

***“Like a tenth wave”*: *Imaging Origins and
Originality in Edward Young’s Night
Thoughts (1742-46) and Conjectures on
Original Composition (1759)***

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L’homme est visiblement fait pour penser ; c’est toute sa dignité et tout son métier ; et tout son devoir est de penser comme il faut. Or l’ordre de la pensée est de commencer par soi, et par son auteur et sa fin.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (1670)

Imaging is, in it self, the very height and life of Poetry. ’Tis, as *Longinus* describes it, a Discourse, which, by a kind of Enthusiasm, or extraordinary Emotion of the Soul, makes it seem to us, that we behold those things which the Poet paints, so as to be pleas’d with them, and to admire them.

John Dryden, Preface to *The State of Innocence, and Fall of Man* (1677)

There is a tendency to forget, to underestimate or to dismiss Edward Young. There are, however, good and sound reasons for remembering, reading and appreciating him. Poet, playwright, author of various prose works (moral discourses, critical writings, and sermons), his literary output possesses both diversity and unity. The works that will be addressed here count as two undoubted and significant high points in his poetry and critical writing. *Night Thoughts* is a long, philosophical poem in blank verse, published between 1742 and 1746 in nine separate “Nights” of unequal length. The poem will henceforth be referred to by its acknowledged short title, but the full title is worth recalling: *The Complaint: Or, Night-Thoughts*

on Life, Death, & Immortality.¹ The second and later work that will be touched on, though it will be discussed first, is the remarkable and influential *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759). It is a relatively short tract but a polemical, incisive piece of writing, opportunistic in some respects, published when the time was right (or ripe), a work striking for its vigour and *élan* given that its author was seventy-five at the time of its publication.

The term “originality” is to be understood here in its double sense.² The first meaning refers to the origin, a commencement, a privileged, unique and founding moment, a paragon, perhaps also a return. Then there is the second more modern meaning, where originality appears to have an almost diametrically opposed significance, where being “original” means not respecting the rules and bounds, making one’s own way, out of the beaten track; where originality is something not collective but individual, the fruit and expression of a personal, unique—often solitary—vision. “L’originalité est une indiscipline” wrote the poet and artist Henri Michaux much closer to us in time.³

“Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, / The proper study of Mankind is Man.”⁴ The famous injunction that opens the second epistle of Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man* (1733-34) yokes together at least two distinct ideas and references. The first is the maxim which originates from

¹ All quotations from Young’s *Night Thoughts* follow Stephen Cornford’s edition, *Edward Young: ‘Night Thoughts’* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989). All subsequent references are included in the text of the article in the form of the “Night” reference, followed by the line reference, both in arabic numerals.

² Samuel Johnson glosses as follows the nouns “origin” and “original”:

1. Beginning ; first existence.
2. Fountain, source ; that which gives beginning or existence.
3. First copy ; archetype.
4. Derivation ; descent.

A Dictionary of the English Language, 2 vols., 9th ed., abstracted from the Folio Edition by the author, Samuel Johnson (London: 1790). *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1993) gives in entry (4) for the adjective “original” the more modern meaning which has tended to supplant the original sense of the word, and which appears for the first time in English towards the middle of the 18th century.

4. Given to or displaying independent exercise of the mind or imagination; inventive, fresh, creative.

³ Henri Michaux, *Connaissance par les gouffres* (1961 ; Paris, Gallimard, 1984) 48n1.

⁴ Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, ed. Maynard Mack, vol. 3 (i), *The Twickenham Edition of the Works of Alexander Pope*, gen. ed. John Butt (1950; London and New York: Routledge, 1993) “Epistle 2,” 1-2.

the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, repeated by writers and philosophers down the centuries, among others, by Sir John Davies in *Nosce Teipsum* (1599), John Arbuthnot (1667-1735) in his poem *Gnothi seauton. Know your self* (1734) and Young himself; the second can be traced back to the programmatic proposition from Pierre Charron (1541-1603) that figures at the beginning of *De la sagesse* (1601) —“la vraye science & le vray estude de l’homme, c’est l’homme”—, a sentiment that was to be echoed by Blaise Pascal in *Pensées* (1670). The two lines then, drawing on both the remote and more recent past, succinctly set out and sum up Pope’s poetic agenda; the heroic couplet itself draws up limits and fences and boundaries between the possible and the impossible, the contained (and containable) and the excessive. Man is tempted by presumption and by nature to overreach himself. Pope’s credo here intends to keep man (and things) in check, seems to share something with the more modern Eliotian “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality” and “For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.”⁵

