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The Invention of Creativity: the Emergence of a Discourse

Abstract

Creativity is increasingly cited as the key to social and economic change in the 21st century. It is also a very modern concept — making its first appearance as an English noun in 1875. This paper investigates the cultural construction of creativity in the context of the history of ideas. It understands creativity not as a given human attribute or ability, but as an idea that emerges out of specific historical moments, shaped by the discourses of politics, science, commerce, and nation. It shifts the ground of analysis away from the naturalised models that have traditionally dominated the field of creative practice research, in order to highlight the historicity of a concept that is more commonly deemed to be without history.

There are few English nouns that have generated such relentlessly good publicity as the word 'creativity'. It is increasingly found scattered across the literature of the arts and sciences, industry, business management, information technology, education and government. It has been called the key to economic growth, the 'decisive source of competitive advantage', and the 'very heart' of 'wealth creation and social renewal'.[i] It is also a burgeoning object of study in the humanities, where it is increasingly applied across spheres and disciplines, most notably in the new interdisciplinary schools of Creative Industries or Creative Practices (incorporating younger disciplines such as Media Arts Production and Writing), as well as in the mainstream of the traditional humanities in the rhetoric of the 'New Humanities'.[ii]

Given the recent surge of interest in creativity, it is surprising that from a cultural historical perspective the idea of creativity remains under-examined. Though the products of creativity have spawned a rich and diverse literature – including scholarly studies of both creative individuals and their works – much of this work is concerned with examining the end product of creativity (the finished art object) and its circulation in discourse, rather than the idea or process of creative production itself. Conversely, while the concept of creativity as a psychological and even biological attribute has become an object of intense interest in the cognitive sciences, these scientific

approaches to creativity tend to overlook that which is specifically modern, cultural, historical, and indeed profoundly political in the constitution of their object of inquiry. [iii]

Perhaps one of the most suggestive properties of the word creativity is the late date of its emergence — making its first appearance as an abstract English noun in 1875, before entering into common usage a half century later.[iv] Though Raymond Williams has argued that the antecedents of the discourse are to be discerned in European culture since the Renaissance — for example, Williams cites Shakespeare as one of the first English writers to apply the word creation to human imagination, but this was, to quote Macbeth, in the largely negative sense of 'A Dagger of the Mind, a false Creation, Proceeding from the heat-oppressed Brain'.[v] The concept of imagination as productive and positive that is entangled in the modern meaning of the word is difficult to sustain in any popular sense before the nineteenth century — and imagination as a passive, inferior, or as Samuel Johnson put it, 'vagrant faculty,' was very much the hegemonic discourse until the arrival of Romantic discourse in the closing decades of the eighteenth century.[vi]

This paper argues that the discourse of creativity is more recent and complex than Williams' hugely influential account allows. Moreover, there is a strong sense in which Williams' text needs to be read historically, as a product of the rapid expansion of the discourse of creativity through the decades of the 1950s and 1960s — as a work that seeks to celebrate the arrival of a concept that 'we should be glad of,' as Williams puts it, rather than to cast a critical eye over its uses and origins.[vii] The paper also seeks to highlight the ways in which recent studies undertaken in the context of the creative industries phenomenon have continued to portray the cultural historical narrative as one of increasing perfection. Creativity, in such accounts, is something that is seen to pre-exist both the naming and, indeed, the thinking or understanding of the concept. For example, Williams' historical narrative is one in which certain exemplary writers come successively 'very near to' recognizing creativity for what it is[viii] — and more recently, for Negus and Pickering, this cultural blindness is coupled with resistance, so that it is only in the late nineteenth century that 'creativity could be explicitly named as such'.[ix] The problem is not just the way in which the recent flurry of creative industries

narratives overlook developments in cultural historiography as it has been debated and practiced for the last thirty years (tending towards an old-fashioned presentation of narratives in which ideas are transmitted in unbroken lines from one 'great man' to the next, with little attempt to grapple with the problem of audience, or to look for their alleged origins in the world beyond the arts) — but also, these proliferating narratives or 'myths of origin' have the effect of eliding alternate paradigms and ideas of process that could more productively inform the contemporary debate.

Rob Pope's *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice* provides an interesting example, in particular his chapter 'Defining Creativity Historically', an extract of which was subsequently presented to the UK Parliamentary Committee on Creative Partnerships.[x] Despite the inclusion within the book of a number of fashionably theoretical chapters composed of lists or fragments, and the slightly ponderous implications of the sections that bookend the work, viz. ' … before the beginning' and ' … after the end', Pope's chapter on history almost exactly replicates the linear arguments of his sources, which tend to be narrowly dependant on the etymology cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and Raymond Williams' *Keywords.* Hence Williams argues that the history of creativity from the medieval to the modern era is one of increasing 'emphasis on human activity'[xi] and Pope echoes that it was 'gradually and fitfully' that a 'human sense of agency' crept into the meaning of the word 'create'.[xii]

Although Pope characterises his history as 'fitful', there is actually little that is fitful or disruptive in his narrative, which is one in which 'much more positive'[xiii] links and 'firm'[xiv] associations are made down the centuries, and in which all roads and citations lead smoothly to a climax in the present. Also problematic is the way in which Pope's argument presupposes a direct equivalence between the history of the word and the history of the idea — so much so, that his method appears to be one of extracting citations from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and matching them to printed sources. There is little if any elaboration of the cultural historical context of the citations he uses, or any attempt to question the methodology that underpins the *OED*'s selections. Ultimately, the problem inherent in Pope's work is best summed up in the chapter's title — the way that Pope embarks on his project with the intention of 'defining creativity',[xv]

posing an ideal signification in the present for which he then constructs an alleged origin in the past.

