The Cult of Genius

The second half of the eighteenth century saw an important shift in the explanation of art’s genesis, with the artist assuming a much more central role. In a typical formulation of the older theory, Pierre François Hughes, the self-styled Baron d’Hancarville, stressed the relative insignificance of individual creativity: “In every Art good models give birth to ideas by exciting the imagination, theory furnishes the means of expressing those ideas, practice puts these means in execution, and this last part which is always the most common is also the easiest.”9 The creative artist, in other words, was considered to be no more than a craftsman, and an ordinary one at that. Aestheticians of the time spoke of genius, but the term referred to a natural facility that was cultivated within the bounds of accepted practice. As the British connoisseur Payne Knight (1750-1824) put it, “It is [...] intuitive feeling and perception for the possible and ideal perfection of art, joined to study, persevering, systematic exertion to reach it, which properly constitutes genius” (Brewer 275).

Such formulations, however, found it increasingly difficult to account for the phenomenon of Shakespeare. Critics had previously dismissed his plays because of their failure to adhere to Aristotelian conventions, but in the second half of the eighteenth century, Shakespeare’s appeal became such that theory would have to explain him. The question now arose: could the dramatic conventions that Shakespeare violated still be saved? In his Hamburgische Dramaturgie (1767-69), [Gotthold Ephraim] Lessing turned to the notion of genius to defend Shakespeare’s neglect of the three unities while not dismissing Aristotelian poetics altogether. Historical circumstances, he acknowledged, could affect a work’s structure; Shakespeare, for example, belonged to a tradition that had no connection to the Greek rules for writing tragedy, and so he could not be expected to respect them. Lessing seemed to side with Herder when he urged the critic to take such contexts into account; but unlike Herder, he still assumed a universally applicable set of standards to which the creative genius will always adhere, if only unconsciously. A Shakespeare, he wrote, already has the rules within himself; indeed, the proof of his genius lies in his natural, untutored conformity with their spirit. Certain specific poetic rules may well prove inessential to tragedy, but taken together they represent an accumulated wisdom that defines universal aesthetic value. Those who cry “Genius! Genius!” in order to do away with all theoretical strictures miss the point. By setting up an opposition between traditional poetics and creative genius, they fail to understand either.10

Lessing aimed this attack specifically at Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg, although without naming him directly. Gerstenberg’s Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Litteratur (Letters on Noteworthy Aspects of Literature, 1766-67), as we will see in the next chapter, asserted a different notion of creative genius, one that stressed its uniqueness. While Lessing saw genius as producing naively what talent achieves through careful study and rigorous application of the rules, Gerstenberg granted genius its own separate realm.

This idea had already been advanced by Edward Young in 1759 in his influential Conjectures on Original Composition. Gerstenberg seems to have read this essay in the original soon after it was published, and a German translation appeared within less
than a year to mostly enthusiastic reviews. Young was already widely admired for his *Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (1742-44), so the Conjectures were a welcome voice in the debate about the need for following classical models. Young distinguished between two kinds of literary imitation,

one of nature, one of authors: The first we call Originals, and confine the term *Imitation* to the second. [...] Originals are, and ought to be, great favourites, 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 [sic] and genius, are at a stand. The pen of an original writer [...] out of a barren waste calls a blooming spring: Out of that blooming spring an *Imitator* is a transplanter of laurels, which sometimes die on removal, always languish in a foreign soil. [...] Still farther: An *Imitator* shares his crown, if he has one, with the chosen object of his imitation; an Original enjoys undivided applause. An Original may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is not made: *Imitations* are often a sort of manufacture wrought up by those mechanics, art, and labour, out of pre-existent materials not their own.12

Genius, Young admits, is both inborn and rare, but it lies hidden under habit and convention more often than we realize. So that authors can nurture this quality in themselves, should they possess it, he offers two pieces of advice:

1st. *Know thyself* [...] dive deep into thy bosom; learn the depth, extent, bias, and full fort 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 I should say little more than my second rule enjoins, (viz.) *Reverence thyself*.

That is, let not great examples, or authorities, browbeat 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 (24).

Up until this point, the discussion of genius in Germany had centered on the question of how much of the creative process required learning, and how much was inspiration. With the reception of Young, however, the focus shifted from creation to creator. Lessing’s test for genius still required its products to conform to universally applicable forms; Young, on the other hand, stressed the validity of the subjective self. Together with Gerstenberg he was part of a new tradition that radically distinguished between talent and genius: the former is a discrete quality, while the latter is an essential mode of being human, something that extends even beyond the aesthetic realm. Talent is the ability to fulfill conventional expectations of taste and form; genius is a capacity for singular creation. One does not have genius; one is a genius. Or, as Johann Caspar Lavater (1741-1801) put it, “Whoever notices, perceives, looks, feels, thinks, speaks, acts, forms, composes, sings, creates, compares, separates, unites,
concludes, has presentiments, gives, takes — as if a genius, an invisible being of a higher sort, had dictated it or otherwise imparted it to him, he has genius; as if he himself were a being of a higher sort — is a genius.”