For a poet like Edward Young, Pope’s almost exact contemporary, though the poet of *Night Thoughts* was to outlive him by some twenty years, who was himself to employ the ancient dictum in both *Night Thoughts* and his *Conjectures*,⁶ the emphasis, style and purport are quite different: man is essentially god-like, deiform, “a Terrestrial God” (4.495). Young, after his manner, is prolonging the Neoplatonic tradition; Reason, that divine and God-given capacity, is to be used to approach and understand and adore God. Young sings “*Immortal man!*” (1.452), a man who desires the infinite;

⁵ “Burnt Norton” I, “East Coker” V in T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943).

⁶ See “Night the Fourth”:

Man! Know thyself; all Wisdom centers there:
To none Man seems ignoble, but to Man;
Angels that Grandeur, Men o’erlook, admire:
How long shall Human Nature be Their Book,
Degenerate Mortal! and unread by Thee? (4.484-87).

The maxim in fact makes an earlier appearance in *A Vindication of Providence: Or, a True Estimate of Human Life* (1728). Young identifies the excessive character of desire that he was to develop in the *Night Thoughts*: “Nothing is so strange as Man’s inextinguishable Thirst for *More*: Nay, he pants after That which he *has*. For I affirm that infinite Numbers have *sufficient* Means of Happiness already in their Hands, and *sufficient* Means is what they are reaching after; For who needs more? But Men *know not* what they possess. How Few have made an Inventory of their own Blessings? How Few know what they do *not* want? Hence, *Know thy self* was said to come from Heaven. For without it no Man can be Content. Our pains are from our *Desires*, not our *Wants*.” 47.

a man also of infinite desires. For Young, to know oneself means to acknowledge that man has an immortal soul, and to act and live accordingly. Young's "know thyself" then is a call to benighted man to open his eyes; it implies both looking within to the intimate and beyond to the infinite, and trusting in man's divine nature and vocation.

Yet man, fool man! here burys all his Thoughts;
Inters celestial Hopes without one Sigh:
Prisoner of Earth, and pent beneath the Moon,
Here pinions all his Wishes; wing'd by Heaven
To fly at Infinite. (1.134-38)

It is the antithesis in this respect of Pope's splendidly cautious programme. A partner maxim, "revere thyself," again appears in both *Night Thoughts* and *Conjectures*, though not, unsurprisingly, and significantly enough, in an *Essay on Man*. Young aims then at the infinite, and the infinite is to be understood in its usual sense of the never-ending and boundless, but also as Edmund Burke (1729-97) intends it in part two of his *Philosophical Reflections on the Origins of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), in the paragraph entitled "Infinity in pleasing Objects," where he talks of the pleasure to be found in the contemplation of the unfinished, the evolving or developing, in a spring lamb for example, perceived to be rich with new life and promise.⁷ Man too is unfinished. Young's poetic credo then also involves being true to oneself, but he understands and applies the dictum in a very different way. His poetry is restless, straining to advance; the rhetoric is sometimes strident. It is a complex, essentially Christian movement forward and backward; looking back to the origins of man, as he understands them, in the story of Genesis—following Milton, he returns to the Garden of Eden, one of the central images of the *Night Thoughts*—but also looks forwards with a Blakean-type yearning for a New Jerusalem, what Young calls a "second-Eden." He similarly follows Milton in adopting blank verse as the vehicle for his poetry, the unrhymed iambic pentameter he refers to in the *Conjectures* as "verse unfallen, uncurst; verse reclaim'd, reinthron'd in the

⁷ "Infinity, though of another kind, causes much of our pleasure in agreeable, as well as of our delight in sublime images. The spring is the pleasantest of the seasons; and the young of most animals, though far from being compleatly fashioned, afford a more agreeable sensation than the full grown; because the imagination is entertained with the promise of something more, and does not acquiesce in the present object of the sense. In unfinished sketches of drawing, I have often seen something which pleased me beyond the best finishing; and this I believe proceeds from the cause I have just now assigned." Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. with an Intro. and Notes by Adam Phillips (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1998). Section XI, "Infinity in pleasing Objects."

