

Historical Treatments of Creativity in the Western Tradition

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Abstract:

This essay focuses on theories of creativity from six historical figures, while noting comparisons to several others. In Ancient Greece, (i) Plato advances the thesis that the poet is a passive vessel inspired by a muse. (ii) Aristotle replies with the antithesis that the poet creates through skilled activity. (iii) Longinus provides the synthesis. Plato is right that poets are passively inspired with original ideas – though the source is natural genius instead of some muse. But Aristotle is also right that the poet must actively employ skill. In early modern Europe, (iv) Margaret Cavendish argues that through creativity women can enjoy some freedom and happiness despite oppression. (v) Alexandar Gerard and Immanuel Kant both inherit the Longinian synthesis. Gerard says we form original ideas through remote associations. (vi) Kant notices that although the genius must be passive in the origination of ideas, she must also be active in the very same process, because she merits acclaim for her originality. Kant designs his theory of genius to resolve this Paradox of Creative Agency.

Keywords:

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The history of Western philosophy flaunts a fascinating array of ideas about creativity. In this brief essay, I focus on five eminent thinkers from the 4th century BCE to the 18th century CE – Plato, Longinus, Alexander Gerard, Margaret Cavendish, and Immanuel Kant. Along the way, I note comparisons to other figures including Aristotle, Edward Young, Nietzsche, the Romantic poets, and theorists in contemporary philosophy and psychology.

In a narrative of overlapping themes, we'll find each of these figures addressing some or all of the following questions: Is creativity a skill? Can creativity be learned? Can it be explained? When people are being creative, are they inspired? Are they using imagination? Are they exercising their agency, or passively receiving new ideas from a process beyond their control?

1 Plato

Among Western philosophers, theorizing about creativity is thought to begin with Socrates, as portrayed in the dialogues written by his student, Plato. With the caveat that we can't be sure when Plato is or isn't casting Socrates as a spokesperson for his own views, I follow the convention of referring to the two interchangeably.

The *locus classicus* is the *Ion*. It begins with Socrates welcoming Ion, who arrives brimming with pride as he announces that he has just won – “First prize, Socrates!” (530b) – in a contest for rhapsodes. Rhapsodes were at once performers and professors of poetry: in addition to reciting poems they would also interpret them, often in response to questions from their large audiences. Ion specializes in Homer's celebrated epic poetry in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Initially, Socrates extols Homer as “the best poet and the most divine” (530c) and praises rhapsodes, like Ion, for how beautifully they enact and expound upon poetry, which they couldn't do if they didn't “know what the poet means” (530b-c). Basking in this moment of recognition, Ion identifies his expository prowess as “the part of my profession that took the most work” (530c).

But Socrates has a trap up his sleeve. He gets Ion to admit the narrow limits of his Homeric specialization (531a). Even when Homer and another poet like Hesiod both write about charioteering, for example, Ion has nothing to say about the latter (531b-532c). Ion cannot explain how he does what he does, how he can do it for Homer but not for any other poet.

Seizing on this concession, Socrates concludes that Ion does not have skill (*technē*) or knowledge (*epistēmē*) in his subject-matter (532c). When you exercise a skill, you know what you're doing. You apply techniques, rules, or methods to perform a given activity, like charioteering, fishing, or commanding an army. Importantly, Socrates' list of skilled activities includes some that we would classify as creative arts, including painting and sculpture. In principle, you could explain these activities by identifying the techniques they involve, and a student or apprentice could learn these activities by applying and

practicing those techniques. But for Socrates, the literary and performing arts of poetry, music, and dance are another matter. Ion cannot explain how he rhapsodizes Homer's poetry – nor, Socrates presumes, could Homer himself have explained how he composed it. How, then, does poetry happen?

Voicing an idea that was familiar in Ancient Greek culture, Socrates asserts that poetry emerges not through skill but through divine inspiration, whereby a human being is “inspired” – *enthousiazôn*, literally “breathed into” – by a god or a goddess, a Muse:

You know, none of the epic [or lyric] poets, if they're good, are skilled in their subject; they are inspired, possessed, and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems. [...] They are not in their right minds when they make those beautiful lyrics, but as soon as they sail into harmony and rhythm they are possessed by Bacchic frenzy. [...] For a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him. You see, it's not skill [*technē*] that enables them to speak those verses, but a divine power. (533e-534c; cf. *Phaedrus* 245a)¹

According to this story, the people we call poets do not create poetry through knowledge or skill or the exercise of rational capacities; in fact, they aren't creative at all. They are merely passive vessels for the creativity of the Muse.

When poets are inspired, the Muse displaces not only their agency but their intellect altogether, transporting them out of their minds into a state of “ecstasy” (*ekstasis*, standing outside oneself) characterized by the “madness” of irrational emotions, weeping in grief or shuddering in fear when in reality they have no reason to act or feel as they do, but are swept away in the telling of a dramatic tale (535c-e).

The mad ecstasy of the poet is also suffered by the rhapsode and the audience. The Muse transmits inspiration from one to the next like a chain of three magnetic rings: the first ring attracts and magnetizes the second, which in turn does the same to the third (533d-e). The people at all three stages find themselves soaked in tears and racked with all manner of misplaced emotions. Ultimately, Socrates will argue in the *Republic* (book X) that such impassioned responses to poetic inspiration are not only crazy but dangerous, to individuals and to the city-state, as they are inimical to truth and the sober regulation of reason. Hence “the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy” (607b) – which, for Socrates, is at bottom the conflict between passion and reason.

Finally, this account suggests that poetic creativity cannot be explained. It cannot admit of a rational explanation, which would cite the reasons for which poets choose to act as they do, because, while possessed and inspired, they aren't making choices at all.

¹ The cited translation has “mastery” for *technē*; other common renderings include “art” and “skill”. I use “skill” to facilitate comparisons with later figures who do so as well.

The story does have the shape of a causal explanation, as the poet, rhapsode, and audience are all effected by an external cause. Since that cause is supernatural, however, it is beyond the scope of scientific explanation, and since it pushes the question back to how the Muse creates, one might well conclude that Plato's story is no explanation at all.

The idea of divine inspiration has enjoyed a long afterlife in Western thought. In ancient Rome, the Latin term "*genius*" referred to a guiding spirit that was thought to accompany each person throughout their lives. The *genius* of an artist would occasionally deliver art through that person (see Tatarkiewicz 1980: chapter 8). Much later, "the divine fury" was appropriated by 19th century Romantic poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, who, in 1821, translated the *Ion* into English and revered it for validating his own feeling that he was but a "vehicle" for the creativity of some higher power that possessed him and spoke through him in poems (Shelley 1965; see Notopoulos 1949).