This emphasis on the creative genius’s uniqueness overlapped with eighteenth-century changes in readership. The emerging bourgeoisie was attempting to create its own place in a literary culture that still defined itself by the values of a leisure aristocracy. Traditionally, writers with pretensions to literary merit avoided commercial success, hard to achieve in any case, and relied on patronage, which was awarded to those who promised to add luster to their benefactors’ reputation for taste and wit. Whether they resided at court or in a nobleman’s household (sometimes with the status of domestic servant), or else held sinecures, authors’ literary legitimation required that they stay above the venal interests of the marketplace — or at least appear to do so. The true artist was an amateur. “Financial independence, the eighteenth-century equivalent of Virginia Woolf’s £500 a year and a room of one’s own’, produced good writing, the marketplace produced trash” (Brewer 150; see also Gray 1995: 35). But the notion of genius provided a welcome alternative to these two extremes. Now critics could argue “that the ability to produce valuable literature was not determined by economic conditions but was rather a matter of individual ingenuity and originality. Literature was less a matter of uncovering and revealing traditional ‘natural’ truths than of creating an original — that is, new — literary artifact” (Brewer 50).

This emerging attitude had several welcome implications. First of all, it suggested to authors who entertained literary pretensions that they might enter the marketplace without necessarily being grouped with commercial hacks. Inferior writers could achieve success by pandering to conventional tastes; geniuses could sell works of literary value. Second of all, in stressing the unique ties between the singular work of genius and its creator, it thrust the author more into the spotlight. Literary biography became an important part of criticism (in Samuel Johnson’s massive The Lives of the Poets, for example), and, as the success of Goethe’s Werther proved, the personal connections between an author’s work and life inspired enormous public fascination. Finally, by insisting that each work bears the mark of its creator, the assertion of genius advanced the concept of intellectual property. This notion was especially strong in Britain, where a form of copyright protection existed, and literary profits, though still elusive to most authors, were more easily attained. In sum, the cult of genius enhanced both the literary and commercial value of a serious author’s work.

It also extended into other, non-literary areas. Johann Georg Zimmermann, for example, explicitly applied this notion to all other forms of accomplishment, including the practice of medicine. His influential study, Von der Erfahrung in der Arzneikunst (Concerning Experience in Medicine, 1764), which went through three German editions and was translated into Dutch, English, French and Spanish, powerfully affected the Sturm und Drang with its definition of genius as arising from the strongest possible combination of imagination (Einbildungskraft) and intellectual understanding (Verstand). Zimmermann coined the word Kraftgenie to designate this phenomenon, stressing the will and self-control that it requires. To the Sturm und Drang, genius thus came to mean not just an ability to create, but a way of being, a capacity to feel and respond passionately to the whole of existence. As Lavater wrote, “Genius, total, true genius, without heart [...] is monstrous — For not higher intellect alone; not imagination alone; not both together make genius — love! love! love! — is the soul of genius” (vol. 2, 223; emphasis in the original). Aesthetic production was of course important, but creative genius was first and
foremost associated with a muscular embrace of life. Friedrich Leopold Graf zu Stolberg described this state in his rhapsodic essay, *Über die Fülle des Herzens* (On the Fullness of the Heart, 1777):

But so that no one misunderstand me in this century devoid of marrow, let that silk-clad little man, who might with a precious simper applaud too hastily, know that fullness of the heart is far more than mere passive sensitivity, and that any enervation of nature is despicable, and that a flaccid sentimentality that teaches youths to whimper and smile extinguishes the divine spark within them.

[...] Oh, you near-sighted rationalists, who ever seek to divide all concepts which the truly wise saw with glowing brow and tears at the sight of known truth!

You would split light’s ray, if you could; the wise man combines together many rays and warms himself by the flame he has given rise to.

Everything alienates you; never have you had an idea of the great harmony of the cosmos, you couldn’t! Nothing is true for you, everything contradiction; for the wise man, nothing is contradiction, much is true, and some things are obscure.\(^\text{15}\)

This strength of feeling, Stolberg admits, can have tragic consequences. The subterranean fires that warm the earth sometimes erupt destructively. But a life full of fire is preferable to a mundane “snail-existence” (796). When the Sturm und Drang writers congratulated each other on being geniuses, they were celebrating this intensity of feeling and oneness with nature as much as their productivity as creative artists. In fact, their concept of genius allowed for no distinction between life and art.\(^\text{16}\)


12 Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, ed. Edith J. Morely (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1918), 6-7. The interest in genius as art’s source has parallels in German music criticism of the time; Mary Sue Morrow traces the increasing emphasis on creative genius, as opposed to compositional correctness, in reviews from the 1760s through the 1780s: *German Music Criticism in the Late Eighteenth Century: Aesthetic Issues in Instrumental Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 99-133.

