
GENIUS

SAMUEL JOHNSON: [Definitions of Genius]¹

GE'NIUS [Latin; *génie*, French]

1. The protecting or ruling power of men, places, or things.

There is none but he
Whose bearing I do fear: and, under him,
My *genius* is rebuked; as it is said
Antony's was by Caesar. *Shakespeare's Macbeth*

The *genius* and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then. *Shakes. Jul. Caesar*

And as I awake, sweet music breathe,
Sent by some spirit to mortals good,
Or the unseen *genius* of the wood. *Milton*

And the tame demon that should guard my throne,
Shrinks at a *genius* greater than his own. *Dryden*

To your glad *genius* sacrifice this day;
Let common meats respectfully give way. *Dryden*

2. A man endowed with superior faculties.

There is no little writer of Pindaric who is not mentioned
as a prodigious *genius*. *Addison*

3. Mental power or faculties.

The state and order does proclaim
The *genius* of that royal dame. *Waller*

4. Disposition of nature by which anyone is qualified for some particular employment.

A happy *genius* is the gift of nature. *Dryden's Dufresnoy*

Your majesty's sagacity, and happy *genius* for natural history, is a
better preparation for enquiries of this kind than all the dead
learning of the schools. *Burnet's Theory of the Earth, Preface*

One science only will one *genius* fit;
So vast is art, so narrow human wit. *Pope on Criticism*

The Romans, though they had no great *genius* for trade, yet
were not entirely neglectful of it. *Arbuthnot on Coins*

1. Johnson's *Dictionary* illustrates its definitions, as here, with examples from the usage of the best English authors. Note that the Latin root of the

word ("a tutelary divinity") casts some influence on all the 18th-century definitions of genius.

5. Nature; disposition.

Studious to please the *genius* of the times,
With periods, points and tropes he slurs his crimes. *Dryden*

Another *genius* and disposition improper for philosophical contemplations is not so much from the narrowness of their spirit and understanding, as because they will not take time to extend them. *Burnet's Theory, Preface*

He tames the *genius* of the stubborn plain. *Pope*

[*English Dictionary*, 1755]

JOHN DRYDEN: [Genius Is above Correctness]

* * * I must take leave to tell them that they wholly mistake the nature of criticism who think its business is principally to find fault. Criticism, as it was first instituted by Aristotle, was meant a standard of judging well, the chiefest part of which is to observe those excellencies which should delight a reasonable reader. If the design, the conduct, the thought, and the expressions of a poem be generally such as proceed from a true genius of poetry, the critic ought to pass his judgment in favor of the author. 'Tis malicious and unmanly to snarl at the little lapses of a pen from which Virgil himself stands not exempted. Horace acknowledges that honest Homer nods sometimes:² he is not equally awake in every line; * * * And Longinus, who was undoubtedly, after Aristotle, the greatest critic amongst the Greeks, in his twenty-seventh chapter of *περὶ Ἰσόθου*,³ has judiciously preferred the sublime genius that sometimes errs, to the middling, or indifferent one, which makes few faults but seldom or never rises to any excellence. He compares the first to a man of large possessions, who has not leisure to consider of every slight expense, will not debase himself to the management of every trifle: particular sums are not laid out, or spared, to the greatest advantage in his economy, but are sometimes suffered to run to waste, while he is only careful of the main. On the other side, he likens a mediocrity of wit to one of a mean fortune, who manages his store with extreme frugality, or rather parsimony; but who, with fear of running into profuseness, never arrives to the magnificence of living. This kind of genius writes indeed correctly. A wary man he is in grammar, very nice as to solecism or barbarism, judges to a hair of little decencies, knows better than any man what is not to be written, and never hazards himself so far as to fall, but plods on deliberately, and as a grave man ought, is sure to put his staff before him * * *

[From *The Author's Apology for Heroic Poetry and Heroic License*, 1677]

2. *Ars Poetica*, line 359.