true *language of the gods*; who never thunder'd nor suffer'd their *Homer* to thunder, in rhyme . . .⁸

Young's *Conjectures*, presented in the form of a letter addressed to his friend, the printer and novelist Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), was not the first occasion on which the poet had evoked the notion of originality. In 1730 when the "War of the Dunces" was at its peak, Young hastened to side with Pope, and his allegiance was to take the form of the offering of two poetic epistles penned in Oxford, where Young was still residing, a Fellow of All Souls. Written in heroic couplets, they are accomplished, entertaining and revealing. They were not Young's first works in the satirical, moral and didactic mode. He already had a high reputation following his seven "characteristical" satires published separately between 1725 and 1728 and known as *Love of Fame: The Universal Passion*. But these later epistles reveal Young's dilemma of identity. In them he sings the praises of Pope (and indeed Swift) in no uncertain terms.

The advice to an author that Young proffers recalls that of Pope in his *Essay on Criticism* (1711). It already introduces, paradoxically so, what was to be one of the central themes of Young's *Conjectures*, the idea that imitation is not enough. Paradoxically because at the same time he seems totally in tune and at ease with the moderation and prudent economy that are characteristic of a certain neoclassicism, at one with its constraints and precepts:

Severely weigh your Learning and your Wit;
Keep down your Pride by what is nobly writ:
No Writer fam'd in your own way pass o'er;
Much trust Example, but Reflection more:
More had the Antients writ, they more had taught;
Which shews some Work is left for modern Thought.
This weigh'd; Perfection know, and known adore;
Toil, burn for That, but do not aim at more:
Above, beneath it, the just limits fix;
And zealously prefer four lines to six.⁹

The passage that consecrates the transition from neo-classicism to pre-romanticism, at least as a statement of intent, comes later in the same epistle,

⁸ *Conjectures on Original Composition in a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison* (London: 1759). Edith J. Morley's edition, with its introduction and appendices, based on the 2nd edition, collated with the first serves here as the reference text: *Edward Young's 'Conjectures on Original Composition'* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1918) 27.

⁹ Young, *Two Epistles to Mr. Pope Concerning the Authors of the Age*, "Epistle 2," 127-36.

and Young thus clearly formulates in 1730 a fundamental and antagonistic distinction between imitation and originality:

Can others write like you? your task give o'er,
'Tis printing what was publish'd long before.
If nought peculiar thro' your labours run,
They're Duplicates, and twenty are but one.
Think frequently, think close, read Nature, turn
Men's manners o'er, and half your Volumes burn:
Dare be your selves; Originals are all;
Great such Attempts, nay glorious is their Fall.¹⁰

There is something (almost) Miltonian in this way of putting things. The *felix culpa* becomes the glorious Fall, associated unexpectedly with the idea of being (daring to be) original. The association is hardly a fortuitous one. Young is indeed sketching out a Promethean poetics.

The imaging process in Young will now be considered, starting with examples in the later prose tract and then turning and returning to the *Night Thoughts* with an aim to showing that the seeds of Young's thought were already sown and had taken root in the earlier poem, that the images he develops were already present in the early 1740s. It is less the choice of metaphors taken individually that is striking in these works than the way Young employs and extends, mixes and juxtaposes them in a concert that gives a final impression of freshness and energy, rather than of stale and laboured repetition. The two works share a number of formulations and images. Both exemplify a peculiarly plastic, mobile and labile imagination.

The *Conjectures* are very much a forward-looking, positive and enthusiastic statement and have the tone and declamatory quality of a manifesto. Taxed, as were his *Night Thoughts*, with lacking form—Edith Morley, a sympathetic reader, is not alone in considering them to be “ill-arranged”—there does nonetheless exist a strong internal coherence.¹¹ The main lines of argument that Young develops in his *Conjectures* are already perceptible in the *Night Thoughts*, but above all both works employ, display and, on occasion, suffer from, a remarkably dense and intense metaphorical

¹⁰ Young, *Two Epistles to Mr. Pope*, “Epistle 2,” 207-14. In 1728, in his “On *Lyrick Poetry*” Young had already written in the same vein: “*Originals* only have true Life, and differ as much from the best *Imitations*, as *Men* from the most animated *Pictures* of them.”