2 Longinus

While Plato's teacher, Socrates, theorizes poetic creativity in terms of supernatural inspiration and the displacement of human agency, rationality, and skill, Plato's student, Aristotle, develops the antithesis, treating the creation of poetry as an intentional, reason-governed, exercise of art or skill (*technē*). In his *Poetics*, Aristotle does literary criticism on the exemplary poetry of Homer, Sophocles, and others in order to identify the qualities that make them great and offer advice on how to imitate them. He asserts that the aim (*telos*) of poetry is to thrill or *amaze* the audience, and, in the case of tragedy, to evoke a cathartic release of pity and fear. As means to that end, he suggests, you should develop sympathetic characters who undergo dramatic twists of fortune, and use vivid imagery and literary devices like analogy, metaphor, and simile, etc. In another work, the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle says that rhetorical discourse, which aims to *persuade* the audience, is also a matter of art or skill, and through a study of exemplars, he develops techniques one can use to that end. Thus begins the grand Greco-Roman tradition of handbooks that blend literary criticism with 'how to' pedagogy for poetry (e.g. Horace) and rhetoric (e.g. Cicero, Quintilian).

The thesis of Platonic passivity and the anti-thesis of Aristotelian agency are synthesized in a game-changing Greek treatise from the 1st century CE: *On the Sublime* (*Peri Hupsos*) by an unidentified author referred to as "Longinus." "The sublime," Longinus says, "consists in a consummate excellence and distinction of language" (§1, 163), whether in writing or oration. His Greek word for 'sublime' (*hupsos*) connotes elevation or loftiness, and he uses it interchangeably with 'grandeur' (*megethos*).²

² My understanding of Longinus owes a great deal to a terrific book by Robert Doran (2015: chs. 1-3).

2.1 The reception of sublimity

Longinus begins by characterizing sublimity in terms of its various effects on the audience. I will group these into three categories of effects: (i) inspired phenomenology, (ii) food for thought, and (iii) exemplarity.

What is it like to experience the sublime? According to Longinus:

Grandeur produces **ecstasy** rather than persuasion in the hearer; and the combination of **wonder** and **astonishment** always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant. This is because persuasion is on the whole something we can control, whereas **amazement** and wonder exert invincible power and force and get the better of every hearer. [... The] ability to gather and arrange facts cannot be detected in single passages; we begin to appreciate them only when we see the whole context. Sublimity, on the other hand, tears everything up like a **whirlwind** [or “pulverizes all the facts like a **thunderbolt**”; see §12] and **exhibits the orator’s whole power** at a single blow. (§1)

Ordinary rhetoric leaves the audience in control of their responses as it persuades them gradually with the cumulative presentation of well-ordered facts. In contrast, sublime language seizes the audience like a force of nature beyond their control. As in the Platonic story, the audience is overtaken by an external creative power, except that now it is the power of the human orator (or author). Replacing the Muse, the orator ascends to the heroic stature of a “demi-god” and thereby elevates the audience as well, as the outpouring of “sublimity [*hypsos*] raises us toward the spiritual greatness of god” (§36). Another aspect of this experience is that it is enjoyable, and universally so, “pleasing all people at all times” regardless of how they “differ in their pursuits, lives, tastes, ages and languages” (§7).

The second effect of sublime language is that it lingers “indelibly in memory” and is worthy of revisiting “again and again” as it provides ample “food for thought” and “bears repeated consideration” (§7). This sustained examination of great discourse, trying to articulate what makes it great, is literary criticism in the tradition of Aristotle, an activity Longinus puts on display with his analyses of works by luminary authors including Homer, Plato, Demosthenes, Cicero, and the celebrated poetess Sappho of Lesbos.

Third, a sublime work provides an *exemplar* for other writers, in a number of ways. As noted above, critics like Longinus can examine it to identify its effective devices and *formulate rules* others can follow. Bypassing explicit rules, others can also “zealously *imitate* the great prose writers and poets of the past” (§14). Providing the ultimate influence for Harold Bloom’s notion of the “the anxiety of influence” (1975), Longinus adds that aspiring writers can “strive, with heart and soul, to *compete* with Homer” and

other heroes, enhancing their own work through the “fight for fame well worth the winning” (§13). Finally, “many are carried away by *being inspired by another*” in a way that mobilizes their own creative powers (§13).

Though sublimity is most at home in great poetry, Longinus suggests that it is also manifest in the best prose (rhetoric, philosophy, history) which is thereby lifted “to the condition of poetry” (§1). Regardless of genre, part of the experience of sublime artistry is that it makes us wonder: How is this god-like creation of sublimity humanly possible?

2.2 The creation of sublimity

Having identified the effects of sublime writing, Longinus draws inferences about how it is caused. He points to the *reception* of sublimity for insight into its creative *production*. We’ll see that he replaces Plato’s Muse with the “great nature” of a human genius, so one contribution to sublimity will now come from *nature*. But he also argues, in effect, that Aristotle was partly right to treat artistic creativity to a methodical *art* (*technē*). Synthesizing insights from Plato and Aristotle, then, Longinus will conclude that sublimity emerges through the co-operation of nature and art.

2.2.1 Nature

To experience any piece of art is to get a window into the mind of the artist who made it. Longinus illustrates this point on both sides of his contrast (in the block-quote from §1 above) between the experience of being persuaded by ordinary rhetoric on the one hand and the experience of being transported by sublimity on the other. When you are persuaded by a skilled lawyer or politician, you “detect” their “ability to gather and arrange facts” in cogent arguments. That ability can certainly be impressive, but it isn’t mysterious, Longinus thinks, because it is a *technē* that can be explained in terms of teachable rules.³ In contrast, he suggests that something more is going on when a sublime work sends you into “ecstasy” and “exhibits the orator’s whole power.” You are likewise impressed by the orator’s technical expertise, but above and beyond that you are also attuned to the workings of a mysterious power, one that cannot be reduced to rules and techniques, and so your aesthetic experience is imbued with mystification. *How on Earth* – you “wonder” in “astonishment” and “amazement” – *did the author create this?*

So, Plato was onto something: to be distinguished as one of “the greatest writers ... and clothed with immortal flame” (§1), you need something other than rules, you need a wellspring of vibrant, arresting emotion – you need *inspiration*. Longinus helps himself to Plato’s vocabulary when he says noble emotion “inspires and possesses our words with a kind of madness and divine spirit” (§8; see also §16). Like Plato, Longinus associates inspiration with overpowering emotions, identifying a principal source of sublimity as “inspired emotion” (*enthousiastikon pathos*). His talk of a “the divine” is only

³ For one illustration of how rules for composition fall short of the sublime, Longinus points to Aristotle’s instructions for the use of metaphors (§32); see Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.7.1408b2.

metaphorical, however, because, for him, the source of inspiration is not a supernatural Muse but a natural power within a human author. He denotes that power as *megalophrosynē* ('greatness of soul') and *megalophueis* ('greatness of nature') – terms which, momentarily, came to be rendered as 'genius' or 'natural genius' in Renaissance and early modern translations. Furthermore, he construes genius as an essentially generative power that originates "novelty."

