

# 1

## Mozart's skull

### Looking for genius (in all the wrong places)

No one, of course, has ever divined the secret of the muse (else we would all become Mozart) . . .

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#### 1.1 Introduction

At the beginning of the Mozart year, 2006—the year of the composer's 250th birthday—a skull long reputed to be Mozart's, in the possession of the Mozarteum since 1901, was given over to a team of forensic pathologists, and other scientific worthies, for the purpose of determining, once and for all, on hard scientific evidence, whether or not it is, indeed, *his*. (See Figure 1.1.)

DNA from two teeth of the skull in question was compared with DNA samples extracted from the thigh bones of two skeletons, believed to be those of Mozart's maternal grandmother and niece, exhumed from the Mozart family grave in Salzburg. The results, alas, were inconclusive, as the skeletons in the grave proved to be unrelated.

What did the investigators and their promoters hope to learn from the skull, if it had turned out to be Mozart's (which it still may very well be)? Richard Powers wrote of the matter in *The New York Times*: “These investigators have probed the skull as if its evidence might render Mozart's mind boggling musical ability more understandable and thus less disturbing.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Richard Powers, “A Head for Music”, *The New York Times*, Sunday, January 8, 2006, the Op-Ed page.



**Figure 1.1.** Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, composer: *b.* Salzburg, 27 January, 1756; *d.* Vienna, 5 December, 1791. The presumed skull of Mozart, recovered from the mass grave by Joseph Rothmayer in 1801, by 1842 in the possession of the anatomist Joseph Hyrtl, and since 1902 in the Mozarteum. On the forehead is a note about the provenance, written by Hyrtl. Salzburg, Mozart-Mus.d.Stift. Mozarteum. (Photo: akg-images/Gilles Mermet.)

There is a good deal of wisdom in Powers' remark. And from it the following three claims can be extracted—claims I would like to examine in what directly follows. (1) Mozart was a genius. (2) Genius is disturbing, Mozart's genius particularly so. (3) Genius is mysterious, Mozart's genius particularly so.

It may seem bizarre in the extreme to those untainted by post-modern theory and scholarship, that there is any need to state what is to them the obvious, as the first claim does: that Mozart was a genius—indeed, one of those who give the word its very meaning. But by and by we will have to spend some time with the post-modern debunkers of genius: what they say, why they say it, and what is to be said in reply. But for now I want to spend some time with the latter two claims.

## 1.2 Why genius disturbs

Powers suggests that genius is disturbing, and I think, at least to some extent, he is right. Why so? Well, for starters, it is mysterious, and, clearly,

the mysterious, the unknown is disturbing in itself. But perhaps genius is disturbing, as well, because it is seen as a challenge to our self-esteem. Its origin and nature are not only beyond our comprehension, but what it *does* is beyond our powers—indeed *so far* beyond our powers as to merit the special name we give it and the awe in which it is held.

But that still leaves the question of why *Mozart's* genius should be, as Powers seems to suggest, *especially* disturbing, *especially* mysterious.

Let me begin to answer this question by calling your attention to the illustration that was chosen for Powers' little essay in *The Times* on Mozart's skull. The drawing (frontispiece) is credited. But it is not clear who chose the musical background for it. Whoever did, however, made a singularly appropriate choice. A close look reveals that it is the opening, in manuscript, in Mozart's hand (?), of Cherubino's first aria, "Non so piu", in Act I of *Le Nozze di Figaro*. (See Figure 1.2.)

And I say that it is a singularly appropriate choice, because Cherubino is a perfect metaphor for Mozart himself. Mozart is, indeed, the Cherubino of music, Cherubino the Mozart of sexual passion. For just as Cherubino's sexuality evinces itself in full, mature strength at the tender age of 13, as

### Nº 6. Aria

The musical score is for the aria "Non so più" (Nº 6. Aria) from Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*. It is marked "Allegro vivace". The score includes parts for 2 Clarinetti in B, 2 Fagotti, 2 Corni in Es, Violino I and II, Viola, Cherubino (soprano), Violoncello, and Contrabasso. The woodwinds and strings play a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth and sixteenth notes. Cherubino's vocal line is in a higher register, featuring a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes. The lyrics are in German and Italian, with German lyrics above and Italian lyrics below. The score is in G major and 3/4 time.

**Allegro vivace**

2 Clarinetti in B

2 Fagotti

2 Corni in Es

**Allegro vivace**  
con sord.

Violino I

Violino II

Viola

Cherubino

**Cherubino**

Ich weiß nicht, wo ich bin, was ich tu - e, bald in Frest, bald in Glut, oh-ne Ru-hel Je-des  
Non sò più co-sa son, co-sa fac-cio, or di fo-co, o-ra so-no di ghirac-cio, o-gni

Violoncello

Contrabasso

Figure 1.2. Aria: musical notation. From the Belwin-Mills edition of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*.