3. The title of this Greek rhetorical treatise of the 1st century A.D. (traditionally but erroneously

attributed to Longinus) is usually translated "On the Sublime."

JOSEPH ADDISON: [The Beauties of Great
Geniuses Independent of Rules]

They [ignorant critics] are often led into those numerous absurdities in which they daily instruct the people by not considering that, first, there is sometimes a greater judgment shown in deviating from the rules of art than in adhering to them; and, secondly, that there is more beauty in the works of a great genius who is ignorant of all the rules of art than in the works of a little genius who not only knows, but scrupulously observes them.

First, we may often take notice of men who are perfectly acquainted with all the rules of good writing, and notwithstanding choose to depart from them on extraordinary occasions. I could give instances out of all the tragic writers of antiquity who have shown their judgment in this particular, and purposely receded from an established rule of the drama when it has made way for a much higher beauty than the observation of such a rule would have been. Those who have surveyed the noblest pieces of architecture and statuary, both ancient and modern, know very well that there are frequent deviations from art in the works of the greatest masters, which have produced a much nobler effect than a more accurate and exact way of proceeding could have done. This often arises from what the Italians call the *gusto grande* in these arts, which is what we call the sublime in writing.

In the next place, our critics do not seem sensible that there is more beauty in the works of a great genius who is ignorant of the rules of art than in those of a little genius who knows and observes them. * * * Our inimitable Shakespeare is a stumbling-block to the whole tribe of these rigid critics. Who would not rather read one of his plays, where there is not a single rule of the stage observed, than any production of a modern critic where there is not one of them violated! * * *

[From *Spectator* 592, September 10, 1714]

SAMUEL JOHNSON: [Genius Requires Invention]

The man whose genius qualifies him for great undertakings, must at least be content to learn from books the present state of human knowledge; that he may not ascribe to himself the invention of arts generally known; weary his attention with experiments of which the event has been long registered; and waste, in attempts which have already succeeded or miscarried, that time which might have been spent with usefulness and honor upon new undertakings.

But, though the study of books is necessary, it is not sufficient to constitute literary eminence. He that wishes to be counted among the benefactors of posterity, must add by his own toil to the acquisitions of his ancestors, and secure his money from neglect by some valuable improvement. This can only be effected by looking out upon the wastes of the intellectual world, and extending the power of learning over regions yet undisciplined and barbarous; or by surveying more exactly our ancient dominions, and driving ignorance from the fortresses and retreats where she skulks undetected and undisturbed. Every science has its difficulties, which yet call for solution before we attempt new systems of knowledge; as every country has its forests and marshes, which it

would be wise to cultivate and drain, before distant colonies are projected as a necessary discharge of the exuberance of inhabitants.

No man ever yet became great by imitation. Whatever hopes for the veneration of mankind must have invention in the design or the execution; either the effect must itself be new, or by the means by which it is produced. Either truths hitherto unknown must be discovered, or those which are already known enforced by stronger evidence, facilitated by clearer method, or elucidated by brighter illustrations.

Fame cannot spread wide or endure long that is not rooted in nature, and manured by art. That which hopes to resist the blast of malignity, and stand firm against the attacks of time, must contain in itself some original principle of growth. The reputation which arises from the detail or transposition of borrowed sentiments, may spread for awhile, like ivy on the rind of antiquity, but will be torn away by accident or contempt, and suffered to rot unheeded on the ground.

[From *Rambler* 154, 1751]

EDWARD YOUNG: [Imitation and Genius]

Must we then, you say, not imitate ancient authors? Imitate them, by all means, but imitate aright. He that imitates the divine *Iliad*, does not imitate Homer; but he who takes the same method, which Homer took, for arriving at a capacity of accomplishing a work so great. Tread in his steps to the sole fountain of immortality; drink where he drank, at the true Helicon, that is, at the breast of nature. Imitate, but imitate not the composition, but the man. * * * What, for the most part, mean we by genius, but the power of accomplishing great things without the means generally reputed necessary to that end? A genius differs from a good understanding, as a magician from a good architect: *that* raises his structure by means invisible; *this* by the skillful use of common tools. Hence genius has ever been supposed to partake of something divine.

