Rita Dózsai

Novelties or "Common Maxims"

Problems of Originality and Genius in Young's *Conjectures*

The purpose of this paper is to consider Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) with special emphasis on the author's understanding of genius. It is well known that this particular essay had had a significant influence on the Romantic Movement in England, Germany and France stretching well beyond the confines of his time. Offering his conjectures on exceptional ability within the broad context of imitation and originality, the author made a peculiar contribution to the vogue of genius on the Continent. When one recalls the date at which this "manifesto of romanticism was written," one may recognise "how the publication of the *Conjectures* was a milestone in literary history."[1] Precisely for this reason, that is, because of the way the *Conjectures* challenged prevailing classicism does Young's enterprise still interest the reader. In what follows, therefore, I propose a consideration of Young's arguments, and attempt to examine whether his claim for originality is justified. To achieve this, in the following pages, I shall revise, at first, the most important eighteenth-century treatises on genius in order to provide a possible contextual framework for Young's composition. I shall also be concerned with the eighteenth-century development of the notion of genius by focusing on Young's original or unoriginal efforts to posit a definition on this term. Meanwhile I also try to explore to what extent the Youngean model paves the way for a Romanticised genius.

---

1 Harold Forster, *Poet of the Night Thoughts: Edward Young, 1683–1765* (Alburgh: Erskine Press, 1986), p. 3.

The AnaChronisT (2002) 27–43 ISSN 1219-2589

Before turning to Young's practical contribution to the history of genius, however, it seems to be necessary to consider at some length the profound changes which came into prominence in the critical thinking of eighteenth century classicism. Atkins exploring "the widening outlook" points out that in the mid-eighteenth century a great bulk of critical material is published – he mentions the works of Gray, Hurd, Lowth, the Wartons and Young – which develops a "fresh approach to the whole critical business."[2] Challenging the authority of the neo-classical doctrines, undermining the established tradition of imitation and advocating originality are the most important tendencies in these new critical attitudes. Equally important is, therefore, the debate between the ancients and the moderns– "principally a French affair, carried on with less heat in England"[3] – upon which Temple, Wotton and Bentley reflect well ahead of Young, taking different positions. Practically speaking, the *'querelle des anciens et des modernes'* concerns the question whether the moderns should copy the ancient authors or exploit their own creative originality.[4] That the modern opposition to antiquity and the views on Homer's original genius become prominent to literary and scientific matters is evident in a great body of eighteenth century discourses. The ancients, according to Simonsuuri, encourage the imitation of classics because classical antiquity is considered to be equivalent with nature. The moderns, quite to the contrary, reject modelling themselves on the examples and rules of ancient authors, while naturally they do recognise their merits. As a consequence, the interest of moderns is directed to contemporary works that display human nature in a more complex way than the classics.[5] As it seems, the antithetical position promoted by the polemic and the shift in emphasis from imitation to originality prepare the ground for the remarkable eighteenth century documents on the concept of genius.

Tracing the development of this very concept, it is apparent that the notion of genius is foremost in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, but it is

2 J. W. H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism, 17th and 18th Centuries* (London: Methuen, 1966), p. 187.

3 Kálmán Ruttkay, "Young's Conjectures Reconsidered," in: *Angol Filológiai Tanulmányok IV* [Hungarian studies in English IV] (Debrecen: Kossuth Lajos Tudományegyetem, 1969), p.70.

4 Kirsti Simonsuuri, *Homer's Original Genius: Eighteenth-century notions of the early Greek epic (1688–1798)* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979), p. 19. The name of the debate originates from Charles Perrault's work, the *Parallèle des anciens et des modernes* (1688–97). During the controversy, the moderns or the followers of Perrault are set in opposition to the ancients, the supporters of Boileau.

5 Simonsuuri, p.23.

also clear that the idea had formed well before that time. Wickman points out that the period from the mid-eighteenth through the early nineteenth century is traditionally considered "an age in which the concept of genius evolves from its prior significations of attendant or ancestral spirit or natural inclination to its more Romantic and modern associations of an ecstatic and creative individuality."[6] For our purposes, however, it is of far greater importance to reconsider the fifth definition of genius given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This enquiry may bring us closer to the origins of genius delineated in the *Conjectures* revealing an earlier contribution to the history of original genius. The *OED* defines the term as "native intellectual power of an exalted type, such as is attributed to those who are esteemed greatest in any department of art, speculation, or practice; instinctive and extraordinary capacity for imaginative creation, original thought, invention, or discovery," providing an illustrative mid-eighteenth century example.[7] Exploring the earliest modern usage of the concept Jonathan Bate suggests a "principal modification" of the date when the word first acquired its widely accepted modern meaning.[8] One should not forget that as early as 1711 Addison in *The Spectator* 160 attempts to posit a definition of original genius supplying all the essential elements which, according to the *OED*, "is not properly formulated" until the mid-eighteenth century.[9] Such an early exploration of the concept, as it will be demonstrated in later parts of this paper, foreshadows Young's "original" model.