I imagine him, so, at that tender age, Mozart was already a mature composer, with an opera and a singspiel, and over 50 works in the Köchel catalogue to his credit. A sexual prodigy as metaphor for a musical prodigy!

Well, it is no news that Mozart was a musical prodigy. The child composer is as inseparable from our image of Mozart's genius as the deaf composer is from our image of Beethoven's. Paul Henry Lang had occasion to observe, on Mozart's 200th birthday, that Mozart was "enthroned as the symbol of genius" by the early Romantics, "and it was the precocious youngster", he adds, "whom they saw in everything".<sup>2</sup> (See Figure 1.3.) Goethe, for one, still remembered, in his old age, the 7-year-old Mozart, as "the little man in his headdress and sword".<sup>3</sup>

It is not just that Mozart was a prodigy. There have, after all, been others in the history of music. But it is the *degree* of precocity that was and remains so stunning. There never was and never has been such a phenomenon; and one is confident in predicting that there never will be such a one again.

Thus what is *so* mysterious, and *so* disturbing about the genius of Mozart is *both* the fact of his precocity, and its magnitude. Genius in any form is profoundly disturbing to us, I suspect, because it is threatening to our self-esteem, and because we do not understand it. I will get to the latter aspect in a while. But with regard to the former, we may ask why it is that precocious genius—Mozart's in particular—should be so disturbing because so threatening to our sensitive egos. It is, I suggest, that as adults we are far more humbled by a 5-year-old genius functioning at a level that is orders of magnitude beyond what we can ever attain, even in our maturity, than we are by the functioning, at a higher level still, of a 54-year-old genius. "A 5-year-old child could do *that*", when said about the work of a 54-year-old man, is a put-down. "A 54-year-old man could not do *that*", when said about the work of a 5-year-old child, is a humbling admission.

When we observe a composer like Verdi or Haydn, who over the *labor* of a lifetime finally achieves the level of creative accomplishment we ascribe to genius, it is humbling and awe-inspiring enough, to be sure. But, somehow, because it *was* the labor of a lifetime, perhaps we think to ourselves, be it unconsciously, that, well, had *we* worked so hard and so

<sup>2</sup> Paul Henry Lang, "Mozart After 200 Years", *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 13 (1960), 197.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Eckermann's Conversations with Goethe*, trans. R. O. Moon (London: Morgan, Laird, n.d.), p. 301.



**Figure 1.3.** Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, composer: *b.* Salzburg, 27 January, 1756; *d.* Vienna, 5 December, 1791. Mozart aged six, wearing gala dress which he received as a gift from Empress Maria Theresa. Painting (1763) attributed to Pietro Antonio Lorenzoni (1721–1782). Salzburg, Mozart-Mus.d.Stift.Mozarteum. (Photo: akg-images/Erich Lessing.)

long at it, maybe, just maybe *we* could have done it too, foolish though the thought might be. Bach is supposed to have said: "I was obliged to be industrious: whoever is equally industrious will succeed equally well."<sup>4</sup> However, in the case of Mozart the child, it does not seem as if genius, in any sense, was *achieved*. How could it have been, if it was already in evidence in the 5-year-old child? It just seems to have *happened*. And this, surely, is what so disturbed Salieri about Mozart, in the play *Amadeus*, where Peter Schaffer has Salieri lay before God his complaint that "I have worked and worked the talent you have allowed me",<sup>5</sup> only to find that it is "an obscure child" who has been given the gift.<sup>6</sup> Work did not *work*.

In a while I shall return to the disturbing quality of genius in general, Mozart's in particular, and indeed to a reaction far beyond being disturbed, that amounts to downright fear and, in the event, hostility and denial. This extreme condition by no means affects everyone; whom it affects, and why, I will get to by and by. But before I do that I want to turn to the mysteriousness of genius, with which its disturbing quality is intimately connected.

### 1.3 The mystery of genius

I begin with a well-known document of what might be termed the "Mozart mystique"—a spurious letter that Mozart was supposed to have written to one "Baron V\_\_", in which, in response to a fictional letter of the Baron's, he answers various questions which the Baron has put to him, principally (and what has made the pseudo-Mozart's letter so fascinating over the years) the question of *how Mozart composes*. The letter, we now know, was fabricated from beginning to end by J. F. Rochlitz, editor of the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, and published in that periodical on 23 August, 1815.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel (eds.), *The Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* (New York: Norton, 1945), p. 334.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Schaffer, *Amadeus*, ed. Richard Adams (Essex: Longman, 1984), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> For further information on this, see Peter Kivy, "Mozart and Monotheism: An Essay in Spurious Aesthetics", reprinted in Kivy, *The Fine Art of Repetition: Essays in the Philosophy of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 189–99.

