Introduction

[W]e ought to know what “genius” is.
—Marjorie Garber, Academic Instincts

[L]et us not pretend to understand what genius means.
—Derrida, “L’archéologie du frivole”

Genius is a word with a long history, two etymological origins, and, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, seven distinct meanings, each with several subcategories. Yet since the eighteenth century the term has often been deployed in the Western world as if its sense were entirely obvious, with speakers relying on an assumption of cultural consensus to pass “genius” off as a self-explanatory notion. It was taken up by all the major European languages in response to the need for a word that would express the new sense of the value of exceptional creative originality. An accolade that defines its object as an exception in a class of its own, “genius” serves as a sort of super-superlative, possessing rather more evaluative purpose than precise semantic content. At the same time, it indicates the distinctiveness of the person to whom it is applied, the stamp of individuality being the guarantee of the originality that was increasingly associated with the term. Genius is therefore exceptional on two different counts, superior quality and distinctive character, so that to speak of “the genius of Mozart,” for example, is both to place Mozart at the top of some hypothetical ranking of composers, and to allude to the particular character of his music.

If one pauses to reflect, however, “genius” is oddly hard to define, and what is odder still, this does not seem to count against its viability as a concept. Speakers continue to use the word as if they can count on listeners to understand what they mean, and the attribution of genius is often used as a clincher in discussions as if to suggest that the word is entirely self-justifying. In the early days of writing this book I attended two memorial services for people whose qualities were recalled in some detail, before the eulogist—a different one in each case—concluded with a version of the statement: “In sum, he was a genius.” In the same vein, and around the same time, I overheard a student telling a friend how much he admired Dickens as a writer, and once again, after
brief reflective pause, he summarized his view with the words: “Well, he was just a genius.” End of story. Except that genius as a general phenomenon has regularly attracted comment and analysis, as if its lack of semantic precision were a vacuum that commentators were repeatedly drawn to fill. And often in the most interesting ways. It is with these interesting ways—in other words, with the many “uses” to which genius has been put—rather than with any attempt at definition that this book is concerned.

“Genius” is an idea that seems to answer a desire to articulate admiration for exceptional human achievement. And as a consequence of the curiosity that such achievements provoke, it invites speculation about its origins and operations, expressed in the question, “How do they do it?” This curiosity can also lead to suspicion and to a view of genius as a form of deception: apparently exceptional achievement can turn out to be not so exceptional after all, and its creators no different from anyone else. All these responses seem to me worthy of consideration, and each has produced discussions that merit closer examination. In what follows I have been guided by the inherent interest of the discussions I consider, and to that extent my approach is agnostic rather than partisan. I shall not confine myself to presenting any single view of genius, and I have no particular theory of genius of my own to advance. Instead, my aim is to present a number of different accounts of genius as they have emerged since the beginning of the eighteenth century, while restricting myself to France—for reasons that I shall explain in a moment.

The semantic imprecision of the term “genius” is due in part, as has long since been acknowledged, to its dual etymology, deriving from the two Latin words genius and ingenium. Moreover, as Jane Chance Nitzsche observes in her book The Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the Latin word genius does not denote a single central concept or meaning, and its forms and associations already constitute “a bewilderingly diverse array.” It referred in the ancient Roman world to a tutelary spirit that accompanied each man from his birth to his death (women had a Juno), and prior to that, it was associated with the worship of household spirits and viewed as a procreative force sustaining the family line embodied in the paterfamilias. It is in this tradition that Genius makes its return in medieval allegory as a kind of deity or spirit associated with sexual reproduction. Deriving from the Latin gignere, this is a biological begetting and not artistic or intellectual creation.

The etymological strand that derives from ingenium refers to both character and aptitude. In the ancient world ingenium was a vital prerequisite for oratory, which is inborn but nonetheless benefits from the kind of effort that Cicero describes as “painstaking.” The word was resuscitated as ingenio in Italian Renaissance thought, where it denoted the natural powers of mind manifested in practical or speculative pursuits. French would later use the term “esprit” and the English “wit,” as in the title of the 1594 translation of Juan Huarte’s Examen de ingenios—The Examination of Mens Wits—which itemizes the different tem-
peraments according to humoral principles and sets out the best way to produce talented offspring.

