may fairly claim, then, that imagination can dissolve what had seemed to Descartes and his successors the insoluble problem of the relation between the inner and the outer, the mental and the corporeal" (Warnock 1994, 21), it is clear, nevertheless, that the imagination began to play an increasingly important role in epistemology in the eighteenth century. In *The Wake of Imagination*, Richard Kearney writes,

> What most distinguishes the modern philosophies of imagination from their various antecedents is a marked affirmation of the creative power of man. The mimetic paradigm of imagining is

> replaced by the productive paradigm—at best imitating some truth beyond man—the imagination becomes, in modern times, the immediate source of its own truth. (Kearney 1988, 155)

We can see that the imagination became a means of accessing truth. Originally, the imagination may have had a strictly epistemological function, but the productive imagination proved to be well suited to expressive ends, and soon the association between a work of art and truth was severed.[3] The traditional understanding of the artist as imitative was superseded by an understanding of the artist as originary (an understanding that can be fairly said to persist today). Once imagination was conceived of as a "lamp" rather than a "mirror,"[4] it seems only a short step to acclaiming some lamps as shining brighter than others. In short, the designation of genius emerges from the recognition that human beings make things after their own imaginations rather than imitating something already given—an illusory theory of representation,[5] to paraphrase Gombrich (1992). Creativity takes center stage, and growing out of creativity is the propensity to celebrate those who are particularly creative in their endeavors. As Charles Taylor points out,

> Artistic creation becomes the paradigm mode in which people can come to self-definition. The artist becomes in some way the paradigm case of the human being, as agent of original self-definition. Since about 1800, there has been a tendency to heroize the artist, to see in his or her life the essence of the human condition, and to venerate him or her as a seer, the creator of cultural values. (Taylor 1991, 62)

Thus, it is a quite recent phenomenon that artists came to be seen as not only self-expressive creators, but also models for how to live one's life.

Kearney remarks that "[i]t was really only with Kant and the German Idealists in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, that the productive imagination became, as it were, officially recognized by mainstream Western thought" (Kearney 1988, 156). And as Warnock reminds us, "From Kant's time on, imagination was increasingly

recognized to be an essential part of making sense of the world, even for those without the elevated powers of genius" (Warnock 1994, 30). Kearney's use of the word "officially" should give us pause, for although Kant was among those who legitimized the productive imagination, the incipient rumblings of such a "faculty" can be found earlier in the eighteenth century. Our point is not to apportion credit to those who first thought of the productive imagination, or of genius for that matter. Rather, by taking a look at some of Kant's influences (both positive and negative) we can form a more comprehensive understanding of how genius fits into his thought. There is a well-trodden path of exegesis on genius and more generally on aesthetics and literary criticism in the Romantic period, a period that flourished after Kant.[6] Our concern is with a less-traveled path of scholarship, the climate of thought that prevailed before and during Kant's engagement with the question of genius.

To uncover the climate of thought regarding genius, we must understand that the transformation of the understanding of imagination was important to a new way of understanding genius. Genius has a long legacy in Western languages, but its meaning, just like that of imagination's, has changed significantly over time. We might say that there is a transformation of place for both imagination and genius. Imagination was once a reproductive power that enabled us to recreate and remember what was absent. Over the course of history, imagination took on an increasingly more important role until eventually it became "an immediate source of its own truth," to use Kearney's words. Similarly, genius, in its role as attendant spirit, played a part in determining a person's course of action. However, it was not until much later that genius became exalted for its specifically creative powers and "the paradigm mode in which people can come to self-definition," to use Taylor's words.

So, let us ask the question, "What is genius?" A brief survey of aesthetics leads one directly to Immanuel Kant. Although his comments on genius are found in only a brief section of his *Critique of Judgment*, his depiction of genius was highly influential—at least among poets and philosophers. Interestingly enough, Kant's description of genius in the third *Critique* was accomplished in the environs of an enthusiastic and lively embrace of the genius in Germany.

Specifically, Kant wrote at a time when the *Sturm und Drang*, and especially Johann Herder, were praising genius over and above all else. John Zammito goes so far as to posit that there is ample evidence that Kant wrote his section on genius in direct response to the *Sturm und Drang*. Zammito writes,

> The Third *Critique* was almost a continuous attack on Herder. At each stage in the genealogy of the Third *Critique* we can discern a clear and self-conscious aggression on the part of Kant against the positions adopted by Herder. Herder and the *Sturm und Drang* were the main targets of Kant's theory of art and genius. (Zammito 1992, 10)

At the very least, what becomes clear is that Kant was not a maverick in the field of *Genielehre*. More accurately, as was his wont, he attempted a critique within a critique; Kant attempted to find the limits of genius in an atmosphere that increasingly only approached genius in one way, and that was to celebrate its endless creative possibilities.