In sum, genius, for Longinus, is the natural talent which originates thoughts that are novel and imbued with inspired emotion, a principal source of sublimity in the verbal arts.

2.2.2 Art

Just as the existence of a Muse would not be up to us, we cannot control the extent to which we've been gifted with natural talent. To that extent, one might conclude, creativity is out of our control. However, Longinus emphasizes at least two ways in which we can and should take our creativity into our own hands.

First, we can proactively develop whatever talent we have. Indeed, one of Longinus's objectives is to show how "we can develop our nature to some degree of greatness" (§1) by making our minds "pregnant with noble thoughts. How, you ask? Sublimity is the echo of a great soul [*megalophrosynē*]." (§9) Longinus equates the metaphors of "echoing" and "being impregnated," which he also equates with "being inspired" (§13). This passage thus expands on how sublime discourse is exemplary, how other artists can develop their creative potential "by being inspired by" examples of genius (§13). When you experience the grandeur of a genius's work, the inspiration of that genius inspires you in turn; the greatness of their soul echoes in yours. By continually exposing yourself to examples of sublimity you get inspired again and again, and just you develop any habit or character trait through repetition, you develop the character of genius by having it echo repeatedly in your mind. Remember, too, that sublime works stay with you "indelibly in memory," so the more examples of genius you harbour, the more you can "zealously imitate" them in your own creative efforts by asking, for example (and I paraphrase), "WWHD?" – "What would Homer do?" (§14). Through these deliberate efforts, you can become increasingly disposed to generate inspired thoughts of your own, and since that disposition defines the nature of genius, you would thereby develop genius, or get closer to it, as second nature.

Second, to compose sublime discourse, the genius also needs to employ art/artifice (*technē*). "Nature ... is herself in every in every instance a first and primary element of creation," because it originates the inspired emotional material. However, without good judgment and technical knowledge, a genius' unbridled outpouring of emotion is apt to be histrionic, ill-timed, and foolish (§2). It will be original but worthless, Longinus suggests, condemning what he sees as the "passion for novelty of thought which is the particular craze of the present day" (§5.1). The inner muse "needs the curb as well as the spur." Pivoting from Plato with a nod to Aristotle, he says "it is method [*methodos*] that is

competent to provide quantities and appropriate occasions for everything, as well as perfect correctness in training and application” (§2). To shape the raw material of inspiration into sublime writing or speech, the genius needs to apply methodical skill in “the proper construction of figures;” the selection of “noble language” in “word choice, the use of metaphor, and elaborated diction;” as well as grammar and “dignified word arrangement” (§8).

Pace Plato, inspiration on its own – now reassigned to the genius’ Nature – is overblown, bombastic, and silly. *Pace* Aristotle, Art on its own is labored, artificial, and dull. Longinus synthesizes the two. In his theory, the genius produces sublime language through the co-operation of her Nature and her Art. Each of them tempers and effaces the other, so that the author’s artifice looks natural and what came naturally looks intended.

Longinus came to have a major influence on discussions of genius among 18th century philosophers, especially Kant, whom we’ll come to at the end. Today, some philosophers would agree with Longinus that the creation of sublime language is at least partly agential, as they make that claim generally about any creative product (Stokes 2008; Paul and Stokes 2018; Gaut 2018). Next, though, let’s make a stop in the 17th century to visit a figure who highlights the agency in creativity through a different lens.

3 Margaret Cavendish

Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673) was a prolific British thinker who published numerous philosophical works on metaphysics and natural philosophy as well plays, poems, and literary fiction. Some of her contemporaries scorned her as “Mad Madge,” not only because her work was controversial but also, evidently, out of simple misogyny. Nevertheless, some of her readers held her in high regard, and she has recently begun to get the attention she deserves among historians of philosophy.⁴ She is especially interesting here as a case study in what I call *radical creativity*, where people from marginalized groups conceive of, and use, creativity as a way to resist oppression.⁵

As a hedonist, Cavendish holds that the highest good for every human being is to enjoy pleasure, which she equates with happiness. In her view, we exercise freedom in pursuit of happiness. While the capacity for freedom is part of human nature in general, she recognizes that sexist attitudes, norms, and societal structures restrict the ability of women to exercise their freedom and, thus, to achieve happiness: “Men endeavour to bar us of all sorts or kinds of liberty, as not to suffer us freely to associate amongst our own sex, but would fain bury us in their houses or beds, as in a grave” (*Oration*, Speech 127). Furthermore, she notes, “[M]any of our Sex have as much wit, and be capable of Learning as well as Men; but since they want instructions, it is not possible they should attain to it;

⁴ For good overviews, see Cuning (2016, 2022) and Lascano (2023).

⁵ The following interpretation of Cavendish is thanks to the excellent scholarship of Julia Borcharding (manuscript; forthcoming) and David Cuning (2018).

for Learning is Artificial, but Wit is Natural" (*Ibid.*). Thus, Cavendish observes that women are not only prevented from using and being appreciated for their talents. What's worse is that they are excluded from educational opportunities and thus hindered from even recognizing and developing their talents to begin with.

Beyond identifying these injustices, Cavendish offers a remedy in the form of radical creativity. By engaging their imagination ("fancy") in acts of creative world-making, she proposes, women can exercise their freedom and thereby enjoy a substantial measure of happiness, even while they are still otherwise oppressed by widespread misogyny.

Cavendish develops this proposal in the context of her metaphysics. She is a materialist who holds that nature as a whole and everything within it consists of matter. More precisely, she maintains that everything is composed of a mixture of *inanimate* matter, which is inert, and *animate* matter, which moves itself and thereby moves the bits of inanimate matter that are joined with it. Animate matter includes both *sensitive* matter, with the capacity for sensation and perception, as well as *rational* matter, which performs a wide array of activities Cavendish attributes to Reason, including judgment, inference, abstract reasoning – and imagination.⁶

Of particular interest here is the difference between how sensitive matter perceives things and how rational matter imagines or fancies things. Since they are both forms of animate matter, sensitive and rational matter both engage in self-motion, "patterning" or "figuring" themselves into various shapes and forms. On the occasion of looking at a pumpkin, for example, the sensitive matter in your eyes moves itself into a pumpkin-like figure or pattern – much like the follower in a dance moves herself to mirror the leader in a dance. Unique to rational matter is the capacity for *originality* – the power not just to "dance itself into a figure" but to "dance figures of [its] own invention" (1653: 31). Perception imitates. Imagination originates.