The two etymologies (*genius* and *ingenium*) converged around the turn of the eighteenth century to give rise to the amalgam of superiority and distinctiveness conveyed by the modern use of the word “genius” as exceptional creative capacity distinguished by originality. The other senses nevertheless remain active, with the tutelary spirit morphing occasionally into an evil genius or the (sometimes winged) personification of abstract entities, such as *Le Génie de la Liberté* on top of the Bastille Column. It merges with the *genius loci* when it embodies the spirit of a place, a nation, or other collective entity, and even a language. This kind of embodiment also tends to carry with it connotations of superiority—as the example of the “genius of the French language” has often suggested.

Any dictionary will tell you this much, and a French dictionary, such as that of Littré or the *Trésor de la langue française*, will indicate the even broader reach that the word *génie* has in the French language, since it includes the "genie" who emerges from Aladdin’s lamp (and whose etymology co-opts the Arabic *Jinn*) on one side, and on the other, the engineering corps of the army and navy and their technical expertise. When qualified, as in *génie civil* or *génie chimique*, it also has the English sense of engineering (as in civil or chemical engineering). French also introduced an adjectival form, *génial*, first attested in 1838, which reflects the nineteenth-century enthusiasm for all forms genius from which it is falsely derived. Other languages restrict the sense of the word “genius,” so that German, for instance, distinguishes between *Genie*, borrowed from the French and referring to exceptional creative genius, and *Genius*, reserved for genius as tutelary spirit or the genius of a nation. My point is not that French is special with regard to the way the word *génie* functions, but that its range is indicative of the remarkably labile character of the term—manifest in all Western languages—and contributes to what I call its semantic imprecision.

This vagueness is reflected in other ways, as genius can refer both to a general attribute—as in “a man of genius” or “the genius of Mozart”—and to the person himself or (more rarely, as we shall see in due course) herself: as in “X is, or was, a genius.” “Genius” is a synecdoche that was increasingly substituted for its possessor over the course of the eighteenth century, the earliest French instance of this shift being recorded in the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* of 1721, and confirmed in the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie* of 1740, where the word is qualified by an adjective in expressions such as *un beau génie* or *un grand génie*. The *OED* suggests that this usage existed in English as early as the mid-seventeenth century.

In similarly divided mode, the source of the exceptional quality of creative genius is imagined as coming either from within or from without, depending on the case. The genius may be viewed as possessed by divine inspiration or Platonic frenzy whose source lies without, or, alternatively, as possessing in the
form of an aptitude that lies within as innate endowment. In a further ambiguity, genius is seen sometimes as an aberrant state, and at other times as the acme of human capability, being either an index of sickness or, conversely, emblematic of health. And in the modern world, there is a certain degree of ambivalence about its status, as if we are not sure how seriously we want to take the idea. While subscribing in all sincerity to the genius of Mozart, we allow ourselves to be seduced by advertising that facetiously tells us that Guinness is “Pure genius,” sells the French a washing powder under the label “Génie” and Anglophones an app for their iPads that goes by the name of “Genius,” or casts its net implausibly wide as a “Genius sperm bank” provides the initial prerequisite for any woman intent on “raising a genius.”

All this means that, etymologically and culturally speaking, the term is hugely overdetermined while remaining strangely underspecified in its actual applications. Any mention of “genius” will call up all its possible meanings whose potential relevance in a given context will hover on its fringes, and where all will be shot through with connotations of distinctive superiority. But, rather than being a problem, its ambiguities and the overall vagueness of its semantic definition could, on the contrary, be a virtue. Although Marjorie Garber, in the epigraph above, appears disconcerted to discover that we do not seem to know what “genius” means, Derrida clearly suggests that a certain laxity in this regard might be a positive advantage, even when he is elucidating one of the earlier eighteenth-century discussions of the term, Condillac’s Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines (Essay on the origin of human knowledge, 1746).

Nonetheless, as I have already indicated and ambiguity notwithstanding, European languages and cultures were broadly convergent in their use of the term as it emerged in the early years of the eighteenth century to express exceptional creative ability. In France the Querelle des anciens et des modernes prepared the ground for the notion of untutored genius, to which Addison gave more coherent form in his essay on the subject (written in 1711) where he celebrated “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.” The rediscovery of Longinus—translated into French by Boileau as the Traité du sublime (Treatise on the sublime) in 1674, and into English “compard with the French of the Sieur Despreaux Boileau” as An Essay upon Sublime (1698)—fueled thinking on both sides of the Channel with its assertion that the sublime proceeds from “greatness of the soul” rather than from mere technical mastery. In France the Abbé Dubos picks up the tale in his Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture (Critical reflections on poetry and painting), whose first edition appeared in 1719. And, as we shall see in fuller detail in chapters 1 and 2, others quickly followed.