¹¹ *Conjectures*, “Introduction,” xii. She finishes her presentation of Young's treatise thus: “As a plea for independence and for innovation, the *Conjectures* is in every sense a remarkable work, the comparative neglect of which it is hard to understand,” xviii.

texturing. The images at times do not so much follow as trip over each other in their haste.

“Dare be your selves; Originals are all.” These ideas are, then, reasserted and expressed with renewed vigour some 30 years on in *Conjectures on Original Composition*, in which Young puts forward the iconoclastic idea that imitation, far from seeking to be true to nature, in fact goes against it, that nature in no way cautions imitation as a model. To follow nature does not mean to copy it slavishly but to develop and express individual creativity. Here is perhaps the most famous passage from *Conjectures*, which ends with a distinct recall of the *Two Epistles to Mr. Pope*:

Nay, so far are we from complying with a necessity, which nature lays us under, that, [. . .] by a spirit of *Imitation* we counteract nature, and thwart her design. She brings us into the world all *Originals* : No two faces, no two minds, are just alike; but all bear nature’s evident mark of separation on them. Born *Originals*, how comes it to pass that we die *Copies*? (*Conj.* 19-20)

Young, if he feels the need for allies and models, philosophical and literary, the author of *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), Francis Bacon in particular, but also Seneca, Shakespeare of course, Pindar and others, also needs something to kick against. Pope and Swift who died in 1744 and 1745, both marked out for praise in the 1730 *Epistles* (Pope is after all the addressee), are again given some space and time, but here receive short shrift. With these two remarkable and redoubtable writers, merciless debunkers and critics of over-reaching and human pride, safely out of the way, it is as though Young is breathing a sigh of relief, letting off steam and can now lay down the burden of the immediate past; the anxiety of influence is attenuated. At last the coast is clear.

The idea that man originated in an ideal state, out of time, living blissfully unaware of mortality, finitude and suffering, in an un-cursed, innocent state, is common to many cultures and the Garden of Eden is of course the essential representation of this time and place in Judeo-Christian culture. The garden also remains the privileged image for a place of retreat and solace, of peace, beauty and reflection. Young compares writing (composition) itself to a garden, a place of both nature and nurture, where the individual mind can retire, read, meditate, come to know itself, and improve:

It opens a back-door out of the bustle of this busy, and idle world, into a delicious garden of moral and intellectual fruits and flowers; the key of which is denied to the rest of mankind. [. . .] How independent of the world is he, who can daily find new acquaintance, that at once entertain, and

improve him, in the little world, the minute but fruitful creation, of his own mind? (*Conj.* 4-5)

From the outset (and indeed throughout this short treatise) there appears a nexus of related terms: the idea of creation, of giving birth, of bearing fruit. The garden is interiorised. Here the references are classical rather than biblical:

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. (*Conj.* 6)

A further crucial and famous distinction that Young develops is that between the mechanical and the organic or spontaneous:

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. (*Conj.* 7)

Young develops a sense of the word “original” more recognisable to modern ears. Thus, to be original means to leave the mainstream, to quit the beaten track, the thoroughfare of convention and conformity: “All eminence, and distinction, lies out of the beaten road; excursion, and deviation, are necessary to find it; and the more remote your path from the highway, the more reputable . . .”¹²

Young is nailing his colours to the mast. This is where his aesthetics and poetics clearly join and complement his ethics; it is here that the term “pre-romantic” comes into its own, as Young is visibly anticipating the romantic ideology, in the form of the Promethean strain that is with us still today. It is his radical message; a message that extols self-reliance, trusting in one’s own capacities, breaking free from convention. However partial and unequal his own successes in the enterprise may be judged to be, the intention and the message come across loud and clear. This equivalence between the moral purpose and the poetic aspiration that informs both the poem and the *Conjectures* is plainly stated:

Sacer nobis inest Deus, says *Seneca*. With regard to the moral world, *conscience*, with regard to the intellectual, *genius*, is that god within.

¹² Young, *Conjectures*, 11-12.