Classical figures like Longinus assigned some role to imagination in creativity, insofar as the outputs of inspiration included vivid mental images both the genius and the audience. But by the late 17th century, philosophers increasingly begin to posit a productive form of imagination – namely "fancy" – either to replace inspiration (Cavendish, Gerard), or to be the faculty through which inspiration operates (Kant), to generate new ideas.

⁶ Parting ways with someone who "defines *Reason* to be nothing else but *Reckoning*," Cavendish writes, "That in my opinion *Reckoning* is not *Reason* it self, but onely an effect or action of *Reason*; for *Reason*, as it is the chiefest and purest degree of animate matter, works variously and in divers motions, by which it produces various and divers effects, which are several *Perceptions*, as *Conception*, **Imagination**, **Fancy**, *Memory*, *Remembrance*, *Understanding*, *Judgment*, *Knowledge*, and all the *Passions*, with many more" (1664: 36, my bold).

Cavendish stresses that she can use her imagination despite the external restraints of misogyny, and that doing so affords her two sets of goods. One set of goods is guaranteed by the *act* of imagining. The other set of goods depends on the *content* of imagination and flows specifically from imagining idealized or utopian alternative realities. She claims to have found both kinds of benefits for herself through her own creative work.

The first good secured by the *act* of imagining is freedom. To creatively imagine something is to *originate* that thing, and with originality comes freedom:

[This] is the difference between exterior perceptions and interior voluntary actions ... for though both are effects of self-knowledge and self-motion ... voluntary actions are not occasioned by any outward objects, but *make figures of their own accord, without any imitation, patterns or copies of foreign parts or actions.* (1668: 211, my italics)

As Julia Borderching explains, Cavendish here conceives of freedom as a two-part power to autonomously move oneself: “(i) the power to move oneself without restraint (to engage in self-motion); and (ii) the power to do so [autonomously], in accordance with a self-determined aim or pattern” (Borderching, manuscript). Perception and imagination both exhibit self-motion, but through imagination we can go further, marshalling the autonomy required for freedom. Indeed, it would seem to follow that we are *freest* when we engage in acts of imaginative creation, to the extent that we thereby proceed “without any imitation” to come up with ideas of our “own invention”.

Observing that the oppressive dominance of men threatens to stamp out her own ideas, Cavendish fights back. Precisely by exercising her creative agency, she can resist the colonization of her mind – and even counteract it, to the extent that she manages to publicize her ideas and give them a life of their own in the social world beyond her. Offering herself as a role model for other women, she writes:

The Fancies of others drive the fancies out of our own braines, as enemies to the nature, or at least troublesome guests that fill up all the rooms of the house. ... I found a naturall inclination, or motion in my own brain to fancies, and truly I am as all the world is, partial to desire that my own fancies, and opinions might live in the world, rather than the fancies and opinions of other men in my brain. (“An Epilogue to My Philosophical Opinions,” 1655: unnumbered)

Witness the assertion of agency. Rather than being a passive receptacle for the ideas of others (and chiefly the ideas of men), she exerts her freedom and flips the script, using her imagination to create her own ideas which she then transmits into the minds of men.

Imagining is not only liberating, for Cavendish – it’s also immensely pleasurable: “Fancy creates of its own accord whatsoever it pleases, and delights in its own work” (Preface to *Blazing World*, 1666 [2003]: unnumbered). She elaborates:

[T]he greatest pleasures that can be in Fruition I take in Imagination: for whatsoever the sence enjoys from outward objects, they may enjoy in inward thoughts. For the mind takes as much pleasure in creating of Fancies, as Nature to create and dissolve, and create Creatures anew: For Fancy is the Minds creature, & *imaginations* are as several worlds, wherein those Creatures are bred and born, live and dye; thus the mind is like infinite Nature. (“The Lady Contemplation,” *Playes*, 1662: 184)

Here Cavendish conveys both the pleasure and the power of imagination – a power she likens to the infinite creative power of Nature itself.

In addition to the freedom and pleasure that comes with the *act* of imagining, Cavendish claims that when she imagines a certain kind of *content* – a better world – she literally creates that better world. Notably, her fictional works are rich with stories of women conquering misogyny and thriving. In one of her plays, *The Convent of Pleasure* (1662), the wealthy protagonist Lady Happy opens an academy for women, a place where women are free to flourish together as they discover, develop, and share their natural talents. In another play, *Bell in Campo* (1662), women defy their husbands’ orders to stay out of battle. Led by a brilliant woman commander, they march into war, defeat the enemy, and rescue their husbands.

In some of her fiction, Cavendish goes even further by inhabiting a world she has created, casting herself as a character within it. She begins *Blazing World*, which some scholars identify as the first science-fiction novel, with a preface entitled, “To all Noble and Worthy Ladies”, and there she says,

[T]hough I cannot be Henry the Fifth, or Charles the Second; yet, I will endeavour to be, Margaret the First: and, though I have neither Power, Time, nor Occasion, to be a great Conqueror, like Alexander, or Cesar; yet, rather than not be Mistress of a World, since Fortune and the Fates would give me none, I have made One of my own. (1668: unnumbered)

Within the story, Cavendish (“The Duchess of Newcastle”) appears and proceeds to “make her [own] world.” At first, she tries to cobble together a world based on patterns from past philosophers (e.g. Epicurus, the Cartesians), but finds fault with their ideas. So she decides “to make a world of her own invention,” within which she meets “men of science” who take her seriously and learn from her (1668: 188).

Cavendish’s metaphysics entails that things we imagine are just as real as things we perceive in the external world: they are commixtures of the three kinds of matter,

conforming to patterns made by rational matter. Her utopian fancies are more fleeting than the external world, but for as long as she imagines them, they are just as real.⁷

Even if you don't accept Cavendish's unusual metaphysics, you may still recognize that being creative is, in itself, an act of freedom. Without embracing her full-blown hedonism, you might concur that acts of creativity can be pleasurable, and that pleasure is good. You might agree further that, even in the face of oppression, women (and other marginalized individuals) can engage their creativity to enjoy at least some freedom and pleasure, to resist being mentally colonized by the ideas of the dominant group, and even to reverse the direction of influence to the extent that they communicate their ideas to a broader audience.