The passage in the spurious letter that concerns me here reads as follows:

I now come to the most difficult part of your letter, which I would willingly pass over in silence, for here my pen denies me its service . . . You say you should like to know my way of composing, and what method I follow in writing works of some extent. I can really say no more on this subject than the following, for I myself know no more about it and cannot account for it. When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone, and of good cheer—say traveling in a carriage, or walking after a good meal, or during the night when I cannot sleep—it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly. *Whence* and *how* they come, I know not, nor can I force them.<sup>8</sup>

Once, of course, one knows, on external grounds, that the letter is spurious, it becomes utterly transparent to anyone familiar with Mozart's authentic correspondence, how different the style of the spurious letter is from that of the *real* Mozart's *real* letters, so refreshingly spontaneous, and free of abstract speculation on the nature of his art. For it is, clearly, driven by *theory*, if that is the right word for it, of the nature of genius, already bearing the marks of the Romantic sensibility. But it is this very aspect of it that makes it relevant to our understanding of the genius concept, and, in particular, what Powers calls "the mysteries surrounding Mozart". For the mystery of his own genius, even to *himself*, is exactly what the pseudo-Mozart is expressing in the passage quoted above.

The pseudo-Mozart begins by calling that part of the Baron's letter in which his method of composition is inquired after "the most difficult part of your letter", the part where "my pen denies me its service". We are thus prepared for the pseudo-Mozart's admission that "I cannot account for it"—which is to say, how he composes. He can, indeed, tell the Baron what the propitious circumstances are for the creative act: when he is completely himself (whatever that means), "entirely alone, and of good cheer"; "it is on such occasions", he says, "that my ideas flow best and most abundantly". But more than that he cannot say; for "*Whence* and *how* they come I know not, nor can I force them."

The pseudo-Mozart can, indeed, tell us the circumstances under which it is most likely that he will experience a flow of good ideas: "When . . . entirely alone, and of good cheer—say traveling in a carriage, or walking after a good meal, or during the night when I cannot sleep." But the very banality of these enabling circumstances deepens rather than

<sup>8</sup> Reprinted and translated in Edward Holmes, *The Life of Mozart, Including his Correspondence* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1868), p. 329; italics in original.

dissolves the mystery. For we all are sometimes entirely alone and of good cheer, and the rest, and do not get the ideas of a genius, and many a genius will tell us that she gets her great ideas under entirely different though no less banal circumstances from those described by the pseudo-Mozart. In short, what puts the pseudo-Mozart in the most likely mood to enable the flow of good ideas is not a method for getting good ideas. There is no such method.

There are, to be sure, various methods and tricks of the trade that enable creators to create or discoverers to discover. One cannot create or discover without having command over the field in which one creates or discovers, and knowing the rules of thumb that lead up to great creations or discoveries. And these methods can, of course, be taught and acquired by the non-genius and genius alike. What there is no method for is the step beyond these "enabling" methods; the great discovery or great work that only genius can achieve. There is no method for *that*, which is precisely what the pseudo-Mozart is telling us.

This is not, however, all there is to say about what constitutes the mystery of genius. For the same mystery we have been talking about surrounds the acquisition of *any* sought-for idea by any individual, whether or not he is a genius. Anyone, for example, who has ever tried to find the proof of a theorem in geometry or logic and succeeds, knows the experience of suddenly seeing the solution, the crucial step, after hours of muddling about. It is the *Eureka!* experience, which anyone can have, at any level of accomplishment, from high-school geometry to Archimedes in his bath. The mystery of genius, then, is not just the mystery of the *Eureka!* experience, which is, indeed, a mystery in itself, but the mystery of how and why some chosen few are able to receive, as it were, bright ideas, at the cutting edge, and consistently, to such a degree that it begins to us under-laborers to seem supernatural: hence the Romantic image of mere mortals elevated to the status of gods.

At this point, then, it seems appropriate to return to the question of why the genius, and the idea of genius, should be disturbing to us, as Powers suggests that they are. We have considered, previously, the disturbance that might be caused by the *threat* of genius to our self-esteem, because the ability of genius so far outstrips ours. Another source perhaps is to be sought in the *mystery* of genius. For since genius is a mystery to us, it is a species of the *unknown*; and, according to ancient folk wisdom, fear of the unknown is part of the human condition.