It is interesting to notice here that the very notion of genius is involved in a prolonged critical dialogue. Let us mention, therefore, further important works developing a detailed account of great ability during the period concerned: Sharpe, *A Dissertation Upon Genius* (1755); Joseph Warton, *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756–82); Duff, *Essay on Original genius* (1767), Gerard, *Essay on Genius* (1774); Reynolds, *Discourses* II (1782).[10] While the main concern of these

---

6 Matthew Wickman, "Imitating Eve Imitating Echo Imitating Originality: The Critical Reverberations of Sentimental Genius in the Conjectures," *ELH* 65 (1998), p. 900.

7 The first attested usage of this particular sense of genius is from Fielding's *Tom Jones*, XIV.i (1749): "By the wonderful force of genius only, without the least assistance of learning."

8 Jonathan Bate, "Shakespeare and Original Genius" in Penelope Murray, ed., *Genius: The History of an Idea* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 77.

9 Bate, p. 78.

10 Anette Wheeler Cafarelli, *Prose in the Age of Poets. Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p. 214. Nineteenth-century discourses on genius include Hazlitt, "*On Genius and Originality*" (1814), "*On Genius and*

treatises is mainly philological, the Scots primitivists (Sharpe, Duff, Gerard), however, are interested in philosophical matters focusing on the faculties that constitute genius and the creativity of primitive man.[11] These discussions contributing to the eighteenth-century development of the term may serve to remind us that by the time Young's essay came on the scene the conjectures on the problems of imitation were far from new. Indeed, Young's argumentation reflects standard contemporary features of genius.

Besides the major eighteenth century works considering the originality and genius of Homer, a large body of minor critical pieces appear, such as "the numerous letters, essays and poems written for didactic or literary critical purposes," – works "which do not directly attempt to evaluate Homer but use him indirectly as an example."[12] Ultimately, Young's essay, *Conjectures on Original Composition in a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison* belongs to these. The essay in the epistolary form is dedicated to Samuel Richardson who plays the key role in shaping Young's draft versions. "One hundred and Fifty Original Letters between Dr. Edward Young, Author of Night Thoughts, and Mr. Samuel Richardson, Author of Clarissa, Grandison, &c."[13] contain such pieces that demonstrate this joint effort. It is therefore of great value and concern that the letters show insight into the different stages of the essay.[14] Thus, the correspondence between 1757 and 1759 is especially relevant as far as the emendations and comments of the novelist are concerned. Richardson's suggestions (concerning both the style and content) bring us to what is perhaps the most difficult problem, the question of his responsibility for any alterations to Young's original composition. Notwithstanding, as Phillips convincingly argues,

---

Common Sense" (1821); Lamb, "*Sanity of True Genius*" (1826); D'Israeli, *Essay on the Manners and Genius of The Literary Character* (1795); Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter II (1817).

11 Simonsuuri, pp. 122–123. The Scottish primitivists are a minority group centred around Aberdeen and Edinburgh during the second half of the eighteenth century. Other renowned members are Blackwell, Reid, Campbell, Beattie, Kames, Lord Monboddo, Blair, Fergusson.

12 Simonsuuri, p. 143.

13 Henry Pettit, ed., *The Correspondence of Edward Young 1683–1765* (Oxford: OUP, 1971), p. xxxiv. From 1813 to 1819 a series of letters was published in the *Monthly Magazine* "as memoirs and remains of eminent persons."

14 Importantly enough, McKillop's article is the first to use and examine the materials provided by the correspondence (Alan D. McKillop, "Richardson, Young, and the Conjectures," *Modern Philology* 22 [1925], pp. 391–404). Patricia Philips also drawing on the letters reconsiders Mckillop's findings (Patricia Phillips, "Richardson, Young, and the Conjectures: Another Interpretation," *Studia Neophilologia* 53 [1981], pp. 107–112).

we can only notice that Richardson makes suggestion whether they are "entirely or partly his own cannot be known."[15] In this respect, the choice of "conjectures" in the title proves to be fairly suggestive reflecting on its development. Since in terms of textual criticism *conjecture* denotes a proposed emendation of a text.[16] By all means, during the crucial period of emendation (14 January 1757–31 May 1759) Young's understanding of original composition and genius is fostered under the authority of Richardson.