Like Cavendish, our next figure identifies imagination or fancy as the faculty of creative invention, but his aim is to give a scientific explanation for how it works.

4 Alexander Gerard

Like his compatriot, David Hume, Scottish philosopher Alexander Gerard (1728-1795) endeavored to do for the mind what Newton did for the physical world. He envisioned a science that would explain mental phenomena in terms of natural, psychological laws or principles. Also like Hume, he was an associationist who thought that, by and large, correct psychological principles describe the various ways in which the mind links, or associates, ideas with one another. By applying this proto-scientific approach to creativity, in his influential *Essay on Genius* (1774), Gerard is arguably the historical thinker who did the most to prefigure contemporary psychological research on creativity.

One way he did so is by distinguishing, at least implicitly, between different stages or operations in the creative process. In his 1926 book, *The Art of Thought*, psychologist Graham Wallas drew on the personal reports of creative thinkers, including mathematician Henri Poincaré (1908 [1913: 383–394]), to propose that creative work involves four kinds of processes: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. Most psychologists today employ some variation of this scheme, and it will be useful here to work with a version Dustin Stokes and I have formulated elsewhere (Paul and Stokes 2023: §5):

1. *Preparation* in acquiring relevant knowledge and skills.
2. *Generation* of new ideas.
3. *Insight* when a new idea pops up in consciousness: "Eureka!"
4. *Evaluation* of ideas to retain or discard them.
5. *Externalization* of ideas in observable form.

⁷ For charitable takes, see Borcharding (manuscript; forthcoming) and Cunning (2018).

Gerard discusses at least three of these operations: generation, evaluation, and externalization.

4.1 Generation

In keeping with his naturalistic outlook, Gerard holds that new ideas do not magically come from nothing or from gods. While he echoes Longinus in this respect, he goes further by positing a psychological mechanism for the production of ideas, old and new. Many of our ideas are formed by manipulating and connecting ideas we already had – by associative processes of the imagination, or “fancy.” Sometimes imagination reproduces familiar ideas, such as when you hear of fire and imagine smoke, or when you see chocolate and imagine gobbling it up. In these mundane cases, the first idea calls up another idea with which it is closely associated. But other times the imagination connects ideas that are only loosely related, and that is when it is apt to forge something creative.

People differ in their powers of imagination and so they differ in their powers of innovation. For Gerard, an exceptional fecundity in generating new ideas – what he calls “invention” – is the principal trait of genius (1780: 163). The genius’ power of invention is due to an exceedingly fast and flexible imagination. Presented with a given idea, the genius’ imagination rapidly animates a vast and diverse network of ideas, including ones that are distantly related. Originality emerges from those remote associations.

Notably, this is a clear forerunner to an important strand in modern creativity research: the Associative Theory of creativity most prominently advanced by Sarnoff Mednick (1962). Though I have no evidence that he read Gerard, Mednick similarly proposed that originality is fostered by a propensity to make unusual associations.⁸ Vindicating the spirit of Gerard’s theory, most researchers now agree that “there is substantial evidence in the literature supporting (1) the relationship between divergent thinking and creativity, and (2) the idea that creative thinking involves unusual associations or ideas” (Fasko 1999: 138).

Departing from the traditional view which limits genius to the arts, Gerard recognizes that there is also scientific genius: “Genius is properly the faculty of invention; by means of which a man is qualified in making new discoveries in science, or for producing original works of art” (1774: 8) – a point we take for granted today.

Gerard notes that we are passive with respect to the arrival of new ideas, in the sense that we cannot summon them through a direct act of will. But it is not completely out of our control. We can spur invention indirectly, Gerard suggests, by putting ourselves into positions where new ideas are more likely to arise (1774: 239). This raises the question of

⁸ For discussion of the kinds of divergent thinking tests developed by Mednick, see Chapter 7, “Empirical Treatments of Imagination and Creativity,” and Chapter 34, “Imagination, Creativity, and Neurodivergence,” this volume.

what those positions are: which conditions – which kinds of stimuli, moods, habits, reward systems, educational programs, and organizational structures – are most conducive to original thinking? A lot of research in psychology over the past half-century has sought to answer those very questions.⁹

4.2 Evaluation

Invention cannot be all there is to genius. If a scientist trying to develop a theory of gravity randomly thinks, “purple gabby poopy” then they have cobbled together remote associations resulting in something new, but this novelty is nonsense, and hardly to be commended as the work of genius. Thus, Gerard explains that in addition to inventiveness, the genius needs “taste” or evaluative judgment to select valuable ideas and discard the rest. Making this point in relation to art, he says that invention

needs the assistance of *taste*, to guide and moderate its exertions ... [W]e acquire much ampler assurance of its rectitude, when taste has reviewed and examined both the design and execution. It serves as a check on mere fancy; it interposes its *judgment, either approving or condemning*; and rejects many things which unassisted genius would have allowed. (1780: 166-7, my italics)

4.3 Externalization

After inventing a plenitude of ideas and tastefully selecting the best ones, creative people still need to communicate their ideas or realize them in concrete form. This may be straightforward in the case of verbalizing a short poem or theoretical insight, but in the fine arts it requires admirable skill: “A genius for the fine arts implies, not only the power of invention or design, but likewise a capacity to express its designs in apt materials. Without this, it would not only be imperfect, but would for ever lie latent, undiscovered and useless” (1780: 165).

Some of Gerard’s ideas are shared by our next and final figure, but even more intriguing are the differences.

5 Immanuel Kant

18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) developed a major theory of genius as the creative force behind beauty in the fine arts. As we’ll see, he was profoundly influenced by Longinus on this topic. His language differs in one important way, because what he calls “the sublime” (*erhaben*) is not what Longinus calls “the

⁹ For short surveys of recent work in the psychology of creativity, see Paul and Stokes 2023: §5 and Chapter 7, “Empirical treatments of imagination and creativity,” this volume; for comprehensive overviews, see Runco and Pritzker 2020, Sawyer 2012, and Weisberg 2016.

sublime" (*hypos*). As we saw, Longinus construed the experience of sublimity as a pleasurable response to exemplary verbal art. Kant, on the other hand, was largely impacted by Edmund Burke's 1757 reconfiguration of sublimity as a curious comingling of pleasure and displeasure (fear, inferiority); and for Kant, its primary sources are nature and mathematics. Nevertheless, Longinus' "sublimity" is the provenance of Kant's "artistic beauty," and so is the theory of genius by which he explains it. From here on, keep in mind the qualification that, concerning art, where Kant speaks of "beauty" Longinus would use "sublimity".