[From *Conjectures on Original Composition*, 1759]

SAMUEL JOHNSON: [Genius and Knowledge]

* * * There is nothing so little comprehended among mankind as what is genius. They give to it all, when it can be but a part. Genius is nothing more than knowing the use of tools; but there must be tools for it to use: a man who has spent all his life in this room will give a very poor account of what is contained in the next.”

[Miss Burney:] “Certainly, sir; yet there is such a thing as invention? Shakespeare could never have seen a Caliban.”⁴

[Johnson:] “No; but he had seen a man, and knew, therefore, how to vary him to a monster. A man who would draw a monstrous cow, must first know what a cow commonly is; or how can he tell that to give her an ass’s head or an elephant’s

4. The man-monster in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.

tusk will make her monstrous? Suppose you show me a man who is a very expert carpenter; another will say he was born to be a carpenter—but what if he had never seen any wood? Let two men, one with genius, the other with none, look at an overturned wagon:—he who has no genius, will think of the wagon only as he sees it, overturned, and walk on; he who has genius, will paint it to himself before it was overturned,—standing still, and moving on, and heavy loaded, and empty; but both must see the wagon, to think of it at all.”

[From *Diaries and Letters of Madame d'Arblay*, 1784]

ALEXANDER GERARD: [The Origins of Genius]

Genius implies such *comprehensiveness* of imagination as enables a man on every occasion to call in the conceptions that are necessary for executing the designs or completing the works in which he engages. This takes place when the associating principles are strong and fit for acting in an extensive sphere. If they be weak, they will call in memory to their aid. Unable to guide our steps in an unknown country, they keep in the roads to which we have been accustomed, and are directed in suggesting ideas by the connections which we remember. Every production of a man who labors under this debility of mind bears evident marks of barrenness, a quality more opposite to true genius than any other. Nothing appears in it uncommon or new; everything is trite and unoriginal. Or, if he attempts to quit the beaten path and start new game, he can find out but a few ideas; he is exhausted by a short excursion and must either make a stop or return to the tracks of memory. Industry, endeavoring in this manner to supply the want of a copious imagination by accurate remembrance or diligent observation, will produce instead of a philosopher a devoted follower or a dull laborious commentator; instead of a poet, a servile imitator or a painful translator. But when the associating principles are vigorous, imagination, conscious as it were of its own strength, sallies forth, without needing support or asking assistance, into regions hitherto unexplored, and penetrates into their remotest corners, unfatigued with the length of the way. In a man of genius, the power of association is so great that when any idea is present to his mind, it immediately leads him to the conception of those that are connected with it. No sooner almost is a design formed, or the hint of a subject started, than all the ideas which are requisite for completing it rush into his view as if they were conjured up by the force of magic. His daring imagination traverses all nature and collects materials fit for his purpose from all the most distant corners of the universe and presents them at the very instant when they become useful or necessary. In consequence of this, he takes in a comprehensive view of every subject to which his genius is adapted.

Thus, when the associating principles are strong and have an extensive influence, they naturally form, in proportion to the degree of their strength, that boundless fertility, that inexhaustible copiousness of invention, which is not only one necessary ingredient in true genius but the first and most essential constituent of it. The smallest production will in some measure discover in what extent this power is possessed. A work of real genius always proclaims in the clearest manner that immense quantities of materials have been collected by fancy and subjected to the author's choice. * * *

[From *An Essay on Genius*, 1774]

JOHN MOIR: [The Unique Vision
of Original Genius]

What is it a truly original genius will not improve? Everything is prolific of novelty in the hand of a master. His ideas are not the crude conceptions of dullness; nor his sentiments either the vapid yawning of a listless, or the insignificant prattle of an empty, heart. He generally plans entirely for himself, and always executes in a manner preceded by nothing similar. The light he strikes out is so singular, and withal so true, that we are equally pleased with what we never saw before, and surprised that we now only see it for the first time. Who, for example, before Virgil, expected to find the fable of the *Iliad* capable of being so beautifull[y] diversified with new elegance and truth, as we find it in the *Aeneid*?

