

Sociology:

GENIUS

"When nature has work to be done," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "she creates a genius to do it." But how? A handful of Nobel laureates, among them physicist William Shockley, believe biology to be the essential catalyst. (Two offspring have resulted thus far from their cooperation with a California sperm bank's controversial experiment in eugenics.) Others contend that geniuses are not so much born as made, that prodigious feats of intellect owe more to diligence, training, and patience than to natural aptitude—as Thomas Edison would have it, "one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration." The enigma of genius has long baffled or beguiled the best and least of minds. Here sociologist Robert Nisbet considers the subject anew.



by Robert Nisbet

Not many words in the English language have suffered from Romantic puffery and what H. W. Fowler calls "slipshod extension" to the degree that the word *genius* has. Prior to the 18th century it meant mostly a special talent or skill. But that meaning has for two centuries been buried in large measure by another which the word then took on: a person of greatness who achieves solely through the "genius" that is endowed in him by God or by nature.

Two influences brought about this new meaning of the word: the Philosophes in France and the Romantics in Germany. The former, in their running warfare with church, university, and other institutions of the old regime, saw themselves as minds of almost unprecedented brilliance, capable of every achievement from running governments to writing encyclopedias. Moreover, in their judgment, history had essentially been made by "geniuses" such as themselves: those of the ancient world, the Renaissance (by definition there were no geniuses in the Middle Ages), the Age of Science, and now in the Enlightenment. Nothing more irritated John Adams across the Atlantic about the French Philosophes than their incessant posturing about their own inner "genius."

At the same time that Voltaire and the other Philosophes were twisting and puffing the word, the Romantics in Germany seized upon it for special application to themselves and to others of Germanic descent. In the same way that the Romantics found a special genius in their racial ancestry, they found individuals in the past of towering intellect and spiritual being who had helped form and then express the Germanic soul or consciousness. These could be generals or poets, statesmen or painters, religious leaders or dramatists. Each was a "genius" because he had been formed of special clay and from this inner majesty issued forth the great works which characterized his life.

The cult of the genius was well formed by the time of Napoleon, and for a long time, in Germany and France alike, he was the focus of hero and genius worship. But he was far from alone. Throughout the 19th century in Europe, the Romantic infatuation with genius intensified and spread. Geniuses were believed to have minds of such surpassing creativity or heroism that their rational limits could sometimes give way, leading to an affinity between genius and forms of insanity. Geniuses, above all, were excused from the ordinary conventionalities and could indulge in vices denied ordinary mortals simply because these vices, eccentricities, and unconventionalities sprang ineluctably from the individual's "genius." Given this kind of superstition, individuals, especially in France in literature and the arts, found it useful, irrespective of actual mental powers, to flaunt the attributes of genius, especially those of licentious nature. The *fin de siècle* was rich in poets and painters who were pronounced geniuses, not so much for the quality of their work as for their highly mannered eccentricities and pathologies.



What proved clinching to the myth of genius was the English biologist Francis Galton, cousin to Darwin, whose best-selling book *Hereditary Genius* was published in 1868. Galton posed the question of why the ancient Greeks were so much greater minds than any in Galton's own 19th-century England. The question is a legitimate one; what is not legitimate is Galton's thesis that the sole and exclusive cause is "hereditary genius," that is, a special intellectual and spiritual power that is inherent in a given person's nature and that transmits itself to succeeding generations through the germ plasm—until or unless, that is, this genealogy becomes corrupted through interbreeding with inferior physical and mental types.

Galton's view cast a wide spell, and the notion of the physical inheritance of genius became a veritable *idée fixe* in the Western mind. Intelligence tests were rampant in the schools; searches for what were called gifted children went on year after year, culminating in psychologist Lewis Terman's Thousand Gifted Children of the 1920s, all of whom were confidently expected to become Newtons, Shakespeares, or Einsteins simply by virtue of their IQ.

That there are individuals born of preternatural intelligence admits no doubt. There are people who from birth are swifter in comprehension, better able to concentrate, quicker to fuse or unite conceptually disparate things, and superior in fashioning with words or numbers or both. These people reach very high scores in intelligence tests, rack up perfect grade averages unless diverted by some alien force, and commonly show extraordinary capacity for solving puzzles.

The question is, however, what forces tend to lead some of them into highly creative work in the arts and sciences but lead others, equally rich in native endowments, to careers of puzzle-solving in its several forms, in as well as outside the sciences and the professions.

