

DIVINE FURY

A HISTORY *of* GENIUS

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CHAPTER I

THE GENIUS OF THE ANCIENTS

EVERY AGE, AND EVERY CULTURE, has its heroes of the mind. The ancient Egyptians told tales of wise men, such as Djedi and Setna, who had so mastered the ancient books that they knew everything there was to know. In China, aspiring scholars performed incredible feats of learning for thousands of years, memorizing the archaic texts of the classical tradition in heroic cultural acts. In India, Japan, and Tibet, Hindu Brahmins and Buddhist monks astonish to this day with their mental gymnastics, reciting sutras and vedas with perfect recall for days on end. Jewish tradition celebrates the mental dexterity of rabbis who can put a pin through a page of Torah and say, without looking, what letter it pricks, just as Muslims take pride in the *mufti* or *ulama* who can recite every verse of the Koran. And many of these traditions possess analogues to the great African bards—the *griots*, *doma*, and "masters of knowledge," living libraries who aspire to gather all that is known in their heads, preserving in oral tradition what would otherwise be forgotten.¹

For those of us who find it hard to remember our anniversaries or where we left our keys, such examples serve as painful reminders of our own inadequacies. But they also illustrate nicely the simple fact that intelligence knows no bounds. Whatever the vagaries of the statistical laws that distribute human aptitude across time and space, they pay little heed to nation, culture, or race. Many in the West long denied these basic continuities, boasting, as some do still, of an inherent superiority of mind. But this book defends no such claims, even (and especially) when it tries to understand them. In short, if we take genius to mean exceptional intelligence or high IQ, great learning, performance, or presence of mind, then "the genius" is both a creature of all seasons and a citizen of the world.²

It is now perfectly common to speak of genius in this general way. But that hasn't always been the case. Only relatively recently, in fact, and above all since World War II, have genius and intelligence been so closely coupled, as if the one were a simple synonym for the other. At the time of its emergence in Europe, by contrast—and for centuries thereafter—the ideal of genius was most often predicated on the belief that this rare capacity entailed something other than mere learning and intelligence, acquired mastery and knowledge. Genius—and the genius—embodied something else.

What was this something, the distinguishing power or possession that set the genius apart? This entire book will treat of efforts to answer that elusive question, and this chapter begins by examining some of its earliest formulations, a series of Greek and Roman reflections on just what it was that made the greatest men great. For though the *genius* of the ancients was not at all the “genius” of the moderns, early attempts to wrestle with the problem of what set the classical paragons apart influenced later discussions. What was it exactly that made Socrates the wisest of all men? Why was Homer, the blind bard, gifted with such piercing poetic sight? Why were Alexander and Caesar masterminds of statecraft and war? Were they possessed by a higher power? Or did they themselves possess a different nature, a special kind of soul? Were they gods, or were they men? Or beings in between? Focusing such questions on the lives of eminent individuals, ancient commentators worked out a range of responses that would resonate down through the ages, informing subsequent considerations of what divided the many from the few.

But before considering further these early reflections and the outstanding men who prompted them, we must appreciate what these ancient exemplars—what *all* ancient exemplars, whether Greek or Roman, Persian or African, Indian or Chinese—were not. For only in this way can we fully grasp the novelty of the subsequent departure and see clearly what separates modern Western paragons of genius from the heroes of the mind who came before. The wise men and sages who open this chapter provide a perfect foil for the modern creative genius, for in every instance the embodied ideal is one of recollection and retrieval, a preservation and calling to mind of what was first revealed long before. Mental prowess, in this understanding, is essentially an act of recovery, a rearticulation of words earlier spoken, of thoughts previously known. The same is true in art, where imitation and mimesis long structured the human gaze. To reproduce the eternal forms, to render in its ready perfection the world revealed to us, was the great goal of the artisans

whom we now describe as "artists," those skilled craftsmen who for centuries confined themselves to tracing the patterns and following the lines inscribed in the world by the ancestors and the ancients, by nature, the gods, or God. To create originally, without precedent, pattern, or model, was never the ideal of the ancient artist or sage, and indeed the ancients frequently denied the very prospect. As early as the third millennium BCE, the Egyptian scribe Kakheperresenb could comment on the impossibility of writing phrases that "are not already known," "in language that has not been used," with "words which men of old have not spoken." And in the eleventh-century Sanskrit epic song-cycle the *Katha sarit sāgara*, or *Ocean of the Streams of Story*, the god Shiva's lover Parvati begs him to tell her a tale that has never been heard before and that will never be heard again. Shiva was a god of great talents (among his remarkable feats, he maintained an erection for eons). But the best he is able to muster is a pastiche of well-worn tales that are in turn quickly recycled. In this case, true originality is impossible even for a god.³