Genius can set us right in Composition, without the rules of the learned; as conscience sets us right in life, without the laws of the land: *This*, singly, can make us good, as men: *that*, singly, as writers, can, sometimes, make us great. (*Conj.* 15)

And here Young looks forward to the insights of Walter Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom insofar as he emphasizes how much tradition sets the agenda and weighs down upon the writer or artist who struggles to free himself/herself from the burden of the past. Only a genius can escape being intimidated by the successes of past writers and tradition, Young suggests, and goes on to claim that their own success and genius lessen the labour of future generations. Only genii can wipe the slate clean and create from an artistic *tabula rasa*:

For when they enter on subjects which have been in former hands, such is their superiority, that, like a tenth wave, they overwhelm, and bury in oblivion all that went before: And thus not only enrich and adorn, but remove a load, and lessen the labour, of the letter'd world. (*Conj.* 16)

Young has by now assembled a cluster of major terms—originality, genius, imagination, and spontaneity—that one commonly associates with romanticism. At this point he returns to and reworks the garden metaphor, relating the process of imagining to a sort of garden of true being, a creative Eden of the mind, whose qualities are those now identified with the sublime, the infinite, the profuse, and extravagant, but also with the arbitrary and the notion of indirection. He is again thinking in metaphor:

In the fairyland of fancy, genius may wander wild; there it has a creative power, and may reign arbitrarily over its own empire of chimeras. The wide field of nature also lies open before it, where it may range unconfined, make what discoveries it can, and sport with its infinite objects uncontrolled, as far as visible nature extends, painting them as wantonly as it will . . . (*Conj.* 18)

This explicit praise of the inner man, and the call to explore the hidden recesses and riches of the mind is a signal element in both the prose and poetry of Young. He evokes: “our ignorance of the possible dimensions of the mind of man,” and continues, in lines that recall those of his fellow poet and Wykehamist, Sir John Davies: “Nor are we only ignorant of the dimensions of the human mind in general, but even of our own. That a man may be scarce less ignorant of his own powers, than an oyster of its pearl, or a rock of its diamond.”¹³

¹³ Young, *Conjectures*, 22-23. See *Nosce Teipsum* in *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. Robert Krueger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) 1889-1892:

Genius is then what Young was to call in the *Night Thoughts* and the *Conjectures* “the stranger within,” our unknown self. It is at this juncture that Young introduces the “two golden rules” as he calls them that he borrows from ethics: “*Know thyself*” and “*Reverence thyself*.”

Therefore dive deep into thy bosom; learn the depth, extent, bias, and full fort of thy mind; contract full intimacy with the stranger within thee. [. . .] Thyself so reverence as to prefer the native growth of thy own mind to the richest import from abroad; such borrowed riches make us poor. (*Conj.* 24)

And in conclusion Young underlines the fact that man has a moral duty to advance. After reminding the reader that “there has been no fall in man on this side *Adam*” he suggests that modern man is certainly at no disadvantage and, indeed, given the accumulated guidance and wisdom arising from works of the past, is better equipped at present to progress: “this world is a school, as well for intellectual, as moral, advance” (*Conj.* 32).

Night Thoughts, typical in this respect of a number of long philosophical poems of the XVIIIth century, is remarkable for the occurrence of a constant juxtaposition and interaction of two fundamental modes of intellection, reason and imagination. Both are ways of ordering, coming to terms with, and expressing reality. This is perhaps stating (or overstating) the obvious. But the constant interplay between the two does create a real tension. They are sometimes considered, if not as mutually exclusive, then at least as problematical and contradictory. Young in the course of his 10,000 lines of blank verse, interweaves the two and there are indeed moments where they jar. There are passages of metaphorical development, and others of argumentative demonstration. However, as the short title of the poem illustrates, the two are for the most part indissociable.

Night is a vast analogy, the space in which Young’s meditations and ruminations, his enthusiasm and contradictions, are played out. Young’s night is a poetic chronotope, a seemingly limitless stage in time and space, on which to explore the poet’s moral doubts, fears and hopes; a space in which to express his feelings, his sense of loss and bereavement, and his religious questionings and faith, his enthusiasm, to give shape to what

O *ignorant* poore man what doost thou beare
 Lock’t up within the Casket of thy breast?
 What Jewels, and what riches hast thou there?
 What heavenly treasure in so weake a cheast?

Coleridge has called his “figurative metaphysics.”¹⁴ Young, for better and, at times, for worse, thinks in images.

