

### EDWARD YOUNG CONJECTURES ON ORIGINAL COMPOSITION (1759)

Young, Edward. "Conjectures on Original Composition." Critical Theory Since Plato. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971. 329-337.

Young's essay demonstrates the paradigm shift in Theory, influenced by the rise to dominance of Locke's philosophy of mind, that occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century and which resulted in the rise to prominence of the successors to the Neo-Classicals, the Romantics. With Young, a shift in emphasis can be detected away from the reader's response to the work and towards the Author of the work, from a concern with the author's conformity with the rules towards his / her originality and uniqueness, inaugurating a characteristically modern preoccupation, not least here in the Caribbean, which has only recently been challenged by theoretical developments that question whether there can be such a thing as originality.

Young begins by sounding the usual Neo-Classical notes concerning the many moral and spiritual benefits which literature bestows on writers and readers alike (329-330). Young's real concern here, however, is with understanding what a genius is and, by extension, with the supremacy of *originality* over *imitation* (in the sense of emulation or mimicry of other writers). He turns his attention, firstly, to the question of imitation. Arguing that all literary works are "imitations" (330), he contends that there are two kinds of imitation: "one of Nature, one of Authors" (330). He uses the terms 'originals' for the first kind of literary work and 'imitations' for the second. Using a series of vegetative and agricultural metaphors, he compares the "mind of a man of Genius" (330) to a "fertile and pleasant field" (330) that "enjoys a perpetual Spring" (330). He proposes that the greatest works are "glorious fruits where genius prevails" (330). "Of that Spring" (330), he writes, "*Originals* are the fairest flowers: *Imitations* are of quicker growth, but fainter bloom" (330). There is a number of important differences between originals and imitations, according to Young:

ORIGINALS	IMITATIONS
The "great benefactors" (330) who "extend the Republic of Letters, and add a new province to its dominion" (330)	They "only give us a sort of Duplicates of what we had, possibly much better, before" (330) and in which " <i>Knowledge</i> and <i>Genius</i> are at a stand" (330)
The "pen of an <i>Original</i> writer . . . out of a barren waste calls a blooming spring" (330)	"Out of that blooming spring an imitator is a transplanter of Laurels, which sometimes die on removal, always languish on foreign soil" (330)
Even when inferior in excellence, "yet has something to boast" (330)	An imitator "but nobly builds on another's foundation; his debt is, at least, equal to his Glory" (330)
An original "enjoys an undivided applause" (330)	An imitator "shares his crown, if he has one, with the chosen Object of his Imitation" (330)

An original "may be said to be of a <i>vegetable</i> nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it <i>grows</i> , it is not <i>made</i> " (330)	Imitations are "often a sort of <i>Manufacture</i> wrought up by these <i>Mechanics, Art, and Labour</i> , out of pre-existent materials not their own" (330)
Our "spirits rouse at an original; that is a perfect stranger, and all throng to learn what news from a foreign land. . . . we are at the writer's mercy; on the strong wing of his imagination, we are snatched from Britain to Italy, from climate to climate, from pleasure to pleasure; we have no home, no thought" (330)	Readers "read imitation with somewhat of his langour who listens to a twice-told tale" (330)

Young then turns his attention to the Ancients versus Moderns debate. He deals, firstly, with the charge that many classic writers were themselves imitators. He is of the view that they are mostly "accidental originals" (330) in that the "works they imitated, few excepted, are lost" (330). He also laments that among the Moderns, there are so few originals. This is "not because the writer's harvest is over, the great reapers of antiquity having left nothing to be gleaned after them" (331). It is because, rather, "illustrious examples engross, prejudice, and intimidate" (331) and so "engross our attention, and so prevent a due inspection of ourselves; they prejudice our judgment in favour of their abilities, and so lessen the sense of our own" (331). He hastens to emphasise that in this debate he is not on the side of the Moderns whose "great inferiority" (331) he does not deny. He stresses that this is "no necessary inferiority" (331), however. With nothing to imitate, the first writers had no choice but to be original. Modern writers, however, "have a choice to make, and therefore have a merit in their power" (331) and may choose to "soar in the regions of liberty, or move in the soft fetters of easy imitation" (331).

Young offers a different view to that expressed by Pope and others that to imitate Homer is tantamount to imitating nature. He advises us to "drink where he drank, . . . that is, at the breast of nature; imitate, but imitate not the composition, but the man" (331). He argues that one should aim to "write naturally" (331) in the sense above, that is, by imitating the same nature which Homer did. By not imitating Homer, one is not departing from nature:

suppose You was to change place, in time, with Homer, then, if you write naturally, you might as well charge *Homer* with an imitation of You. Can you be said to imitate *Homer* for writing so, as you would have written, if *Homer* had never been? (331)

He advises writers to depart from one's literary precursors as far as a "regard to nature, and sound sense, will permit a departure from your great predecessors; so far, ambitiously, depart from them" (331):

the farther from them in *Similitude*, the nearer are you to them in *Excellence*, you rise by it into an *Original*; become a noble Collateral, not an humble descendant from them. Let us build our Compositions with the Spirit, and in the Taste, of the Ancients; but not with their Materials. Let us build our compositions with the spirit, and in the taste, of the ancients, but not with their materials. . . . All eminence, and distinction, lies our of the beaten road; excursion and deviation, are necessary to find it. (331-332)

This emphasis on originality above all else would become very influential upon the Romantics.