The history mapped out in John Hartley's introduction to *Creative Industries* is beset with similar difficulties, although in this case the historical narrative runs not to an apex but to *nadir*.[xvi] In this instance Hartley draws on art historian John Barrell's influential study of eighteenth century British painting[xvii] to anchor the idea of creativity in the discourse of civic humanism — characterized as a patrician or aristocratic discourse that Hartley's work attempts to subvert with the aim of 're-purposing' creativity, 'bringing it into closer contact with the realities of contemporary commercial democracies'.[xviii] In Hartley's history, the word 'creative' is designated as a term 'associated with the subsidised or sponsored public arts … espoused by people like the Earl of Shaftesbury and Sir Joshua Reynolds'. He explains that in Reynolds' theory of art, 'paintings conveyed abstract ideas about moral values and civic virtues' and are therefore to be included in the 'skill-set of government'.[xix] According to Hartley, this is why the creative arts have been progressively gathered into 'national institutions, museums and galleries for the civic education of the public'. Hartley underscores the anti-elitist aspect of his argument by invoking Shaftesbury's statement that 'the mere Vulgar of Mankind', who could not 'act virtuously out of public spirit', stood in need of 'such a rectifying Object as *the Gallows* before their Eyes', and wittily concludes:

> Instead of slavish obedience, the increasingly sovereign [ie. democratic capitalist] 'Vulgar of Mankind' were to be taught self-control, and they would learn it via the 'rectifying Object', not of the Gallows but of Art.[xx]

The *nadir* of Hartley's argument is signaled by the way in which he positions creative art as a form of disciplinary power or social control. But in the wake of the *nadir* (as in the classic form of the story), a clear dramatic arc begins to emerge, and the rest of the argument proceeds smoothly through crisis, to climax and resolution (or 'repurposing', as Hartley puts it) in the self fulfilling prophecy of the creative industries agenda that is laid out in rest of the book.

Hartley's, albeit, briefly articulated, history is deeply problematic not least for the way in which he universalises Barrell's argument — taking a historically specific engagement with the language of civic humanism and generalising it into an abstract ideal quite separate from the historical ground of its enunciation. In short, he strips Barrell's argument of both geography and history. Civic humanism is, after all, a term derived from historiography, coined by the German historian Hans Baron in the second quarter of the twentieth century to characterize a cluster of social and political phenomena in Renaissance Florence. The term was subsequently taken up in the work of the Cambridge School historians J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, from whose work it gradually entered into debates about pre-revolutionary America, and into political philosophy through the work of Hannah Arendt. In popular usage, the phrase civic humanism is used to designate a form of ideological opposition to liberalism construed as rampant individualism or enlightened greed. It is best understood not as a reference to a particular form of government (republican, democratic or oligarchic, for example), but as a rhetoric that evokes a political and cultural condition — a model of active citizenship in which 'liberty' is characterized as the (positive) freedom of citizens to expand the virtues inherent in them through participation in society, as opposed to the classic liberal idea of (negative) liberty construed as immunity from interference with a citizen's capacity to do whatever they will. It seems to be essential to the functioning of the discourse that civic humanism is understood as historical — that it conjures up a vanished past in which these richer forms of citizenship actually existed. Hence Nikolas Rose argues that the key theme of civic humanist literature is its 'tragic tone' — that it operates via a logic of nostalgia that tells us that 'the citizenship we have today is merely a hollow shell of this real and authentic form'.[xxi]

Hartley's evocation of civic humanism as a rhetorical response to 'creativity' is intriguing and significant, in that it allows him to associate 'creativity' with the idea of decaying aristocracy, and then, via a rhetorical sleight of hand, to recuperate both creativity and a kind of repackaged humanism in which the aristocratic barriers of class and inherited privilege are replaced by the free play of the market. This rhetorical gesture might even be viewed as eccentric except that Hartley is far from being the only creative industries academic to make such connections. For example, Terry Flew has sought to substitute not just the idea, but the actual word 'creativity' for the concept of

the ‘humanities’ — creativity being, as Flew puts it, a new kind of ‘humanism which does not possess the baggage of earlier forms of liberal humanism’.[xxii] But to return to the historic claims of Hartley’s argument, it clearly needs to be acknowledged that the republic of taste advocated by the likes of Shaftsbury was undemocratic, but also that it was pre-democratic. In short, democracy in the guise of universal suffrage or the welfare state — not to mention the key terms ‘creativity’ and ‘civic humanism’ that anchor his argument — were not actually invented for a further two hundred years.