The ideas of spontaneity and growth, the organic aesthetics, the vegetable genius (all described and analysed in detail by M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp*), that characterize German romanticism in particular, are forcefully developed not only in Young’s *Conjectures* but also in his *Night Thoughts*. Two examples of these vital, organic images that were to reappear in the *Conjectures*, already present in *Night Thoughts*, are in many ways inextricably linked. The first concerns the garden image, the idea of a return to, and regeneration or restoration of, Eden and man’s divine origin. The second concerns the essential Youngian idea of progress and advancement, both spiritual and moral, linked to the idea of originality in poetry.

Young develops at various points in the *Night Thoughts* the idea and image of embryonic growth. Man is unfinished but full of potential. In the following example from “Night the Fourth” it is the contemplation of God on the cross that leads Young to the revelation of man’s potential destiny and vocation, a passage where Young also gives free expression to the Christian sublime:

The Beam dim Reason sheds shows Wonders There;
 What High Contents? Illustrious Faculties?
 But the grand *Comment*, which displays at full
 Our human Height, scarce sever’d from Divine,
 By Heaven compos’d, was publish’d on the *Cross!*
 Who looks on that, and sees not in himself
 An awful Stranger, a Terrestrial God?
 A glorious Partner with the Deity
 In that high Attribute, immortal Life!
 If a God bleeds, he bleeds not for a Worm:
 I gaze, and as I gaze, my mounting Soul
 Catches strange Fire, Eternity! at thee,
 And drops the World --- or rather, more enjoys:
 How chang’d the Face of Nature? how improv’d?
 What seem’d a Chaos, shines a glorious World,
 Or, what a World, an *Eden*; heighten’d all!
 It is another Scene! another Self!
 And still another, as Time rolls along,
 And that a *Self* far more illustrious still. (4.489-507)

¹⁴ *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) 211.

As in the *Conjectures*, ethics and aesthetics, religious belief and poetics, the natural sublime and the marvellous, are intermingled. Looking up at the night sky he writes:

This Prospect vast, what is it? – Weigh'd aright,
 'Tis Nature's System of Divinity,
 And ev'ry Student of the *Night* inspires:
 'Tis *elder* Scripture, writ by GOD's own Hand;
 Scripture authentic! uncorrupt by Man [. . .]. (9.643-47)

The stars show us the way with their paradoxical message: the revelation of the light of stars and other worlds that only shine when darkness falls; a world bereft of objects, without human presence, an empty infinitude, yet full of a promise that for Young is the presage of immortality.

The night is obviously both the central formal and thematic element in the poem. It is omnipresent. Young uses the garden metaphor to describe the night sky and to compare the vault of heaven to a second Eden: "A fairer *Eden*, endless in the Skies" (9.387) or again, in a clear reference to Milton, "a Paradise un-lost" (9.1071), and "The Garden of the DEITY, / Blossom'd with Stars, redundant in the Growth / Of Fruit ambrosial; *moral* Fruit to Man" (9.1042-44). It is this propensity to fashion and mix the abstract and material, the moral and spiritual, the argumentative and metaphorical that characterises the poem as a whole.

In the following passage Young develops the idea of the human destiny as a divine vocation, the draw of the spectacle of the night skies, with the myriad stars and infinite space as a call to man to reject the sublunary, to aspire to the eternal, to quit his exile here on earth and return to his true, celestial origins and home. Young again works in a remarkable number of images and *topoi* in a long, sublime verse paragraph:

The Soul of Man was made to walk the Skies;
 Delightful Outlet of her Prison *Here!*
There, disincumber'd from her Chains, the Ties
 Of Toys terrestrial, she can rove at large;
There, freely can respire, dilate, extend,
 In full Proportion let loose all her Pow'rs;
 And, *undeluded*, grasp at something Great:
 Nor, as a Stranger, does she wander *There*;
 But, wonderful Herself, thro' Wonder strays;
 Contemplating *their* Grandeur, finds *her own*;
 Dives deep in their Oeconomy divine,
 Sits high in Judgment on their various Laws,
 And, like a Master, judges not amiss:
 Hence, greatly pleas'd, and justly proud, the Soul