The moral of the story is that "there is nothing new under the sun," a sentiment that will be familiar to readers of Jewish and Christian scripture, but is in fact common to virtually every ancient account in which God or the gods are held to have created the universe and all that it contains, or in which the universe is understood to have always existed. In either instance, genuine originality is, strictly speaking, impossible, for mere mortals must confine themselves to recovering and reproducing what already exists. And insofar as the defining characteristic of modern genius is original creation, it follows that the ancient sage cannot a modern genius be. Rather than look to the horizon of the original and new, the ancient's gaze is focused instead on the eternal recurrence of perennial forms, or on a "time of origins" in a mythic past that demands constant vigilance. For there in the "absolute past" lies the key to all understanding in the present and future, which will but be an eternal return, as it was in the beginning in a world without end. In the past lie the answers to all questions. In the past lie the solutions to all riddles. In the past lies the map of our fortune and fate.⁴

Students of ancient mythology and religion have taken pains to show that this general temporal orientation was common to the wisdom traditions and great world religions that took shape in the so-called Axial age that spanned the first millennium BCE. Its sway was extensive, and it proved lasting, enduring well into the early modern period in the West and elsewhere besides, a fact that has important implications for the emergence of genius as a cultural ideal. For only when the primacy of the past was challenged and the gods' monopoly on creation contested

could human beings truly conceive of themselves as creators of the new. Only then could the ideal of modern genius assume form.

Much of this book will be devoted to explaining the emergence of that ideal and to developing its implications, but the basic point may be grasped quickly enough simply by considering the etymology of the words "discovery," "invention," and "creation." Into the eighteenth century, the first two of these terms retained in the various Indo-European tongues their root meanings of "uncovering" or "finding." To "dis-cover" was to pull away the covering cloth, disclosing what may have been hidden, overlooked, or lost, but that was in any case already there. To "invent," similarly, was to access that *inventory* of knowledge long ago assembled and put into place: an invention was just a dis-covery, a recovery of an object forgotten, now an *objet trouvé*. The word "creation" provides an even more striking illustration of the point. "To create" was long deemed impossible for mortal human beings; creation—the supreme act—was reserved for the gods. *Solus deus creat*, the medieval theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas affirms in a typical refrain. "God alone creates," for God as the *creator omnium* was the creator of all. As late as the eighteenth century, French jurists drew on that principle to justify the king's authority over copyright on all books and ideas. Seeing that God was the author of everything in the universe, it was only just that his representative on earth should oversee how *royalties* were collected and dispersed on behalf of their true creator. Human ideas were but imperfect imitations of the divine original.⁵

It followed from these same assumptions that those who took it upon themselves to approximate the divine act of parturition—bringing into existence something new—flirted with danger, for they risked usurping a sacred prerogative. The classical myth of Prometheus imparts this message well. The wisest of the Titans, gifted with "forethought" (the literal meaning of his name), Prometheus hailed from a race of monstrous gods who had been defeated by Zeus and the pantheon of Mount Olympus, but who then took vengeance by stealing their fire. He bestowed on humanity that elemental power, which served in turn as the source of many more inventions—language and agriculture, metallurgy and carpentry, medicine, astronomy, and prophecy. But Prometheus was severely punished for his audacity, chained to a rock for all eternity as an eagle pecked out his liver again and again.⁶

The consequences of usurping creation were no less severe in Judeo-Christian myth. The apocryphal book of Enoch, for example, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, tells a tale not unlike that of Prometheus, elaborating on the biblical account in Genesis 6 of a race of

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fallen angels, “the sons of man,” who were moved by lust to couple with women of the earth. The fruit of their unnatural union are giants, part human, part divine, who bring evil and oppression to the world while disclosing knowledge stolen from God—metallurgy, agriculture, writing, and “other eternal secrets made in heaven.” God’s anger is uncompromising. Just as Zeus punishes Prometheus for his theft and disclosure, Yahweh lays waste to the giants and their misshapen world in the great flood that spares only Noah. Christian legend elaborates on a similar theme, telling how Lucifer, the “bringer of light” and wisest of the angels, became Satan, “the enemy,” by daring to usurp the function of creation, which is prohibited even to the angels. In John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in fact, Satan is depicted famously as a kind of Prometheus himself, a dangerous source of innovation and imagination, justly punished, to be sure, but not without a tragic heroism in his doomed attempt to aspire to godhood. Indeed, the message in these mythic examples is often mixed—for though aspiring to creative prowess is dangerous, hubristic, redolent of sin, it is also heroic. Those who challenge the gods may be monsters and giants, but they tower above ordinary men. And yet those who are raised to great heights have a tremendous way to fall.