To make the gigantic assumption that nature endows some of these individuals more than others with great innate mental strengths and only gives issue to these supergifted minds sporadically in time, thus causing those clusters of genius which lie in so-called golden ages, would assuredly be naive. Far more likely is the proposition that the distribution of mental strength in the population remains about the same from one period to another. "Nature uses one paste," observed Blaise Pascal, "and she applies it evenly throughout time." Thus, the nonhereditary, nonbiological forces of history and culture would have to account for that high level of talent in the arts and sciences and for that uneven efflorescence of this level of talent which the historical record makes vivid.

Insight into genius is to be found not in some single and

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compact hypothesis but rather in the crucial experiences and traits which are common to those of highly creative being. The chief feature in common is milieu, which does not mean quite the same thing as the environment. John Addington Symonds clarified the concept: "The intellectual and moral milieu created by multitudes of self-centered, cultivated personalities was necessary for the evolution of that spirit of intelligence . . . that formed the motive power of the Renaissance."



The concept of milieu is at once historical, psychological, and specific. Milieu is that part of the larger environment which is being shaped by the individual and which is also being participated in and swept into the individual's consciousness, so that environment and consciousness are fused into one.

Every individual above the level of moron is from time to time excited emotionally and intellectually by the people and things around him. It is a fair statement that the highly talented are the most excited in this way, and whether it is a poem or a scientific theory, what we witness is the capacity to internalize a social experience and to make the product socially available. W. H. Auden said that those who possess poetic talent stop writing good poetry when they stop reaching for the world they live in. D. H. Lawrence put the essence of all this admirably: "Everything, even individuality itself, depends upon relationship. . . . The light shines only when the circuit is completed. . . . In isolation, I doubt if any individual amounts to much; or if any soul is worth saving or even having."

In one of their conversations, Eckermann asked Goethe how he would explain the extraordinary richness and maturity of mind of a young Frenchman still in his twenties who had just astonished them with his learning and agility. Goethe answered: "Imagine a city like Paris where the most excellent minds of a great realm are congregated in a single place and enlighten and strengthen each other in daily association, strife, and competition; where the cream of all the realms of art and nature on earth stands exposed for daily contemplation; imagine this metropolis, where every stroll across a bridge or square brings a great past to mind, and where a piece of history has been made at every street corner. And in addition to all this imagine the Paris not of a dull and unintellectual time but the Paris of the nineteenth century, where for a span of three generations such men as Moliere, Voltaire, Diderot and their like have been circu-

lated, the productive genius in such abundance as cannot be found in a single spot anywhere on earth a second time, and then you will understand how a fine mind like Ampère's can well be something at age twenty-four. If a talent is to develop quickly and joyously, it is essential that there be in circulation throughout the scene an abundance of productive genius and of sound culture. . . . We admire the tragedies of the ancient Greeks, but upon proper examination we should admire the period more than the individual author."

In sum, it helps immensely, if one is destined for the arts or sciences, to apprentice in a Paris as described by Goethe, an Athens of the fifth century B.C., a Rome of the first century, or a London of the 16th century. No doubt there is the occasional exception, the mind of great creative force that from the beginning buries its light and takes refuge in isolation. But this could not possibly be more than vicinal isolation. It is better to assume that this rare individual through reading, fantasy, and sheer imagination creates his own milieu. Milieu is, however, essential. Great ages in the history of culture are made by their great component individuals, but the reverse is also true, that in large degree great individuals are made by great ages and by all the intellectual circuits which operate at high intensity in such ages. Goethe's adjuration to admire the period more than the individual author is pertinent, since great artist and scientist that he was, he was not likely to be indifferent to individuality. He chose in due time to move permanently to the relatively secluded Weimar, where his greatest works were done or completed. But Goethe never forgot for a moment that his early, formative experiences had put him in continuous contact with minds of superlative powers from whom he learned while they were in turn learning from him; nor did he have to be reminded of the stimulatory effects of the world's light and leading who came to visit him in Weimar. "I sense how it is," Goethe said once, "when men like Alexander von Humboldt visit me and in a single day advance me farther in what I seek and need than on my solitary part I otherwise could have achieved in years."

The past is a very important part of milieu, in the form of tradition, convention, and memory. The great ages of genius, starting with the fifth century B.C. in Athens, have never been calculatedly revolutionary, contemptuous of the past, in avid search for originality. People who seek originality generally wind up with two-headed calves, just as those who use the word *creativity* regularly in conversation are never creative minds. Ages of genius have truth, beauty, and goodness emblazoned on them, not modernism, post-modernism, and futurism. The

Impressionists did not, at least in the beginning, consider themselves to be breaking with the past; they believed they had recovered the spirit of the best of the past despite efforts of the establishment in their day merely to freeze or ritualize the past. Max Planck had a notably conservative, traditionalist mind, and it was only when he had carried classical or conventional theory to its absolute end that he found himself reaching the quantum theory, one of the truly revolutionary theories of the 20th century. Eliot, Yeats, Pound, Joyce, and other titans of the 1920s were one and all reactionaries in politics and profoundly traditionalist in their literary craft.