Grows conscious of her Birth celestial; breathes
 More Life, more Vigour, in her native Air;
 And feels herself *at home* among the Stars;
 And, feeling, emulates her Country's Praise. (9.1018-35)

The poet expresses his nostalgia for an elsewhere (and implicitly for a future state too), in which man, wandering and in exile, quits “this foreign Field” (7.41) and the soul “feels herself *at home* among the Stars.” The verbs used express an invitation (almost a summons) to an astral voyage, the voyage itself being the symbol of a mobile imagination, freed from the objects and ties of this world: “rove,” “respire,” “dilate,” “extend,” “let loose,” “wander,” “stray,” verbs which all insist on the notion of divagation, of wandering with no aim in view, of indirection, of breaking free. Consciousness itself is a process: “the Soul / Grows conscious of her Birth celestial.”

Young here develops two of the *topoi* that are present throughout the poem: sublunary existence is a prison; life is an illusion. The true Youngian life aspires to the starry heavens, a world where the soul is in its element, seized by infinitude. Freed from all shackles, from all constraints, it is, in the image of the celestial scene, grandiose, sublime, conscious of its divine origin, of its vocation, of its destiny and its destination. Here then is the Youngian sublime with its peculiarly self-referential, autotelic and autosoteric quality, man as responsible for his own salvation, both moral and aesthetic:

How Great,
 How Glorious, *then*, appears the *Mind* of Man,
 When in it All the Stars, and Planets, roll?
 And what it *seems*, it *is*: *Great* Objects make
Great Minds, enlarging as their Views enlarge;
Those still more Godlike, as *These* more Divine. (9.1061-66)

As guide and psychopomp he takes his adversary–cum–alter ego, Lorenzo, his interlocutor and foil throughout the poem, on a journey to the sidereal and imaginative beyond, with a paradoxical reference to a Prometheus, innocent yet liberated by a transgressive act:

Come, my PROMETHEUS, from thy pointed Rock
 Of *false* Ambition, if unchain'd, we'll mount;
 We'll, *innocently*, steal celestial Fire,
 And kindle our Devotion at the *Stars*;
 A Theft, that shall not chain, but set thee free. (9.615-19)

Here again the reader is confronted with an abundance of commonplace metaphors. The theme of the Promethean destiny of man, but in which man

is not so much a usurper as a partner of the divine prerogative, a destiny which is potential, yet to be realized, is a leitmotif of the poem.

Following other references and traces one discovers the expression of a sustained moral throughout the poem. Man must exercise his free will, a gift of God which despite the Fall and man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden remains intact, and is, according to Young, one of the principal elements of man's divine identity. Thus man, God's creature, unceasingly makes and creates himself morally, in the same way that he "creates" the world aesthetically and poetically through his senses. It is in this respect that man is embryonic, in that he is always in a state of becoming, and has not yet achieved his full potential. He is a being in a state of becoming. The model proposed is thus optimistic, melioristic and dynamic.

For Young, and this is a central point in his religion and poetics, man is not immobilized and helpless in a fixed, immutable order. If the chain of being continues to exist, at least metaphorically, the chain or scale has thus become a ladder, hence the omnipresence in the poem of the idea of an ascension and a transformation. Young Christianises and poetises the chain of being to his own ends, associating the revolution of the seasons, an image of renewal, and including the idea of a progression which is not only possible, but necessary, inherent to man.¹⁵

Young's poetic vision thus contains a linear element. One of the figures used to evoke this dynamic trajectory, this spiritual progression, is then that which is at the heart of romantic poetics, the organic, biological, embryonic metaphor. Young, in a poetics which is at once Christian and proto-romantic, develops the idea of a teleology, of a destiny to be fulfilled by each and every individual, a divine scheme which is also a return in so far as it unfolds and repeats itself both for each individual soul and for humanity as a whole. It is both ontogenetic and phylogenetic.

Robin Dix, referring to *The Mirror and the Lamp* in which M. H. Abrams draws a distinction between two polar poetics, the mimetic and the expressive theories,¹⁶ the first founded on the project of establishing a faithful representation of the external world, the second valorising the

¹⁵ See for example "Night the Sixth," 677-92.