The seduction and allure of the ascent is bound up with the attraction of genius, which helps to explain why so many of the powers first attributed to it—creativity, imagination, originality, and “invention,” in the modern sense of making something new—were long regarded as taboo: they were a challenge to the gods. It is largely for that reason that the ideal of creativity only began to emerge as a modern value in the eighteenth century, and that in earlier times imagination was viewed with deep suspicion as a faculty to be controlled and even feared. That is not to say that there was no imagination prior to this point, any more than it is to suggest that people throughout the world somehow lacked creativity of their own. One need think only of gunpowder, the pyramids, or printed paper to dispel such thoughts. Yet to draw attention to the eighteenth century’s novel claims to creativity and genius is to suggest that it was only in this period—and, above all, in the advanced dominions of Europe—that the pervasive belief that there *was* something new under the sun was first put forth in a sustained and systematic way. If, as has been claimed, “the existence of the Creator deprives human beings of their own creativity,” then it could only be where the Creator’s existence was called into question that human creativity could fully emerge. In this respect, genius as a cultural ideal, an embodiment of imagination, innovation, and creative capacity, was a product of a specific time and place, born in the West and given birth in the long

eighteenth century, amid the very first period in the whole of human history to launch a sustained attack on the gods. Undoubtedly, there are analogues and approximations to this ideal in other traditions. But it was above all in Europe and its dependencies that it first assumed widespread prominence, with revolutionary consequences for better and for ill.⁷

How then to chart the long gestation leading up to the birth of this new being, the slow and sometimes painful delivery? There are, no doubt, different ways. But surely any satisfying account must make sense of that special "something" that set the special apart. Scholars and sophists will make their appearance, along with men of intelligence and learning, poets and bards. But the individuals who must focus our attention are those who were believed to be more than men, those who in their audacity or divine election approached the summit of Mount Olympus and reached up to the heavens. At once dangerous and seductive, monstrous and beautiful, ominous in their power, these special beings were creatures apart. They possessed—or were possessed by—what no other human being could claim. And though there are many examples of such lofty beings among the ancients—from Pythagoras to Archimedes and beyond—one man fascinated and perplexed his peers and posterity like no other. With a philosopher from Athens—the wisest of mortals, who claimed to know nothing—does this history of genius begin.

WE HEAR OF HIS STRANGE companion only obliquely, in snippets and asides. "Just as I was about to cross the river," Socrates explains in one of Plato's many dialogues, the primary source, however imperfect, of the master's own beliefs, "the familiar divine sign came to me which, whenever it occurs, always holds me back from something I am about to do." Elsewhere, Socrates refers to this "sign" (*sêmeion*) as a "voice" that has spoken to him since childhood. But the word that he invariably uses to describe it is *daimonion*, the diminutive of *daimon*, ancestor of our own "demon." The term had not yet taken on the exclusive connotation of evil that it would develop with the advent of Christianity. Yet that there was already something potentially menacing—something dangerous and revolutionary even—about the *daimonion* in question is given dramatic illustration by the setting in which Socrates was forced to account most fully for its existence. As Socrates's pupil, the Athenian soldier and historian Xenophon, explained, "It had become notorious that Socrates claimed to be guided by 'the *daimonion*': it was out of this claim, I think, that the charge of bringing in strange deities arose." Accused

by prominent citizens of Athens of having introduced "new demonic beings" (*daimonia kaina*) into the city, Socrates was put on trial as a heretic and corrupter of youth, whose appeal to an unfamiliar power threatened the very stability of the state. He himself denied any such explicit political intent, though he candidly acknowledged that the *daimonion* was the source of his urge to "interfere" in the affairs of others. "I experience a certain divine or daimonic something," he confessed, "which in fact [has been] caricatured in the indictment. It began in childhood and has been with me ever since, a kind of voice, which whenever I hear it always turns me back from something I was going to do, but never urges me to act. This is what has prevented me from taking part in politics." Ironically, the very power that kept him from power proved his political undoing. And so the man who "of all men living" was the "most wise," as the Pythian priestess at Delphi famously declared, was found guilty of introducing strange demons into the city and sentenced to death in 399 BCE. Socrates apparently drank his hemlock in peace, for, as he told his friends in the hours before his death, his *daimonion* approved his actions, never once holding him back. "That which has happened to me is undoubtedly a good thing," he concluded, making himself a martyr, if not, strictly speaking, to genius, then at least to his own *daimonic* power.⁸