Naturally, there is the question about the origins of the disagreement between Herder (and the *Sturm und Drang*) and Kant on the subject of genius. the answer to this question has a neat symmetry when we discover that both Herder and Kant were influenced by certain English writers and literary critics. Herder was an enthusiastic proponent of the Englishman Edward Young, and Kant recognized the Scotsman Alexander Gerard as one of the few writers on the subject of genius who did a worthy job. That both Young and Gerard were writing on the subject in the mid-eighteenth century can be traced to the increasing interest in England on the subject of genius. Joseph Addison, in his *Spectator* articles at the beginning of the century, stimulated and popularized a great deal of discussion on the topic. Addison, known principally as an essayist, was also a widely known playwright and literary critic, and although his commentary on genius is brief and given in the form of ruminations, he originated[7] a way of discussing genius that was different from his predecessors.

While Kant may have been responding to the contemporary literature on genius when writing about the subject in the third *Critique*, he was actively trying to resolve questions left over from the

first *Critique* concerning the interrelationship between nature and the subject. As is well known, the discovery of Newtonian mechanics impelled Kant to consider the limits and possibilities of human cognition. In the first of his critical works, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant asserted an active role for the subject in making nature intelligible, and he conceived of nature as accessible in terms of laws. In short, determinate lawfulness and order were nature's defining characteristics. But this conception of nature left unanswered those questions concerning the aspects of nature that resist determinate judgments: "Is there a purposiveness in nature?" Does all the diversity in nature move in a lawful way towards an end? The indeterminate end of nature will not submit to the machinations of understanding or theoretical cognition. Kant asserts the need for judgments, specifically reflective judgments, in order that we may understand nature in its diversity.

Judgment must have its *a priori* foundation in law if it is to be legitimately recognized as something pure by Kant. The principle not "borrowed from experience" that judgment asserts for itself is the idea of purposiveness of nature. The purposiveness of nature asserts that there is a harmony to all that is diverse in nature. The theoretical can determine the laws that govern the mechanical part of nature; practical reason concerns itself with putting into practice desires, and "[a]ll other propositions of performance we might call technical rather than practical" (Kant 1987, 390). The technical allows us to address the realm of the contingent, and thus we can approach the realm of nature that is, to use a term made popular in the nineteenth century, "becoming." Kant says the technical belongs to "the art of bringing about something we want to exist [*sein*]" (Kant 1987, 390). This exploration of "bringing about something" is important for two reasons.

The first reason is that it demands the cognitive capacity of reflective judgment. Judgment is a mediating cognitional ability that bridges the gap between understanding and reason, those cognitive abilities that govern nature and freedom respectively. Secondly, "bringing about something" allows us to look at nature not as a unified amalgamation of laws, but as if it were a work of art. The consequences of this assertion are twofold. First, the mechanical

understanding of nature that Kant describes in the first *Critique* is in need of some complement. Second, Kant must address the question of fine art (*schönen Kunst*), because if he is going to look at nature as if it were a work of art, then it is imperative to explain what fine art is.

The emergence of conceiving of nature in these two disparate ways is important for our purposes, in that we arrive at a notion of nature that is at once governed by determinate concepts in its mechanical aspect and at the same time resists concepts in its technical aspect. This resistance to concepts is a recurring theme in the third *Critique*. Not only does the technical aspect of nature not admit the use of concepts, but so too does aesthetic judgment resist concepts. When Kant moves the discussion to fine art, it is clear that a *technē* such as fine art cannot use concepts either. Thus, as a way of finding answers to this problem, genius is finally introduced in the third *Critique*. The curious relationship between nature and genius is magnified when we consider that Kant defines genius as "the innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art" (Kant 1987, 174). In addition to what we have already said about Kant's technical understanding of nature, the quotation cited above makes it clear that nature and genius are inextricably bound in Kant. In fact, understanding what Kant says about genius is impossible without uncovering his understanding of nature. Therefore, we will dedicate a significant part of this study to exploring Kant's somewhat complicated understanding of nature as found in the first *Critique* and the third *Critique*.

Once we have understood the ways in which nature is apprehended, we will proceed to an examination of Kant's remarks about genius. We will see that Kant offers a much more sober definition of genius than that of Herder and the *Sturm und Drang*. Furthermore, Kant's insistence that taste and judgment play a prominent role in genius recalls Gerard's explication of genius.

Chapter One

Origins of Genius

Etymology of Genius

The root of the word "genius" comes from the Latin *gen* (to be born; to beget; to come into being). Other recognizable English words with this root are "generate" (to produce, beget) and "engender" (to bring into being; to bring about).