Perhaps it might be of interest to remark that as early as 1756 Young is at work on his critical essay sending the first draft to his correspondent.[17] And in the same year Joseph Warton dedicates his *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* to Young himself. This piece of criticism regards imitation as an inferior poetic technique proposing the demotion of Pope from his established rank.[18] Apparently, Warton's confidence in Young's patronage is based on their shared *modern* position and the poet's earlier points of attack on the works of Pope.[19] The information in Young's letter of 24 February 1757 seems to provide further details about the essay in progress and contemporary literary life. Somewhat excited, Young planning a flying visit to London writes: "I must borrow one hour of you to hear me read the letter, as now, by your assistance, amended; for it is so transcribed, that, without some hints to you, it will be unintelligible."[20] Interestingly enough, it is concerning this occasion that Dr. Johnson also comes into the picture. The famous incident is narrated by Boswell:

> the first time he saw Dr. Young was at the house of Mr. Richardson, the author of *Clarissa*. He was sent for, that the doctor might read to him his *Conjectures on original Composition*, which he did, and Dr. Johnson made his remarks, and he was surprised to find *Young receive as novelties, what he thought very common maxims.*[21]

---

15 Phillips, p. 109. According to McKillop, Richardson was very often rewriting Young rather than making additions of his own.

16 Cf. the definition of 'conjecture' given in the *OED* (head 5).

17 Young's letter of 21 December 1756: "I know not the merit or demerit of what I send; if it has merit, I beg you give it more. How much does the Centaur owe to you! If it has no merit, keep the secret and all is well" (Pettit, p. 440).

18 Forster, p. 303.

19 Neither regards imitation and translation as original composition.

20 Pettit, p. 452.

21 R. W. Chapman, ed., *James Boswell: Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (Oxford: OUP, 1944), p. 341 (my italics).

Now let us quote the concluding notes to the 1854 edition of the *Conjectures* which question Boswell's authentic recordings of Johnson's talk and account for the literary friendship between the listeners:

> But does the biographer mean, that Johnson's opinions on Young's production, delivered after dinner ore rotundo, in his oracular style, were mere commonplace sentiments, and received as 'novelties' by his delighted auditory? If this be the sense of the passage, it is one instance, among many, of Boswell's loose diction; and is by no means complimentary to Johnson's character, when Young and Richardson, with a select party, were his willing listeners. But if he intended to convey the impression, that Young had introduced into his *'Conjectures'* 'very common maxims' which he regarded as 'novelties,' it is manifestly erroneous. At the time of this interview, Johnson was in the prime of life, being about thirty years the junior of Young; and his intellectual powers had reached their maturity. He had not then become notorious for overbearing dogmatism; and the presence of the kind-hearted Richardson and of his polite friends might restrain much of his exuberant criticism.[22]

Even though the nineteenth century editor argues against Young's "commonplace sentiments," there is scant doubt that in its day the essay turns out to be hardly original. However it seems to be far more doubtful, as it shall be detailed, whether Johnson commits his strictures to paper. Indeed, the ever-recurring element of the correspondence is the uncertainty about Johnson's making his remarks at all. In this respect, Richardson's letter of 24 May 1759 might be of interest. Here the novelist informs his friend about the reception of the *Conjectures'* first edition: "Mr. Johnson is much pleased with it: he made a few observations on some passages, which I encouraged him to commit to paper, and which he promised to do, and send to you."[23] What makes Young disappointed or at least impatient with – the same that makes the student of Johnson suspicious of – is the critic's (unusual) reluctance.[24] Such a peculiar attitude towards the

---

22 *The Complete Works, Poetry and Prose of the Rev. Edward Young, LL.D.*, revised and collated with the earliest editions (London: William Tegg, 1854), Vol. II, n.p.

23 Pettit, p. 498.

24 Young's hesitation whether to send Richardson the revised version of the essay originates from Johnson's silence: "I shall not send a copy till I have the pleasure of Mr. Johnson's letter on the points he spoke of to you, and please let him know that I impatiently wait for it" (Pettit, p. 500). In the final letter on 31 may 1759 Young writes: "It was very kind in you to send to Mr. Johnson's; and unfortunate to me that you sent in vain" (Pettit, p. 503).

Conjectures, as it shall be discussed, remains to be the same in Johnson's later approaches to Young.