But what exactly was this power, this *divinum quiddam*, as Cicero would later call it, struggling like Socrates to find the words to capture this divine and mysterious thing? Generations of scholars once passed over the question in embarrassed silence, or sought to explain it away, as if a man as rational as Socrates could never have believed anything so strange. The simple truth, however, is that this same man, who sought by the power of his intellect to clarify what was obscure, recognized the existence of mysterious forces, and obeyed them. Socrates, we can be certain, believed in his inner *daimonion* and heeded its call.⁹

In that respect, at least, this extraordinary man was not all that different from the great majority of his contemporaries, who also believed in spirits hidden and unseen. Invoking *daimones* as a way to explain the silent forces that moved through their lives, they conceived of these powers as akin to fortune or fate, affecting their actions despite their explicit intentions, for better or for worse. That human beings were attended by guardian *daimones* of sorts, whether evil or good, was in fact a widely shared belief among ordinary people, who held that although a mischievous *daimon* might lead them astray, a "good *daimon*" (an *eu daimon*), could make them "happy" (*eudaimon*). The two words were one and the same.¹⁰

Socrates's own understanding of his *daimonion* likely drew on these broader beliefs, which were also sustained by widely received legends, myths, and poems. In the verses of Homer, for example, Greeks would have encountered scattered, if conflicting, references to the *daimones*, which the bard equates on occasion with the gods of Mount Olympus themselves. Homer's rough contemporary, the poet Hesiod, was more specific, claiming that the *daimones* were originally heroes of the Golden Age, transformed by Zeus when their race died out into guardians and "watchers of mortal men." And the followers of the sixth-century philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras maintained that they could see and hear *daimones* as a consequence of their superior enlightenment. When we bear in mind that a similar ability was attributed to soothsayers, priestesses, and priests, the mysterious *daimonion* of Socrates begins to seem rather less a mystery. As Xenophon insists, in defending the apparent normalcy of his master's sign, "he was no more bringing in anything strange than other believers in divination, who rely on augury, oracles, coincidences and sacrifices."¹¹

Xenophon's claim to normalcy, however, is an exception, and even he cannot sustain it. Whereas other men skilled in prophecy read in natural occurrences like the flight of birds the signs of the gods' will, Socrates, Xenophon conceded, observed the sign in himself, and the sign was invariably right. Was this not a tacit admission that the wisest of all men had been specially touched, that his spiritual something was something special? Socrates himself seemed to acknowledge as much, observing, in a passing reference in Plato's *Republic*, that few, if any, had ever possessed such a sign. In this respect, Socrates's accusers had a point: his *daimonion* was strange, unlike any the world had known.¹²

It was that understanding that came to dominate Socrates's legend, which was perpetuated both by his detractors and his proponents. On the one hand, his detractors insisted on the essential monstrosity of this man possessed and apart. The point was given graphic illustration by Socrates's notorious physical appearance. He was, by all accounts, "strikingly ugly," short and squat with a broad, flat face, bulging eyes, swollen lips, and a deep-set nose. A bald head and an unkempt beard completed the picture, rendering Socrates the very antithesis of conventional Athenian beauty, like a university professor gone to seed. And given that it was common to relate physical appearance to character, Socrates's ugliness was used by his detractors to highlight the base and demonic nature of his soul. Socrates as satyr, Socrates as monster, Socrates as sorcerer who trafficked with demons to seduce the young and threaten the stability of the state—these were the images that haunted the memory of

a man who, by his own admission, was an annoying gadfly, disturbing the peace with unsettling questions and impertinent remarks. It is revealing that the earliest known representation of Socrates—a bust executed within ten to twenty years of his death—depicts Socrates as Silenus, the drunken and unattractive tutor of the wine-god Dionysius, whose ecstatic trances were legendary.¹³