But surely fear of the unknown arises only in circumstances in which the unknown may be a threat or danger to us. And it is difficult to understand why the mystery of genius should be seen as a threat to our safety. Our absence of knowledge of the cause and nature of genius hardly seems to pose a threat or danger, as would, say, our absence of knowledge of what might be lurking in the dark, or in the future.

One might, I suppose, suggest, with Aristotle, that “Learning things gives great pleasure not only to philosophers but also in the same way to other men . . .”;<sup>9</sup> so that the absence of knowledge of *anything* will be the absence of the pleasure of learning that thing, and, hence, a discomfort—a gnawing, persistent disturbance. But although this may tell us why the absence of knowledge of *anything* will be, to a certain degree, disturbing or painful, it hardly tells us why the mystery of genius should be singled out as disturbing, above any other instance of our ignorance.

Perhaps, it might be suggested, the peculiarly disturbing nature of the genius mystery lies in its seeming recalcitrance to a so-called “scientific” explanation; although one is, in the event, hard put to it to conjure up an idea of just exactly what a scientific explanation of Mozart’s genius would look like. As a matter of fact, Powers, in the essay on Mozart’s skull, with which this chapter began, does indeed express considerable skepticism with regard to the relevance of science to genius. In the essay, Powers writes: “That the skull exists separately from the skeleton at all is testimony to the 19th-century cutting-edge science of phrenology, and the habit among budding phrenologists of going about collecting the heads of geniuses.” It scarcely needs saying that neither Powers, nor I, nor anyone else now living holds out the hope of phrenology casting light on the mystery of Mozart’s genius. But nor does Powers hold out hope for present-day science, or science to come. For he writes: “Even if DNA analysis does succeed in confirming the skull’s identity, it will lay to rest exactly zero of the mysteries still surrounding Mozart. Nor”, he adds, “will any future science ever put to rest the unsolved Mozart, the inexplicable genius, that most troubles and transforms us.”<sup>10</sup>

Again, however, the question poses itself of how this particular ignorance marks out a difference between the mystery of genius, and the

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1953), The Loeb Classical Library, p. 15 (IV. 3–10).

<sup>10</sup> Powers, “A Head for Music”.

mystery of anything else, that should make the mysteriousness of genius *particularly* disturbing. Many mysteries, after all, are awaiting scientific explanation. Yet genius is singled out by Powers as not only mysterious, but disturbing into the bargain. Why so?

Without venturing an answer to this question, I think we can at least conclude that genius in general, and Mozart's in particular, *is* disturbing, *qua* genius, because, as I suggested previously, it is a threat to our self-esteem. And the mystery surrounding genius is disturbing, as any mystery is disturbing, because, quite simply, we are disturbed by the unknown. It is, as Harold Bloom has claimed, just in the nature of genius to be a disturbing element in our lives or, as he describes it, "a strangeness that we either never altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncrasies".<sup>11</sup>

The disturbing quality of genius, quite unsurprisingly, has not caused either skepticism or hostility to it among the generality of mankind. Quite to the contrary, the modern sensibility holds it in the same reverence in which it was held by the Romantic sensibility during the years in which the concept was given its familiar shape, with Mozart as one of its poster boys. Those uninfected by what might be termed post-modern genius syndrome—a complaint we will consider in a moment—not only tolerate the concept of genius, disturbing though it may be, but obviously *need* it to correctly and adequately comprehend their world; for it is a world with Mozart in it; and without the concept of genius, Mozart is *more* not less of a mystery.

For most, then, genius disturbs; and there is an end on it. Far from estranging us to genius, its disturbing, unsettling quality is part of its fascination; part of what draws us on. But there are some whose disturbance by genius escalates into hostility and fear. Who *are* these people? Who *is* afraid of Virginia Woolf?

## 1.4 The fear of genius

I suppose it will come as no surprise to many of my readers that resistance to the concept, indeed to the very *existence* of genius, emanates from the

<sup>11</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (New York, San Diego, London: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 4.

academy; in particular, from a segment of the academy that perceives the heavy hand of “politics”, broadly conceived, in every human enterprise in which value or truth are the underlying methodological assumptions. I refer, of course, to the politicizing of aesthetics, ethics, epistemology, and natural science, that is endemic to post-modernism. I am in no position to say anything very deep about what is behind this, except to venture the not-too-surprising hypothesis that one driving force is a kind of moral suspicion of any concept that suggests *inequality*. As Paul Boghossian hypothesizes in his recent book, *Fear of Knowledge*, “In the United States, constructivist views of knowledge are closely linked to such progressive movements as post-colonialism and multiculturalism because they supply the philosophical resources with which to protect oppressed cultures from the charge of holding false or unjustified beliefs.”<sup>12</sup> As teachers we have all faced this, at least in our classrooms, where rational argument is seen as political oppression, and the belief that poetry is better than pushpin, or Milton more elegant than Ogilby, is cried down as some kind of ill-defined but nevertheless odious elitism, completely at odds with a “pluralist”, “democratic” society.