In attempting to ‘repurpose’ the history of creativity as a platform for their respective versions of the creative industries, Hartley, Flew and Pope, and, indeed, Negus and Pickering, succumb to the temptation of writing history backwards — an approach that effectively transforms historical figures into ‘heralds’ or ‘harbingers‘ for contemporary ideals or dispenses with them altogether. The problems here are not merely the traditional historical ones of anachronism and prolepsis, but also one of elision in that what gets left out is the incredible variety of ideas about art, culture and the concept of human ‘making’ that have materialized through the centuries. For this reason, these works should not be understood as critical or explanatory histories, but as ‘myths of origin’ that are designed to promote (or, at best, think through) a specific institutional agenda in the present. This paper is part of a larger project that responds to this challenge by attempting, as Hayden White recently advocated, to return past events ‘to their presents, to their living relations to their conditions of possibility’.[xxiii] It is only by refusing the trap of producing historical narratives based on contemporary assessments of significance that it becomes possible to explore the ways in which the very different ideas about art or writing practice embedded in the past might be used to inform and rework the future.

A Short History of Un-Creative Art

One of the problems associated with the historical study of art practice is that the cultural context of production is often unwittingly erased when historical artefacts are contemplated as ‘Art’ in the white space of the museum or gallery, or indeed the lecture theatre, or ubiquitous coffee table volume, so that angels cut from an altar screen, for

example, or a portrait pried off the side of a municipal chest, are physically rearticulated in the exhibition space, and symbolically rearticulated within a very different system for the creation and reception of art. The consequence of this rearticulation is that the values of the modern system of the arts tend to operate as an invisible standard against which all such objects are judged or interpreted.

For example, there was no word equivalent in meaning to 'create' in Ancient Greek, the Greek word for art was *techne*, commonly translated as 'to make' or 'the making of things, according to rules'.[xxiv] In contrast to the modern idea of art being something that is conjured out of nothing (with results arriving in an 'inexplicable' or 'supernatural' manner, according to a current *OED* definition of genius), the Greeks understood art as a practice that could be taught and learnt. More significantly, *techne* could be — and was — applied to all forms of human endeavour from verse making to shipbuilding or bricklaying, so long as it was performed with grace. This ancient concept of art, or *ars* as the Romans were later to call it, can be seen in contemporary expressions such as the art of cooking or the art of winemaking — the remnants of an older usage before European culture created art and craft as antonyms for one another. In this sense, it should also be noted that the opposite of *techne* was not art, but nature.

The middle ages inherited the classical idea of art practice, and continued to consider art as a characteristic of reason. For Thomas Aquinas, art was the 'right rule of reason', or '[rational knowledge] of things to be made'.[xxv] Aquinas also extended the term *ars* to include a broad range of productive activities, so that stonemasons and cobblers were practised in art in the same way as painters and poets. Also significant is the way in which Aquinas separated the arts into the useful and pleasurable categories, rating the functional forms of art more highly than the decorative. Poetry was considered functional because it provided instruction, and painting was considered functional in that it provided instruction for those who could not read or write. In this sense, art was understood to have a functional or didactic rather than a revelatory or purely aesthetic end. This is not because medieval society failed to delight in beautiful objects. Rather, it was because style was not deemed to be separable from content in the systematic way that it is in the modern world. Beauty was identified with the good, and beauty and

functionality were inextricably related, so that one was inconceivable without the other. As Aquinas famously argued:

> Thus, for instance, when a man makes himself a saw for the purpose of cutting, he makes it of iron, which is suitable for the object in view; and he does not prefer to make it of glass, though this be a more beautiful material, because this very beauty would be an obstacle to the end he has in view.[xxvi]

Aquinas's saw eloquently demonstrates the relationship between beauty, utility and moral value that informed the medieval ideal — an art practice founded on the concept of harmony between things and their functions, in which creativity in its contemporary sense played no part. The problem is that once this difference is rearticulated within a modern system of value the works seem diminished, so that even such a partial critic as Umberto Eco finds it necessary to apologise for the very different ideas about art practice to be found in the middle ages, scattering phrases such as 'we must be careful not to find too much fault with it'[xxvii] or 'one cannot really cavil'[xxviii] through the length of an otherwise wonderful exploration of the medieval ideal. At best, such qualifications imply that art was historically undervalued because it was deemed mechanical — mere craft, as opposed to Creation — or because it was carried out in the political and economic context of urban construction, or produced by collectives of anonymous artists via a system of paid commissions, or regulated as a trade through a system of guilds. Alternatively, a perspective less clouded by contemporary systems of value might seek to understand the middle ages as a period in which the system of art was integrated at many more social and economic levels — as an age in which the constructive nature of art was better valued by artists, or in which critics appeared to appreciate the artistic element in all forms of human making. In this sense, it may well be that the contemporary valorisation of creativity, of the artist as loner/outsider — in short, the ideal of a purer realm of art unsullied by economic or political imperatives — though superficially beguiling, is wilfully blind to its own ideological compromises, and impoverished for this reason.

Art and the Reproductive Imagination

Perhaps the first European philosopher to explain art with reference to the imagination was Francis Bacon (better known as the father of scientific method), who divided knowledge into the three human faculties of memory, reason and imagination, with the three 'great branches' of human learning finding typical expression in each — history under memory, philosophy under reason, and poetry under imagination. For this reason, Bacon is often credited with effecting the separation between reason and imagination that gave rise to the modern understanding of imagination — an understanding that the term creativity was later to encapsulate. In writing and literary studies both Dawson and Engell give eloquent accounts of this development, while Pope inverts the premise to make a negative argument out of the same basic story.[xxix] However, a more critical approach reveals that the emergence of the concept of 'creative imagination' is more troubling than such tidy narratives allow.