Like Longinus, Kant begins his argument by describing the characteristic ways in which the audience (viewer, reader) responds to beautiful art. Unlike Longinus, however, the effect he is especially concerned with is the judgment that an artwork is beautiful. Judgments of artistic beauty differ from judgments of natural beauty, because art and nature are different kinds of thing. Art is a kind of artifact, something that someone has intentionally made. While the stunning array of colors in a sunset is merely an "effect" of light refracted through atmospheric particles, a painting of that scene is the "work" of an artist (1790, §43, 182). When I appreciate the beauty of the sunset, I adopt a formalist stance toward it, attending to its "mere form" (§43, 183), without considering what it's intended to signify or convey. By contrast, I must consider the artist's intentions when I recognize the beauty of "a work of art ... understood *as* the work of human beings" (*Ibid.*). It is important for Kant that when we judge whether or not a work of art is beautiful, we assess it in light of the fact that someone made it intentionally. Crucially, this is an *interpersonal* judgement.

As an artifact, art is, by its very essence, produced through artifice, that is, through the artist's intentional actions and thus through an exercise of agency (freedom).

By right, only production through **freedom**, i.e., through a capacity for **choice** that grounds its actions in **reason**, should be called **art**. ... [Thus,] art ... is so constituted that a **representation** of it in its cause must have preceded its reality ... and as art it is **ascribed** ... to its creator. (§43, 182, my emphasis)

When you make "art" - as when you perform any intentional action - you first have a mental "representation" of a possible action as being good in some way. This gives you a "reason" to perform the action, and - for that reason - you make a "choice" to do it, and you do it. Your choice and your action are thereby exercises of your "freedom," such that they are "ascribed" to you - i.e. you are responsible for them. Because you are responsible, it makes sense to ask whether or not you ought to choose and act as you do, and whether you are, accordingly, to be praised or blamed.

We'll see that Kant finds something paradoxical about the creation of artistic beauty: it is both passive and active. Moreover, when you appreciate a beautiful work of art, you get a glimpse into the paradoxical nature of its creation, and that is part of why you find

it so captivating and intriguing. In this respect, too, Kant is building on a theme from Longinus, but he affords us a sharper appreciation of the paradox in part because of the theory of agency outlined above.

Elaborating on that theory, Kant identifies the “representation” which must precede your action as your “intention” to perform it. Your intention to draw a square, for example, includes a “concept” of the thing you want to make as well as the “plan” or “rule” you’ll follow to make it. The two are linked. Since the concept identifies the features that make something a square, it entails a potential plan for making one: draw a plane figure with four equal straight sides and four right angles. You then have a reason for drawing each of those features, and so if you draw them for that reason, there is a rational explanation for why you are performing those actions.

Kant maintains that good art of any kind is made at least partly through *skill* (§43, 183), which involves *knowing* what to do and being able to do it. What the skilled person knows is a “rule” or “plan” which specifies methods, techniques, or procedures for achieving her intended result. Since skills consist in rules, they can be taught and learned (for further discussion, see Chapter 10, “Imagination, creativity, and skill,” this volume). A master violinmaker can impart the tricks of her trade to an apprentice in either or both of two ways. She might *tell* him what to do – so he can learn by *following rules*. Or she might *show* him what to do – so he can learn by *imitating* her example. Thus, the kind of practical knowledge embodied in skills is learned either through rules or imitation.

A certain kind of art – “craft,” Kant says – is entirely a matter of skill. Its constitutive aim is to fabricate objects that are useful for some further end. The craftsmanship itself is all about the skill employed in the *externalization* of ideas. Given the “cognition of a possible object”, provided by a designer who may or may not be someone else, the craftsman *qua* craftsman “merely performs the actions requisite to make it actual” (§44, 184). Invoking a then-salient contrast between machines and spirits, Kant calls craft “mechanical,” implying that its products could in principle be made by a machine.

Kant takes the Longinian idea that when you appreciate a piece of discourse you get a glimpse into how it was created, and he extends it to artifacts in general. When you recognize that a Stradivarius violin was exceptionally *well made*, you are making a judgment not just about the formal and functional features of the violin, but also an *interpersonal* judgment about the violinmaker and the agential process they employed to make it – a process evidently guided by exquisite skill.¹⁰ For Kant, this is a conceptual judgment, one you make through your faculty of concepts (Understanding), because it is based on the concept of a violin (roughly, something which emits a certain range and quality of sounds when its strings are bowed) and on your recognition of how well the violinmaker *willfully* managed to create a near-ideal instantiation of that concept. You feel impressed, and this feeling is like a “reactive attitude” in that it is linked to your judgment

¹⁰ Dustin Stokes and I have argued similarly that when you judge a product to be creative, you thereby regard it not only as new but as the product of someone’s agency (Paul and Stokes 2018).

about how well someone has used their will (Strawson 1962). You may not know the techniques employed, but you can imagine how someone with the right aptitude could come to know them through imitation or rule-following and master them through practice. You feel impressed, not mystified.

Fine art – or what is better translated as “beautiful art” (*schöne Kunst*) – is another matter, because its constitutive aim is not utility, but beauty. Among the beautiful arts, Kant includes the verbal arts (chiefly poetry), the visual arts (painting, sculpture, architecture), and music (§51). While fine artists aim at beauty, it is rare to succeed. Echoing Longinus again, Kant insists that what makes art *beautiful* is precisely what goes beyond teachable devices and skills – and, like Longinus, he appropriates Platonic language to identify this X-factor as “spirit” (*Geist*) or “inspiration” (*Eingebung*). He associates it with “originality,” and he attributes it to “genius” (§46). Think of any painting or novel that is tasteful and exquisitely crafted but falls short of beauty and leaves you cold because, you want to say, “It’s got no *Geist!*” It’s soulless, mechanical, formulaic, derivative – uninspired and unoriginal. A work of beauty, by contrast, is soulful, exciting – inspired and original. This beauty affects you in distinctive ways.

Kant retains the three Longinian categories of effects: (i) inspired phenomenology, (ii) food for thought, and (iii) exemplarity. But he also highlights the *judgment* of artistic beauty. Being the passive recipient of an experience does not commit to anything. But when you make a judgement endorsing that experience – when you judge, in this case, that an artwork is beautiful – you commit yourself to its “universal validity” (§§44, 45, 50). That is, you presume, at least implicitly, that anyone in your position *ought to* form the same judgement, and so anyone who fails to recognize this beauty exhibits a defect: they lack good taste. So, whereas Longinus made the universal descriptive claim about the aesthetic experience – that it “pleases all people at all times” (recall section 2.1.1 above) – Kant makes the universal normative claim about the aesthetic judgment, that anyone confronted with beauty should recognize it as such. How Kant grounds this normative claim is a matter of scholarly debate (see Ginsborg 2024).

