Francis Galton’s *Hereditary Genius*, 1869 & 1892

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27 November 1869: *Hereditary Genius* [Francis Galton publishes He*reditary Genius*, which purports to be the first statistical study of creative and intellectual eminence.]  
October 1892: *Hereditary Genius*, 2nd ed. [Francis Galton publishes a new edition of *Hereditary Genius* with an added Preface.]

Abstract:

Francis Galton’s *Hereditary Genius* (1869, reissued 1892) claimed to be the first statistical study of genius. Drawing on data culled from biographies and biographical dictionaries of “eminent” figures, he argued that creative and intellectual exceptionalism was measurable and heritable. Despite their claims of objectivity, the two editions demonstrate the extent to which scientific theories of intelligence and creativity were shaped by popular discourse, particularly that surrounding the figure of the Romantic genius and the ascendant Aesthete. This essay explores the influence of cultural notions of genius on Galton’s studies and notes briefly the lasting impact of his methodology, which forms the basis of IQ testing still in use today.

Text:

While the nature and definition of genius is an evergreen topic for men of letters and their critics, the rise of taxonomic sciences in the mid-nineteenth century promised an empirical basis for quantifying and assessing genius, if not explaining its origin. Francis Galton’s 1869 *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* proved to be a watershed.[[1]](#endnote-1) Building on the burgeoning fields of evolutionary biology and heredity headed by Galton’s half-cousin Charles Darwin, the study applied statistics to the study of human aptitude and eminence to demonstrate that “a man’s natural abilities are derived from inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the whole organic world” (1). Yet despite its claims of scientific objectivity, *Hereditary Genius* could not shirk contemporary debates about the nature of creative and intellectual exceptionalism, particularly those surrounding the Romantic genius, a figure who by the 1860s was increasingly regarded as antagonistic to a Victorian work ethic. The second edition of Galton’s study, published in 1892, engages with anti-Romantic sentiment and further responds to the figure of the Aesthete, one incarnation of a post-Romantic genius gaining increasing prominence in the 1880s. Through both editions, as I suggest in this essay, Galton’s treatment of poets—in particular—evinces the degree to which Victorian ideals of creativity and intellect permeated even scientific discourse.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of the empirical orientation for Galton: others might have toyed with theories of hereditary genius, he writes, but he “may claim to be the first to treat the subject in a statistical manner, to arrive at numerical results, and to introduce the ‘law of deviation from an average’ into discussions on heredity” (*Hereditary Genius* vi). His conclusions, as first forwarded in an 1865 article published in *Macmillan’s*, were that “talent is transmitted by inheritance in a very remarkable degree; that the mother has by no means the monopoly of its transmission; and that whole families of persons of talent are more common than those in which one member only is possessed of it” (“Hereditary Talent” 157). These claims were, to use Galton’s phrase, “diametrically opposite” to then-prevalent notions regarding the heritability of exceptional qualities. And the implications of his argument were profound, as Galton argued not only that “each generation has enormous power over the natural gifts of those that follow,” but also that wisely using that power was “a duty” that readers “owe to humanity” (1). Galton’s commitment to eugenics in the *Macmillan’s* article was exuberant: “If a twentieth part of the cost and pains were spent in measures for the improvement of the human race that is spent on the improvement of the breed of horses and cattle,” he wrote, “what a galaxy of genius might we not create!”(“Hereditary Talent” 165). Recent scholars have cautioned against an overdetermined reading of Galton’s eugenics project (see Gökyiḡ­it 238-39), but it is worth noting that his claims did cause some contemporary readers consternation. One critic objected that “[Galton] would breed men and women as we do shorthorns and devons” (“Gleanings” 6) and another allowed that Galton’s “theory of breeding clever people from clever people does very well for a magazine article” while wondering, “but how is the thing to be accomplished?” (“Literary Gazette” 3). Those perusing the book-length study would find a more subdued tone, the call for social engineering tempered with lengthy appendices of biographical details, a system of coding eminent familial connections of geniuses and their degrees of relation, and charts compiling aggregated data: all familiar scientific apparatuses, newly applied to the study of extraordinary human ability.