In its Latin usage, genius is understood in reference to a pagan belief in a tutelary god or attendant spirit. Every person is born with such genius. It functions as a determinant for character and is thought to govern one's fortunes, not only functioning as a guide for one's life, but as a conduit out of this world and into the next after death.[1]

We see examples of such usages of genius in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. In Macbeth's soliloquy in Act 3, scene 1 he expresses his fear that Banquo knows about his role in Duncan's murder:

> And, to that dauntless temper of [Banquo's] mind,
> He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
> To act in safety. There is none but he
> Whose being I do fear: and, under him,
> My genius is rebuked; as, it is said,
> Mark Antony's was by Caesar. (3. 1. 57–62)

We can see here how genius functions as an attendant to one's actions. Macbeth recognizes the role of Banquo's "wisdom" and how it acts as his "guide." However, unlike Banquo's valourous wisdom, Macbeth's "genius is rebuked." As Macbeth realizes the enormity of his crime, his genius—that guardian of his character—loses out, thereby vitiating his valour. The internal conversation has as its interlocutors a guiding

wisdom and a guiding fear. A battle is waged between the sentinel of Macbeth's virtue, that is, his genius, and his passions or fears. Rebuking his genius amounts to a victory for fear. What we want to stress is genius's tutelary function. It is constitutive of one's character and fortune, and for the most part it is concerned with the goodness of that character.

To highlight genius's role as an attendant spirit and as a guide out of the world, we can again examine Shakespeare's use of it in Act 2, scene 1 of *Julius Caesar*. Brutus's soliloquy reads,

> Since Cassius first did whet me against Caesar
> I have not slept
> Between the acting of a dreadful thing
> And the first motion, all the interim is
> Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream:
> The genius and the mortal instruments
> Are then in council; and the state of man,
> Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
> The nature of an insurrection. (2. 1. 65–73)

That both of these references in Shakespeare arise in soliloquies is important to note. The soliloquy has a confessional character and tone; we are, in effect, listening in on the ruminations of a particular character as he confronts a profound conflict in his life. In the example from Caesar, the picture that is painted is something like a cartoon where a little devil is giving bad or unvirtuous advice to a character in one ear, while an angel is advising the right and true conduct in the other. Brutus witnesses an internal confrontation between his immortal, rational soul, that is, his genius, and his "mortal instruments" or passions. The suggestion that genius is immortal also hints at the fact that somehow genius is a conduit to the next world. The insurrection amounts to an overthrow of that which guides him to do right. With both Macbeth and Brutus we see that genius battles their mortal passions, and in each case genius seems to be on the side of valour or virtue, thus adding an ethical valence to its role as a guide.

The ethical valence, as well as the cartoon image just used, help us to consider a second characteristic of genius that can be found in use more frequently in the seventeenth century—that of the evil genius. The evil genius influences one towards more sordid ends. Again, Shakespeare is helpful. In *The Tempest*, after Ferdinand is warned by Prospero, his future father-in-law, about dire consequences if he "dost break [Miranda's] virgin-knot before/all sanctimonious ceremonies may/with full and holy rite be minist'red" (15–17), Ferdinand assures Prospero that his will follows a path of rectitude. He says,

> As I hope
> For quiet days, fair issue and long life,
> With such love as 'tis now, the murkiest den,
> The most opportune place, the strong'st suggestion
> Our worser genius can, shall never melt
> Mine honour into lust. (4. 1. 23–28)

Such use of the "worser" or evil genius seems to have begun with none other than Shakespeare. The above is the first cited use of the word genius in this way, although it is fitting that an evil guiding spirit finds its opposite with the original Latin usage of attendant spirit. Shakespeare essentially gives genius its own opposite to play against. He gives a name to what might act as the physical or lustful side of the human character, against the morally righteous aspect of the same character. Fittingly, it is contrary to the side of human character that is concerned with virtue. This Manichean view of evil affords Shakespeare the means to dramatize an internal struggle. Here, one character can effectively articulate an internal conflict.

Another later and now obsolete definition of genius that the likes of Joseph Addison, David Hume and Edmund Burke used in the eighteenth century is one that simply means disposition or inclination; this can be a characteristic of a person, a nation, or an age.[2] Hume writes, "Men of such daring geniuses were not contented with the ancient and legal forms of civil government" (*History of England.* (1761) III, lxi, 319). Genius here is a particular disposition or temperament of a person. It does not act as a guide or attendant

spirit; it is a description of one's personality or temperament. In speaking about a nation, Addison writes, "A composer should fit his Musik to the Genius of the People" (*Spectator* #29, 9). About an age Hume writes of "the barbarous and violent genius of the age" (*History of England.* (1761) I, ix, 196). Burke writes of "The genius of the faction is easily discerned" ("Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs" 1842, I, 531). In each case we see genius depicted as a temperament, disposition, or inclination. The object of the disposition or inclination can be, as we see here, a person, nation, age; it can also be a language, law, institution, place, material thing, or disease. This usage seems to do away with the virtue/vice, good/bad dichotomy. Genius does not necessarily guide one in the direction of good action or bad, but rather it simply exists as one's temperament or inclination. In this usage, genius may be barbarous, daring, common, or otherwise. The ethical dimension seems to have fallen away.