The Germans joined in the conversation when Herder discovered Edward Young’s Conjectures on Original Composition (1759) and the word Genie en-
tered the German language courtesy of Batteux’s *Les Beaux-arts réduits à un même principe* (The fine arts reduced to a single principle, 1746). Diderot read Shaftesbury, and Alexander Gerard cited Dubos in his *Essay on Genius* (1774). Shakespeare’s first French translator, Le Tourneur, published a French translation of Young’s *Conjectures* within a decade of its English appearance, and Kant’s discussion of genius in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) owes as much to Alexander Gerard and to his French precursors as to any foregoing German discussions. French commentators regularly invoked Locke and Newton as examples of genius alongside Racine, Corneille, and Molière; Shakespeare was increasingly regarded as the embodiment of genius, even in France, where he had hitherto been regarded as a literary barbarian; and every educated person in Europe drew on the same repertoire of classical reference in support of their arguments. All of which provided a common set of examples and cited authorities in the writings of the period, regardless of nationality.

This history has been extensively documented and explored in ways that lend credence to the view that genius is the topic of a single, pan-European conversation to which the French, the English, and the Germans are the major contributors over the course of the eighteenth century. Although this is indubitably true, the effect is to give piecemeal prominence to individual contributors while ignoring the nature of the disciplinary and discursive context in which those contributions were made. But by focusing on the intellectual and cultural history of a single nation, it becomes easier to acknowledge the nature of those terms and to take account of the conceptual languages and disciplines from which they derive. This is particularly true for the French contributions to the debate, which tend to be marginalized in many accounts. Logan Pearsall Smith, whose discussion of genius in his *Four Words* still carries authority, recognizes that France made its contribution to the conception of genius, but he does so in a footnote to which his only two French references—Condillac and Voltaire—are also consigned.

The German tradition is better endowed with histories than the French one, with studies such as Jochen Schmidt’s exemplary *Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens in der deutschen Literatur, Philosophie und Politik 1750–1945*, which has gone through two editions. Otherwise, focus tends to be confined to a specific period, such as the eighteenth century, with Jonathan Bate’s *Genius of Shakespeare*, which tracks the emergence of Shakespeare’s status as a genius in the eighteenth century in England, Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler’s history of the notion of genius in the *Goethezeit* or Herman Wolf’s history of the term from Gottsched to Lessing in Germany, and, for France, Kineret Jaffe’s excellent essay, “The Concept of Genius: Its Changing Role in Eighteenth-Century French Aesthetics,” or Herbert Dieckmann’s equally excellent account of the many uses of the term in Diderot’s work. At the other extreme, and closer to the present day than many of these other studies, Penelope Murray’s suggestive anthology of essays, *Genius: The History of an Idea*, contains a
somewhat eclectic assortment of discussions, extending from her own lucid account of the classical origins of poetic genius to current views about musical or mathematical genius, very few of which, incidentally, make any kind of reference to French discussions of the topic. In a different vein, Christine Batterby’s *Gender and Genius* explores the specific issue of the implicit gendering of genius as male in the history of the idea, and draws on a wide range of sources.12

All these approaches, while invaluable for any understanding of the term (and I should like to record my own debt to them), are not only restricted to a single conceptual framework or to a single historical moment, but tend to position genius as any object to which any discussion might be more or less adequate, or about which a given argument might offer a particular view. Such strategies, even when they contest the notion of genius, nonetheless ignore the character of the language in which it is being discussed and so neglect to consider what investment that language and those who use it might have in the notion. It is these questions that my history of genius in France is designed to bring to light, so that, strictly speaking—and, as I am suggesting, rather more interestingly—it is less a history of the idea of genius itself, than a history of its uses and the ways in which that idea has been discussed and developed over the course of three centuries.