This suggests another vital element in the formation of genius: emulation. Velleius Paterculus, in his musings on the great Athenian dramatists from Aeschylus to Euripides, thought emulation a crucial desire. Emulation, not imitation. Longinus wrote that selection of a model early in life was vital to the emergence of great writing. To be as great as the master has surely lifted many an apprentice quickly through journeyman status to that of master or even greater-than-master. Models, like metaphors, are indispensable to the aspiring.

Again it is instructive to quote from Goethe and Eckermann. Eckermann suggested that Shakespeare, magnificent as he was, unique as he was, would have yielded somewhat different results had he not been the associate of Marlowe and others of his time, men he was obliged to respect and learn from, even occasionally steal from. "You are absolutely right," responded Goethe. Shakespeare without his contemporaries would have been as it is with the mountains of Switzerland. "Transplant Mont Blanc into the great plain of the Lüfneburg heath and its size will leave you speechless with amazement. But visit it in its colossal homeland; approach it by way of its neighbors: the Jungfrau, the Finsteraarhorn, the Eiger, the Matterhorn, the Gotthard, and the Monte Rosa, and although Mont Blanc will still remain a giant, it will no longer amaze you. . . . Furthermore, whoever refuses to believe that much of Shakespeare's power reflects the greatness of his time should ask himself whether he seriously believes this astounding phenomenon we know as Shakespeare would be possible in the England of 1824, during these bad days of journals of criticism and dissent."

Accident and chance play their due roles in the formation of

high talent. Dr. Samuel Johnson defined "true Genius" as "a mind of large general powers accidentally determined to some particular directions." It is doubtful that any of the great creative minds in the arts and sciences—not to mention other spheres of existence—would ever have discounted the role of chance and the accidental. From Plutarch on, the biographies of the great are rich in the impact of the purely fortuitous upon human lives. Horace Walpole summed it up with his story of the Prince of Serendip, who never found exactly what he was looking for but who, in the process of incessantly looking for it, found other things he had not even imagined. Louis Pasteur went somewhat past mere chance or accident when he remarked, "Chance favors the prepared mind."

Indeed, it is not only the unremitting search that creates fertile soil for the benign accident, but also the well-filled mind that is capable of recognizing the entry of Fortuna. This is easy to overlook in those stories of great strokes of insight having come to artists or scientists while they were double-parked or while they were climbing a mountain.

Alfred North Whitehead remarked on "the monumental one-sidedness" of genius. This is doubtless the case with a great many people of highly developed talent in a field. Although they usually are not lacking in general knowledge up to a point and rarely push their special interest upon one in ordinary casual conversation, their minds and indeed their whole lives are dominated by a single interest. Large minds, but also narrow minds. It was also Whitehead who said that a good education "has got to be narrow; otherwise it won't penetrate." The role recently advertised by a celebrity hostess for the perfect guest, namely a "broad-gauged, wide-ranging, versatile and clever mind," is not likely to be filled by the true genius.



History affects the eruption of genius in various and subtle ways. Turgot, speculating in his *Notes on Universal History* (1750) on the singular absence of English artists of note for two centuries or more, as compared with the French, German, Dutch, and Italian, noted the desiccating effect of the Puritan Revolution on England. The Puritans, with their hatred of everything in religion that did not proceed directly from faith alone, set themselves to the destruction of works of religious art and, more to the point, of the numerous crafts which fed into religious art, one way or the other. These crafts produced little

but cheap medallions, crucifixes, and miniatures, but the craft ateliers were also the places where fathers apprenticed sons who had manifested any interest at all in art. From such apprenticeships often came the greatest painters. To have destroyed the many craft ateliers in England was to have destroyed the roots of the art of painting. No painters of talent were thenceforth even possible, no matter how many boys of potential talent were born.

Turgot's point is well taken. It is said that in the Paris of Cézanne, close to 10,000 painters were at work, the overwhelming majority of whom were mediocre at best, but whose collective presence represented the flood tide upon which the few of signal distinction rode. To change the image, high mountains are almost always surrounded by others nearly as high. A Michelangelo stands out, but only in the company of those who are almost as good. As for the historical development of the scene within which the genius works, Michelangelo simply would not have been possible had it not been for the state of the arts within which he worked—the technological as well as the social and cultural state. Turgot, in his *Notes*, put it nicely: "Not every plowboy can aspire to be a Corneille, but had Corneille been confined absolutely to a village, he would have become only a good plowboy."

