Meet me at the genius bar: 'Divine Fury: A History of Genius'

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By Glenn Altschuler

When he was three years old, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart sat at the clavier and harmonized in thirds. At age six, he composed his own music. Two years later, Mozart dazzled the king and queen of England with a virtuoso performance.

A concert announcement anointed the boy as “the most extraordinary Prodigy, and most amazing Genius that has appeared in any Age.” As if to confirm this judgment, Mozart, at 14, was said to have memorized “Miserere,” a beautiful, complex, and lengthy composition by Gregorio Allegri, after hearing it one time in the Sistine Chapel.

The “Wunderkind” was not only a wonder to behold Darrin McMahon points out in “Divine Fury: A History of Genius” (Basic Books, $29.95), he generated wonder. Along with other men of genius, Mozart clearly possessed some particular, extraordinary quality. What it was, however, his contemporaries could not say.

Emphasizing that genius is a cultural ideal, a social construction and the product of a specific time, Mr. McMahon, a professor of history at Florida State University and the author of “Happiness: A History” and “Enemies of the Enlightenment,” traces the concept of genius from its roots in antiquity, where it was deemed a gift of the gods.

It was also associated with the modern values of individualism, imagination, originality and invention in the 18th-century, and was deified for better and worse, in the 1930s and ‘40s.

Elegantly written, engaging, and learned, his book is a fine example of intellectual history. For centuries creativity (in the sense of making something new) was associated with the sin of hubris, Mr. McMahon writes.

Renaissance thinkers drove genius within, identifying the soul as the site of human prowess, and challenging the notion that great art and science involved only “recovery and imitation, a recreation of
what God in his perfection had already conceived.”

Building on these insights, the Romantics praised geniuses as people willing to defy conventions and rules, “even unto madness and despair,” in their quest for originality. This stress on human agency, Mr. McMahon argues, was connected to the rise of Protestantism: “In God’s absence, human beings were free to assume elements of his power.”

Although they indicated that geniuses often exceeded the limits of human understanding and asserted that their minds had to be something more than blank slates, Mr. McMahon notes, intellectuals debated whether genius should be attributed primarily to nature or nurture.

Some, Mr. McMahon adds, connected genius to moral transgression. Acknowledging that Prometheus was a criminal, who stole from the gods and was punished for his audacity, they defended him for acting in the service of mankind.

On the other hand, some stressed that a “sublime hatred of the status quo” and a conviction that they possessed a special authority led geniuses like Napoleon, Lenin and Hitler to stop at nothing to achieve their ends.

The half century following World War II, McMahon argues, marked “the end of the idolatry of genius itself.” In decidedly different ways, Hitler and Albert Einstein (who was feared for his ability to devise something more destructive than the bomb), he suggests, “helped shatter the aura of the genius’ sanctity.”

More important, certainly, is a recognition, especially in the sciences, of the role of collaboration in creative endeavors. Moreover, as intellectuals and academic researchers turned away from genius, or “changed the name to protect the innocent (or hide the guilty),”

Mr. McMahon claims that the term exploded in popular culture,” with a spate of self-help books offering readers practical ways to spark their inner genius. These days, he writes, the notion that all people are created equal, an ideal which often threatened the cult of genius, “may be having the last laugh.”

Perhaps. But, as Mr. McMahon acknowledges, economic inequality continues to grow at an alarming rate in the United States and elsewhere. And genius continues to titillate. More importantly, it fills a need. Is it conceivable, one wonders, that we are but a global financial crisis away from the emergence of a leader, endowed with a mythic genius, about whom it could be said, as it was of Napoleon, “General, you are great like the world, and the world is not great enough for you.”

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