In descriptive poetry, as in landscape painting, fancy has the fullest scope. Here, however, fiction does not consist in feigning objects unknown to the senses, but in embellishing them with colors, endowing them with qualities, connecting them by relations, and disposing them in attitudes and groups of which we have little or no acquaintance. In truth, ideal arrangements are endless. While our affections retain their usual aversion to uniformity, the multifarious objects of our respective senses and faculties must unavoidably admit of new combinations.

This, like every other art, is improved by practice: for the more a fertile imagination creates or fabricates the exercise becomes the easier, new veins of verisimilitude are disclosed, and we may give over for want of patience or strength, but not of materials. The human genius is so versatile, and the original sources of beauty so inexhaustible, that every new inspection of the most common and familiar phenomena of nature discovers a thousand new variations, distinctions, and resemblances, at the same time that it opens up a multiplicity of avenues, where novelty wantons in all her charms, where science displays her happiest attractions, where the fancy is feasted, and the heart at once entertained and made better. * * *

Want of real discrimination is one of the greatest defects in thinking, acting, or writing. It infallibly degrades every species of composition; and indeed is a decisive criterion by which the most genuine offspring of dullness is everywhere known and distinguished. Ordinary minds are seldom struck with anything, because they never particularize or examine the objects of their respective senses. All their literary efforts, whatever departments they may fill, or consequence they may effect, are but an echo, which dies with the sound that begets, or the situation that occasions it. Original genius never rests in generals, never runs in a circle, but gives, in vivid, glowing, and permanent characters, the identical impression it receives.

Perhaps no better account can be given of a quality which, from the beginning of the world, has continued in full possession of universal homage, than that individual minds are distinguished by nature in the formation and structure of the organs by which they respectively operate; that we have all our own way of thinking whenever we do think; and that our sentiments and ideas are never destitute of novelty or justness but when we cease to think.

[From "Originality," *Gleanings or Fugitive Pieces*, 1785]

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS: [Genius the Child
of Imitation]

Genius is supposed to be a power of producing excellencies, which are out of the reach of the rules of art; a power which no precepts can teach, and which no industry can acquire.

This opinion of the impossibility of acquiring those beauties, which stamp the work with the character of genius, supposes, that it is something more fixed than in reality it is; and that we always do, and ever did agree in opinion, with respect to what should be considered as the characteristic of genius. But the truth is, that the *degree* of excellence which proclaims *Genius* is different, in different times and different places; and what shews it to be so is, that mankind have often changed their opinion upon this matter.

When the arts were in their infancy, the power of merely drawing the likeness of any object, was considered as one of its greatest efforts. The common people, ignorant of the principles of art, talk the same language, even to this day. But when it was found that every man could be taught to do this, and a great deal more, merely by the observance of certain precepts; the name of Genius then shifted its application, and was given only to him who added the peculiar character of the object he represented; to him who had invention, expression, grace, or dignity; in short, those qualities, or excellencies, the power of producing which, could not *then* be taught by any known and promulgated rules.

* * *

What we now call Genius, begins, not where rules, abstractedly taken, end; but where known vulgar and trite rules have no longer any place. It must of necessity be, that even works of Genius, like every other effect, as they must have their cause, must likewise have their rules; it cannot be by chance, that excellencies are produced with any constancy or any certainty, for this is not the nature of chance; but the rules by which men of extraordinary parts, and such as are called men of Genius work, are either such as they discover by their own peculiar observations, or of such a nice texture as not easily to admit being expressed in words; especially as artists are not very frequently skillful in that mode of communicating ideas. Unsubstantial, however, as these rules may seem, and difficult as it may be to convey them in writing, they are still seen and felt in the mind of the artist; and he works from them with as much certainty, as if they were embodied, as I may say, upon paper. It is true, these refined principles cannot be always made palpable, like the more gross rules of art; yet it does not follow, but that the mind may be put in such a train, that it shall perceive, by a kind of scientific sense, that propriety, which words, particularly words of unpracticed writers, such as we are, can but very feebly suggest.