Nowhere is this moral attitude more in evidence than in the political deconstruction of genius that has become so prevalent in musicological circles, as elsewhere. For the concept of genius is the ultimate expression of human *inequality* and the concept of *artistic* genius the ultimate expression of faith in an objective standard with which artistic value can be measured, at least in the continued absence of a good argument to the contrary.

It is, indeed, a nice question whether we are paying a compliment to someone by calling him or her “genius”. For if a compliment is meant to give praise for what the genius has accomplished, praise for something for which he is responsible, then it pays the genius no compliment at all, of that kind, to call him “genius”. For genius is not acquired by dint of labor or sacrifice or intestinal fortitude. That is the whole point. It is not something one can set out to get. It is, as we say, a “gift”. And a gift is *given*, not *gotten*.

We might, to be sure, praise the genius for what he has done with his genius, if he has done more with it than another equally gifted. But, of course, the only measure we have of genius is in its accomplishments, so

<sup>12</sup> Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 130.

we cannot tell, in any given instances, whether one genius has accomplished more than another because he did more than the other with the equal genius they both had, or whether he had more genius than the other.

In any event, the genius is a thing apart, the ultimate “elite” human being. And for those uncomfortable with that “inequality”, that “elitism”, if you like, political deconstruction is the natural result in the post-modern age.

Musical genius has not, by any means, escaped the political purge. Among others, Beethoven has been its victim, in Tia DeNora’s book, whose title pretty much tells the story: *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792–1803*. Beethoven’s genius, we are to understand, is a political construct, like the credentials of a candidate for public office. And were another musical candidate as well placed politically, as Beethoven, for example (and it is DeNora’s example) Ladislav Dusseck, he, not Beethoven, would have been Vienna’s “next Mozart”.<sup>13</sup> As DeNora puts her view:

It is fallacious to argue that the artistic steps Beethoven took were those of a giant, and that if his contemporaries were unable to perceive their inherent value it was because they were too small or lacked vision. To account for Beethoven’s talent in any of these ways is to hold a view that flatters present-day viewers’ so-called more advanced perspective; it also imposes our own aesthetic evaluative terms on a group for which they are not necessarily appropriate.<sup>14</sup>

“Genius”, like “witch”—and the analogy is not without significance, for the genius may seem a magical, supernatural being—is to be put in scare quotes: it is “genius” (previously so-called), now to be viewed, in a more enlightened time, as an irrational superstition; the result of something completely *non*-mysterious that we can all perfectly understand: a political put-up job.

But now, I think, it ought to be crystal clear *who* might be especially frightened by *Mozart’s* genius, and *why*. It is, of course, the political deconstructionist crowd who are discomfited for the obvious reason that the incredibly rapid and early flowering of Mozart’s genius presents a challenge to their project of imposing proportions. Political reputation–

<sup>13</sup> Tia DeNora, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792–1803* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

building, after all, takes considerable time to unfold. It was a long road from Ronald Regan the second-string movie actor to the image of Ronald Regan the great statesman—the “great communicator”, as he came to be called. And if you are willing to accept this as a paradigm case of politically constructed reputation—if not, choose another—then you at least have a fighting chance of convincing some, anyway, that the long road from the image of Beethoven, the untutored rustic from Bonn, entering Vienna in 1792 with straw still in his hair, to the image of Beethoven the cloud splitter, who “seized fate by the throat”, is the very same road of PR and politics that can make a genius from a sow’s ear. But Mozart’s genius is in your face, right from the get-go. And if you were to seek for a paradigm case of just the opposite of a politically constructed reputation for genius (which, of course, would be “genius” so-called) then Mozart would be your man. Genius arrived before PR had a chance to work its magic.

Of course, nothing ever daunts the political deconstructionist crowd. Where there’s a will there’s a way. But it should certainly ring alarm bells all over the place when what is happening is that a distinction we use all the time, in ordinary life, is simply obliterated by a “theory”. The best way to introduce the concept of a politically constructed genius—which is to say, a genius so-called, a “genius” who does not deserve the name—is to compare a case of the constructed variety with a case of the genuine article. And who would be a better example of the latter, for illustrative purposes, than Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart? But that will not do. For what we are being told is not what we already think we *know*, that some folks *deserve* the name of genius and some do *not*—namely, the politically constructed ones. We are being told that *all* geniuses are geniuses politically constructed, geniuses so-called, geniuses in name only. It is turtles all the way down.