Perhaps, needless to say, the essay receives very different critical response from those of the similar tracts of Young's contemporaries. The influence and the reception of the *Conjectures* divide the reading public for a long time. As Ruttkay points out:

> [t]he reason why it evoked enthusiasm abroad and met with indifference at home is that, while it could strike even post-Bodmer Germany as something like a revelation of a new artistic creed, it could have no such message of novelty for English readers, who had been gradually accustomed to similar ideas discussed in a great number of works.[25]

It must not be forgotten that before the Conjectures Young's fame is already established by his *Night Thoughts* (1742–1746) becoming a "poet of European standing" and an "inspiration to artists from Blake to humble and anonymous engravers."[26] The great influence of the essay on *Sturm und Drang* movement is evident in the 1761 Leipzig translation of the text as well as in the Young-Klopstock correspondence.[27] This way the German romanticism may owe "a double debt" to Young: a poem and an essay.[28]

However indifferent the immediate reception of the essay is at home, within six months of its publication there appears a second edition. Importantly enough, the revised text incorporates some changes, now minor, now major, which may as well shed new light on Young's understanding of originality. While it is true that Young's reflections are far from being innovative, there remain at least three particular aspects that may break new ground in the field of originality and genius. By and large, it is the pose of the originator, the metaphoric language and

---

25 Ruttkay, p. 67.

26 Quoted from the exhibition: *Edward Young. Poet of the Night-Thoughts (1683–1765)* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 1983). The exhibition provides a wealth of information about the European vogue of the Night Thoughts, displaying different editions and translations of the text. The enquirer, for instance, can find out that "the first book printed at Elsinore was not Hamlet but the Danish translation of the Night Thoughts" or in Venice Yohannes Eremean translated the work into Turkish printed in Armenian characters.

27 Cf. Gedanken über die Original-Werke ["Conjectures on Original Composition"] In einem Schreiben [...] an den Verfasser des Grandison [Samuel Richardson] Aus dem Englischen [translated by von T., i.e. H. E. von Tenbern]. For Young's influences, see Martin Steinke, *Edward Young's "Conjectures" in England and Germany* (New York: Stechert, 1917).

28 Forster, p. 388.

the model of Addison that the novelty of his work consists in. Let us consider how these innovative, albeit fairly ambiguous, qualities manifest themselves in the text.

The essay, cast within the framework of "monumental marbles" to which Young conducts the reader, embarks upon "composition in general."[29] Then come Young's attempts to define originality and genius in the author's elaborate metaphoric diction which I shall consider later. As a next measure, he inquires into the applicability of definitions to ancient and modern authors. And finally, he turns to his main theme, "the long digression" on the marbles of Addison "the chief inducement for writing at all" (108). Thus, as far as the argumentation is concerned, the author examining the minds of the ancients and moderns, imitative and original geniuses, gradually moves towards the original destination he promised to reach from the start.

Near the beginning of the essay one encounters the following note: "You [i.e. Richardson] remember that your *worthy Patron*, and *our common Friend* [...] desired our Sentiments on Original, and on Moral Composition" (4). Chibka asserts the somewhat obvious when he says that Young here "helps his readers to identify with Richardson by means of devices that gives the *Conjectures* a quasi-fictional air."[30] Indeed, the patron in question appears to be invented since Richardson's letter of 14 January 1759 indicates that the subject of the *Conjectures* is "desired" (meaning suggested) by the novelist himself.[31] Thus, it seems that what Richardson requests in their private correspondence is now concealed in a public letter, i. e. in the essay, by the introduction of the fictitious figure of the anonymous and mysterious patron. In this way, Young's originality might be preserved and Richardson's role in the origin and development of the *Conjectures*

29 Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition in a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison. 1759*, facsimile (Leeds: The Scholar Press, 1966), pp. 3–4. All parenthesised references are to this edition.

30 Robert L. Chibka, "The Stranger Within Young's Conjectures" *ELH* 53 (1986), p. 562.

31 "As you do the writer of the history of Sir Charles Grandison the honour of directing to him your two letters, and give him other hours, which modesty will not allow him to claim, will it not look to some that his request to you to write on the two subjects, *Original* and *Moral*, was made to you in hopes of receiving some kind compliments from your friendly partiality could not, therefore, some powerful and deserving friend be substituted, as knowing I have the honour of corresponding with his valued Dr. Young, to put me upon requesting you to touch upon these two subjects? I conceive that the alteration may be easily made; suppose like this – "Your worthy patron, our common friend, by putting you on the request you make me, both flatters and distresses me" (Pettit, p. 446).

remains unknown. But this is only one of the several examples when Young – pretending that Richardson's suggestions seem new even to the novelist himself – creates a "quasi-fictional air" in his text.