In the sixteenth century imagination was a contentious subject. Once again, there had been no word for imagination in Ancient Greek. The closest Greek term was *phantasma,* which carries a more general sense of 'how things appear', such as the way the sun appears deceptively small from the vantage of the earth, or the land appears to rock from the vantage of a rowing boat. Hence Plato argued that imagination — conceived as images, appearances or copies of things — worked to seduce the mind away from reason. Aristotle, by contrast, understood mental images as the means by which the sensory world connects to reason, and though prone to error and illusion, Aristotle suggested that images nevertheless assisted reason in its proper function. The medieval scholastics continued to distrust imagination and stressed the need for imagination to be kept subordinate to reason lest it lead its owner astray. Bonaventure expressed concern that imagination abetted demonic possession, and Aquinas famously wrote, 'Demons are known to work on imagination, until everything is other than it is'.[xxx]

Imagination in Bacon's theory of the mental faculties played a markedly different role. For Bacon, imagination acts as a messenger between reason and the will. It draws images from sensory data that the body has received and submits them to the rule of

reason. 'Neither is the imagination simply and only a messenger,' he wrote, 'but it is either invested with or usurps no small authority in itself, besides the simple duty of the message.'[xxxi] Significantly, this 'small authority' did not inevitably lead to error or delusion. Rather, Bacon argued that imagination is what transforms the prosaic 'what has happened' into 'what may or should happen' through the idealizing process. Poetry is given a special place in Bacon's scheme because it invents more heroic deeds or examples of vice and virtue than those found in nature, and for this reason is 'ever thought to have some participation of divineness, because it doth raise the mind, by submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind.'[xxxii]

Moreover, the special place that Bacon grants to poetry should not be seen as inconsistent with the thrust of his famous scientific method, as critics such as Pope have argued.[xxxiii] The mistake is in the attempt to understand the aim of Bacon's method as 'objectivity' or even 'objectivity in the making' (which is then contrasted with 'creativity' or 'creativity in the making'), for in the sixteenth century 'objectivity' was an un-invented concept. Rather, the aim of Bacon's method is better understood as a form of self-distancing in which the new cautioning of the mind, to use Bacon's own phrase, served a purely instrumental function — the conquest/exploitation of nature by man in the service of God and sovereign.

In other words, imagination is not opposed to reason as such, but is encouraged in so far as it remains subordinate to this larger instrumental function. This is why, as Foucault has argued, Bacon does not attempt to dissipate the false resemblances generated by the imagination by means of logic or evidence. Rather, he shows them as idols — 'shimmering before our eyes, vanishing as one draws near, then reforming again a moment later, a little further off'.[xxxiv] Thus the curiously named 'Idols of the Tribe', 'Idols of the Cave', and 'Idols of the Market'. Bacon's work does not represent a decisive break with the pattern of sixteenth century thought — for example, the idea of a full universe proceeding from multiplicity to unity epitomized by the Great Chain of Being rising in ascending order from insects to angles. But, as Dr Thomas Sprat put it in his history of the Royal Society, it was the task of the new method to 'follow all the Links of this Chain, till all their Secrets are open to our Minds, and their Works

advanced or imitated by our Hands. This is truly to command the World … '[xxxv] Bacon's new method does not represent a break with the prevailing regime of knowledge, but as Foucault puts it, 'sixteenth century thought becoming troubled as it contemplates itself'.[xxxvi]

Interestingly enough, although Bacon categorises the production of poetry under imagination, he does not include the whole of what we now call the creative arts in the same category. This is because the modern system of the arts (the idea of literature, painting and sculpture as a discrete field of endeavour linked by the human imagination) did not emerge until the mid-eighteenth century. In fact, it was not long after Bacon proposed his three categories of knowledge that his former pupil Thomas Hobbes put forward an entirely different system of classification — placing poetry together with mineralogy, optics and ethics on the one hand, and architecture together with astronomy and navigation on the other.[xxxvii] Of greater significance to the history of art practice was the way in which Hobbes reorganized Bacon's distinction between imagination (or 'wit', as the eighteenth century was to call it) and reason (or 'judgment'), a distinction that was to shape artistic and philosophical debates over the course of the next century.

The most common understanding of imagination in the seventeenth century was not in the form of Bacon's wayward 'messenger', but as the more prosaic capacity to reproduce images that enter the mind through the senses, primarily with reference to visual images that enter through the eye. Hobbes, for example, defined imagination as 'decaying sense,' a phrase conceived not so much as a pejorative than literal description of the condition of the mind after the remembered object is removed.[xxxviii] According to this view, man did not generate anything new from within the mind, but merely reproduced or recombined previously perceived objects, processes that Hobbes named simple and compound imagination, 'as when from the sight of a man at one time, and of a horse at another, we conceive in our mind a Centaure'.[xxxix] Reason, by contrast, depends on the apprehension of difference. For Hobbes, it is the process of discrimination through which 'men attaine to exact and perfect knowledge' by 'discerning suddainely dissimilitude in thinges that otherwise appeare the same'.[xl] Reason is the faculty that provides access to truth and the 'similitudes' of imagination

are not only considered less reliable than the products of reason, but are also deemed capable of inducing delusion. Hobbes was not alone in his fulminations against imagination. For example, Nicolas Malebranche, a one-time pupil of Rene Descartes, argued that imagination led directly to depravity:

> For the better the Imagination is furnish'd, the more dangerous it is; great qualities in the Eyes of Men, are the most prolifick and the most general causes of the blindness of the Mind and the corruption of the Heart.[xli]

The popular eighteenth century science writer Henry Barker (author of 'The Microscope Made Easy') took a milder view, but remained thoroughly suspicious in his attitude, arguing:

> Tis not then a Defect, absolutely speaking, to have a strong, quick, and fine Imagination; since it is of so great a help to Reason. But 'tis a very great Fault to pervert the Order of Nature, to make Reason wait upon Imagination, to prefer and delight only in this, and, by a shameful Injustice, carry it as it were in Triumph, and place it in the Seat of Reason, which we almost intirely darken and eclipse.[xlii]

Even as inspiration for artistic activity imagination was profoundly distrusted. Art was considered to be the product of reason, and imagination was only believed to be important to the degree that it gave substance to insight. Hobbes famously articulated his vision of the writing process in the following terms, 'Experience begets memory; Memory begets Judgment and Fancy: Judgment begets the strength and structure, and Fancy begets the ornaments of a Poem'.[xliii] Or as the poet John Dryden was later to put it, 'if this fancy not be regulated, it is mere caprice, and utterly incapable to produce a reasonable and judicious poem'.[xliv]

The examples are easily multiplied: Descartes' characterized imagination as '*la folle du*

logis,'[xlv] Johnson dubbed it a 'vagrant faculty,'[xlvi] Locke associated it with 'enthusiasm', which 'takes away both Reason and Revelation, and substitutes in the room of it, the ungrounded Fancies of a Man's own Brain'.[xlvii] Likewise, Davenant called inspiration a 'dangerous word,'[xlviii] Johnson labeled it a 'mental disease',[xlix] Joshua Reynolds declared it a 'Phantom',[l] and Hobbes memorably wrote that the concept of the creative Muse is the imitation of a foolish custom, 'by which a man, enabled to speak wisely from the principles of Nature and his own meditations, loves rather to be thought to speak by inspiration, like a Bagpipe'.[li]

The logic that underpins eighteenth century discourse is qualitatively different from that of earlier periods, in that it does not seek merely to delimit knowledge (to exclude thinking based on imagination in order to keep knowledge 'error free', as Bacon had proposed), but rather to condemn imagination as confusion, as a jumble of images that needed to be catalogued in terms of difference and order — or, as Foucault argued, by 'universalizing it and thereby giving it its purest form'.[lii] In short, rather than stating, as Williams does, that the eighteenth century was the period in which creative imagination 'with its key-word, 'imagination', was becoming paramount',[liii] or that the eighteenth century is the period in which 'a positive link is forged' between creativity and human agency, as Pope proposes[liv] — it might be better to characterize the eighteenth century imagination as epistemic. For art was concerned with an entirely different aim — to know. Classical art aimed to produce the true, the believable, and the probable. Originality was understood only in the sense of typicality — of art's proximity to the great Original, which was Nature. Hence, the Augustan emphasis on order was not the product of a mechanical aesthetic, but a reflection of the perceived harmony of the classical universe. Once again, in the light of such aims, creativity, originality, and innovation as we understand them, not to mention the feelings of the artist and his artistic self-expression, were entirely irrelevant.

In finding evidence to support his argument Williams (and, following his lead, Negus and Pickering, Dawson and Pope), makes the claim that in 1728 the minor Scottish poet David Mallet was the first to apply the modern concept of creativity to the powers of the poet.[lv] The source for the claim is a quotation from Mallet's The Excursion, in particular Mallet's opening line 'Muse, Creative Power, IMAGINATION!' However, it ought to

be noted that Mallet makes use of the word creative in the context of invoking the poetic muse, a traditional device used to signal that a writer was working within a given poetic tradition, according to fixed rules. There are in fact several earlier examples of the word 'creative' used in the context of the hymnic tradition (for example, the poet John Hopkins invokes his Muse's gifts: 'You, like creative Heav'n your Labours frame;/You spoke the Word and at your Breath they came').[lvi] Read in this context, it is unclear whether Mallet intended his invocation as a decisive break with the hymnic tradition. It is also unclear whether Mallet intended the word creative to signify a human rather than divine or muse-like attribute.

Moreover, the version of the poem quoted in the above-mentioned studies is taken from the radically revised 1743 edition of The Excursion, and not the original 1728 edition (as cited), which actually read:

> FANCY, creative Power, at whose Command
> Arise unnumber'd Images of Things,
> Thy hourly Offspring; Thou whose mighty Will
> Peoples with airy Shapes the Pathless Vale
> Where pensive *Meditation* loves to stray
> *Fancy*, with me range *Earth's* extended *Space*
> Surveying Nature's Works.[lvii]

The 1728 work falls more naturally within the tradition of the invocation, with the poet asking his muse 'Fancy' to be his companion on a journey. In the more commonly cited 1743 version, the balance shifts and imagination becomes a more impressive player in the poem. Thus,

> Companion of the muse, creative power,
> IMAGINATION! at whose great command,
> Arise unnumber'd images of things,
> Thy hourly offspring: *thou*, who canst at will
> People with air-born shapes the silent wood,
> And solitary veil, thy own domain,

Where *Contemplation* haunts; O come invok'd,
To waft me on thy many-tinctur'd wing
O'er EARTH's extended space:[lviii]

The changes would seem to suggest that Mallet welcomed a more radical interpretation of his work, given the emphasis he gives to the word 'IMAGINATION,' for example. However, Mallet's description of the poem as laid out in the 'Argument' continues to make it clear that the invocation is 'addressed to Fancy' — that it is Fancy and not the poet who is creative, using her heavenly power to waft the poet on her 'many-tinctur'd wing'.