Even as he broke new methodological ground in the first edition of *Hereditary Genius*, Galton turned to familiar non-scientific structures to explain his approach and results. He demonstrates, for example, nearly unqualified appreciation for the university examination, which he adopts as a model for his initial consideration of eminence. From exams, Galton perceived that exceptional capability arises only in small proportion to the average: “In ordinary scholastic examinations,” he writes, “marks are allotted in stated proportions to various specified subjects—so many for Latin, so many for Greek, so many for English history, and the rest. The world, in the same way, but almost unconsciously, allots marks to men” (7). He trusts that such exams establish the “enormous difference between the intellectual capacity of men” (16); that is, that individuals are born with vastly differing innate ability, a range that no social, economic, or educational disparities can entirely overwhelm (14-16).[[2]](#endnote-2) Galton also takes much from the bell curve discernible in exam results, which he finds to be equally relevant to genius in the broader population, as “there is not room,” he insists, “for many men to be eminent” (9).[[3]](#endnote-3) To arrive at a numerical value, a ratio of eminent individuals to the common masses, he turns to biographical sources ready at hand: obituaries in the *Times*, biographical dictionaries, and compilations such as *Men of the Times*. Finding confidence in the relative consistency of the figures derived from these varying sources, he finds that the proportion of eminent men to the general population is consistently around 250 to one million. To drive this point home to readers, Galton turns once again to Oxbridge, adopting the Oxford and Cambridge boat race (which “excites almost a national enthusiasm”) as an illustrative example of the relative scarcity of real eminence; he argues that it would take twenty thousand years of Oxford and Cambridge cohorts “before eight men could be furnished, each of whom would have the rank of the superlative crew” (12).[[4]](#endnote-4)

If “the world” “allots marks” to individuals, it does so over time, and Galton depends upon the levelling power of collective regard, memory, and large data sets to vet individuals’ merit. His thesis in *Hereditary Genius* depends as much upon an assessment of men’s reputations as their innate ability. His definition of reputation is therefore central to his project: “By reputation,” he writes, “I mean the opinion of contemporaries, revised by posterity—the favourable result of a critical analysis of each man’s character, by many biographers” (37). The statement lays bare some of the tensions at the heart of his *Hereditary Genius*, as this notion of reputation depends upon opinion and—moreover—on the power of narrative to compel and convince. For Galton, narrative was never anathema to scientific analysis. One of his earliest publications was the *Narrative of an Explorer in Tropical South Africa* (1853), which combined travelogue and ethnography with biological field studies. But while that account used narrative to frame and contextualize a body of data, his methodology in *Hereditary Genius* instead seeks to transpose information communicated via narrative—and even qualities of narratives themselves, including length, relative detail, and depth of description—into data points. Assuring readers of the rigor of his efforts, he describes reading “many pages of large biographical dictionaries and volumes of memoirs” in order “to arrive at data, destined to be packed into half a dozen lines, in an appendix to one of [his] many chapters” (vi). A kind of Morettian distant reading *avant la lettre*, Galton’s method depended on the size of his data pool to bolster its validity by ensuring that reputation was not confused with “high social or official position” or with the regard “implied by being the mere lion of a London season” (37). Many contemporary critics seem untroubled by this methodology. Regardless of their opinion of Galton’s work, they acknowledged his dedication to the scientific method, a dedication which is itself presented as an assessable, quantifiable measure. An otherwise dubious reviewer in the *Examiner*, for example,allowed that Galton “attacked the subject in a thoroughly scientific fashion” (“Literary Examiner” 84). And a critic writing in the *Theological Review* cited the “immense mass of evidence adduced to prove the main theses of the work” before declaring that Galton’s “main doctrine” had been “demonstrated with mathematical certainty” (Cobbe 214-15).