Nor can it escape the attention of the reader that the second edition of the essay incorporates a daring assertion that requires reconsideration. Young plunges into the "desired" theme of original composition "the more willingly, as it seems an original subject to me, who have seen nothing hitherto written on it."[32] In her introduction to the 1918 edition of the text, the editor assessing Young's originality contends: "the author does not add anything striking new to the various statements made by his immediate predecessors and contemporaries. It is his merit, rather, to sum up and emphasise their scattered remarks in an essay, brief, brilliantly pointed, enthusiastic and readable." Strangely enough, it is precisely this insertion, "his somewhat self-congratulatory statement"[33] that makes him original. Hence the whole argument for originality and the way it is articulated appear to be of fundamental importance to Young's claim for priority. Of course, the added phrase can be read as signs of his self-canonisation and self-fashioning. Such a characteristic tendency in almost the same manner appears in his somewhat earlier work *On Lyric Poetry*.[34] In part this attitude is due to the fact that the discourse on original composition evidently requires some instances of originality from the author. Or, more importantly, it is due to the fact that the author should display his own genius from the start on.

Adopting the pose of the "originator," the author lets himself neglect the long established tradition of imitation and originality. The claim of having seen nothing written hitherto on the subject prepares the ground for his contribution to the controversy of ancients and moderns. In this respect the dilemma whether or not Young "forgets" about the renowned parties in the debate is pointless

---

32 Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition in a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison*, ed. Edith Morley (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1918), p. 8. This text of the Conjectures is based on the second edition with readings of the first one suppressed into the footnotes. Cf. also the anthologised edition of the essay in Geoffrey Tillotson, Paul Fussel, Jr., and Marshall Waingrow, eds., *Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969).

33 Ruttkay, p. 66.

34 *On Lyric Poetry* (1728) written on the same subject, anticipates many statements of his *Conjectures*. "And we should rather imitate their example in their general motives and fundamental methods of their working than in their works themselves. *This is a distinction, I think, not hitherto made*, and a distinction of consequence" (Scott Elledge, ed., *Eighteenth-Century Critical Essays* [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1961], Vol. I, p. 414).

because he deliberately overlooks them to gain priority.[35] This is how the self-appointed originator indulges in suppositions, i. e. conjectures, the topic of which is "unprecedented," at least Young comes to pretend so. Furthermore, Young's attitude towards the second letter on moral composition turns out to be directly antithetical to the first one. The doubt about what counts to be an original as contrasted to an unoriginal subject is again evident from the correspondence. "I have written a second letter," Young replies to the novelist, "but it by no means pleases me – the subject is too common and cannot keep out of the footsteps of my predecessors."[36] Such a claim for originality, in the sense of being the first instance of its kind, is, of course, an overstatement, which requires a more detailed examination.

The *Conjectures* delivers a passionate defence of originality and freedom from poetic rules, traits that, as the author contends, are supposed to guarantee genius. It is along these concepts that Young attempts to undermine the neo-classical doctrines of imitation, thereby supporting the cause of the moderns. Oddly enough, when the author comes to explain the essence of originality, he leaves the operative term of the essay undefined as the following excerpt shows:

> The mind of a man of Genius is a fertile and pleasant field, pleasant as *Elysium*, and fertile as *Tempe*; it enjoys a perpetual Spring. Of that Spring, *Originals* are the fairest Flowers: *Imitations* are of quicker growth, but fainter bloom. *Imitations* are of two kinds: One of Nature, one of Authors: The first we call *Originals*, and confine the term *Imitation* to the second. I shall not enter into the curious enquiry of what is, or is not strictly speaking, *Original*, content with what all must allow, that some Compositions are more so then others; and the more they are so, I say, the better (9–10).

Young here turns to describe the mind of genius in terms of organic metaphors such as gardens, plants and soil. It is apparent that the author's efforts to posit a definition of originality set in opposition to imitation are problematic. Instead of definition he provides his reader with spoiling the unity between the imitation of ancients and the imitation of nature. Young, as Jonathan Bate puts it, "divides the two practices, confines the term imitation to the imitation of authors, and extols writers who have direct access to nature as originals."[37] Furthermore, it appears

35 Cf. Wickman's argument concerning the likelihood of Young's forgetting about the works on originality (Wickman, p. 920).
36 Pettit, p. 455. The second essay, however, was never published.
37 Bate, p. 88.

(from yet another correspondence) that for Young originality consists in matter rather than manner. And it is concerning this point that Warburton in his letter to Hurd raises his voice against the *Conjectures*: "He [Young] is the finest writer of nonsense of any of this age. And had he known that original composition consisted in the manner, and not in the matter, he had wrote with commonsense, and perhaps very dully under so insufferable a burthen."[38]