Invention is one of the great marks of genius; but if we consult experience, we shall find, that it is by being conversant with the inventions of others, that we learn to invent; as by reading the thoughts of other we learn to think.

* * *

To find excellencies, however dispersed, to discover beauties, however concealed by the multitude of defects with which they are surrounded, can be the

work only of him, who having a mind always alive to his art, has extended his views to all ages and to all schools; and has acquired from that comprehensive mass which he has thus gathered to himself, a well-digested and perfect idea of his art, to which every thing is referred. Like a sovereign judge and arbiter of art, he is possessed of that presiding power which separates and attracts every excellence from every school; selects both from what is great, and what is little; brings home knowledge from the East and from the West; making the universe tributary toward furnishing his mind and enriching his works with originality and variety of inventions.

[From *Discourse VI*, 1774]

WILLIAM BLAKE: [Genius Unbound]

When a man talks of acquiring invention & of learning how to produce original conception he must expect to be called a fool by men of understanding; but such a hired knave cares not for the few. His eye is on the many, or rather on the money.

The man who says that the genius is not born, but taught—is a knave.

How ridiculous it would be to see the sheep endeavoring to walk like the dog, or the ox striving to trot like the horse; just as ridiculous it is to see one man striving to imitate another. Man varies from man more than animal from animal of different species.

Reynolds thinks that man learns all that he knows. I say on the contrary that man brings all that he has or can have into the world with him. Man is like a garden ready planted & sown. This world is too poor to produce one seed.

He who can be bound down is no genius. Genius cannot be bound; it may be rendered indignant & outrageous.

“Oppression makes the wise man mad.”

Solomon

[From his marginalia to Reynolds’
Discourse VI, ca. 1808]

WILLIAM HAZLITT: [Reynolds’ Genius]⁵

Northcote began by saying, “You don’t much like Sir Joshua, I know; but I think that is one of your prejudices. If I was to compare him with Vandyke and Titian, I should say that Vandyke’s portraits are like pictures (very perfect ones, no doubt), Sir Joshua’s like the reflection in a looking-glass, and Titian’s like the real people. There is an atmosphere of light and shade about Sir Joshua’s, which neither of the others have in the same degree, together with a vagueness that gives them a visionary and romantic character, and makes them seem like dreams or vivid recollections of persons we have seen. * * * ” I mentioned that I thought Sir Joshua more like Rembrandt than like either Titian

5. Between 1826 and 1830 William Hazlitt, the Romantic critic, published a series of conversations with James Northcote (1746–1831), a painter who had been Reynolds’ best student and

remained his staunchest defender. Northcote defended Reynolds against Hazlitt’s attacks, but only by insisting, against all Reynolds’ teachings, that nothing counts but genius.

or Vandyke: he enveloped objects in the same brilliant haze of a previous mental conception.—“Yes,” he said; “but though Sir Joshua borrowed a great deal, he drew largely from himself: or rather, it was a strong and peculiar feeling of nature working in him and forcing its way out in spite of all impediments, and that made whatever he touched his own. In spite of his deficiency in drawing, and his want of academic rules and a proper education, you see this breaking out like a devil in all his works. It is this that has stamped him. There is a charm in his portraits, a mingled softness and force, a grasping at the end with nothing harsh or unpleasant in the means, that you will find nowhere else. He may go out of fashion for a time: but you must come back to him again, while a thousand imitators and academic triflers are forgotten. This proves him to have been a real genius.

[From *Third Conversation with Northcote*, 1826]