Galton’s method may have been designed to insulate his results from the immediate currents of the day, but even old antecedents exert enormous power over the shape of foundational narratives, and circulating accounts of genius were unavoidably ubiquitous in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.[[5]](#endnote-5) To offer one example: it is difficult to encounter any tale of foundling genius without recalling Giorgio Vasari’s hagiographic accounts of artists, which give rise to oft-repeated tropes: the young Cimabue was distracted from his academic studies by his preternatural artistic abilities, and so too was the young Giotto, who was discovered when Cimabue stumbled upon the uncannily brilliant sketches he produced while he was supposed to be watching sheep (Vasari 7-8, 16). Precocity (or lack thereof) is frequently noted in the brief biographical blurbs that fill Galton’s appendices, and it is not surprising that Vasari himself appears as a source.[[6]](#endnote-6) The Italian’s work was well known to Victorians thanks to multiple mass-market translations published through the second half of the century, including editions for children, who could thus learn what behaviours or signs were expected of child geniuses. Havelock Ellis, who would go on to write his own statistical study of genius, edited an edition in which he argued that “the light which [Vasari] throws on the psychology of genius in artists” was “incomparable.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Such establishing narratives shape (and perhaps over-determine) the expectations and the memories of parents, biographers, and—apparently—socio-psychologists alike. Galton himself was not immune to this treatment, as Raymond Fancher has shown that Galton’s own biographers molded accounts of the scientist’s life to conform to his theories (227), and even pioneering psychologist of intellect Lewis M. Terman offered a post-hoc assessment of Galton’s IQ based on Karl Pearson’s biography, rating it “not far from 200” (Terman 209). Similarly, the Galton-approved “opinion of contemporaries,” the “revision of posterity,” the “critical analysis of each man’s character,” and the necessarily-multiple authors required to generate this body of biographical data are all variables beholden to story-telling conventions as well as to the vagaries in taste, fashion, finance, and publishing to which biography, like all texts, is subject. What is more, in 1869, Galton’s work entered into highly charged terrain, where the nature of genius—literary genius in particular—was distilled into stark, often oppositional narratives in the periodical press.

As I—and others—have argued elsewhere, the 1860s and 70s witnessed a Victorian codification of “the Romantic” in contradistinction to the present.[[8]](#endnote-8) If Victorian creative and intellectual genius could be oriented around the results of labor, Romantic genius came to be coded as a pathology, giving rise to symptoms of sensuality and lassitude, and the genial spark was seen as central to the high Romantic figure (especially the high Romantic poet) and a most visible indicator of the movement’s faults. Some of this shift can be linked with newly published biographical accounts that cast the Romantics in new lights. The 1869 disclosure, for example, of charges of incest against Byron rocked his reputation, causing some to reconsider the extent to which his poetic gifts mitigated charges of personal and sexual immorality.[[9]](#endnote-9) But literary creation narratives also contributed to the trend, as authors’ accounts of their process were seen retrospectively as evidence of genial disregard for the proper application of talent. A quick nod to these stories establishes the topos that drives such complaints: an opium-riddled Coleridge receives “Kubla Khan” fully formed and needs merely to record the donnée.[[10]](#endnote-10) *Frankenstein* comes to Mary Shelley in a dream.[[11]](#endnote-11) The fifteen-year-old Chatterton churns out his Rowley poems with alacrity and ease that defy believability.[[12]](#endnote-12) These are spirit-driven, not labor-driven exercises, or so the stories go. By the mid-century, these seemingly superficial accounts of Romantic genius had become entrenched in the public imagination, their lack of nuance or even their questionable truth notwithstanding. An August 1867 comic verse from the journal *Fun* illustrates the diffusion of this stereotyped figure, mocking the self-delusion of the lazy poet who finds misappropriated refuge in the old Latin saw that “poets are born, not made”:

You find not in the songs I sing  
A solitary touch of toil;  
You vainly seek for anything  
Suggestive of the midnight oil.  
I never slap my brow at all  
For grace, for wisdom, or for wit,  
But keep them at my beck and call—  
*Poeta nascitur, non fit.* (“A Born Genius” 255)

Other popular accounts in the years leading to the publication of Galton’s study entrench the common binaries of inspiration vs. effort, god-given vs. labor-earned, immoral vs. moral, Romantic vs. Victorian. *Bow Bells* declared in 1865 that “Talent is plodding and industrious, Genius is vagrant and idle” (“Talent and Genius” 499) and in 1867 that “Genius rushes like a whirlwind: talent marches like a cavalcade of heavy men and heavy horses” (“Genius, Talent, and Cleverness” 138). The *Saturday Review* insisted in 1866, *pace* poetic genius, that “Good literary work cannot come from moral and intellectual valetudinarians” and that “the original writer is not better, but much worse, for leading the hothouse Strasburg-goose life” (“Woes of Poetic Genius” 604). And, bemoaning the wasted potential of Richard Savage, *Reynold’s Miscellany* concluded in 1868 that “genius and knowledge are utterly useless, without good moral principle and rectitude of conduct” (“Richard Savage” 252).