I have no idea whether Mozart’s genius has been, as of yet, a victim of a similar political deconstruction to that of Beethoven’s. (Josquin’s has.<sup>15</sup>) If Mozart has, indeed, been, thus far, spared this indignity, perhaps it is for the reason cited above. In anticipation of the event, I suppose I might “refute” the political deconstruction of Mozart simply by appeal to my own experience of the transcendent beauty of Mozart’s music, or adduce evidence from another worshiper at the shrine, Karl Barth, who wrote that

<sup>15</sup> See Paula Higgins, “The Apotheosis of Josquin des Prez and Other Mythologies of Musical Genius”, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 57 (2004), pp. 443–510.

"Whenever I listen to [Mozart], I am transported to the threshold of a world which in sunlight and storm, by day and by night, is a good and ordered world."<sup>16</sup> "Thus I refute the no-genius theory of Mozart", I might say. "What *else* but genius can we be in communication with here?"

Of course, the political deconstructionists are ready for this one. For they are fully prepared, I imagine, not only to politicize the concept of genius but to politicize our *experience* of genius as well. We do not doubt, they will say to me, and to Barth, that the music of Mozart moves you and pleasures you in the exalted ways you describe; we do not doubt that the very idea of Mozart's genius fills you with awe and wonder. But just as Mozart, his music, and his genius, so-called, were the beneficiaries of the political hype that made them what we think they are, we ourselves are the victims of the same political hype, whether we know it or not. And had the musical politicians worked for Süßmeyer rather than for Mozart, we would see Mozart as the mere teacher of the great Süßmeyer, as we do now see Neeffe as the mere teacher of the great Beethoven. It is all done with mirrors.

Such a view seems absurd to me on the face of it; nor do I know a single argument, or a single shred of evidence, in its favor. It does, of course, have the charm of irrefutability, if one is bound and determined enough to believe it. But I will leave the true believers to their faith. What I am more interested in are the *consequences* of our belief in the good, old-fashioned, Romantic picture of genius, with all of the mystery it is imbued with, quite rightly, on my view, and the *consequences* of falling out of this belief and into that of the deconstructionists. I shall conclude my essay with some marks on this regard.

## 1.5 Consequences of disbelief

Let me begin with the notion, dismissed out of hand by Powers in his *Times* article, of a "solution" to the mystery of genius by the "hard sciences". There is no reason, after all, to think that all questions are answerable by us, scientifically, or in any other way. My former colleague, Colin McGinn, is well known for his view that the problem of

<sup>16</sup> Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, trans. Clarence K. Pott (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), p. 22.

consciousness—the so-called “hard problem”—is, at least for human beings, an insoluble one. As he puts the view, in one place:

Our scientific faculty . . . has the wrong “grammar” to solve the problem. It is precisely for this reason that we experience the problem as peculiarly deep, as conceptual, as distinctly philosophical. It is why understanding consciousness is not just a project in normal science. Not only do we need a “paradigm shift” to come to grips with consciousness; we need a fundamentally new structure of thought.<sup>17</sup>

To solve the problem of mind we, as it were, need a different mind from the one we have.

It is with the “problem” of genius, perhaps, as it is with the related “problem” of “creativity”. As Gregory Currie writes, in the latter regard: “The creative process is close to being a mystery rather than a problem; there is some plausibility in the Fodor-inspired claim that we don’t even know what a theory of this process would look like.”<sup>18</sup> To quote Fodor himself: “We don’t just not know . . . we don’t even know what it would be like to know.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, “theory of creativity” is something like a category mistake, as perhaps is “theory of genius”.

For what it is worth, which probably is not much, I am convinced, as is Powers, that science cannot dissolve the mystery of genius, although science never stops trying.

And perhaps it is the same reason McGinn gives for the recalcitrance of consciousness, of the hard problem anyway, to our scientific endeavors. I do not mean that the problem of genius *is* the hard problem, or a part of it. I mean, only that, like the hard problem, it might well be a problem that, *for us*, is an insoluble one; that we are just not constituted to solve it. Which does not make genius magical, or supernatural, any more than consciousness is. There *is* to be sure, an explanation, but not an explanation that *we*, constituted the way we are, can ferret out.