The judgment of artistic beauty is an “aesthetic judgement,” so-called because it is based on the aesthetic experience, which is imbued with pleasure.¹¹ This pleasure is not the mere sensation of your favorite ice cream; nor is it the “momentary entertainment” of jokes, table-settings, and background music. Reprising what Longinus called “food for thought,” Kant says beautiful art provides “enduring material for later reflection” (§44, 184), for continuing to judge it in art criticism. Beautiful art, he says,

gives the imagination cause to spread itself over a multitude of related representations, which let one think more than one can express in a concept determined by words (§49).

¹¹ I am simplifying for brevity. See Sethi (2019) for a detailed account.

This is not some tidy train of reasoning. While you are savoring the beauty of art, your imagination is swept into a state that is vigorously animated, expansive, teeming with a superabundance of ideas – you are, in a word, *inspired*. The inspired imagination engages in “free play” with the understanding, a relationship that is “harmonious” because the aesthetic idea corresponds to the concept of its subject-matter, but, crucially, its richness overflows what any concept could contain. Thus, Kant says, “beauty is not a concept of the object” (§38, 290). Although Kant doesn’t use the Longinian vocabulary of “wonder”, “astonishment,” and “amazement” here, he is conveying the mystified phenomenology of the aesthetic experience in his own way: since beauty defies conceptual grasp, it literally surpasses Understanding.

This inspired aesthetic experience and the judgment linked to it are interpersonal; they respond not just to the artwork but to the way the artist made it. The subject-matter of the artwork itself may be repugnant or grotesque, but what you find beautiful is the way the artist has managed to render it. Think of the way Picasso depicts war in *Guernica*. Think of the way Toni Morrison portrays the aftermath of slavery in *Beloved*. Each “way” is the artist’s inspired aesthetic idea; you cannot articulate it. But you feel it. What you recognize and feel, with mystified awe, is not just the masterpiece, but the manifest power of the master artist who made it – the creative life force behind it. As Willow sings on a banger that exemplifies the thing it describes, “Beauty is a symptom of life.”

In the well-made violin, as I noted, what you recognize is the manifestation of skill. It is remarkable but rationally explicable. In contrast, what makes art *beautiful* is what goes beyond skill and intentional action – and yet the artist is most praiseworthy for this beauty. This is paradoxical. We respect the expertise with which they externalized their aesthetic idea. We feel mystified by the originality through which they came up with it: How did they *think of that*?

On my reading, then, the pleasure the audience derives from artistic beauty, for Kant, is the distinctive elation of inspiration. More precisely, it is the receptive pleasure of being inspired *by* inspired art, and thus by an inspired artist. Through this chain of inspiration the audience glimpses its source. They get the sense, the inspired feeling, that the process by which the artist came up with their aesthetic idea was not mechanical or derivative, but inspired and original.

Crucially, what Kant calls “originality,” the mark of genius, is not just novelty. Newton was a “great mind” who exercised his rational agency to “invent” a “great deal for science” that was profound and new. Nevertheless, Kant says, Newton was not “a genius” – meaning he did not display *originality* – because he came to his new insights through a rational process governed by rules (the scientific method), and so that process can be taught or learned. By contrast, “no Homer” could demonstrate how “to write inspired poetry, ... how his ideas ... arise and come together in his head, because he himself does not know it” (§47, 187).

Novelty is a feature of a creative *product* (principally a new idea, which may then be realized in a new artifact). Originality is the property of a special kind of *process* that generates new ideas. A rational process like Newton's can lead to new ideas, but a process originates new ideas, in Kant's sense, only if it is not regulated by concepts, rules, plans, methods, or skills. It must happen instead through inspiration, the activation of the genius' *spirit*. Inspired origination therefore cannot be planned or performed as an intentional action. One can only be passive with respect to it. Inspiration happens *to* the genius; it is not done *by* the genius. Since the inspired origination of ideas is not something anyone can *do*, it follows, a fortiori, that no one can learn how to do it, neither through rules nor imitation.¹² It also follows that no one, not even the genius, can give a rational explanation for why or how they do it. It's not like choosing to dive into a lake; it's like being hurled in by the wind. It gets a causal explanation, not a rational one.

For Plato, the wind comes from the Muse breathing into the poet. But recognizing that originality must be "ascribed" to the artist, Kant locates its cause – genius – within her. Since it cannot be learned, Kant concludes, "Genius is [an] *ingenium*" – i.e., an "inborn predisposition of the mind" (§46). When the innate talent of a genius is activated, her "spirit" animates her imagination into "free play" with her understanding to originate aesthetic ideas. As Kant explains later, in his *Anthropology*, what comes into play here is not the "reproductive imagination," which aims to imitate reality, such as when you conjure a visual memory of what you wore yesterday. Rather, spirit activates the "productive imagination," which creates "in an original way (not imitatively)" (APP 7:246).

This "originality" is "the primary characteristic" of genius (308), but "since there can be original nonsense," Kant adds that a work of genius must also be "exemplary." What is *exemplary* is not simply useful or valuable. Crafts are useful; art that is agreeable is valuable, even if it isn't beautiful. But neither is exemplary in Kant's sense of being a "model" (exemplar, paradigm) which provides a new "standard or a rule" for subsequent art (§46, 186-7). For Kant, a work of genius is exemplary in three ways. First, it sets a "standard for judging" art; it is an ideal to which other artists can aspire, and the value of other art can be measured against it. Second, although the genius does not follow rules to produce this art, others may study it to extract rules from it. Third, upon being inspired by an exemplary work, a talent that lay dormant may stir into free play.

Kant's definition of the creative product as "original" and "exemplary" is often cited as a forerunner to "the standard definition of creativity" in psychology, according to which a creative product is new and useful or valuable (Runco & Jaeger 2012; for discussion, see Paul and Stokes 2023: §2 and the Introduction to this volume). However, Kant's conditions are richer on both counts. While the psychologists' definition is strictly focused on the product of creativity, Kant is primarily concerned with the *processes* involved, ones that are marked by inspiration. First, beautiful art is original insofar as the

¹² This is Kant's version of an argument Edward Young had made in 1759.

artist was inspired in *producing* it. Second, it is exemplary insofar as the audience is inspired in *receiving* it. In addition, Kant holds that the production of art must be at least part intentional. In these three process-oriented ways, a work of genius for Kant differs in kind, not just degree, from a creative product as it standardly defined.