Throughout the eighteenth century, a new definition was taking shape. The burgeoning use of the word as a creative force moves from undifferentiated and broad usage to a more studied and refined use. This is not to suggest that one purified and universal definition emerged to supersede all others. As we will see, Young, Gerard, Herder, and Kant conceived of genius in different ways, yet they all retain something of the creative, inventive impulse, an aspect of the word that came into prominence in the eighteenth century.

We first see the tentative advent of a new way of speaking about genius in the eighteenth century with Addison and Lord Shaftesbury. They straddle the line between conceiving of genius as disposition or temperament and conceiving of it in a new, and now more familiar manner, as creative power. The new way genius comes to be understood is as a

> native intellectual power of an exalted type, such as is attributed to those who are esteemed greatest in any department of art, speculation, or practice; instinctive and extraordinary capacity for imaginative creation, original thought, invention, or discovery. (OED)

This should be understood as etymological definition #3 for the remainder of this study. In fact, let us keep in mind the following

three definitions of genius just discussed. Each will be numbered to more easily distinguish them as the study progresses.

1a. genius as an attendant spirit or guide (evidence of ethical valence).
1b. evil genius.
2a. (Obsolete) a disposition or inclination (of a person).
2b. (Obsolete) a disposition or inclination (of a nation or age).
3. a native intellectual power of the exalted type.

Of primary interest for this study is definition #3 since it deals with the creative aspect of the definition that is still with us today.

Despite the ascendancy of this third sense of genius in the eighteenth century, genius was not recognized in Dr. Johnson's 1755 Dictionary.[3] It is worth noting that the word genius in the European languages (*génie* in French and *Genie* in German) share the same Latin roots. Evidence suggests that, in terms of philosophical use, the German word *genie* migrated to German from English, whereas the word "aesthetic" traversed languages in the opposite direction[4] going from German to English. Thus, the roots of the German word *genie* are found in English, specifically with the English literary critics.

The *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* identifies the same remote Latin roots that we have identified for the German word *Genie*. However, the *Wörterbuch* identifies the more recent roots of the word *Genie* which is defined as *"Personifikation der Zeugungskraft"* (the personification of the power of creation) in eighteenth-century France. The *Trésor de la Langue Française* (1789–1960) entry for *génie* gives references to several French writers who use the word in the sense of etymological definition #3. Among them are Voltaire and Diderot: In his 1734 *Lettres Philosophiques*, Voltaire wrote of, *"un génie comme Mr Newton."* (ARTFL [online]). Diderot also uses genius in the sense of etymological definition #3. He writes,

> The interest and the charm of the work conceal Richardson's art from those who are the most capable of seeing it. Many times I've begun to read Clarissa in order to train myself, many times I have forgotten my project at the twentieth page; I was completely struck like all ordinary readers with the genius with which

> he had imagined a young girl filled with wisdom and prudence. (ARTFL [online])[5]

Despite the above cited usages of *génie*, it is important to note that there is no evidence that any Frenchman undertook studies specifically dedicated to uncovering the meaning of genius, like those of Gerard and Young. We should also note that the French seems to have a sense of the word genius that is not acknowledged by either the OED or the *Wörterbuch*. This meaning, unique to the French, means simply the powers of the mind. The *Trésor*, records a meaning of *génie* as *"Nature (bonne ou mauvaise), ensemble des aptitudes innées, des facultés intellectuelles, des dispositions morales."*[6] It is a slight variation on etymological definitions #2a and #3. Unlike etymological definition #2a, it is not concerned so much with personality as it is the capacity of the mind. And unlike etymological definition #3, it does not emphasize a creative element, it is simply the powers of the mind. Recognizing that the words for genius in each of these languages shared meaning, we will see that both Herder's and Kant's accounts of genius were directly influenced by the English literary critics. As Abrams points out,

> The Copernican revolution in epistemology—if we do not restrict this to Kant's specific doctrine that the mind imposes the forms of time, space, and the categories on the 'sensuous manifold,' but apply it to the general concept that the perceiving mind discovers what it has itself partly made—was effected in England by poets and critics before it manifested itself in academic philosophy. (Abrams 1953, 58)

As we will see, although Herder may not be considered an academic philosopher, his writings on genius are strongly influenced by Young. And we will also see the strong influence that Gerard had on Kant.