It may be that these ways have been more varied in France than elsewhere, or it may be that, unlike Germany, with its literary-philosophical tradition, France has had no single dominant intellectual framework to provide a consistent context for consideration of the question of genius. Added to this absence, France differs from England (which has Shakespeare), Germany (which has Goethe), Italy (which has Dante), Spain (which has Cervantes), and Russia (which has Pushkin) in that it has no single national figure around which such thinking might coalesce—although, as we shall see, Victor Hugo was happy to present himself as a candidate to remedy this lack. Discussions of genius in France have emerged in a series of very different disciplines and discourses as they themselves have emerged into intellectual life, as if—to adapt the phrase that Lévi-Strauss once used about animals—there was something about genius that made it particularly “good to think with.”13

In the eighteenth century these new disciplines were aesthetics and sensualist philosophy. At the turn of the nineteenth century, ideas of collective and specifically national genius became the focus for thinkers in France concerned with national identity in the wake of the Revolution. Romanticism, as elsewhere, homed in on the notion of genius, but did so by giving it a strategic role in the mutual recognition of the lyric poets who established the movement in France. Psychological medicine, where the French took the lead in the nineteenth century, made genius a matter of specialist concern, while the realist novel cast genius in terms of the failure to which the genre was repeatedly drawn for its subject matter, and children’s literature offered young readers a
huge repertoire of youthful and morally improving examples of genius. At the
development of experimental psychology equipped
time thinking about genius with a tool for its measurement in the form of the IQ
test, devised by Alfred Binet before it was exported to the United States, and in
the middle of the twentieth century the child prodigy, Minou Drouet, provided
journalists and cultural commentators with a pretext for reevaluating genius,
both for and against. Finally, in the latter part of the twentieth century, the era
of French theory began and ended with reflections on the question of genius,
Derrida having the last and unexpectedly positive word. The history of the idea
of genius in France is therefore clearly not a continuous one, and these different
approaches to the topic seem to function largely without reference to each
other, further reinforcing the impression of diversity, and more especially of
discontinuity.

Genius may be the object of specialist disciplinary attentions, but the idea
continues to circulate freely in the wider culture—as my examples of memorial
services and overheard student conversations show—although, as those exam-
pies also indicate, it does so at the cost of a certain unquestioned acceptance
thanks to which it quickly reverts to cliché. So that each time it comes under
scrutiny, genius must be drawn out of this banality as well as out of its constitut-
ive imprecision to serve as an object of fresh enquiry. This challenge no doubt
contributes to making it “good to think with.” But there is something else as
well: the connotations of originality and superiority associated with the modern
meaning of the word make a genius a topic of interest to new forms of intel-
lectual enquiry or artistic endeavor seeking their own forms of acknowledg-
ment and legitimation. In speaking of genius, some of its supposed qualities
may be thought to rub off onto those who speak of it. And in redefining genius,
a reverse process of osmosis can sometimes take place, whereby genius takes on
the characteristics, whether positive or negative, of the theory or discipline of
which it is the object. Genius can be made in the likeness—though also in the
unlikeness—of those who set out to describe it. Which means that genius is not
just good, but often positively advantageous to think with.

There is no established sense of a corpus of French writings on genius, and
one of the aims of this book is to outline one. But since discussion of the idea
of genius in France is so strikingly discontinuous, and since it is not sustained
by a single tradition of intellectual reflection or enquiry, any history of French
notions of genius needs some kind of rationale in order to create the corpus on
which it rests. The rationale of the history I am proposing here is twofold. First,
I shall make a virtue of the phenomenon of discontinuity and will argue that it
is precisely the novelty of each discourse that makes genius with its associations
of groundbreaking originality an attractive object of enquiry. This is a history
that constantly starts afresh, very often as if unaware of the discussions that
have preceded it elsewhere. The second assumption underpinning this history
is less specific to France, but it is prompted by this lack of continuity in the
French tradition: namely, that the reinvention or reenergizing of genius as an idea tends to be most effective when it is brought into contact with elements that appear to be antithetical or even positively inimical to it, and which, for the sake of convenience, I shall refer to as the “others” of genius.

