The End of ‘Genius’

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WHERE does creativity come from? For centuries, we’ve had a clear answer: the lone genius. The idea of the solitary creator is such a common feature of our cultural landscape (as with Newton and the falling apple) that we easily forget it’s an idea in the first place.

But the lone genius is a myth that has outlived its usefulness. Fortunately, a more truthful model is emerging: the creative network, as with the crowd-sourced Wikipedia or the writer’s room at “The Daily Show” or — the real heart of creativity — the intimate exchange of the creative pair, such as John Lennon and Paul McCartney and myriad other examples with which we’ve yet to fully reckon.

Historically speaking, locating genius within individuals is a recent enterprise. Before the 16th century, one did not speak of people being geniuses but having genius. “Genius,” explains the Harvard scholar Marjorie Garber, meant “a tutelary god or spirit given to every person at birth.” Any value that emerged from within a person depended on a potent, unseen force coming from beyond that person.

As late as the Renaissance, people we’d now consider quasi-divine creators were more likely to be seen as deitimitators, making compelling work from familiar materials. Shakespeare, for example, did not typically dream up new ideas for plays but rewrote, adapted and borrowed from the plots, characters and language of previous works. “Romeo and Juliet,” as Mark Rose, a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, notes, is an episode-by-episode dramatization of a poem by Arthur Brooke.

Of course, theater is inherently collaborative. But the Elizabethan stage was more like the modern film industry, where the writer is generally less an auteur than a piece of a machine. Surviving records show three or four or even five playwrights receiving pay for a single production, according to the Columbia professor James Shapiro. The irony is that Shakespeare, whose world serves so well to illustrate a collaborative (or networked) idea about how good work is made, would become the icon of the solo creator.

The big change began with Enlightenment thinkers, who sought to give man a dignified, central place in the world. They made man’s thinking the center of their universe and created a profoundly asocial self.