The depiction of Socrates as Silenus, however, cuts another way. For the companion of the god was also renowned for his piercing insight and prophetic power. And though Silenus's "frightening wisdom," as Friedrich Nietzsche would later describe it in *The Birth of Tragedy*, may have heralded dismemberment, nothingness, and death, it was privileged wisdom all the same. In the hands of Socrates's admirers, the prophetic and oracular forces allegedly mediated by the demon could be extolled. Thus Plutarch, a Greek writing under the Roman Empire in the first century, has one of his characters observe, in a celebrated dialogue devoted to Socrates's sign, that his *daimonion* was heaven sent, a divine source of revelation and prophecy, illuminating him in "matters dark and inscrutable to human wisdom." Despite Socrates's insistence that his sign acted only negatively, characterizations of this kind, building on Xenophon's early intimation of divination and prophecy, assumed considerable importance. Cicero reports on a collection in his possession by the Greek Stoic Antipater that gathered together "a mass" of stories regarding Socrates's *daimonion* and its "remarkable" premonitions. And later classical commentators, such as Apuleius, Proclus, and Maximus of Tyre, devoted entire treatises to the subject, which were often frank in their embrace of an explicit demonology linking Socrates to higher powers. As Maximus explains, typically, in this vein, in the second century CE: "God himself, settled and immobile, administers the heavens and maintains their ordered hierarchy. But he has a race of secondary immortal beings, the so-called *daimones*, which have their station in the space between earth and heaven." These *daimones* are the "middle term" of the universe. Some heal diseases, some "descend from their station above the earth to inhabit cities," and still others "are assigned homes in different human bodies; one Socrates, another Plato, another Pythagoras, another Zeno, another Diogenes." The greatest minds of the ancient world, in short, were singularly chosen and possessed. The indwelling presence of the *daimon* was what explained their superior powers.¹⁴

Maximus's understanding of Socrates's demon was both literal and crude, and in this respect it was not unlike a great many Platonic and later Neo-Platonic accounts that speculated with lavish imagination about the sundry spiritual beings who filled the universe, interacting

with the gods and human beings alike. They found the basis for such speculation in Plato himself, who dwelled at considerable length in a number of his dialogues on the function and role of the *daimones*, describing them as angelic "messengers" who "shuttle back and forth" between the gods and men, or spiritual beings who were themselves "a kind of god," existing "midway" between the human and the divine. Read literally, these descriptions offered a banquet of materials on which later admirers could feast in speculation about the *daimonic* forces that filled the cosmos. But more refined delicacies were also hidden in their midst, providing the basis for a different kind of reflection, an explanation of the *daimonic* man that dwelled less on the nature of the demon than on the nature of its host. For if outstanding individuals like Socrates excited wonder about the nature of the forces that might possess them, they also excited speculation about the nature of the forces they possessed. On whom did the gods lavish their powers, and why, anointing some while spurning others? These are questions even older than the *daimonion* of Socrates, and in the ancient world, it was poets as much as philosophers who begged them.¹⁵

"SING, O GODDESS, OF THE ANGER of Achilles." "Sing, muse, of the man of twists and turns." So begin the two most celebrated poems of the ancient world, Homer's *Iliad* and Homer's *Odyssey*, the epic tales of the exploits of Achilles and Odysseus during and after the Trojan War. Both men are heroes, favored by the gods. But the poet who conjures them is also divinely attended. A different translation hints at how: "Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story. . . ." A séance, petition, and prayer, the words are a summons to the goddess to take possession of the poet and command his voice, to settle and dwell in his person. The founding texts of the Western literary canon open with an incantation.¹⁶

The conception of the poet as a medium who reveals divinely inspired words is by far the oldest understanding of this exalted being in the Greek tradition, and many others besides. Homer himself writes of the blind bard Demodocus, who moves Odysseus to tears and others to laughter when "the spirit stirs him on to sing." "God has given the man the gift of song," Homer declares, "to him beyond all others." Generations of Greeks said much the same of Homer himself, who was also frequently represented as blind, though uniquely gifted with special sight. Hesiod, Homer's only equal for early poetic fame, spoke similarly of the source of his power, recounting how the Muses appeared before him atop Mount Helicon and "breathed into me a divine voice so that I might celebrate the events of the future and the past. They bade me