Well, if it is true that genius is, for us, inexplicable, I think I am glad of it. There are, after all, some things one does not *want* to know. To quote McGinn again:

<sup>17</sup> Colin McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> Review of Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston (eds.), *The Creation of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), *The Philosophical Review*, 114 (2005), 139.

<sup>19</sup> Jerry Fodor, in conversation. And again: “The likelihood that there will be a substantive theory of creativity is about the same as the likelihood that there will be a substantive theory of Tuesdays.”

Knowledge is generally a good thing, but it is not self-evident that complete knowledge of ourselves would leave us better off. Maybe it would be depressing to discover exactly what makes us the psychophysical beings we are; it might feel desiccating and debilitating.<sup>20</sup>

My experience of Mozart's music, after all, is wrapped up with the concept of his genius as an inexplicable mystery. Without the latter, my experience of the music would have to be drastically changed, and, I fear, not for the better. McGinn writes of the mystery of consciousness:

If consciousness proves permanently enigmatic, a marvel of nature that we cannot explain, then we can retain our sense of awe about the universe . . . I think it undeniable that science has taken some of the poetry out of the world, and it is no bad thing if a part of the world resists our efforts to domesticate it.<sup>21</sup>

Genius, like consciousness, has resisted our efforts at domestication. Like consciousness again, we are, perhaps, better off in our ignorance. If that ignorance proves permanent, as I think it will, our experience of Mozart will remain for us what it is. And I surely would prefer it as it is, rather than risk its changing for the worse. After all, how could it change for the better, except if we had *more* of it, which, alas, we cannot have?

But as I have said before, I have no idea what shape an explanation of Mozart's genius, by the hard sciences, would take. So I really have no idea of just *how* my experience of Mozart's music would change, under its influence. So I will say no more about it.

However, I have a pretty good idea what a political deconstructionist explanation for Mozart's genius would look like, and, hence, a pretty good idea how it would change my experience of the music if, *per impossibile*, I became convinced of its truth. What I *do not* have a very good idea of is what kind of musical experience of Mozart a person could have had, who *could* become an adherent to the political deconstruction of his genius. So let me begin with that.

Imagine an "outsider" to the kind of experience of Mozart that Karl Barth described himself as having, which I will call simply, the "Barth experience", for short. I have particularly in mind, here, the place in Thomas Mann's novel, *Buddenbrooks*, where the author describes Thomas

<sup>20</sup> McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame* p. 71.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



Buddenbrook's attitude towards the musicality of his wife, Gerda, and to that of his son, Hanno, something of a musical prodigy: an attitude of bewilderment and even outright hostility. Mann writes:

Never had he dreamed that music was so essentially foreign to his family as it now seemed. His grandfather had enjoyed playing the flute, and he himself always listened with pleasure to melodies that possessed a graceful charm, a lively swing, or a tender melancholy. But if he happened to express his liking for any such composition, Gerda would be sure to shrug her shoulders and say with a pitying smile, "How can you, my friend? A thing like that, without any musical value whatever!"

He hated this "musical value". It was a phrase which had no meaning for him, save a certain chilling arrogance . . .

He understood her; that is, he understood what she said. But he could not follow her: could not comprehend why melodies which touched or stirred him were cheap and worthless, while compositions which left him cold and bewildered possessed the highest musical value. He stood before a temple from whose threshold Gerda sternly waved him back—and he watched while she and the child vanished within.<sup>22</sup>

I can readily understand a man such as Thomas Buddenbrook is unable to enter the temple, never having had the Barth experience, bewildered by and estranged from what his wife and son share, being convinced that somehow it is an artifact of political promotion with which he is confronted. He is, after all, a man of commerce and practical affairs. Merchandising is what he knows; and politics is his family's stock in trade. It is just such an individual who I can comprehend as accepting that "musical value", a thing he hates because a thing he cannot directly experience, and therefore smacking to him of "chilly arrogance", is the result, in those who cherish it, of nothing more than what he does have intimate acquaintance with: in a word, a "selling job". For he well knows the process by which the worthless is made indispensable to the consumer and profitable to the entrepreneur.