Perhaps, the crucial problem of leaving the key concept of the *Conjectures* undefined merits a further look. Considering the reason for this conspicuous omission, Weisheimer argues that originality may not be distinguished from imitation; therefore, they belong to a "continuum." As a solution, he offers a reasonable combination speaking of "imitative originals" as well as "original imitation."[39] So conceived, the notion of originality as well as genius escapes from clear-cut definition but it allows for metaphoric elaboration. Thus content with a comparative explanation, the author continues his defence in the same rhetorical vein: he relies on organic metaphors to describe original genius. Certainly for Young the image of growing plants seems more appropriate and expressive than his earlier definitive approaches to the key concept. Indeed, it is in its contribution to the developing organic aesthetics that the importance of the *Conjectures* consists, since the vegetable concept of genius was part of an established critical discourse. With the striking comparison of the "natural products of mind to the products of the vegetable world"[40] the natural growth of genius is again set in opposition to mechanical imitation:

> An *Original* may be said to be of a *vegetable* nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of Genius; it *grows*, it is not made: *Imitations* are often a sort of *Manufacture* wrought up by those *Mechanics*, *Art*, and *Labour*, out of pre-existent materials not their own (11–12).

The antithetical position between active organic growth and mechanical making, as it has been often noted, embodies such ideas that fall precisely in the field of Romantic aesthetics. This notable passage also shows insight into what makes Young feel compelled to claim originality. His innovation is most significant less for the traditional view of works of art as having organic form

38 Warburton, Letters to Hurd quoted in Edith Morley, p. 51. Cf. also Richardson's letter of 29 May 1759 (Pettit, p. 502).

39 Joel Weisheimer, "Conjectures on Unoriginal Composition." *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 22 (1981), p. 60.

40 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: OUP, 1971), p. 187.

than for combining the two ideas, i. e. the organic growth of a plant with mechanical art.[41] Anticipating Coleridge's and Schlegel's similar distinction, there remains one further example (foreshadowing Wordsworthian ideas) that may as well test the author's ambitious claim. Tracing the origin of "spontaneity," Bate contends that the Youngean comparison quoted above is "the earliest passage to use the word spontaneity in the context of poetic production."[42]

It is, of course, obvious that Young's system reaches backwards to the contemporary tradition as it is clearly indicated by allusions to prior treatises on original genius. With respect to the correspondence, the implicit references, and the author's "chief inducement for writing at all" (108), all these elements point to the safe conclusion that Addison provides the most important model on which Young builds his own argument. Interestingly enough, it is through the example of Addison, as we shall see later, that Young eventually comes up with an incongruous combination of the governing concepts.

That Addison's particular reflections on genius in *The Spectator* are of fundamental importance to Young as well as Dr. Johnson is evident in their attempts at definition in the essay and the dictionary respectively. In Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755), for instance, the second sense of genius ("a man endowed with superior faculties"[43]) is illustrated by the following quotation from Addison: "[t]here is no little writer of Pindaric who is not mentioned as a prodigious genius." Bate in relation to Johnsonian sense of the word carefully points out that the *OED* turns out to be inaccurate when it claims that the fifth sense of the term "is not recognised in Johnson's *Dictionary*."[44] We should, therefore, pause for a moment on how Young develops the notion of original genius already present in *The Spectator* paper.

Addison's essay distinguishes between "the first class" and "the second class of geniuses" in a way that these classes show "equal greatness" but "different manner."[45] The first class of great geniuses are "the prodigies of mankind who by the mere strength of natural parts, and without any assistance of art or learning,

41 Bate, p. 89.

42 Bate, p. 89. Bate also mentions that the growth of organisms described as spontaneous appears in scientific writings. Cf. also the *OED*'s definition

43 Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), Vol. 1: "genius."

44 Bate, p. 77. The author thinks that Johnson presumably requires from his readers to recall Addison's famous *Spectator* paper on Genius.

45 Joseph Addison, "Genius" in Scott Elledge, ed., *Eighteenth-Century Critical Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1961), Vol. 1, p. 29. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *A*.

have produced works that were the delight of their own times and the wonder of posterity" (A, 27–28). Natural geniuses (Homer, The Old Testament poets, Pindar, Shakespeare) are set in sharp opposition rather to the French 'bel esprit' than to the second kind of geniuses which implies, of course, some nationalistic fervour.[46] On the other hand, the second class of geniuses (Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, Tully, Milton, Bacon) are "those that have formed themselves by rules and submitted the greatness of their natural talents to the correction and restraints of art" (29). Keeping a balance between the two aspects of genius, the author exploits the metaphor of wilderness and shaped garden, the recurring imagery of *The Spectator*. Anticipating by half a century Young's organic metaphors of natural genius, Addison asserts that:

> [i]n the first [original genius] it is like a rich soil in a happy climate that produces a whole wilderness of noble plants rising in a thousand beautiful landscapes without any certain order or regularity. In the other [imitative genius] it is the same rich soil under the same happy climate that has been laid out in walks and parterres and cut into shape and beauty by the skill of the gardener (A, 29).