The impact of these circulating ideas is plainly evident in Galton’s accounts, yet *Hereditary Genius* tries to thread the needle, with its empirical orientation allowing it to rise above these polarized (and polarizing) descriptions. His hypothesis that genius was an organic quality that could be inherited challenged the notion that genius could instead be derived from diligent work or applied education. But neither did he endorse Romantic genius; poets are meted out particular derision in *Hereditary Genius*. It is difficult to account fully for Galton’s treatment of the poets: he segregates them into a separate category from “Literary Men” for reasons that are not made explicit.[[13]](#endnote-13) It does appear that he struggled to reconcile the marked individualism expected of the genial poet with the insistent heritability of his version of genius. The statistics drawn from any of Galton’s classifications are suspect, but he does allow that the poets feature markedly less indication of heritable or inherited genius than the wide-ranging literary men (less than 40% versus “more than one-half” [172]), making them an acknowledged outlier in his study.

Galton links that resistance to heritability with personal and moral failures; he describes poets as “a sensuous, erotic race, exceedingly irregular in their way of life,” who “are clearly not founders of families” (225, 227), qualities that affected both the efficacy of his study and the potential for the improvement of British society.[[14]](#endnote-14) Galton’s explanation for the Poets’ exceptional status demonstrates the degree to which his prose reflects a maligned view of the Romantics:

To be a great artist requires a rare and, so to speak, unnatural correlation of qualities. A poet, besides his genius, must have the severity and stedfast [*sic*]earnestness of those whose dispositions afford new temptations to pleasure, and he must, at the same time, have the utmost delight in the exercise of his senses and affections. This is a rare character, only to be found by some happy accident, and is therefore unstable in inheritance. Usually, people who have strong sensuous tastes go utterly astray and fail in life, and this tendency is clearly shown by [those] who have inherited the dangerous part of a poet’s character and not his other qualities that redeem and control it. (227)

This kind of strike against sensuousness suggests that Galton’s work actively participates in a Victorian notion of anti-Romanticism. Still, a number of Romantics reach the level of eminence required for inclusion in his study. Byron is begrudgingly glossed with “very ill-educated at home; did not show genius when at Harrow” and Coleridge was “always slothful and imprudent,” Galton wrote, a man who “had warm friendships, but was singularly regardless of duties, and somewhat querulous; of a peculiarly hesitating disposition; opium eater” (230).[[15]](#endnote-15) While allowing that their poetic genius arises and can result in the creation of works that would assure the author’s position in the pantheon of eminence, Galton establishes—as noted above—that the sensibilities which attend such organic endowments more or less preclude procreation. So in Galton’s telling, the Poets’ resistance to reproduction means they pose no threat to his imagined “galaxy of genius,” as their manifestations of genius could not or would not be perpetuated in future generations. Thus granting that this sensuous genius exists, Galton nevertheless frames it as a relic of the past. As one astute critic writing in *Fraser’s* noted, by taking this position in the battle over the nature of the poetic bent, Galton’s study was mired in a perfectly contemporary set of issues: “In speaking of poets and artists as ‘a sensuous, erotic race, exceedingly irregular in their way of life,’ we can readily believe that [Galton] has been partially misled by a mass of accidental biographical scandal, much of which might be unhesitatingly rejected” (“Hereditary Genius” 254). Such a critique counters Galton’s claims of objectivity and suggests that his work reinforced prevalent views about the Romantic character. Treating the “subject in a statistical manner” and “arriving at numerical results,” in other words, did not inure Galton’s conclusions to popular influence.