13 *Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschenliebe* (Leipzig and Winterthur: Weidmann, 1775-1778), vol. 4 (1778), 80: “Wer bemerkt, wahrnimmt, schaut, empfindet, denkt, spricht, handelt, bildet, dichtet, singt, schafft, vergleicht, sondert, vereinigt, folgert, ahndet, giebt, nimmt — als wenn’s ihm ein Genieus, ein unsichtbares Wesen höherer Art diktiert oder angegeben hätte, der hat Genie; als wenn er selbst ein Wesen höherer Art wäre — ist Genie.”

14 Rudolf Ischer, *Johann Georg Zimmermann’s Leben und Werke* (Bern: Wyss, 1892). Like Kraftkerl (see footnote 46), Kraftgenie defies translation. The compound adds Kraft, which means “power, force, vigor,” to the term for genius.
Zimmermann (1728-1795) was friends, at least for a while, with Boie, Goethe, Herder, and Leisewitz, and he supported efforts to get Lenz’s work published. Goethe paints a very mixed portrait of him in Book 15 of *Poetry and Truth*.


3: Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg

[...]  
*Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Litteratur* (Letters on Noteworthy Aspects of Literature, 1766-67)

None of this later lethargy was apparent during Gerstenberg’s fruitful years of accomplishment, however, when the *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Litteratur* appeared. Modeled after Lessing’s *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend* (Letters Concerning the Latest Literature, 1759-65), these essays, which have come to be known as the *Schleswigische Briefe* (Schleswig Letters), purport to be an informal exchange among a group of men who write in different styles and from various perspectives. Gerstenberg told Nicolai that they were intended in part to awaken a new German taste for older works, and they comment on a number of figures, including Ariosto, Cervantes, Homer, and Spenser. Letters 14 through 18, however, provide a new appreciation of Shakespeare. Rejecting the traditional notion that tragedy’s purpose lies in the effects of fear and pity, indeed, dispensing with all such normative classifications, Gerstenberg applies a different criterion to drama.

Shakespeare’s genius, he asserts, lies in his presentation of real life as it is embodied in individual characters and particular national traditions. Each of his plays is a rich structure that combines a variety of complex emotions and particularities of nation, class, and character. Rather than view this wealth through the prism of the three unities, Gerstenberg proposes to measure genius by how wide a variety of “times, settings and plots” it can encompass. Shakespeare’s diverse forms of speech, temporal leaps, rapid changes of scene, and contrasting emotions are thus to be seen positively. At the same time, however, Gerstenberg insists that such diversity does not threaten real dramatic unity. First of all, we have to recognize the particularities of national custom and class-specific language. What at first appear to be random mixtures of mood and speech in fact mirror social reality. Furthermore, the artist’s shaping hand is at work: the diverse elements, even as they reflect nature’s multiplicity, are held together by inherent qualities: “I see a certain wholeness which has a beginning, middle, end, relation, intention, contrasting characters and contrasting groupings” (106). In moving the interpretive perspective to the work itself and away from prescribed forms intended to evoke specific effects, Gerstenberg both articulated the Sturm und Drang concept of art and even anticipated the aesthetics of the classical and romantic movements.

The twentieth letter considers more closely the phenomenon of genius, one of the defining tenets of the Sturm und Drang. Here Gerstenberg proposes to distinguish between “talent,” a discrete characteristic to be possessed and developed, and “genius,” which is an inborn identity. Talent, he writes, can be sought, and it can be buried by circumstance, but genius “finds itself” and fights its way through any
hindrance; talent contributes to a work, but genius creates it (119). No matter how industriously talent applies prescribed aesthetic forms, it can never hope to match the effect of poetic genius. The former copies nature in conventional forms; the latter makes nature present within us in all its complexity. Instead of imitating a world, genius creates one, immersing us in a metaphorical existence so real that we become part of it and it of us. We conceive it — in both senses of the word — in our souls (123). Yet at the same time, Gerstenberg recognizes that, even though the reader’s experience is of nature itself, this poetic truth is in fact mediated by illusion — or, as he delights in calling it, Betrug (deception, 121).

In an analogous pairing, Gerstenberg distinguishes between traditionally normative aesthetics and the appreciation of genius; he invokes the difference between “works of wit” and “true poetry.” The former originate in a bel esprit and reflect cultivated taste and reason. Their structure depends on adherence to convention. “True poetry,” in contrast, springs from the heart. Indistinguishable from the genius that embodies it, it possesses its own creative force and inner form. And that which true poetry conveys is neither a concept nor the object of feeling, but the feeling itself. In describing the nature of song but actually speaking of all works of genius, Gerstenberg writes that

not every object of feeling expresses itself in song; rather, the feeling itself, in which the various objects flow together, dissolves itself into the notes and becomes the simple, uncomplicated song of nature. Love’s yearnings, its wheedlings, its pains, its agitations, etc., the object could be a beautiful girl or a bottle of wine! — not the subordinated concepts concentrated therein! (111)

The same holds true for drama, which neither imitates a situation nor even evokes the prescribed feelings of pity and fear; rather it conveys the complexity of character and emotion in an intense experience. This is what Gerstenberg means when he tells Lessing that, in Ugolino, “The course and the goal of my drama was a starvation.”

Notes