Genius and Its “Others”

In the history of thinking about genius these others recur with remarkable regularity in the form of pathology (madness or melancholy), imposture (genius has always had its skeptics), and, finally, the spectator of genius: genius is a name conferred by those who behold it, and is very rarely claimed in the first person. Indeed, to assert “I am a genius” is almost invariably to lay oneself open to the suspicion of imposture. We take genius to be something that is instantiated in a person, but not self-proclaimed, and the category of genius depends on granting to third parties the right to determine its presence in the figures who bear a name that can be uttered only in the third, or occasionally the second person, but (almost) never convincingly in the first. Each of these “others” has its own founding text that provides points of reference in subsequent discussions: Aristotle’s “On Melancholy,” Plato’s dialogue “Ion,” and, much closer to the modern period, Kant’s Critique of Judgment, which makes the clearest case for the place of the beholder of genius. To that extent Kant may be said to articulate a point already implicit in other discussions, but since the case is made with an exemplary combination of clarity and subtlety, I have given the Critique the same status as Plato’s “Ion” and Aristotle’s “Melancholy.”

The inclusion of these external counterparts to genius might seem to go against the grain of many of the existing discussions, which have sought to arrive at some specificity of definition by contrasting genius with factors that are construed as its obverse. The emergence of genius as a key concept in the eighteenth century was frequently supported by an opposition between genius and talent: talent is the competent application of rules, whereas genius is the attribute necessary for creating original works of art, art being the sphere with which genius was predominantly (though not exclusively) associated. The following quotation from Condillac is typical of many eighteenth-century views on the subject: “[Talent] combines ideas of a known art or science in a manner that will produce the effects one would naturally expect. . . . [Genius] adds to talent the idea of a mind that is in some sense creative. It invents new arts, or, within the same art, new and equally valid genres. . . . A man of talent has a character that could belong to others who may be his equal or even surpass him. The character of a man of genius is original; it is inimitable.”15 This view of genius as the positive antithesis of talent became a commonplace, and it was widely used in conjunction with a notion of genius as unique, original, and creative.
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Much was made of this in Edward Young’s widely read *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), and his argument—or perhaps one might better say, his panegyric—includes a large number of further binaries as part of his attempt to construct an account of the creative powers of genius. The originality that is synonymous with genius is opposed to “mere” imitation: “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.”

The supporting antitheses between the organic and the mechanical, spontaneous growth and laborious construction, the new and the secondhand are just a few of a whole series of contrasting metaphors that Young mobilizes in support of his view.

The opposition between genius and imitation evolves in turn into a further contrast between genius and learning (*mere* learning), and it too is underscored by a set of corresponding antithetical evaluations: “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.”

The oppositions—afforced by the extravagant use of capitals and italics—between thanking and revering, pleasure and rapture, informing and inspiring, heaven and man, borrowed and innate are marshaled to endorse the implication that genius can be unequivocally demarcated from its lowly opposite, whether talent, imitation, or learning.

Young’s text was hugely influential, particularly in the development of the idea of genius in Germany, thanks to this emphasis on originality. But unlike the *Conjectures* and other approaches that rely on an opposition between genius and its others of talent, imitation, and learning, my three founding texts on genius treat some kind of otherness as integral to a proper understanding of the topic. I shall begin with Aristotle, even though this disrupts strict chronology, since it means discussing the pupil, Aristotle (384–322 BC) before the master, Plato (424/423–348/347 BC). Moreover, when I say “Aristotle,” it is safer to understand the “Pseudo-Aristotle” to whom it is conventional to attribute the *Problemata*, which contain the discussion of melancholy. For Aristotle, melancholy, or black bile, is a defining characteristic of what he calls “men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts,” and his is the first text to treat what we now call genius in terms of abnormality or pathology. The idea was picked up by Marsilio Ficino in the fifteenth century with his *Three Books on Life* and by Juan Huarte in the sixteenth, before seeing its apotheosis in the new medical sciences of the nineteenth century, of which Lombroso’s *L’Uomo di genio in rapporto alla psichiatria* (1888, translated into English as *The Man of Genius* in 1891), a revised version of his earlier *Genio et Follia* (1864), is a kind of summation, and which opens with a reference to Aristotle’s text.
The particular problem that Aristotle is seeking to explore is the association of melancholy with exceptional or outstanding figures. The two elements, melancholy and outstanding ability, are presented as being inextricably linked from the outset. Although not all melancholics are exceptional, Aristotle takes it as axiomatic that all exceptional individuals are melancholic. Melancholy is treated here in the context of the theory of the humors, and his men of exception include a broader range of figures than would normally be implied in the modern notion of genius (Hercules and Empedocles as well as Plato, Socrates, and others who have excelled in poetry and the arts), so it is not entirely straightforward to extrapolate the discussion onto modern conceptions of either pathology or genius. But the humoral principles serve to foreground the factors of admixture and instability in the account Aristotle provides of exceptional beings.