Importantly enough, Young radically turns natural or "Adult Genius" into a superior kind of originality putting "Infantine Genius" of "Learning, Lover of Rules" exactly in second place (27). Here we have Young's challenge to the united power of learning and genius, or as Beddow puts it, "by abandoning the balancing act," Young subverts the "neo-classical ideal of artful genius."[47] This is how in Young's version natural genius held in high esteem becomes and remains throughout antithetical to the artful genius.[48] As for his method here, Young builds up his thesis through comparatively brief multiple parallels: "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" (36).

---

46 For Génie, "L'étendue de l'esprit, la force de l'imagination, & l'activité de l'âme, voilà le génie" see the *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers.*

47 Michael Beddow, "Goethe on Genius" in Penelope Murray, ed., *Genius: The History of an Idea*, p. 98.

48 In *The Rambler*, 154 (1751) for instance, Johnson gives voice to "[t]he inefficacy of genius without learning": "The mental disease of the present generation, is impatience of study, contempt of the great masters of ancient wisdom, and a disposition to rely wholly upon unassisted genius and natural sagacity" (W. J. Bate and A. B. Strauss, eds., *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1969], Vol. V, p. 55).

The author concludes the paragraph in which the qualities of genius and learning are enumerated with a caution against setting genius above divine truth. The context of this remark also shows that the Youngean understanding of genius extends backwards to Addison and forwards to the Romantic aesthetics. Recalling yet another popular short *Spectator* essay on "the fairy way of writing," Young extols imagination as one of the distinguishing traits of original genius.[49] Genius (depicted as "wandering wild [...] in the Fairyland of Fancy" having a "creative power" (37), is associated with creativity, inspiration and grace. It is, therefore, of some significance that Young does not display suspicion of the imagination, but rather he assigns to it an essential role in the shaping of the mind of genius. The period extending from Addison's essays on *The Pleasures of the Imagination* to Young's *Conjectures*, as Babbitt also points out, is of particular importance because these critical pieces contribute to "the rehabilitation of the imagination" and the popularisation of the expression, "creative imagination," or "creative fancy."[50]

As Young proceeds to bring his concepts into the field of contemporary criticism, he presents the original author with "two golden rules from Ethics, which are no less golden in Composition, than in life" (52). Despite his earlier attacks on the neo-classical ideal of artful genius, now he prescribes the rules of "Know thyself" and "Reverence Thyself" for observation. It is along these lines that original genius touches upon moral issues (the intended topic of the second letter) "co-ordinating ethics and aesthetics," sentiments on moral and original composition.[51] Here we encounter again the prevailing metaphor of a growing organism encouraging the innate powers of the mind of genius: "let thy genius rise and prefer the native growth of thy own mind to the richest import from abroad" (53). Following the Addisonian example, Young confines the concept of genius to Englishmen. In his picture of genius, Bacon, Boyle, Newton, Shakespeare and Milton occupy the same privileged position as the ancients. From these great names it is clear that for Young genius is a wider concept employed not to evaluate exclusively poetic genius. Classing the giant Shakespeare together with Milton and Homer, comparing Ben Jonson to Shakespeare, or in other words, "learning" to "untutored genius," Young by no means voices original, unprecedented ideas: in fact he echoes the general trends or commonplaces of his

49 Donald F. Bond, ed., *Critical Essays from the Spectator by Joseph Addison* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 199.
50 Irving Babbitt, *On Being Creative and Other Essays* (London: Constable, 1983), p. 82.
51 Wickman, p. 913.

time. When the author inquires into the field of contemporary literature, however, he changes his tone.

In the attempt to assess the moderns (with regard to the ancients), he passes his strictures on the renowned authors of the Augustan age – including his friends as well. Thus, extolling Richardson's "moral" and "original" genius over many of his contemporaries, the critic turns to compare "the original attempts" of Swift, Pope and Addison. Needless to say, in many respects, Young's canon of literature and critical attitude towards the moderns are to be found wanting. In a notable passage, for instance, he vigorously attacks Pope, "an avowed professor of imitation" (65), thereby undermining the complex issue of imitation, translation and the use of rhyme as a means of original compositions. It is his conspicuously low estimate of Pope as an original author that Dr. Johnson deeply reconsiders in his *Lives*. As I have already mentioned, the "promised papers" conveying Johnson's "more detailed opinions about the *Conjectures*, never reached Young."[52] However, it seems apparent that Johnson does not refrain from addressing himself to the problematic parts of the *Conjectures* in his different works. Regarding the same date of publication and the message of *The Idler* 60 (June 9, 1759) we can consider it as Johnson's direct answer to the notions explicit in the *Conjectures*. The following pivotal excerpt would seem to indicate such a criticism of Young's understanding of genius: "the chief business of art is to copy nature; that a perfect writer is not to be expected, because genius decays as judgement increases, that the great art is the art of blotting."[53] Perhaps, what is more interesting is to discover Johnson's borrowings from the Conjectures when he attempts to describe poetic genius in the *Life of Cowley*: "[t]he true Genius is a mind of a large general powers, accidentally determined to some particular direction."[54] Therefore, we should also argue that in the passage concerned he is not only "thinking of Sir Joshua Reynolds as well as Cowley" – as Grundy argues– but also of Young.[55] Furthermore, Johnson in the concluding *Life of Pope*, challenges the authority of Warton's and Young's demotion of the Augustan poet. As far as the technique of the biographer is concerned, Johnson renders Pope "all the qualities that