Because he never has had, and cannot have, the Barth experience, I can understand why Thomas Buddenbrook might be able to think that musical genius, and the experience of its product, the despised "musical value", can be accounted for on the hypothesis that they are the result of a political selling job. His own musical experience is no deeper, nor more profound

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Poerter (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), pp. 400–1 (Part VIII, Chapter 7).

or arresting than his experience of various other things—people and products—whose reputations and supposed worth have been exposed, in his lifetime, as hype and puffery. And when so exposed, in his own experience, he has felt the inevitable evaporation of interest in, and respect for them: they cease to satisfy. Thus there is no reason, in his own experience, to think it any different for Gerda's and Hanno's (to him) excessive love and enthusiasm for a certain kind of music. Were they only to come to see that they are victims of musical public relations, their love and enthusiasm would dissipate like his own admiration for a discredited public figure, whose image and reputation turn out to be an artifact of inspired advertising. He has indeed come very close to saying this outright to his wife. As Mann writes: "More than once he remonstrated angrily, 'This constant harping on musical values, my dear, strikes me as rather tasteless and opinionated.'"<sup>23</sup>

If it were only the likes of Thomas Buddenbrook who fell prey to the political deconstruction of musical genius and value, the phenomenon would be easily understandable, and its result unmysterious. There is no mystery in how someone who never had the Barth experience in the first place could believe that those who do have it are victims of politics, cultural conditioning, or whatever you want to call it, along those lines. It is nothing to him but one of the many pleasures that succumb to disillusionment in the normal process of living and learning.

However, it is very plain that the musically unsophisticated are far from being the only, or even the principal, victims of the political deconstruction of genius. Indeed, it is on the pages of scholarly journals and books, written by the musically learned, that the concept of musical genius is beaten down. And we cannot dismiss out of hand the possibility that many of them are no strangers to the Barth experience.

For my part, then, there is a double mystery here, quite beyond the initial mystery of genius itself.

It is an old methodological principle, in causal explanation, that *the cause must be adequate to the effect*. And it is a mystery to me how anyone who has had the Barth experience of Mozart could conceivably accept the political deconstruction of genius as adequate to *that* effect.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Poerter (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), pp. 400–1 (Part VIII, Chapter 7).

But conceding, as I think we must, that there *are* those who have had the Barth experience of Mozart, and yet can accept the political deconstruction of his genius, the mystery is *what* their experience of Mozart could be like *after* their political enlightenment. Could they continue to have the Barth experience? It is hard to think how. For it is characteristic of the realization that someone or something one had admired does not have the virtues that were the objects of her admiration, that her admiration is no longer possible: her idol has been revealed to have political feet of clay. And for me to understand the state of mind of someone who *both* is having the Barth experience of Mozart *and* believing, at the same time, that, were it not for politics, she would be having the Barth experience of Süssmeyer, is no less difficult than knowing what it is like to be a bat. It is hard to know how there could be business as usual in the state of political disillusionment regarding the genius of Mozart.

Doubtless there *are* those whose embracing of the politicized genius concept has indeed led to the death in them of the Barth experience of Mozart, or of any other composer. It is the well-known leveling effect. In Theodor Adorno's words: "Bach's music is separated from the general level of his age by an astronomical distance." As for the levelers, however: "They say Bach, mean Telemann . . ." <sup>24</sup> But, of course, if it is the fear of elitism that drives the political deconstruction of genius in the first place, then the leveling effect is just what the doctor ordered. It is the whole point of the exercise: a welcome consequence.

Thus, if the political deconstruction of Mozart's genius is supposed to dissolve its mystery, it not only fails to do that; into the bargain, it creates more mysteries than the one already in evidence. For it is a mystery how anyone who has had the Barth experience of Mozart could possibly find a political explanation of it satisfactory; and it is a mystery how anyone could *continue* to have the Barth experience of Mozart after finding the political explanation satisfactory. As for those who accept the political deconstruction of Mozart's genius *and* say Mozart, but mean Süssmeyer, one does have to wonder whether they ever had the Barth experience in the first place.

So where are we now, 250 years since the birth of the greatest musical prodigy in recorded history, and one of our greatest composers? My

<sup>24</sup> Theodor T. Adorno, "Bach Defended against his Devotees", *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), p. 145.

diagnosis is that in spite of political deconstruction and various other forms of genius-bashing now fashionable, the unique genius of Mozart is alive and well—at least among those who still cherish the kind of music he made and still believe it one of the wonders of Western culture. It is anyone's guess whether anyone will still care at Mozart's 350th birthday. I am not sanguine about his prospects. But if no one does care, it will not, I think, be because we have explained away the concept of genius in general, Mozart's in particular, and made him and his music as drab for that reason as a disgraced politician or a defrocked priest. As Goethe rightly said, "a phenomenon like Mozart remains a miracle".<sup>25</sup> No, the devaluation and loss of Mozart, if it does indeed occur, will be, rather, because of events so cataclysmic that *none* of our cherished cultural objects will stand. That is not, alas, an unthinkable outcome. So let us have *our* Mozart while we can. The barbarians are at the gates.

<sup>25</sup> *Eckermann's Conversations with Goethe*, p. 351.