First of all, even if black bile (or melancholy) predominates in a given person, it is nevertheless just one in the compound of the four humors that are present in every individual. Moreover, says Aristotle, the “melancholic humour is [itself] already mixed in nature,” since it consists of a “mixture of hot and cold.” This mix is to be understood as a propensity to instability between the two extremes of temperature, and hence of mood and temperament. At the naturally cold end of the scale are apoplexy, torpor, despondency, and fear; but when the humor is overheated, “it produces cheerfulness with song, and madness,” and even “the breaking out of sores,” this last being is one of the features of Aristotelian melancholy that cannot be straightforwardly assimilated to the manic depression that contemporary thinking tends to associate with genius. The melancholic temperament is inherently “variable,” melancholics are “not equable in behaviour,” and, thanks to the inherent instability of black bile, they are by nature “abnormal” in ways that those whose temperament is determined by other humors—the choleric, the phlegmatic, and the sanguine—are not.

The intrinsically labile nature of black bile means that the spectrum of character produced by the humor is very wide, depending on degrees of hot and cold. Extremes of heat can produce madness and frenzy, the latter accounting for all “inspired persons.” But if this sounds like an early example of modern artistic genius (and the reference to Maracus, the Syracusan, who was apparently an even better poet when he was mad, might encourage one to think so), Aristotle goes on to argue that superiority results from moderation of such excessive heat. This is the case with those melancholics who are more intelligent and less eccentric than the ones who suffer from the extremes of humoral temperature, and they are in consequence able to excel in a whole variety of domains, be it education, the arts, or statesmanship. In short, we may say that Aristotle makes mixture, variety, and instability, rather than purity, the core of his argument about the superiority of those who include the kind of figure to which later ages gave the name of genius.

Plato’s dialogue, “Ion,” is probably read most frequently for its discussion of enthusiasm, but it also intriguingly suggests that the phenomenon of “genius”
entails an inextricable component of imposture: the poet’s knowledge is shown by Socrates to be fake knowledge. This view of genius as a form of charlatanry is, for obvious reasons, unlikely to appeal to anyone other than those who are anxious to discredit the whole concept, among whom one might include the rationalists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who regarded inspiration as a “dangerous word” that referred to “delusions” or an “impostures of poets.” The possibility of fraudulence haunts a good many discussions of genius, and Kant specifically excludes from serious consideration those who simply choose to “speak and decide like a genius” and are in reality “charlatans” who spread “haze.”

Plato treats imposture as an unavoidable if regrettable element in the inspiration of the poet or rhapsode. Where Aristotle distinguishes between frenzy and the kind of superiority that interests him in exceptional beings, Plato is concerned exclusively with the frenzy of inspiration. Moreover, whereas Aristotle locates the origins of superiority in an internal humoral physiology, Plato attributes poetic frenzy to divine dispensation. This, incidentally, constitutes a further example of the instability of genius, since, as one founding text succeeds another, it slides from an external, divine source, to an internal, humoral one.

And while Aristotle’s exceptional beings are endowed with superior intelligence and include philosophers (notably, Plato and Socrates, the author and interlocutor, respectively, of the dialogue that forms “Ion”), Socrates’s quizzing of Ion casts doubt on the rhapsode’s intellectual capacities by revealing that his claims to knowledge are spurious. First, it emerges that the rhapsode, who combines the role of critic-commentator with that of performer, can neither comment on nor recite the work of any poet other than Homer. Ion’s knowledge is invalidated for the philosopher on the grounds that the rhapsode is unable to generalize: he knows about Homer, but not about poetry. Such specialism might be a pardonable shortcoming; however, as the discussion progresses, Socrates succeeds in demonstrating that the knowledge that poets—and the rhapsodes who are their spokesmen—pass on to their audience is without substance. Homer can describe a chariot race and quote the advice that Nestor gives his son about how to negotiate the turning post, but he or, in this instance, his representative, Ion, is unable to judge whether the advice is correct. Under further pressure from Socrates, Ion is obliged to acknowledge that “the skill of a rhapsode is different from that of a charioteer” for the obvious reason that each has knowledge of different objects.