Other than Mallet's use of the adjective there seems little in The Excursion to differentiate it from the work of his contemporaries, and less to suggest that the use of the adjective signals a new epistemic relationship to imagination. Indeed The Excursion belongs, together with James Thomson's better known To the Memory of Sir Issac Newton, to a sizable genre of eighteenth century poetry devoted to Newton's *Principia* and *Opticks*, which in the words of literary critic M.H. Abrams it 'joyously pillag[es]'.[lix] Far from being innovative, Abrams characterizes the genre as the product of an illustrative process, via which the 'truth' of Newton's *Opticks* is turned into poetry through a process of ornamentation — an illustrating of its statements — rather than creating things afresh. In other respects, The Excursion retains the Classical period's concern with the external world (as opposed to, for example, the idea of creative self expression). It is heavily influenced by the Gothic and Picturesque (elements that are also far more marked in the 1743 edition), but these elements are strongly framed in the context of an ordered Classical universe, in which the rainbow, for example, is deemed more poetic for having been demystified by Newton's 'pure intelligence' and 'mind's clear vision' into a vision of 'ideal harmony'.[lx] In short, an equally tenable interpretation of the poem would place it as yet another example of imagination enlisted in the service of reason.

Joseph Addison is another eighteenth century writer whose work is commonly invoked to support claims about the flourishing of the discourse of creativity in that period, and his use of the divine analogy 'Imagination ... has in it something like creation' is

enlisted in the arguments of Pope, Engell and Dawson among others.[lxi] However, in 'The Pleasures of the Imagination', the essay from which this citation is taken, Addison goes on to suggest that the faculty of imagination is actually less refined than the faculty of reason. He argues that reason searches for hidden causes, while imagination is content to passively experience things. For Addison, this is why the pleasures of imagination are more easily acquired than those of reason. He writes:

> A beautiful Prospect delights the Soul, as much as a Demonstration; and a Description in Homer has charmed more Readers than a Chapter in Aristotle. Besides, the Pleasures of the Imagination have this Advantage, above those of the Understanding, that they are more obvious, and more easie to be acquired. It is but opening the Eye, and the Scene enters. The Colours paint themselves on the Fancy, with very little Attention of Thought or Application of the Mind in the Beholder. We are struck, we know not how, with the Symmetry of any thing we see, and immediately assent to the Beauty of an Object, without enquiring into the particular Causes and Occasions of it.[lxii]

According to Addison, seeing a landscape or reading about one affects us equally — both require remarkably little effort; just an 'opening [of] the Eye'. Though Addison's essay is justifiably famous for the way in which it collects the imaginative arts together (a new concept for the eighteenth century), the imagination it describes remains profoundly passive. Thus, the 'scene enters', 'colors paint', we are 'struck … with the Symmetry' and 'immediately assent'. Collectively Addison's essays on the imagination work to suggest that the imagination is not serious, rather it 'bestows charms', offers 'a kind of refreshment' or 'ornament' to the more important work of reason.[lxiii]

In attempting to create a narrative that reaches as far back into history as possible, the studies of creativity examined in this essay tend to miss the fundamental fracture in the discourse of the mind that occurs at the end of the eighteenth century — what M.H. Abrams once called the 'Copernican revolution in epistemology' that was the Romantic era.[lxiv] As Foucault has argued, the shift between the classical episteme and the modern

is one in which the structure of knowledge undergoes a fundamental reversal. In the course of this reversal, imagination, once regarded as a poor cousin to reason — at best, passive, and at worst, a dangerous faculty that led to madness or delusion — becomes the primary faculty of the human mind. To overlook this shift is to miss the tension between the Enlightenment ideal of the rationally bounded individual and the Romantic myth of the unbounded autonomy of the infinite self. It is also to elide the possibility that the arrangement of knowledge that gave rise to creativity may well have been that which created the modern and anthropological subject — a new arrangement of knowledge that created man as the central subject and object of reality.

The Creative Mind

Kant is an obvious figure in this transition. It was Kant who increased the scope of the imagination in the theory of knowledge to a revolutionary degree. Just as Copernicus reversed the way people thought about the relationship of the earth to the sun, Kant reversed the way people thought about the relationship between the mind and the world of objects and experience. In a dramatic reversal of both empiricism and rationality he argued that some of the properties observed in objects might be due to the nature and constitution of the human spectator. Or, as Kant indelibly put it:

> Failing of satisfactory progress in explaining the movements of the heavenly bodies on the supposition that they all revolved around the spectator, [Copernicus] tried whether he might not have better success if he made the spectator to revolve and the stars to remain at rest.[lxv]