Capacity for intense and sustained concentration of mind is also one of the qualities seen oftener in the great than in other people. Johnson's remark on the concentrating effect upon the mind of a man's certain knowledge that he is to be hanged in a fortnight has generally been misunderstood. Johnson was specifically answering Boswell's question as to how it was possible for a particular condemned man, a cleric, found guilty of treason, to write the vast number of sermons he did while awaiting execution.

The final force that figures in the formation of genius is family—perhaps not universally but certainly overwhelmingly. Galton did not err in his linking of geniuses by family and genealogy; where he went wrong was in limiting family to physical genealogy rather than seeing it as the very microcosm of the whole social order, a social, cultural, moral, and intellectual entity as well as a continuity of germ plasm. Heredity, yes, but that word is also properly used when prefaced by the word *social*. Social heredity is the conventions, habits, incentives, coercions, disciplines, and punishments which, once they become ensconced in a household, tend to become traditional, literally "handed down" in the Latin sense of the word.

It is astonishing what three generations of exposure to the

intellectual and cultural affluence of a family line can accomplish, granted that the family "handing down" also includes the transmission of those innate mental powers which are requisite to all activity of any worth. It is not economic affluence or material wealth of any kind that is vital here, but rather the closeness of the generations, the intimacy between parent and child, both intellectually and morally, which resembles a close form of apprenticeship, of emulation, and role modeling, allowing for assimilation of the many psychological and social insights, understandings, skills, and techniques which can be done only within the emotion-freighted circle of the kinship group.



It would be a mistake, however, to see family only through rose-tinted glasses. Family and love are by no means linked conditions. Family can house love and respect, but it can also, and frequently does, house hate, resentment, and exploitation. But where there is a deep determination by the father or the mother to teach, to instruct, and to cultivate, and an equally deep determination to accomplish this through whatever means seem necessary, the results can be as extraordinary in the absence of affection and tenderness as in their presence.

Beethoven's father was a drunken brute much of the time, and he was not himself an outstanding musician by any means. But he knew music well, he recognized early the sheer physical-mental force contained in his son, and drunk or sober, abusive or laudatory, he knew how to implant the language of music into the young Beethoven's soul.

What precise combination of fear, hate, dread, respect, even admiration, lay in Beethoven's lasting response to his father would be difficult to determine. Winston Churchill has written, in partial description of the Duke of Marlborough: "It is said that famous men are usually the product of an unhappy childhood. The stern compression of circumstances, the twinges of adversity, the spur of slights and taunts in early years, are needed to evoke that ruthless fixity of purpose and tenacious mother-wit without which great actions are seldom accomplished." Perhaps so. All that is known about Beethoven's relation to his father is that the same hand that struck his ears punitively, leading to eventual deafness, struck also, in extraordinary ways, chords of a very different kind, chords of devotion, imagination, experimentation, and confidence.

To Beethoven's experience could be added that of the young

Mozart, also at the hands of the father who, if he did not drunkenly abuse his talented child, exploited him egregiously. Samuel Butler, one of the most powerful and original minds of the nineteenth century, suffered abominably as a child. But Butler too learned things, experienced states of mind, which could only have been learned and experienced in a context as intimate and dependable as the family. Innumerable instances of the psychic wound as the fertile seed of genius are to be found in biographical accounts of the great, from Plutarch down to Churchill's Marlborough.

But without for a moment disparaging such accounts, the evidence is reasonably clear that love and affection serve far better than hate and pain as the family seeds of distinguished careers. Aristotle's loving relation to his father, the physician-scientist, Bach's relation as a child with his parents and then at their death with his older brother who reared and instructed him in music, and Goethe's relationships of continuing love and happiness with his family undoubtedly are more common in the lives of geniuses than are those of Beethoven.

What is true of individuals is true of peoples. By common assent the three most talented peoples of the past two and a half milleniums have been the Chinese, the Greeks, and the Jews. In all, the role of the family has been distinctively powerful. And in all three, the family extended itself into all aspects of the individual mind, becoming the nursery of education, moral precept, citizenship, piety, and craft skill.

To repeat, the family is not simply the microcosm, the formative nursery of things loving and good. It can be, as the Jews, Greeks, and Chinese have made clear in their religious and dramatic writings, the setting of greed, fratricide, incest, and other manifestations of evil. The Greeks at least were, on the evidence of some of their greatest works, more interested in the linkage of family and evil than of family and good. But family murder is the price to be paid, along with incest, blood feud, and other linked evils, for the uniquely intimate atmosphere of family, and it is, on the evidence of history, a price that should be paid. Better a society in which these specific evils will always exist as the consequence of the family tie than one in which, in order to abolish the evils, the family itself is abolished.

One can somehow live with the evils, but civilization could hardly exist without the nurturing ground of its geniuses.