Ion has difficulty taking the point on board, but, as Socrates presents him with a series of quotations from Homer, Ion is repeatedly compelled to cede the apparent authority of the poet-rhapsode to the proven skills of various other figures—a doctor, a fisherman, and a prophet—whose expertise is cited in the poem. Worse still, when, with his back against the wall, Ion rashly lays claim to a distinctive area of professional expertise about the ways in which various classes of person speak—women, slaves, freemen, even cowherds and spinning
women—Socrates disempowers him once again by refuting the assertion that the argument has led Ion to make: namely, that although a general cannot be a good rhapsode, a rhapsode would make a good general because he knows how generals speak. The imposture is patent, albeit unwitting, and Socrates ends up, in so many words, accusing Ion of deception: the rhapsode pretends to knowledge that he cannot then substantiate, and is finally quite unable to say what the objects of his expertise might be.

If Ion is ultimately exempted from the charge of fraud, this is due to the fact that poets recite “not by virtue of a skill, but in a state of inspiration and possession.” A poet, says Socrates, is a “light thing, and winged and holy” who composes on the basis not of reason and knowledge, but of an inspiration that derives from the Muse. Inspiration compensates to some degree for the imposture of genius, but the dialogue nonetheless makes it clear that possession is a form of dispossession, which keeps both poet and rhapsode vulnerable to the charge of fraudulence, since they speak without mastery of the skills and knowledge that they appear to possess. Plato bequeaths to subsequent discussions of genius an account that makes the potential for imposture inherent to the phenomenon.

The third and final instance of my “others” of genius is the Other on whom genius depends for its recognition: its reader or audience, whose human character justifies my capitalization of “Other” here. In some senses this is so obvious a factor that it scarcely seems worth the mention. But in the history of the discussion of genius, the issue of recognition becomes increasingly important. Regarded as more or less self-evident by eighteenth-century commentators, genius was evaluated largely in terms of the effects it produces on its beholders. In the case of Young’s Conjectures, it might even be said that the very presence of genius in a work produces emotional response in its viewers, be it reverence, rapture, or the swoon of spiritual elevation. In the nineteenth century, however, the question of the recognition of genius became significant through the alleged withholding of recognition from those who supposedly deserved it most, thus requiring a new class of person able and willing to hail and defend figures who were otherwise reviled or ignored by a philistine or malevolent public.

Kant focuses primarily on the reader’s perspective in the Critique of Judgment (1790), where genius is considered in relation to the judgment of works of art, and the recipients of those works—rather than their creators—provide the starting point for his argument. Genius and the fine arts are treated as more or less synonymous in Kant’s discussion since for him there can be no fine art without genius. This view is present in Plato (he is discussing poets and poetry), but also in Aristotle, who suggests that all poets are exceptional, whereas superiority in the spheres of philosophy and statesmanship is a much rarer phenomenon. Like many of his contemporaries, Kant initially relies on a series of oppositions to circumscribe his definition: art versus nature, art versus science,
skill versus knowledge, fine art versus mercenary art, agreeable art, and mechanical art. And, still in accordance with many accounts of the topic in the eighteenth century, he makes originality the chief criterion of genius: “the foremost property of genius must be originality.”

What complicates his picture of the radical autonomy and distinctiveness of genius is the way that, rather than simply asserting genius in terms of its absolute value, as Young does, Kant pursues the implications and consequences of such a view. He begins by arguing that the essential originality of genius makes redundant all existing precepts, since genius creates its own. Or, as he famously puts it, “Genius is the innate mental predisposition (ingenium) through which nature gives the rule to art.” However, the radical originality of genius and the resistance of art to rational concepts mean that the genius-artist is incapable of formulating the rules that have produced the work, even though they are his own. If, as Kant says, natural disposition (ingenium) is the source of the artist’s originality, his inability to explain his own rules allies genius to its origin as daemon—or Latin genius—“the guardian and guiding spirit that each person is given as his own at birth, and to whose inspiration [Eingebung] those original ideas are due.” This is not quite the Platonic muse, but Kant’s genius shares with Plato’s Ion the peculiar inability to account for itself: “Genius itself cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, and it is rather as nature that it gives the rule. That is why, if an author owes a product to his genius, he himself does not know how he came by the ideas for it; nor is it in his power [Gewalt] to devise such products at his pleasure, or by following a plan, and to communicate [his procedure] to others in precepts that would enable them to bring about like products.” It is this inability that makes the artist differ so fundamentally from the scientist, who, in Kant’s account, can ultimately explain and reconstruct the procedures that led him to his new idea: “Newton could show how he took every one of the steps he had to take in order to get from the first elements of geometry to his great and profound discoveries; he could show this not only to himself but to everyone else as well, . . . allowing others to follow.” By contrast, “no Homer . . . can show how his ideas, rich in fancy and yet also in thought, arise and meet in his mind; the reason is that he himself does not know, and hence also cannot teach it to anyone else.” Unlike Plato, Kant does not culpabilize the artist’s inability to translate his skill into knowledge. But what follows from his peculiar incapacity is that the articulation of the rule that art seems so strongly to call for, must be given to the reader to perform.