We will now proceed to a more thorough exploration of etymological definition #3, the vestiges of which remain with us today.

Lord Shaftesbury

We find evidence of all three definitions of genius in the writings of the widely influential Lord Shaftesbury, or Anthony Ashley Cooper,

Third Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury did indeed use the word genius in the sense of etymological definition #1, but only as a means to suggest that etymological definition #2 was more appropriate. In some of his other writings he clearly has in mind the creative connotations that came to the fore in the seventeenth century. Let us examine the use of each definition in turn.

In *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, Shaftesbury addresses what he thinks is a misapprehension of an ancient teaching in one of his soliloquies. He wants "to shew the Antiquity of that Opinion, 'That we have each of us a Daemon, Genius, Angel, or Guardian-Spirit, to whom we were strictly join'd, and committed, from our earliest Dawn of Reason, or Moment of our Birth'" (Cooper 1981, 60). The hypothesis that we have a genius that acts like a guardian angel is rejected by Shaftesbury. He writes,

> But I shou'd esteem it unfair to proceed upon such an Hypothesis as this: when (the very utmost) the wise Antients ever meant by this Daemon-Companion, I conceive to have been no more than enigmatically to declare, "that we had each of us a Patient in our-self; that we were properly our own Subjects of Practice; and that we then became due Practitioners, when by virtue of an intimate Receá we cou'd discover a certain Duplicity of Soul, and divide our-selves into two Partys." (Cooper 1981, 60)

Shaftesbury is dismissing any notion ("an Hypothesis") of attendant spirit in favor a more equivocal "Patient," or, to use a modern word, personality. However, he also seems to want to retain some semblance of the dualism we discussed earlier with regard to Shakespeare's use of an evil genius. The "Duplicity of Soul" suggests a conflicted personality. Recall Ferdinand assuring Prospero that he would not follow his "worser genius." Curiously enough, Shaftesbury seems to want to spurn the idea of an attendant spirit but retain its progeny, evil genius. In addition, in advocating "a Patient in our-self," Shaftesbury is asserting the broader understanding of genius as personality that is apparent in etymological definition #2.

In a later soliloquy in *Characteristicks*, Shaftesbury refers to "the different Genius of Nations," "the Genius of our People," "British

Genius" (306) and even "the moral Genius" (Cooper 1981, 190–92). Clearly, in these instances Shaftesbury is employing etymological definition #2 while, at times, still reaching back for the ethical valence we discussed in etymological definition #1. In *The Moralist* he continues this use with references to "the Genius of the People" and "Genius of the Place."

The transition to etymological definition #3 must be located in Shaftesbury's use of the Prometheus story. In fact, Abrams recognizes Shaftesbury's use of the Prometheus myth, specifically the idea that "paralleled the poet to the Creator," (Abrams 1953, 280) as widely influential in Germany.[7] In *De Shaftesbury à Kant*, Jean-Paul Larthomas recognizes the importance of Shaftesbury's claim that the imagination is Promethean, that is, that it can create. In the chapter entitled *"L'Enthousiasme et la Théorie du Génie,"* Larthomas devotes much of his discussion to Shaftesbury's use of the Promethean myth. Larthomas writes, "Prometheus is at the same time the force of nature and that of liberty reunited" (Larthomas 1985, 254). Furthermore, the creative impulse is not strictly bound to feeling; reason plays an important role: "Shaftesbury puts forth that this 'hardy adventure' of sentiment as much as that of reason is implicit of all creative genius, of all Promethean art" (Larthomas 1985, 236). Shaftesbury equates the poet with Prometheus. He writes that a poet who "give[s] to an Action its just Body and Proportions" should be recognized as "a second Maker: a just Prometheus, under Jove" (Cooper 1981, 110). In *The Moralist*, Shaftesbury states, "Prometheus was the Cause. The Plastik Artist, with his unlucky hand, solv'd all. 'Twas His Contrivance (they said) and He was to answer for it'" (Cooper 1987, 48). We should state that indeed Larthomas is correct to remark that Promethean art requires the rational faculties—"just Body and Proportion," "Tones and Measures," "Judgment and Ingenuity," and "Harmony and Honesty" to use Shaftesbury's words (Cooper 1981, 110). Although Shaftesbury recognizes that reason is involved in Promethean art, he does not directly equate the Promethean story with genius. In fact, the references to genius in his discussion of Prometheus are sparse.[8] It is only in Soliloquy Part I, section 3 in *Characteristicks* that Prometheus and genius are found in proximity, and almost a full page apart at