Genius originates the “rich material” of an aesthetic idea. But “its elaboration and form require a talent that has been academically trained, in order to make a use of it that can stand up to the power of judgment” (§47, 310). The artist must exercise aesthetic judgment – i.e. “taste” – to evaluate her attempts through many rounds of trial and error. Identifying the first stage of the creative process, Kant says “the necessary *preparation* and foundation for beautiful art” is the pre-requisite acquisition of knowledge and skills as well as “acquaintance with” the exemplary “products of beautiful art” by means of which one cultivates taste (§44, 305).

The creative interplay between passive origination on the one hand and active skill and judgement on the other is the now-familiar synthesis of Plato and Aristotle, which begins with Longinus and has variants in Gerard and contemporary psychology. It shows up in many other thinkers, too, including Friedrich Nietzsche (1872) who says the great tragic poetry of ancient Greece was born from the intercourse between the “Dionysian” spirit of ecstatic intoxication, which imbues the work with vitality and passion, and the “Apollonian” spirit of sober restraint, which tempers chaos with order and form.

Through the chain of inspiration, as we saw, the free play of the genius’ productive imagination is echoed in the audience’s receptive imagination. It is precisely “on this feeling of freedom in the play of our cognitive powers” that the pleasure of the experience “rests” (§45, 306). And again, that inspired experience is tinged with mystification at a paradoxical appearance. Lifting yet another formulation from Longinus, Kant writes:

Nature was beautiful, if at the same time it looked like art; and art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature. (§45, 306)

Art is made intentionally. Nature is not. But in a work of beauty, what was intended looks natural, and what was natural looks intended. This appearance is not illusory, for Kant; it’s an insight into what is so special about the creation of artistic beauty.

An important first move is to parse creativity into distinct operations: the artist is active in preparation, evaluation, and externalization – but passive in origination. This does not dispel the paradox completely, however, because the originality itself is somehow natural and yet artful. The distinctive result of it, “beautiful art ... is purposive in itself, though without an end” (§44, 306). Why does he say this? Well, we’ve already seen why Kant holds that:

- (a) The distinguishing characteristic of a genius – her inspired origination of aesthetic ideas – is something that occurs to her passively, not an action she performs.
- (b) Something is “ascribed” to a person – she is responsible for it, and to be praised or blamed for it – only if it is, or is the result of, an action she performs.

There is nothing strange about commending an artist for her tasteful choices and skillful actions. However:

- (c) The genius merits superlative acclaim precisely for her inspired originality.

Consider the ring of painters who forged convincing replicas of more than 1000 works by Ojibwe artist Norval Morrisseau, in what has been called “the biggest art fraud in world history.”¹³ They displayed the same impressive skill that Morrisseau did in externalizing his aesthetic ideas. But – as (c) implies – Morrisseau deserves incomparable acclaim because those ideas were *his*. That is puzzling because (a) those ideas came to him passively, and (b) he is praiseworthy only for what he does actively. We could call this the “Paradox of Praiseworthy Passivity.” But to accentuate the positive, the active, let’s call it

The Paradox of Creative Agency:

The origination of ideas is not an action the artist performs (so she is passive), and yet the artist is praiseworthy for her originality (so she is active).

What is Kant’s solution?

On the one hand, the artist is *passive* in the origination of ideas, because although the process happens within her, it is not done *by* her. It does not flow from her will, so it’s not an action she performs.

On the other hand, the artist is *active* in the origination of ideas, and they are credited to her, because they flow from *her* innate genius; they express her “individual nature”, which makes her who she is, and so they are a form of self-expression. Kant requires that art *qua* art must be preceded by a plan or rule. In this case, the artist cannot consciously know or follow the rule, because that would just be methodical action. So, the rule must be housed unconsciously, as an innate predisposition.

We cannot specify the rule in a causal explanation, as Gerard aimed to do with his associationism, because the point of positing the rule is to explain how origination is not *merely* causal like the wind – how it is akin to a rational action for which the artist deserves credit, even though it bypasses her will.

¹³ <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/03/08/canadian-police-bust-art-forgery-ring-norval-morrisseau#>

We can't pin the rule down in a rational explanation either, since it's a rule for originality, which, by its very essence, goes beyond concepts and rational understanding.

The best we can do is attend to works of exemplary originality, to get inspired by them and reflect on them with the searching curiosity of the art critic. In so doing, we might surmise the devices of the artist's craft, and formulate them in rules as in the handbooks of Aristotle and Longinus. Each uncovered rule is a partial post hoc rationalization of what the genius did, a rule she has given to art from her very nature. Thus, Kant concludes,

Genius is the inborn predisposition of the mind (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art (§45, 186).

The rules are given "to art", because when you follow them, you exhibit artifice, not nature. Nature gives rules; art follows. This is the deep sense in which art imitates nature. Notably, these rules are never exact plans or "algorithms," to borrow terminology from Berys Gaut (2014); they are only broad guidelines or "heuristics" that leave plenty of room for inspiration and taste – and since origination defies rationalization, that is all they ever could be.

6 Conclusion

Let me close by recapping the dialectic along one major through-line.

Plato gives us the *thesis* that a poet exercises no skill, reason, or agency in the creation of poetry, and is only a passive vessel for the inexplicable, unlearnable inspiration of the Muse.

Aristotle replies with the *antithesis* that authors create through skillful actions that can be rationally explained and learned through rules.

Longinus provides the *synthesis* of the two. He thinks Plato is right that authors of sublimity must passively receive their ideas through inspiration, although he supplants the muse with natural genius as its source. But unconstrained originality is worthless, he observes, so Aristotle is also right that skill and judgement are required.

Following a trend that became common in the late-17th and 18th centuries, our last three figures all identify a productive kind of imagination ("fancy") as the faculty which generates new ideas. Cavendish is most like Aristotle in thinking that literary creativity is entirely an exercise of reason and agency. And she marshals her creative agency in resistance to misogyny.

Gerard and Kant both inherit the Longinian synthesis: the geniuses are passive in the “invention” or “origination” of ideas, but they must also be active in applying judgement (“taste”) and skill. Prefiguring a theory in contemporary psychology, Gerard says we form original ideas through remote associations.

Because of his theory of agency, Kant sees with unprecedented clarity what I called the Paradox of Creative Agency. Gerard’s associationism does not help with it. And it is precisely in order to resolve this paradox that Kant arrives at his famous theory that, through her nature, the genius gives the rule to art.¹⁴

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