I. History, mystery, and neglect

What is special about art? One of the first answers to this question will involve mention that artworks and artists are creative. Set to one side for the moment what this fact amounts to, just assume that there is some truth to it. This fact is at tension with another fact: aestheticians, at least of the analytic school, have said very little about creativity relative to other special features of art.

Upon quick perusal of collections in aesthetics from my bookshelf, I find only six entries out of 258 focused centrally on creativity, and all of them except for one focused on genius rather than creativity generally.\(^1\) One will, however, find scores of entries on definitions of art, ontology, aesthetic value, and interpretation, among others. If in fact ‘creativity’ is one of the first things that rolls off the tongue in ordinary and critical conversations about art, why is it so grossly overshadowed by these and other topics?\(^2\)

Part of the answer is found in the history of thought on creativity. Common to both ancient and modern explanations of creativity is a central if not exclusive emphasis on genius. Famously, Plato took the master poets to be conduits for divine inspiration. Homer knew nothing of real charioteering but rather reported whatever his muse inspired him to report. Works of genius derived not from the expertise or skill of the artist, but rather from the divine inspiration they were lucky to have.

In the early eighteenth century, Joseph Addison, following the ideas of third-century AD critic Longinus, endorsed a notion of natural genius.\(^3\) The natural genius is unconstrained by artistic rules or conventions. In fact, as Peter Kivy recounts Addison’s notion, the natural genius is outside all conventional realms, creating art without any knowledge, a kind of creative primitive, if you will. Addison distinguishes this kind of genius, which echoes the Platonic version, from a learned genius who, lacking the innate capacities of the natural genius, must learn and master his art. Although Addison explicitly claims the contrary, he favours the natural genius as superior since,
among other reasons, it is only the natural genius who may create something truly original. This marks the importance of novelty for those who follow Addison but at a cost, namely, requiring absolute novelty of creative genius.

Kant’s model of artistic genius is developed in his *Critique of Judgment*. The definition he offers at the start of his discussion of genius is telling. ‘Genius is the innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art’. Genius is thus a natural ability to create artworks of the highest quality, namely, ones which give the ‘rule’ to art. Two points to note on rules for Kant. First, geniuses give the rule to art by creating works from which rules for the (imitative) making of later works may be extracted. And second, geniuses do not—and this is an analytic point for Kant—use rules to create such works; there are no rules for creating works of genius. Rather, such works must be original, giving the rules rather than following them. So Kant too, like Addison, endorsed absolute novelty as a condition on creative genius.

Were we to continue through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, we would find much of the same. Most theories of creativity from this time are, like those of Plato, Addison, and Kant, theories of genius. From the ancient roots in Plato and Longinus, to the German idealists after Kant, to the romantics, there is an emphasis on radical originality, innate cognitive capacity, and irrationality.

It is an understatement to say that these philosophers offered insights into the creation of art: much of their work is essential for the development of modern philosophical aesthetics. However, they tended, explicitly and otherwise, to mystify creativity in a way that thwarts further analysis. The Platonic view chalks creativity up to divine inspiration, stripping the responsibility from the creator and tagging creativity as no more explicable than divine intervention. On neo-Longinian views such as Addison’s, creativity results from a native disposition towards genius. Kant’s view rejects creative use of rules or constraints, requiring absolute novelty.

If one were to take any of these views as a kind of explanatory metric for creativity, the prospects for explanation would look grim. They leave us with little illumination regarding what the phenomenon of creativity is, and which features of the phenomenon are the ones that underwrite its importance to art, science, and the lot of human life. And the features that do get the attention are treated in such that mystery is compounded rather than removed.

Here are three common features.

*Creation ex nihilo*: Creative ideas, tradition has often had it, come from nowhere. This derives, it seems, from the fact that creative *Fs* are novel *Fs* and the supposition that novelty, if it is genuine, is entirely new. It is, of course, another step or two to the inference that novel *Fs* come *from nowhere*. Suffice it to say that theorists of creativity—Addison and Kant are both examples—have in fact made such inferences, and studies of creativity have suffered (or simply not occurred) as a result.