One can immediately see a confluence between Kant's transcendental inclinations and Shaftesbury's idea. For Kant, a judgment of beauty will be made through the subject's feelings of pleasure or displeasure, and furthermore, the "forming power" certainly invites one to consider a notion like Kant's free play. For Shaftesbury, as with Kant, locating a judgment of beauty in the subject does not necessitate gainsaying universality. "All of us own the standard, rule, and measure" of beauty says Shaftesbury. It is only "interest and passion [that] breed disturbance" (Hofstadter and Kuhns 1964, 255). Thus, we can see the roots of Kant's all important characteristic of a judgment of beauty in the First Moment of the "Analytic of the Beautiful"; it is a disinterested judgment. Furthermore, disinterestedness is a key component of the idea of a free play of the imagination.

In sum, let us recognize that Shaftesbury had a strong influence on Kant in many of his aesthetic ideas. The Promethean myth proves to be quite useful in changing the conception of the artist to artificer and creator from merely an imitator. Let us now turn to Joseph Addison who directly addresses the question of genius in its creative and artistic sense.

Joseph Addison

The critic who first begins to reflect on the significance of the word genius itself is Addison. Addison reflected on genius in the *Spectator*. The entry dated September 3, 1711 proposes to "throw some thoughts together on so uncommon a subject" (Addison 1864, 329). The subject to which Addison is referring is genius, and he immediately recognizes his contemporaries' tendency to label as genius just about everyone with a pen. He writes,

> There is no character more frequently given to a writer, than that of being a genius. I have heard many a little sonneteer called a fine genius. There is not an heroic scribbler in the nation that has not his admirers who think him a great genius; and as for you smatters in tragedy, there is scarce a man among them who is not cried up by one or other for a prodigious genius. (Addison 1864, 329)

Addison, like Ulrich in *The Man Without Qualities*, acknowledges that genius is liberally used to describe writers and poets, and it is the liberality of use that compels him to ruminate on the subject. That we are simply seeing Addison's pithy musings on the subject is clear; he harbors no pretense of a rigorous examination of the subject. Addison simply identifies two classes of genius—one endowed with natural abilities and the other acquiring his trade through imitation and learning.

Of the first type Addison writes,

> Among great geniuses those few draw the admiration of all the world upon them, and stand up as 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. There appears something nobly wild and extravagant in these great natural geniuses. (Addison 1864, 329)

The adjective "great" seems to serve an exegetical purpose for Addison. The great genius, the one who does not need training or education, is the one endowed with natural abilities. Addison places Homer, authors of the Old Testament, Pindar, and Shakespeare among those who belong to the class of great geniuses. These disparate writers have in common that "they were very much above the nicety and correctness of the moderns" (Addison 1864, 330) and that they were "hurried on by a natural fire and impetuosity to vast conceptions of things and noble sallies of imagination" (Addison 1864, 331). We can see the close relationship between both classes of genius in Addison and definition #3. The native intellectual power of definition #3 is evident throughout Addison's discussion. The locus for such exuberance is the imagination, and learning is not emphasized. It is also a very select class of writers; one does not easily merit the label great genius.

It is only Addison's second class of genius which employs the aid of learning, rather than having natural gifts endowed to him. Although Addison insists that this second version is not inferior to the first class, we do see a marked change in tone. Instead of "noble sallies of

imagination" and the appearance of something "nobly wild and extravagant," we get the more temperate submission of natural talent to "the corrections and restraints of art" (Addison 1864, 332). Addison explains the difference in class of genius with a verdant simile:

> The genius in both these classes of authors may be equally great, but shows itself after a different manner. In the first, it 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. (Addison 1864, 332–33)

Addison's use of nature to make this distinction begins a long list of writers who closely relate genius and nature. The use of a nature trope anticipates what will be an increasingly common usage from this point on into the Romantic age. Despite Addison's insistence that neither class is superior to the other, he does seem to privilege the first class. First of all, he uses the adjective great when referring to the first class of genius. Secondly, he reminds us of the danger of the second class of genius cramping his ability by "too much imitation" (Addison 1864, 333). Thirdly, he states,

> An imitation of the best authors is not to compare with a good original; and I believe we may observe that very few writers make an extraordinary figure in the world, who have not something in their way of thinking or expressing themselves that is peculiar to them, and entirely their own. (Addison 1864, 333)

The evidence clearly suggests that Addison esteems the first class of genius over the second despite his comments to the contrary. The first class is able to reveal something peculiar to them; the "personal" is invoked, and that brings with it a depth of vision that a more imitative practice lacks. Furthermore, Addison's mention of writers "expressing themselves" and thinking in a manner "peculiar to them" or "entirely their own" signals a new way of conceiving of a writer as

self-expressive. We may find this language commonplace today, but Addison, who wrote at the beginning of the eighteenth century, was undoubtedly at the forefront of conceiving of the artist as self-expressive and having a personal vision. As we will see with Young and those who follow, the approach to literary criticism underwent a great deal of change in the eighteenth century. This fundamental change had to do with centering criticism upon the artist or writer rather than upon the work of art itself.