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sing of the race of the blessed, eternal gods, but always to sing of them-
 selves first and last." Poetry of this kind, invoking the gods even as it is
 dictated by their emissaries, provides a perfect illustration of what later
 writers will call *inspiration*, from the Latin verb *inspirare*, meaning "to
 breath into." Hesiod uses a different word, a variant of the Greek verb
pneo, to breathe, but his stress is on the same pneumatic source of poetic
 revelations, which are blown directly into the mind by the Muse. When
 we consider that poetry itself comes from the verb *poiein*, to create, it
 follows clearly enough that poems are the creation of the gods, realized
 through their human artisans and agents.¹⁷

It is partly for this reason that poetry was so often likened to proph-
 ecy and prophets to poets. The famous priestesses at Delphi, who
 declared Socrates the wisest man, delivered their oracular pronounce-
 ments in bits of verse, filled with the breath of the gods and the sulfu-
 rous vapors that wafted up from the vents below their temple, inducing
 prophetic states of trance. And just as Hesiod "might celebrate the events
 of the future" when he was properly inspired, prophets frequently spoke
 in poetic language, serving, like the much older Hebrew *nabi* (one who
 communicates the thoughts of God), as divine ventriloquists, blending
 beauty and revelation. In the beginning was the word, and the word, in
 many traditions, was with the gods and from God, imparted to poets
 and prophets alike.¹⁸

But though the Greek poet-prophet was by no means unique, he
 was accorded unique status within ancient Greek society, singled out as
 a special being. Painters, for example, or architects or sculptors, enjoyed
 no such favor, despite the ancient world's admiration of their handi-
 work. Deemed craftsmen—artisans who labored with their hands—they
 were judged inferior to those who labored with their minds, a prejudice
 that would endure until at least the time of the Renaissance. In ancient
 Greece, poets were privileged. It was they who kept alive the memories
 of the past. It was they who told the stories of the gods and heroes. And
 it was they who served as the principal educators of the youth, imparting
 morals and models of conduct in what was still a predominantly oral
 culture. In the greatest masters—Hesiod and Homer above all—the cul-
 ture conceived its spokesmen, and as the many surviving busts of these
 two men indicate, they were held in particularly high esteem.

But why should Homer and Hesiod have been singled out by the
 gods? Any simple answer to the question is complicated by the fact
 that the works of "Homer" and "Hesiod" were not composed by single
 "authors." The thousands of lines we attribute to them, in other words,
 were a blend of different voices, worked and reworked by many as they

were handed down orally over the centuries. Still, contemporaries believed that the poems were the product of that special in-breathing conferred on those who exhaled them. Which only begged the question of why the Muse should choose to settle here and not there. Were the greatest poets like lightning rods, drawing energy from the sky? Perhaps there was special metal in their souls, a "conducting" agent that summoned this power? Or were they merely empty vessels, filled from on high?

The earliest Greeks seem to have had no notion of innate poetic ability, a perspective that would have harmonized well with the common observation, by no means confined to Greece, that the gods—or God—worked in mysterious ways, frequently conferring power on the unsuspecting. The greatest of the ancient prophets, Moses, for example, was "slow of speech and tongue" until God filled him with words. "Who gave human beings their mouths?" replies Yahweh in answer to Moses's fumbling protests that he was not worthy to speak for the Lord. God himself decides whom to fill with his breath, and he needn't give an account of his choices, however unlikely they might seem. In the same way, the gods and Muses inspired where they would.¹⁹

This ancient notion of the utter passivity of the poet was given its most explicit formulation well after the fact by Socrates's pupil Plato, who develops in his early and middle dialogues, the *Ion* and the *Phaedrus*, a theory of inspiration that would exert a tremendous influence on later understandings of genius. There Plato puts forth the view that poets and rhapsodists who recite their works are inhabited and taken over by the Muse in moments of production and performance. "God takes away the mind of these men," he says, "and uses them as his ministers, just as he does soothsayers and godly seers." Like ecstatic prophets, poets are filled by the divine breath—they are inspired, possessed. God is the source of their power.²⁰

Nor is that all. For to be possessed, Plato insists, is to lose one's mind, to cede one's self entirely to the god. "Unable ever to compose until he has been inspired and put out of his senses, and his mind is no longer in him," the poet experiences radical alienation in the enthusiasm of composition. He is caught up in the grips of *mania*, a form of madness or inspiration that Latin commentators, on Plato's example, would later describe as the *furor poeticus*, the poetic "fury" or "frenzy" that claims a poet in the midst of impassioned composition or recital. In such an enthusiastic trance, the poet's mind is literally not his own. Temporarily insane, he is in ecstasy (from the Greek *ek-stasis*, literally a standing outside of oneself), a condition that Plato explicitly relates in the *Phaedrus* to other forms of divine alienation. Playing on the close similarity in Greek between the words

es. Still, contemporaries believed that special in-breathing conferred by the gods begged the question of why they were there and not there. Were the greatest poets filled from the sky? Perhaps there was a "divine" agent that summoned this inspiration, filled from on high?