Referring to Shakespeare as his prime example of modern genius, Young then turns his attention to the question of genius. He contends that there is a number of important differences between genius and mere learning:

GENIUS	LEARNING
Genius is a "masterworkman" (332)	Learning is "but an instrument" (332)
Genius is the "power of accomplishing great things without the means generally reputed necessary to that end" (332)	A " <i>good understanding</i> " (332) is the product merely of " <i>Learning</i> " (332)
Having genius is like being something akin to a "magician . . . that raises his structure by means invisible" (332)	Having only learning is like being something akin to a "good Architect" (332) who builds by means of the "skillful use of common tools" (332)
"Genius has ever been supposed to partake of something divine" (332)	Learning is of this world and is "destitute of this superior Aid" (332)
Genius produces "unprescribed beauties, and unexampled excellence, which are characteristics of genius, lie without the pale of learning's authorities, and laws; which Pale, Genius must leap to come at them; but by that leap, if Genius is wanting, we break our Necks; we lose that little credit, which possibly we might have enjoyed before" (332)	Learning is a "great lover of rules, and boaster of famed examples; . . . learning inveighs against natural unstudied graces, and small harmless inaccuracies, and sets rigid boundaries to that liberty" (332)
Rules are an "Impediment to the Strong" (332). "Liberty" (332) is that "to which Genius often owes its supreme Glory" (332)	Rules, "like crutches, are a needful Aid to the Lame" (332). Learning "sets rigid bounds to that Liberty" (332)
"There is something in Poetry beyond Prose-reason; there are Mysteries in it not be explained, but admired" (332)	These 'Mysteries' "render mere Prose-men Infidels to their Divinity" (332)
The genius is a "divinely-inspired Enthusiast" (336) who is comparable to the "rising sun" (336)	The non-Genius is merely a "well-accomplished Scholar" (336) who is comparable at best to the "bright morning star" (336)
The "true genius" (336) is "crossing all publick roads into fresh untrodden ground" (336). He "conceives . . . the least embryo of new thought; opens . . . [a] vista thro' the gloom of ordinary writers, into the bright walks of rare Imagination, and singular Design" (336)	The merely learned "thinks in wretched unanimity with the throng; Incumbered with the notions of others, and impoverished by their abundance" (336). The non-genius "up to the knees in Antiquity, is treading the sacred footsteps of great examples" (336)

All in all, Young argues, learning “we thank, genius we revere; that gives us pleasure, this gives us rapture; that informs, this inspires, and is itself inspired; for genius is from heaven, learning from man. . . . Learning is borrowed knowledge; genius is knowledge innate, and quite our own” (333).

Young stresses that genius is rare and imitation much more likely, whatever the historical period in question. Moreover, what is at stake is not achievements but innate capacity: “[q]uite clear of the dispute concerning ancient and modern learning, we speak not of performance, but powers. The modern powers are equal to those before them; modern performance in general is deplorably poor” (335). Great writers can emerge in the future, however, given the right conditions:

Reasons there are why talents may not appear, none why they may not exist, as much in one period as another. An evocation of vegetable fruits depends on rain, air, and sun; an evocation of the fruits of genius no less depends on externals. What a marvellous crop bore it in Greece and Rome? And what a marvellous sunshine did it there enjoy? What encouragement from the nature of their environments, and the spirit of their people. . . . The sun as much exists on a cloudy day, as in a clear; it is outward, accidental circumstances that with regard to genius either in nation, or age, *‘Collectus fugat nubes, solemque reducit’* [drives away the gathered clouds and brings back the sun--Virgil’s *Aeneid*]. (335)

Young stresses that we are not only “ignorant of the dimensions of the human mind in general, but even of our own” (335). That men are “scarce less ignorant of his own powers, than an oyster of its pearl, or a rock of its diamond; that he may possess dormant, unsuspected abilities . . . is evident from the sudden eruption of some men, out of perfect obscurity, into public admiration” (335). Because men are often “strangers to their own abilities” (335), Young wants to borrow “two golden rules from ethics” (335): 1. Know thyself; 2ndly, Reverence thyself” (336). He advises us to

dive deep into thy bosom; learn the depth, extent, bias, and full forte of thy mind; contract full intimacy with the stranger within thee; excite and cherish every spark of intellectual light and hear, however smothered under former negligence, or scattered through the dull, dark mass of common thoughts; and collecting them into a body, let thy genius rise (if a genius thou hast) as the sun from chaos; and if I should then say, like an Indian, worship it, (though too bold) yet should I say little more than my second rule enjoins, (viz.) reverence thyself. . . . [L]et not great examples, or authorities, browbeat they reason into too great a diffidence of thyself: thyself so reverence, as to prefer the native growth of thy own mind to richest import from abroad; such borrowed riches make us poor. The mind who thus reverences himself, will soon find the world’s reverence to follow his own. (336)

The alternative is “meanness of mind” (336) and “prostration of our own powers” (336) resulting from “too great admiration of others” (336). Imitators are akin to “translators” (336) who often “rather raise their original’s reputation, by showing him to be by them inimitable, than their own” (336). A good example of this is the translation of Homer into what Young terms ‘Indian’ languages:

Aelian tells us, that the Indians, (hopeful tutors!) have taught him to speak their tongue. What expect we from them? Not Homer’s Achilles, but something, which like Patroclus, assumes his name, and, at its peril, appears in his stead; nor expect we Homer’s Ulysses, gloriously bursting out of his own cloud into royal grandeur, but an Ulysses under disguise, and a beggar

to the last. (336)

The result is an unsatisfactory mimicry of a great original and the not the expression of powers unique to the Indian people, a view that resonates even today in our Postcolonial world.