Seeking a definitive answer to the question of priority regarding the first or second class of genius in Addison's writing would be folly for the simple reason that he presents his piece as reflections casually put together. However, such a conflict is important to note because the tension between natural and learned genius has a legacy that persists throughout and beyond the eighteenth century. It is a conflict that finds champions on either side of the argument. We will now turn to two of the thinkers who reside on opposite sides of this conflict: Alexander Gerard and Edward Young.

Edward Young

Throughout the eighteenth century genius was becoming a significant topic in critical discussions where there was a marked shift from focusing upon a work itself to looking at how the writer creatively interacts with his work. This phenomenon has, to a certain degree, been adumbrated in our discussion of Addison and others. To further our sense of this shift, we must look to Edward Young (1683–1765), who was very much a part of the discussion, and who amplified a very powerful strain of thought regarding genius.

Young is credited with being one of the progenitors of the Romantic movement, which flourished in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. His writings in "Conjectures on Original Composition" (1759) prefigured many of the principles that became commonplace in the Romantic era. Hazard Adams, in his *Critical Theory since Plato*, points out that Young was at the forefront of literary criticism in two key areas: First, his interest turned "from the relationship between the work and the reader to that between the author and his work,"

and second his "emphasis shifted from discussion of rules and conventions of literary statement to interest in originality and innate 'genius'" (Adams 1971, 337). The two comments by Adams are obviously interrelated; they point to an emphasis on the artist, rather than on the work of art. Adams goes on to say that "Young's aim is to change the main preoccupations of criticism as it had been practiced by the neoclassicists, and to emphasize the uniqueness of personal genius and the element of poetry that is 'beyond prose reason'" (Adams 1971, 337). Young saw reason, with its universalizing tendencies, as something that effaced individuality; personal genius could be revealed in a realm "beyond prose reason."

Herder was said to have remarked that Young's "Conjectures" had an "electrical effect and kindled a blaze of fire in German hearts."[9] The blazing fire of which Herder speaks found its outlet mainly in the German *Sturm und Drang* movement of the late eighteenth century—championed and perpetuated, as we will see, particularly by the influential Herder. A look at some of the ideas put forth by Young reveals his predilection for the natural, as opposed to the learned, genius.

Young does not undertake a systematic critique of genius; rather, he does exactly what the title of his work says he does—he makes conjectures. As one might expect when reading the title, his "conjectures," much like Addison's throwing together of thoughts in his *Spectator* entries, take the form of speculation or opining without much rigorous or systematic inquiry. It is instructive to learn that Young's conjectures are addressed to his friend Samuel Richardson, a critic and novelist, who suggested that Young write something of his "sentiments on original, and on moral composition" (Adams 1971, 338). Young muses on original composition at length, and it is fair to say that his conjectures swirl around haphazardly rather than deliberately building from some foundational ideas to a logical conclusion. His conjectures are peppered with numerous references to genius. Such a whimsical approach is consistent with his ideas on genius: one would not expect a deliberate approach from someone who is effusively praising the deep and spontaneous inner drives of feeling that miraculously result in profound visions of beauty. Indeed, Young addresses the question of genius as one tossing around ideas regarding the state of politics in the next century.

thought less, if he had read more?" (Young 1968, 574) and "the less we copy the renowned ancients, we shall resemble them the more" (Young 1968, 555). Thus, education and learning are seen as potential strictures on the creative genius. Young is relentless in his assault against learning, in that he attaches to learning a stifling and inhibiting quality. For Young, learning to read and write amounts to the fitting of shackles on the imagination, whereas inspiration and rapture are the desired ends of genius. Learning merely provides information, not enlivening creativity.

The roots of the relationship between divinity and genius are clear enough. As we remarked earlier, etymological definition #1a includes the idea of an "attendant spirit or guide." The word spirit, if not something explicitly divine, nevertheless hints at something supersensual. In the earlier understanding of the word, the spirit guides one to virtue or valor. The significant change that took place in the eighteenth century is that the spirit or guide became a creative, original, and inventive force. Young's comparison with the divine does indeed retain some sense of the word's origins. The difference however between Young's and Addison's usage is in the decidedly creative ends that they attach to it. The sense of genius as a guiding spirit aimed at valiant behavior is superseded by the sense of genius as a creative impulse.