Plato had no notion of innate poetic inspiration that harmonized well with the common sense of Greece, that the gods—or the Muses—were frequently conferring power on the great poets, Moses, for example, until God filled him with words. "Where do the Muses?" replies Yahweh in answer to the question, "Are they not worthy to speak for the Lord. They have His breath, and he needn't give an account of them as they might seem. In the same way, the Muses give them as they would."¹⁹

The passivity of the poet was given emphasis by Socrates's pupil in the middle dialogues, the *Ion* and the *Phaedrus*. There Plato puts forth the view that the poet's works are inhabited and that the poet is a vessel of production and performance. "The poet is a vessel," he says, "and uses them as a vessel and godly seers." Like ecstatic poets, the poet's breath—they are inspired, possessed.²⁰

Plato insists, is to lose one's mind, and is unable ever to compose until he has regained it, and his mind is no longer in him," in the enthusiasm of composition. This state, a form of madness or inspiration, as Plato would later describe as the "divine madness" that claims a poet in the midst of composition. In such an enthusiastic trance, the poet, temporarily insane, he is in ecstasy (standing outside of oneself), a condition Plato describes in the *Phaedrus* to other forms of divine inspiration. The similarity in Greek between the words

for madness (*manike* or *mania*) and prophecy (*mantike*), Plato describes there how the Sybil and other priestesses in the ancient world delivered their ecstatic pronouncements while possessed, predicting the future, and granting oracles, inspired by the god Apollo. This "prophetic madness," like "poetic madness," bore a direct affinity to what Plato describes as a kind of "mystical madness," induced by the god Dionysius during cultic rites, which filled religious devotees with ecstasy and enthusiasm, taking them temporarily out of themselves.²¹

Plato insisted that these forms of "divine madness" owed not to sickness or disease, but to a divinely inspired presence. As such, they were gifts of the gods. And yet it should also be clear that his account was not without its ambiguities, particularly where poets were concerned. For by taking the position that poets were nothing but empty vessels—and totally out of their minds!—Plato denied them any merit or knowledge of their own. And while there was ample precedent for that claim, by the time Plato formulated it in the fourth century BCE, the Greeks had also elaborated a notion of poetry as an art—a *technê*, or craft—whose rules could be learned and intricacies perfected by practice and the accumulation of skill. The poet needed inspiration, to be sure, but that divine gift could be refined through cultivation.

Plato, however, explicitly denies that poetry is an art of this kind, taking pains in the *Ion* to demonstrate that all good poets compose and utter their work "not from art, but as inspired and possessed." And if the poet, like the prophet and the religious ecstatic, practices an art that is no art, he can have no real knowledge of what he does, no wisdom at all. His madness may be divine, but it is madness all the same, irrational and potentially dangerous. Poets, Plato seems to suggest, are a little bit crazy and so must be watched, and indeed in the *Republic* he makes that suggestion explicit, calling, in an oft-cited discussion, for the poets to be censored in his ideal community, and even banished, until they can give a proper account of their benefit to the state. Ironically, the theory of poetic inspiration that would later prove so influential among poets was used by Plato to challenge their claim to authority.²²

Plato's subtle critique of the poets, however, should not be read as animus toward poetry per se—his entire oeuvre resounds with a love of poetic language and skill—but rather as a frank acknowledgment of poetry's seductive power. The divine gifts of language and imagination, he recognized, may easily be abused, above all in a political setting, where they can quickly inflame the passions and sway the soul. If the poet, in Plato's celebrated description, was a "light, winged, holy thing," this same angelic being could prove a demon.