52 Isabel St. John Bliss, *Edward Young* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969), p. 147.

53 W. J. Bate, ed., *The Idler and the Adventurer* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963), p. 186. Johnson here defends Pope recalling clichés from *An Essay on Criticism*.

54 Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets* (London: Dent, 1968), Vol. 1, p. 2. Cf. also Young's lines: "as for a general Genius, there is no such thing in nature: A Genius implies the rays of the mind concenter'd, and determined to some particular point" (85–86).

55 Isobel Grundy, *Samuel Johnson: New Critical Essays* (London: Vision Press, 1984), p. 32.

constitute genius": "Invention," "Imagination," and "Judgement."[56] For one thing, that the Youngean discourse on genius seems not to be irrelevant to Johnson becomes evident in this scattered statements of his biographies. Strange as it is, in the *Life of Young* the inquirer would search in vain for the Johnson's "promised observations on some passages" of the essay since this particular life is "the only one of the fifty-two Lives of the English Poets *not* written by Johnson himself."[57] The account of Young adopted in Johnson's work is written by Sir Herbert Croft who underestimates Young both as a poet and as a man. No wonder that this joint enterprise is ridiculed and severely criticised by James Thomas Callender as the following excerpt from his *Deformities of Dr. Samuel Johnson* indicates: "[h]e is the bad imitator of a bad original; and an honest man will not peruse his libel without indignation [...] And yet this critical assassin, this literary jackal, is celebrated by the Doctor."[58] Here again we encounter the contemporary problem of imitation coupled with originality which leads us to the final but the most puzzling scene of the *Conjectures*, namely the digression on "monumental marbles," Addison's death.

Young's judgement on "the triumvirate" concludes with extolling Addison, the "great author" over Pope, the "correct poet" and Swift, the "singular wit." (96). The anecdotes about Swift's evening walk (65–66), Pope's plan of an Epic (69) building on the common element of dying prepare the ground for Young's elaborate reflections on Addison's "triumphant" death (102), his "chief inducement for writing at all."[59] Wickman points out that Addison is placed "within the tradition of the ars bene moriendi," thereby locating his genius in his person rather than in his works:[60] "his compositions are but a noble preface; the grand work is his death" (104). As for Young's originality here, the author does

56 Johnson, *Lives*, p. 214.

57 Pettit, p. xxxiii. It is of great relevance, however, that the critical section of this biography is reconsidered by Johnson himself and attached to the end of Croft's rather problematic account.

58 J. T. Callender, *Deformities of Dr. Samuel Johnson: Selected from his Works*, facsimile (Los Angeles: University of California, 1971), p. 18.

59 "Pointing at it [a noble elm], he [Swift] said, 'I shall be like that tree, I shall die at top.'" Then: "We might have had two Homers instead of one, if longer had been his life; for I heard the dying swan [Pope] talk over an Epic plan few weeks before his decease." Young reports on Addison's triumphant death: "Dear Sir! You sent for me: I believe, and hope, that you have some commands; I shall hold them most sacred: 'My distant ages not only hear, but feel the reply!' Forcibly grasping the youth's hand, he softly said, 'See in what peace a Christian can die.'"

60 Wickman, pp. 914–915.

not accept Richardson's "humble suggestions" that he should "separate the heterogeneous parts," referring to the strange inclusion of moral genius. The *Conjectures* arguing against imitation, at the end, puts forward the imitation of Addison, whose "compositions are built with the finest materials in the taste of the ancients and on truly Classic ground" (98).

In this light the account of the deathbed scene reporting Addison's exemplary death at the most empathic point of the essay seems to give an incongruous combination of the problematic concepts considered throughout the *Conjectures*. A puzzling solution to the central problems the topic of original genius poses involves: the blending of moral and original genius, imitation and originality, Richardson's emendations and Young's original version. Thus it seems that Young's claim as well as arguments for originality rest rather on a bold than false assumption.