In the decades following the publication of the study, symptoms of archetypal Romantic genius became aligned with symptoms of the period—the first half of the nineteenth century—thus shoring up ideas of Victorian selfhood and further entrenching the hard distinction between the (moral) fruits of labor and the (immoral) productions of genial inspiration. Writing in the middle-brow *Good Words* in 1885, Dinah Craik frames this debate over creative agency in terms that emphasize its moral implications. She sighs with relief that “the day is gone by when one’s ideal portrait of a poet was with bare throat, Byronic tie, and eye ‘in a fine frenzy rolling’… Experience has proved that a man of the highest genius may be also a good man of business, accurate, methodological, and conscientious; as well as an excellent husband and father, citizen and friend” (231). And Eliza Lynn Linton adopted a similar tack (and the same well-worn allusion) some three years later in the *Fortnightly*. She bemoans notions of genius prevalent in the 1820s and 1830, when “moral irresponsibility in certain directions was held to be part of [the furniture of genius], like the fine frenzy of the poet’s eye” (521). In her own time, she writes, “The mind is held to be more of a servant to the will and more obedient to, as well as mouldable by, habit, than it was when poetry ranked as inspiration and the creative faculty claimed to be a divine gift, conferring immunity and carrying privileges” (525). On these grounds, she protests against Coleridge and Thomas Moore, suggesting that their results did not justify their “moral irresponsibility”: “Perhaps,” she writes “it would have been better for the world at large had there been two worthy citizens and exemplary fathers of families…than that two prominent examples of undutifulness and inconstancy should have been given for the imitation of weak brethren” (529).[[16]](#endnote-16)

It is no coincidence that these proclamations hit a new register at a point when the figure of the Aesthete was gaining prominence. Performing an ideal of indolence or lassitude, the Aesthete threatened the high Victorian, Carlylean model of industry with a return to a Romantic notion of genius mixed with a fin-de-siècle decadence. Linton sees the effects in her day, as she takes aim squarely at the Aesthete: “Those effeminate, sickly, languid youths, who now sing a little, and paint a little, and write weak poems and novels whereof a half mystic and wholly denaturalized concupiscence is the *motif*” would not even, she suggests, have made it in the 1820s or 30s (535). While Linton does allow that there are varying degrees of innate giftedness, she foregrounds the theme of dutiful cultivation as a means of counteracting Aesthetic tendencies. It is a point that is easy to make under the guise of education; she regards narratives of other writers as models (or cautionary tales) for later generations, and her emphasis is squarely prescriptive. Given their didactic dimension, popular accounts like Craik’s and Linton’s demonstrate an awareness of the way that stories can impact both public regard and personal (or parental) action, and that stories of genius are powerful vehicles for ideology.[[17]](#endnote-17)

**The Second Edition of 1892**

The accretion of discussions of genius like Linton’s and Craik’s, along with a spate of additional scientific and statistical studies of exceptionalism from the 1880s, made the ground ripe for Galton to revisit his study. When he reviewed *Hereditary Genius* for a second edition in 1892, Galton took pains to clarify the kinds of aptitude he endorsed and the kinds he did not, unequivocally reframing his consideration of genius as distinct from what might be considered a Romantic poetic disposition. This intervention was completed via the addition of a preface; the content of the study proper remained, for the most part, the same. Throughout this Preface, Galton is in conversation with the extra-scientific dismissals of Romantic genius of the time—which had, as noted, become strikingly aligned with dismissals of the Aesthetes and their productions—as well as the new studies of the pathology and heritability of genius. Foremost among these is Cesar Lombroso’s *Man of Genius* (trans. 1891), which argued that genius was indeed hereditary, but that it was demonstrably akin to insanity. Though Lombroso’s account applied to geniuses from across the disciplines—proving especially important, as Anne Stiles notes, for the fin de siècle figure of the “mad scientist” (115, 117)—he drew heavily on models of the poets for his background. This is no new line of thinking, having been articulated by Plato in the *Ion* and *Phaedrus* and repeated through the centuries, but Lombroso recast it in neurological language and Galtonian empirical measurements. James Sully published an article on the subject in an 1885 issue of the *Nineteenth Century*; his examples too were almost entirely drawn from the artistic realms of creative production, with poets, novelists, musicians, and painters among the most frequent exemplars. In contrast to Galton, whom he nevertheless accords a good deal of respect, Sully is interested not in tracing heritability or families of genius, but rather the uniqueness of the genius, the ways in which his (and again, it is almost always *his*) “light of genius happens to flash out in this particular family at this particular moment” (961). He looks to poets for the answer: the “lurking-places of abnormal tendencies will, we may expect, betray themselves more readily in the case of artistic and especially poetic genius, which has, indeed, always been viewed as the most pronounced form, and as the typical representative of creative power” (962). (Sully is also evidently aware of the limitations of Victorian biography in communicating these “abnormal tendencies”: “Inasmuch, too, as many of the symptoms of nervous disease in the intellectual heroes themselves or their families would possess no significance to the ordinary lay mind, we may feel confident that in many cases where we have a fairly full record important data are omitted” [960].)[[18]](#endnote-18)