Just as Young refers to the divine origins of genius, so too does he refer to nature as the origin of genius. In the context of nature we find the key to originality. Young writes, "Imitations are of two kinds; one of Nature, one of Authors: The first we call Originals, and confine the term Imitation to the second" (Young 1968, 551). Again, we can see emerging here the tension between imitation and originality. Original imitation sounds like a oxymoronical contradiction, but Young distinguishes imitation of nature as a way of being original, while imitation of (other) authors should be understood in the more reductive sense of copying. Young's clumsy distinction is not terribly profound. He is not struggling, as William Desmond does in "Kant and the Terror of Genius," with an inherited dualism of creativity and imitation; rather Young merely points toward a vague distinction between production and reproduction, or invention and copying, but for the most part, he seems only able to broadly suggest that


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of genius that Kant and Gerard make explicit—invention, taste, and judgment, for example. He writes, "The first and most considerable circumstance requisite to render truth agreeable, is the genius and capacity, which is employ'd in its invention and discovery" (Hume 1984, 495). In this case, Hume does equate genius and invention. Man has a capacity for discovery, and genius has the potential for invention. Thus, we see that Hume does not reduce the activity of genius to finding rules. The inventive element is found in genius. But, the inventive element is never developed in any substantive way.

It would be difficult to sustain an argument that Hume had any particular influence on Kant's explication of genius; rather, Hume seems to fit in the general legacy of Addison's early eighteenth reflections: genius is sought in the realm of the arts, and creativity is a cornerstone of genius's power. For a more influential philosopher regarding the specific characteristics of genius we must turn our attention to Alexander Gerard.

Alexander Gerard

Alexander Gerard (1728–1795) was a professor of philosophy at Marischal College in Aberdeen, Scotland. From 1758 to 1773 he belonged to the Aberdeen Philosophical Society (records exist of these meetings up until 1771) which included other Aberdeen scholars such as Thomas Reid, John Gregory, George Campbell, David Skene, Robert Trail, and John Stewart.[10] It was at the twice monthly meetings of the Aberdeen society that Gerard began his examination of genius. In fact, the question regarding genius was number eighteen on a list of 126 questions formulated by the society. It read: "In the Perfection of what faculty does Genius consist? Or if in a Combination of Faculties, what are they?" Indeed, the opening section of *An Essay on Genius* seems to be a direct response to these questions.

Gerard states in the preface to *An Essay on Genius* that "the first part [was] composed, and some progress was made in the second part, so long ago as the year 1758" (Gerard 1966, iii). This is evidenced by the 1759 publication of his *An Essay on Taste* where Gerard provides a propaedeutic for his fuller examination of genius by devoting a

section to it. This is noteworthy because it places Gerard at the forefront of a number of books composed on genius in a twenty-year period that dates from the 1750s.[11] As Bernhard Fabian points out in the introduction, if Gerard composed much of the book in 1758, he may be considered to be

> one of the earliest writers on the subject and almost reverse[s] the traditional history of *Genielehre*. For what might be considered as a summary of established doctrines when written in or shortly before 1774 must appear as new and "original" if written or at least conceived in the seventeen-sixties or even in the late seventeen-fifties. Gerard would then deserve a different place among these pioneer thinkers and, perhaps, stand out as their precursor. (Gerard 1966, xi)

Our purpose is not to determine Gerard's historical place in the history of *Genielehre*. Rather, our interest is in Gerard's influence on Kant. Important dates, therefore, would be 1766, the year the German translation of Gerard's *An Essay on Taste* appeared in Germany and, more importantly, 1776, the year *An Essay on Genius* appeared in German translation. Zammito states, "Kant read [*An Essay on Genius*] just about as soon as it arrived" (Zammito 1992, 41). The year 1776 is fourteen years before the date of publication of the third *Critique*. Georgio Tonelli, in his essay "Kant's Early Theory of Genius (1770–1779)," points out that "before 1770 Kant rarely uses the term genius" and "after 1770 Kant gives terrific development to his theory of genius" (Tonelli 1966, 109–10). Tonelli makes clear in his essay that 1776 is a pivotal year for Kant's conception of genius. Questions regarding *Geist*, education, and talent take on a different hue for Kant in the years following 1776. Such development will be addressed below. For now, let us return to Gerard and examine his concept of genius.

Milton Nahm suggests that there is a fundamental dualism in Gerard's theory of genius (Nahm 1956, 141). The suggestion of a dualism arises because Gerard refuses, unlike Edward Young, to give genius free reign in creation. Genius manages to combine creation with judgment and taste. We can recall that etymological definition

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