Kant accepts that knowledge begins with sense experience, but argues that the mind applies preexisting categories of perception — including logic, causality, substance, space and time — to the object. In this sense, the perceiving mind might be said to discover only that which it itself has partly made. With Kant, imagination ceases to be an empty storehouse for images generated by the senses, a blank sheet of paper on which the imprint of experience is placed, and begins to be understood as active and productive. Interestingly enough, it is not long after Kant, that scientists and

phrenologists such as F.J. Gall, Charles Bell and Erasmus Darwin begin to elucidate the active mind in neurological terms — for the first time locating the mind in the brain, and not in the heart, the spinal column, the pineal gland, or the body as a whole.[lxvi]

In English, Kant's influence manifested itself in poetry before entering into philosophy. In particular, in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge imagination is seen to take the leap beyond the subject through the act of artistic creation. With Coleridge, the imagination ceases to be 'a lazy Looker-on on an external world' and is endowed with a synthetic or 'magical' power.[lxvii] He describes this new apprehension of imagination as a power of knowledge that is a repetition in the subject's mind of the auto-poetic power of God's creation. Or, in Coleridge's own words, the imagination is 'the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception' and 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'.[lxviii] This statement of the artist's auto-poetic power is qualitatively different from, and therefore historically discontinuous with, the tradition of the divine analogy — that is, the many statements likening the poet to a 'second Maker' that form the subject matter of so many histories of creativity, such as, for example, the quotation from Tasso that Williams argues is the 'decisive source of the modern meaning' of the term,[lxix] and that the literary historian E.N. Tigerstedt has extended back to the Florentine poet Christoforo Landino in the fifteenth century.[lxx] The essential difference is that for Coleridge the perceiving mind is seen to be active in giving shape and meaning to what is outside it, so that our knowledge of what is outside us is also the knowledge of ourselves. Hence, Coleridge calls this new creative power both a self-manifestation and self-discovery because we see ourselves through the structure of our own minds.

It is following Kant and the Romantics that creative imagination comes to be seen as the 'true source of genius' and the 'basis of originality', words which themselves gain a new meaning. Genius is distinguished from mere talent, and redefined as a quality of mind that makes rules instead of following them, and the art object comes to be understood as the embodiment of original aesthetic ideals that are the product of the artist's creative imagination, not mere reflections, imitations, or perfections of truths found elsewhere. The emergent discourse also needs to be understood as a product of the new system of the arts arising in the eighteenth century, with its now familiar

dualities of art/craft, aesthetic/purpose, genius/talent, creative/mechanical, which can be usefully mapped through the shifting definitions provided in the French *Encyclopédie* between 1751 and 1780.[lxxi] The consequence of this reorganisation is that art is effectively created as a separate realm of human endeavour standing above and outside the rest of social and economic life. For this reason, Marx argued that 'The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of the division of labour', attributing an economic origin to the process through which the older idea of art as construction is replaced by a system that devalues the work of the artisan as a manual worker, and revalues the work of the artist via a cult of mystification.[lxxii] Also relevant is the way in which the new discourse intersects with the artist's bid for respectability, driven by the artist's new reliance on the vagaries of the market as traditional patronage systems collapse. There is an emerging sense in which artists 'add value' to their work by placing art beyond value.

The new discourse affects both the creation of art and its reception. Creative art is arranged in the contemplative spaces of the recently invented art museum, a centre that also becomes a storehouse for imperial plunder. In the same way, the cannon of English literature appears on the university curriculum for the very first time (for example, Oxford University did not introduce English Literature as a subject until 1875), just as music moves out of church and salon into the rarified spaces of the concert hall. The new discourse is also edged with a strange nationalistic fervor, and it is not coincidental that the *OED's* earliest citation of the noun 'creativity' occurs in the context of a chapter on Shakespeare as the English national poet written by a German-educated historian, with my own research locating earlier citations in historical works influenced by the prevailing nationalist/racialist interpretation of Herder. It is from this dense cultural matrix that the concept of creativity actually emerges. It a strange and remarkable birth — one that eclipses a two thousand year old tradition of art practice — and occurs in an age that prided itself on its scientific spirit, but saw fit to endow the practice of writing on paper or painting on canvas with mystical attributes.

Hence, 'Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance,' wrote Shelley in a sentence that reverses many

centuries of European thought.[lxxiii] For Wordsworth, the mind is 'creator and receiver both' and human imagination 'Is but another name for absolute power/And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,/And reason in her most exalted mood'.[lxxiv] John Ruskin addressed himself to objects that bore the impress of 'highest creative life that is to say the mind of man'[lxxv] William Hazlitt located 'this creative impulse, this plastic power' in works of art from Chaucer to Shakespeare.[lxxvi] Thomas Carlyle extended the term to other professions, finding an 'active power', 'creative instinct' or dynamic force in all kinds of human production,[lxxvii] and popular newspapers of the period were as likely to invoke the 'creative power' of industry, as they were to invoke the creative powers of the poet. It is also during this period that statements of a qualitatively different order are to be found, including Benjamin Disraeli's assertion that 'man is made to create,'[lxxviii] Marx's argument that human happiness lies in a 'positive, creative activity,'[lxxix] Matthew Arnold's claim that 'a free creative activity is the true function of man,'[lxxx] and Frederic Nietzsche's argument that it is 'creative plenipotence' that separates the *Ubermensch* from the rest of humanity.[lxxxi] The work of such writers exemplify the shift away from the eighteenth century idea of a fixed and immutable universe (as exemplified in the mathematical physics of Newton), towards a universe that is understood as a continuous process of organic invention — a universe unfolding within a metaphysical structure that is malleable enough to impart a new sense of freedom to human endeavour. This shift gains its most characteristic expression in Darwin's theory of evolution — and, no less famously, in *The Descent of Man,* the work in which Darwin aligns human imagination with a narrative of continuous novelty or invention, formation and transformation, arguing, 'The imagination is one of the highest prerogatives of man. By this faculty he unites, independently of the will, former images and ideas, and thus creates brilliant and novel results'.[lxxxii] In this sense, it might even be possible that the discourse of creativity does not originate in art, or the discourse of imagination, as is commonly believed, but represents new forms of thought migrating into the arts from the emerging biological and life sciences[lxxxiii] — perhaps reaching full expression in works such as those of the philosopher-mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, who defined creativity as the process, 'whereby the actual world has its character of temporal passage to novelty'.[lxxxiv] Or, more forcefully, 'The creativity of the world is the throbbing emotion of the past hurling itself into a new transcendent fact.'[lxxxv]