In light of these developments which do further the project of arguing for an organic, and not a learned, seat of genius, Galton provided a new context for his study that is very telling. Acknowledging the work of Lombroso, Galton sounds a note of scepticism about the conclusion that genius is necessarily and organically connected to insanity. Nevertheless, he allows that “there is a large residuum of evidence which points to a painfully close relation between the two” (1892, ix). Recalling the language from his chapter on the poets (where he described their tendency to “go astray” and “fail in life”), he writes in the Preface in support of the link between a kind of creative spark and insanity, that “Those who are over eager and extremely active in mind must often possess brains that are more excitable and peculiar than is consistent with soundness. They are likely to become crazy at times, and perhaps to break down altogether” (1892, ix-x). Ultimately, Galton concludes that *that kind of genius* is not genius at all.He clarifies: if by genius we mean “a sense of inspiration or of rushes of ideas from apparently supernatural sources, or of an inordinate and burning desire to accomplish any particular end, it is perilously near to the voices heard by the insane…It cannot in such case be a healthy faculty, nor can it be desirable to perpetuate it by inheritance” (1892, x). His book therefore does not treat, much less advocate, that kind of genius. It treats “natural ability” (1892, x). Regretting even his choice of title, Galton writes in the Preface that readers “will find a studious abstinence throughout the [original] work from speaking of genius as a special quality,” and thus he feels confident that he could now call the work *Hereditary Ability*, a title he dismissed in 1869 due to concern that it would erroneously communicate an interest in the effects of education or self-improvement (1892, ix)*.* Here, Galton’s diction underscores the tension in his project, teasing apart natural ability and organic talent from the psychological manifestations of that ability, the effort required to manifest that ability, and the specific cultural contexts in which those manifestations arise.

The clarification offered by Galton’s later Preface helps to contextualize some of his initial conclusions. It is no wonder that Poets remained an exception in his study. He notes a “peculiarity” in his data: “the small number of eminent fathers, in the group of Poets” (320). What does he do with such an anomaly? “This group,” he concludes, “is too small to make me attach much importance to the deviation: it may be mere accident.” In the next line, though, he notes that Artists aren’t represented by a much larger group than the poets, but the number of eminent first-degree relations (fathers, mothers, siblings) among them “is enormous and quite exceptional” (320). Galton’s study, then, purports to challenge normative Victorian doctrines of hard work via the statistical analysis of biographical data. But this group of Poets might be understood to represent a most powerful example of the genial spark which is not dependent upon diligent effort to make itself known. Because that spark remains, at least according to popular depictions, spontaneous and resistant to heritability (perhaps *because* those popular depictions insist on its being spontaneous, regardless of the actual effort deployed by the poet), they remain an exception case in Galton’s *Hereditary Genius*. What is more, even this most empirical of studies participates in the broader characterization of creative genius, and poetic genius in particular, in ways that would go on to affect the perceptions and receptions of poets and writers for decades.

**Galtonian Afterlives**

Later scientists (and historians of science) came to challenge what Stephen J. Gould termed the “unholy alliance” of evolution and quantification that fuelled many Victorian theories of genius (74). Yet we are, in many ways, still in thrall to the basic tenets of Galton’s inquiry into hereditary genius, and many of the same anxieties that underscore his study still propel discussions of creative and intellectual exceptionalism. The field of the psychology of intellect, especially sociometrics and historiometrics, grew in his wake. Galton originally turned to biography, and especially the biographical dictionary, as a means of ensuring through a sheer mass of data a kind of statistical objectivity. To be sure, even the sources that Galton used demonstrate the same kinds of prejudices that appear in works like Craik’s and Linton’s—including the disparagement of the ease of genius past in favour of stories of diligent genius present. But, looking forward, Galton’s methods helped to calcify the very data upon whose revisions he depended.