This might seem like a way of preserving the purity of genius against the adulteration of imposture, but, as I am suggesting, it introduces and makes indispensable the presence of the Other in the identification of genius. The judgment that derives from the Other is central to Kant’s understanding of genius. This is made evident on a number of counts, the first of which lies in the distinction he makes between copying and imitating. On the one hand this op-
position looks like one of those that are so common in accounts of genius in the period; but on the other hand, it is curious, given Kant’s insistence on the absolute originality of genius and its independence from all prior precept, that he should make the issue of imitation a central feature of his account. For him, it is precisely a mark of genius that it be imitated by subsequent artists: it may not lend itself to direct copying or what Kant calls aping, but the very principle of originality is, paradoxically, what must be imitated by a successor-genius if it is to exist at all. It is as if genius required an echo-chamber in the imitative response of the successor, without which it would not exist.

The second further factor that integrates reception to the otherwise autonomous genius is the requirement of taste. If Kant opposes art to mechanism, and originality to learning, he nonetheless argues that genius in its “pure” and unadulterated form is not viable, and that it requires the addition of taste (which is the province of the readers who judge) if it is to meet the fundamental character that Kant ascribes to art, namely its purposiveness. There is, he says, no fine art that does not have as its essential condition “something mechanical, which can be encompassed by rules and complied with.” The work of art can never be the product of chance, and “directing the work to a purpose requires determinate rules that one is not permitted to renounce.” It is only “shallow minds” who believe “that the best way to show that they are geniusies in first bloom is by renouncing all rules of academic constraint.”29 It is these shallow minds who are the charlatans in Kant’s analysis, and far from undermining genius, the integration of the reader’s perspective (as taste) within genius itself, seems on the contrary to be the guarantee of its full realization.

Kant concludes his discussion by outlining a kind of symbiosis whereby, in addition to the rule that genius gives to art, the work created by the genius also solicits a determinate concept by way of readerly response, even if genius then goes on to exceed that concept “so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it.”10 This to and fro between genius and its beholding Other is what constitutes the fine art that Kant defines as the sole domain of genius. The reader is at once necessary to genius and invariably transcended by it in ways that subsequent discussions will continue to develop and inflect. Indeed, the modern story of genius is ultimately one of its recognition—and misrecognition—by a variety of reading, viewing, and observing “Others” whose responses form the different discourses through which the idea of genius is constantly reinvented.

In demonstrating the degree to which these three founding texts expose genius to some kind of “other,” I should repeat that I am not seeking to construct any kind of theory of genius as such. Rather, my aim is to provide the basis for outlining a history through reference to the “others” that have accompanied thinking on the subject, even though the terms of reference in these founding texts have long since ceased to be part of Western thinking: humorism in Aristotle, the enthusiasm that derives from the Muses in Plato, and the taste to
which Kant ascribes such an important role. In selecting the disciplines and discourses to be explored in this book, I have sought to identify moments in French intellectual and cultural life where France was in some way distinctive and not simply carrying on a francophone version of a discussion that was also happening elsewhere. And although aesthetics, national identity, Romanticism, psychological medicine, the realist novel, experimental psychology, and children's literature all have their own manifestations in other national traditions, the French version of each of these has something singular, and at times appealingly bizarre. The French contribution to the history of the idea of genius is a story worth telling in all its variety, not just because of the intrinsic interest of the discussions, but also as testimony to the fascination that constantly reinvents this semantically imprecise but strangely persistent notion in Western thinking.