Despite its emphasis on the new, what seems crucial to the functioning of the discourse as it flourishes is that 'creativity' appear old, that it offer us a mythical history stretching back to the first time man applied paint to a cave wall. This illusion is aided by the emergence of a new critical vocabulary with which to survey the entire history of European art, together with means and opportunity, as art and literature programs flourish in the university cloister. In reality, the discourse of creativity is not even two hundred years old. It is more likely less — for it is only once creativity is reified and named that it makes itself available as an object for scientific study. Once named, it can be measured and dissected by psychologists and brain surgeons, and political and educational institutions can create policies for its cultivation. In this sense, the important period for the formation of the discourse might even be the twentieth century — the period in which the discourse becomes codified.

In this respect, my own preliminary research indicates that the abstract noun creativity entered into common usage in the US between 1926 and 1953, where it far outstripped its then minimal usage in the United Kingdom. The growing popularity of the term was accompanied by a dramatic shift in the contents of the discourse, so that creativity ceases to be understood as the preserve of genius, but is located in all kinds of people and human endeavours. The American ideal is exemplified in the work of the advertising impresario Alex Osborn and his wildly successful bestseller, *Applied Imagination* — a work that is inflected with a particular American character, combining ideas of 'uplift' with ideas of accessibility and the concept of the 'common man'. In this sense, Osborne's work draws implicitly and explicitly on the ideas of the pragmatic philosopher John Dewey, whose work influenced the cultural activities of the Federal Arts Program under Roosevelt's New Deal, the Progressive Education Movement (of which the creative writing movement is an enduring legacy), and the work of others including the psycho-educationalist Hughes Mearns at the Chicago Laboratory School. The significance of Osborn is that he radically transfigures these ideas in order to make them compatible with a specifically nationalist enunciation of entrepreneurial capital.

The decades of the 1950s and 1960s saw an unprecedented proliferation of institutes and foundations devoted to the fostering of creativity in the US, a phenomena that J.P.

Guilford, dubbed the 'father' of creativity studies in psychology, allegedly attributed to the massive redirection of funds from the US defence budget in the wake of the 'Sputnik Shock' — the US, it was feared, was losing the Space Race because its scientists were not 'creative' enough. Shortly afterwards, Paul Torrance invented the Torrance Test (the 'creative' equivalent of the IQ test) to measure creativity in American children, an estimated one trillion dollars flooded into tertiary education institutions through the National Defense Education Act, Osborn's Creative Education Foundation received contracts from the US Air Force, and Guilford's research at the University of Southern California was funded by the US Navy. These government-sponsored initiatives shifted the focus of the discourse once again — this time onto the identification and study of individuals and individual traits as a means to combat Soviet totalitarianism, but mobilizing those traits within a framework that placed emphasis on organizational and structural optimization, which is the most likely antecedent of creativity theories in organization and business studies today. Significantly, it is also in the decade of the 1950s that the Anglo-American word 'creativity' is imported into European languages, such as French and German.[lxxxvi]

In Short …

The real issue that needs to be brought to light in any study of creativity is not the history of the growing perfection of the concept, or a cultural shift from blindness to recognition, but its conditions of possibility. Creativity is an invention brought about by a particular arrangement of knowledge — and as Foucault famously argued with respect to the arrangement of knowledge that saw the birth of the humanist subject:

> If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility — without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises — were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.[lxxxvii]

It is perhaps unlikely that the term creativity will be 'erased' any time soon. However, by denaturalizing the discourse — by questioning the 'common sense' appeals of creative industries rhetoric and the romantic appeals of the creative arts — we can begin to understand the multiple and contradictory ways in which the idea of creativity is deployed in the present. For example, the way in which creativity can sustain a focus on social innovation, as in Florida, and personal self-expression, as in Julia Cameron's popular self-help books; the way in which creativity can be directed towards the cultivation of 'great leaders,' as Simonton proposes, or the 'power' and 'freedom' of 'mass creativity,' as Leadbeater asserts[lxxxviii] — and at the same time the 9/11 Commission Report can state that it is 'crucial to find a way of routinizing, even bureaucractizing, the exercise of imagination' and the US House Select Committee on Intelligence can call hearings to discuss the Commission's 'requirement for imagination and creativity' in the US intelligence service.[lxxxix]

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[x] Rob Pope, *Creativity: History, Theory, Practice*, Routledge, London, 2005.
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