Some nine years after the revised edition of *Hereditary Genius*, James MacKeen Cattell published *A Statistical Study of Eminent Men*, in which he adopts Galton’s methodology (if not his attempts at elegant prose) to distill 1000 preeminent men from biographical dictionaries, whose relative illustriousness was measured directly according to the length of entries. The 1093 figures addressed in Havelock Ellis’s *Study of British Genius* (1904) came from the *DNB*. It was, in fact, the publication of the *DNB* that, in Ellis’s account, made his study possible, though the amount of data required winnowing (Ellis *Study* 1-2). For Ellis, the cut-off point for eminence was three pages in the published dictionary. Individuals with entries that required fewer than three pages, Ellis wrote, “could scarcely be generally regarded as of the first rank of eminence” (Ellis *Study* 4). Lewis Terman, who assessed the youthful Galton’s IQ as being close to 200, developed the “Stanford-Binet” intelligence quotient scale largely on Galtonian foundations. Catherine Cox, a student of Terman, composed a study in which she retrospectively assessed the IQs of 300 subjects of unquestionable genius whom she drew from among Cattell’s original pool of 1000, again depending on length of entry as a primary data point (Cox 21). By following Galton’s lead, then, these works—and those that follow—forestall ongoing “revisions of posterity.” The approach to IQ analysis today has not thrown off Galtonian methods entirely; the fifth edition of the “Stanford-Binet” is still in use today. A desire for metric qualifications for genius underscores popular manifestos like Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers*, based on the studies of K. Anders Ericsson, whose work pegged the magic 10,000 hours of practice as the prerequisite to exceptional performance*.* This trend is perhaps more pronounced in the US, where IQ testing has been a mainstay of primary school aptitude testing, but we are still very much living in a world where our understanding of intellectual—if not creative—ability is beholden to the methodology of Galton, and therefore beholden to Victorian ideas of the relative values of creative agency.