Which raises an interesting question. What was the difference between a poet driven mad by the Muse and a philosopher like Socrates, whose *daimonion* whispered in his ear? Weren't they likewise possessed, and so equally dangerous? The question takes on added drama when we bear in mind that one of Socrates's principal accusers, the Athenian citizen Miletus, was a poet himself. Was Plato simply avenging his master in banishing the bards from the Republic? Or worse, was he committing the very same crime that the rulers of Athens had committed against his beloved teacher, condemning the appeal to a god he could not control?

The distinction between the two cases becomes clearer when the divine madness of poetry, prophecy, and religious ecstasy are contrasted with what Plato describes in the *Phaedrus* as a fourth type of mania, the divine madness of love, which offers a glimpse of yet another way of conceiving that special something said to distinguish the most exalted human beings. Love, too, is a potentially dangerous force, which may possess us utterly and completely, as a shuddering orgasm or a jealous rage make only too clear. But though the gods who impart it—Eros and Aphrodite—can be the bearers of a fury and frenzy of their own, Plato maintained that they could be channeled and controlled, given direction and course. By choosing an exalted object of desire, we might not just be led along, but lead ourselves, learning to love in a process that Sigmund Freud would later describe as sublimation, the redirection of erotic energy to "higher" things. This is a theme of much of Plato's work, but immediately following his discussion of divine madness in the *Phaedrus*, he gives it a particularly arresting articulation by focusing on the vehicle of ascent. That vehicle is the soul, he says, "immortal," "self-moving," and endowed metaphorically with wings, "which have the power to lift up heavy things and raise them aloft where the gods all dwell." The soul, he claims further, is composed of three parts—reason, will, and desire—which he likens in a famous image to a charioteer hitched to two winged horses, one white and noble, the other black and unruly. The driver, who occupies the place of reason, attempts to goad the two horses—his will and desire—ever upward in an effort to return the soul to the place whence it came: the realm of the immortal gods. But those souls that get weighed down by earthly things—their dark horse led astray—will never soar to the heights of truth. Only those led successfully by reason can do so, and in Plato's view, it is the philosopher (*philosophos*), the passionate lover of truth, who achieves the greatest heights. Striving to discipline his will and curb his unruly desires, the philosopher orients himself toward lofty things, standing "outside human concerns" in order to "draw close to the divine." Ordinary people will "think he is disturbed and rebuke

him for this, unaware that he is possessed by god." They will "charge that he is mad." But his madness is in truth the highest form of wisdom. "Perfect as perfect can be," he knows the *furor divinus*, the divine fury, and is privy to extraordinary vision and power. Like Socrates, this philosopher lives in the "grip of something divine."²³

Here then was a form of divine inspiration that, while unruly and potentially dangerous, like all forms of possession, could nonetheless be cultivated and at least partially controlled by the appropriate forms of training. Philosophy, unlike poetry or prophecy, was a craft that could be learned, and throughout his works, Plato places a good deal of emphasis on the kind of education necessary to acquire it. Which is not to imply that Plato believed that philosophy could simply be imparted to any and all: the vision of truth that it afforded could only be glimpsed by the special few. On several occasions, Plato suggests that Socrates alone had succeeded in training his eye to see in this way. To "live in the grip of something divine"—and to see accordingly—was a privilege of very special souls.

Did that mean that Socrates's own philosophical soul was constitutionally different from that of other men? That his nature—and that of other great-souled individuals like him—was somehow distinctive and unique? To put the question another way, can it be said that Socrates was not only possessed by, but in possession of, a special power? Any speculation to that effect in the context of Plato's thought must bear in mind that he likely shared with other early Greeks, such as Pindar and Protagoras, a belief in metempsychosis, or the transmigration of the soul. If all souls are shaped by their past experiences, and are born into the world bearing the imprint of prior knowledge, then it follows that they would indeed be "unequal" at birth, endowed with varying capacities. It is also true that in a famous passage in the *Republic*, Plato acknowledges the expediency of conceiving of human beings as constitutionally unequal in this way. It would be useful, he maintains, to perpetuate the belief that social hierarchies are natural, that the body politic reflected the composition of souls. The rulers of his ideal republic are taught to believe that they have souls of "gold," while their auxiliaries possess souls of "silver," and the lowly workers and craftsman, souls of "iron" or bronze. Plato describes this fiction as a "magnificent myth" or "noble lie"—politically useful, if not true.²⁴

Men's souls, clearly, are not composed of gold. But that their "metal" might be measured in another way is suggested in a fascinating aside in Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*, where he repeats an assertion made elsewhere that every man has a *daimon*, an attendant guardian, linking him to the