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1. In-text citations for *Hereditary Genius* are to the 1869 edition unless otherwise indicated. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Galton upholds the belief that genius will out in spite of circumstantial constraints, contrasting him with contemporaries who argued that self-improvement was subject only to the will of the individual. “I have no patience,” he writes, with the hypothesis occasionally expressed, and often implied, especially in tales written to teach children to be good, that babies are born pretty much alike, and that the sole agencies in creating differences between boy and boy, and man and man, are steady application and moral effort” (14). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Throughout this essay I adopt Galton’s use of “men” to signify all of his subjects, a small percentage of whom are women, so as to maintain consistency with his original lexicon. The gender and racial bias that permeates the studies explored here, along with so much of Galton’s larger oeuvre, is well established. As I argue, Galton’s work perpetuates the narrative and social biases of his source material; statistics resulting from those sources do not—and likely could not —challenge normative ideology. But his own inaccuracies in his data are also telling: in the 1869 edition he erroneously cites Jane Austen as “Mrs. Austen” in one place (170) and her entry in the “Literary Men” appendix reads “Austen, Sarah [*sic*]; novelist. ‘Pride and Prejudice,’ ‘Sense and Sensibility,’ etc.” (173). In the 1892 edition, she is dropped from the appendix altogether. For more on Galton’s eugenics, see, for example, Parrinder, “Eugenics and Utopia: Sexual Selection from Galton to Morris” and Danahay, “Wells, Galton and Biopower: Breeding Human Animals.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Perhaps in light of this example it might seem less odd that the “Oarsmen” count as a class of men of genius alongside Judges, Musicians, and Men of Science in his study. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In the preface to the second edition of *Hereditary Genius* (1892), Galton articulates this concern: “It was necessary, in seeking for [homogeneous data], to sedulously guard against any bias of my own; it was also essential that the group to be dealt with should be sufficiently numerous for statistical treatment, and again, that the family histories of the persons it contained should be accessible and, if possible, already published” (1892, xii-xiii). See Sherrin Berezowksy, “Statistical Criticism and the Eminent Man in Francis Galton’s *Hereditary Genius*”; Alison Booth, “Men and Women of the Time: Victorian Prosopographies”; Hilary Fraser and Daniel Brown, *English Prose of the Nineteenth Century*; George Levine, *How to Read the Victorian Novel*; and I. Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact, Form*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Galton cites Vasari in his gloss on painter Francesco Mazzuoli(252). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Havelock Ellis, “Preface” in *Lives of the Italian Painters*, xiii.Other editions include Mrs. Jonathan Foster’s translation, published with Bohn’s in 1850, which went through multiple editions and was taken up by George Bell and Sons in 1859; and the Arundel Society’s 1850 translation by G. A. Bezzi, printed at the Chiswick Press. The edition for children, *Stories of the Italian Artists*, was published by Scribner & Welford in 1885. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Rebecca N. Mitchell, “‘Cultivated Idleness’: Carlyle, Wilde, and Victorian Representations of Creative Labor,” *Word and Image* (forthcoming 2016) and Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell, *Oscar Wilde’s Chatterton: Literary History, Romanticism, and the Art of Forgery* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2015), 129-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Stowe, “The True Story of Lady Byron’s Life” and contemporary reaction against it. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Coleridge writes in the third person in the prefatory note to the poem: “The author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awakening he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved.” “Of the Fragment of Kubla Khan,” 51; italics in the original. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Mary Shelley describes the genesis and composition of the novel: “When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie…On the morrow I announced that I had *thought of a story*. I began that day with the words, *It was on a dreary night in November*, making only a transcript of the grim terrors of my waking dream.” *Frankenstein,* 11, 13; italics in the original. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Chatterton described the composition of one of his Rowley parchments as feeling that “he had sprung a mine”; biographer Daniel Wilson notes that “it was far easier to believe [Chatterton] a ‘forger,’ a ‘liar,’ and a cheat, than to discern in the poor charity-boy, or attorney’s clerk, a poet of rare genius and strange creative power. So he soon learned to produce [to his patrons] only his local satires and other ephemeral pieces.” Cited in Gregory, ‘His Life,’ I.lxxv; Wilson, *Chatterton: A Biographical Study*, 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Later scholars of genius would perpetuate this distinction, assigning poets into separate categories for analysis. See Cattell and Ellis for examples. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. In his account of “The Divines,” Galton bemoans the fact that the Catholic Church is “rich in ecclesiastical biography” but it provides him no usable data “for the obvious reason that its holy personages, of both sexes, are celibates, and therefore incapable of founding families” (258). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Of the individuals deemed eminent in each section, only those with hereditary ties to other well-known people are treated in Galton’s appendices; the others are simply listed. Thanks primarily to his grandfather and sister, Byron’s data are included. Burns, Keats, Shelley, Southey, and Wordsworth are also listed among the eminent poets, but only Wordsworth—in addition to Coleridge and Byron—has familial ties that qualify. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Craik’s and Linton’s examples show one of the primary ways that women were involved in contemporary discussions of genius: though frequently denied the title themselves, they were framed (or framed themselves) as facilitators of genius through maternal and educational roles. The idea that accounts of genius were to edify and instruct readers—that they would serve as a basis for imitation or inspiration—was long established. An 1869 review of C. J. Brightwells’s compilation of biographical sketches, *Annals of Industry and Genius*, recommended it as an “entertaining and instructive book for the young mind, and one that is sure to leave a good an abiding impression” (“Annals of Industry” 358). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Perhaps nowhere is the shaping power of biographical anecdote more evident than in Samuel Smiles’s colossal success *Self Help* (orig. 1859), which deployed sample narratives for emulation and which was eagerly digested by countless readers heartened to have such a degree of control over their lives. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See chapter 4, “H. G. Wells and the Evolution of the Mad Scientist” of Stiles’s *Popular Fiction and Brain Science in the Late Nineteenth Century* and chapters 3 and 4 of Gould’s *Mismeasure of Man* for fuller discussions of the developing Victorian scientific context. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)