¹⁶ M. H. Abrams sums up the expressive theory as follows: "In general terms, the central tendency of the expressive theory may be summarized in this way: a work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. The primary source and subject matter of a poem, therefore, are the attributes and actions of the poet's own mind [. . .]." *The Mirror and the Lamp* 22.

internal, individual vision and reaction to the world, sees in the images evoking fecundity employed by Mark Akenside (1721-1770) in *The Pleasures of Imagination* (1744) an early formulation of the theory of originality that Young was to develop in his *Conjectures on Original Composition*. Dix quotes an extended passage by Akenside in the course of which the images invoke a quasi biological model of poetics in the third book of that poem: “The poet is described as ‘The child of fancy’ whose ‘breast’ is ‘pregnant’ with images (iii. 375-6); his ‘plastic pow’rs / Labour for action’ (iii. 381-2). His material comes to him ‘From the womb of earth’ and from the ‘ocean’s bed’ [. . .].”¹⁷ He glosses this passage as follows: “From the frequency with which these images of fecundity appear, it is clear that Akenside was consciously drawing a parallel between the production of a work of art and the production of a living organism. However, it must also be admitted that he seems not to have realized the full significance of his metaphor.”¹⁸ Dix adds that “The realization that the image could be developed into a theory capable of supplanting the conventional doctrine of mimesis was left to Young, who [. . .] set the two in opposition.”

While accepting that a clearly marked opposition between mechanical and organic is not explicit in *Night Thoughts*, the organic vision, which takes the growth of the natural world as its basis and model, is already present in “Night the First” (1742) in a passage where Young juxtaposes Neoplatonic and organic elements. He invites the reader to see the cemetery as a place of life and hope. It is life itself that is illusory:

How populous? how vital, is the Grave?
 This is Creation’s melancholy Vault,
 The Vale funereal, the sad *Cypress* gloom;
 The land of Apparitions, empty Shades:
 All, all on earth is *Shadow*, all beyond
 Is *Substance*; the reverse is Folly’s *creed*;
 How solid all, where Change shall be no more? (1.115-21)

After this rapid evocation of an again paradoxical world, both lethal and life-giving, Young inverts the usual order of things evoking death as the dawn of being, a new life, where all will be “Embryos of Existence free”:

This is the bud of Being, the dim Dawn,
 The twilight of our Day; the Vestibule,

¹⁷ See Robin Dix, “Organic Theories of Art: The Importance of Embryology” *Notes & Queries* 230 (June 1985): 215. Dix points out that Akenside trained as a doctor. His thesis which he presented in Leyden in 1744 was entitled *De Ortu et Incremento Foetus Humani*.

¹⁸ Robin Dix, “Organic Theories of Art”: 216.

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Life's Theater as yet is shut, and Death,
 Strong Death alone can heave the massy Bar;
 This gross impediment of Clay remove,
 And make us Embryos of Existence free.
 From *real* life, but little more remote
 Is *He*, not yet a candidate for Light,
 The *future* Embryo, slumbering in his Sire.
 Embryos we must be, till we burst the Shell,
 Yon ambient, azure shell, and spring to Life,
 The life of Gods: O Transport! and of Man. (1.122-33)

Here, as elsewhere, the images seem to slide and merge into each other before they are fully formed. One remarks also the presence of paradox and excess embodied in the oxymoron, “momentary Ages,” and the promise of a Garden of Eden to come:

On life's fair Tree, fast by the throne of God:
 What golden Joys ambrosial clust'ring glow,
 In *His* full beam, and ripen for the Just,
 Where momentary Ages are no more? (1.140-43)

This image, or rather this cluster of images around the idea of the embryo, recurs in various guises throughout the poem. Further on in “Night the First” Young evokes the negative side of the image. Man is unable to evolve and progress; he is doomed to remain in the embryonic state:

Of Man's miraculous Mistakes, This bears
 The Palm, “That all Men are about to live.”
 For ever on the Brink of being born [. . .]. (1.398-400)

But fullest expression is given to this “Embryo-creation” (5.99) in “Night the Seventh” where Young neither for the first nor the last time strives to persuade Lorenzo that immortality alone can provide the key to the enigma of human existence. In a passage in which he anticipates the *Conjectures*, he makes use of images of fertility or of an impeded development: “unripen'd” (7.65) and “immature” (7.76). Young asserts that everything in man, his reason, like his passions, his instinct and desires, show that he has a divine calling, that his final destination is not this world, that he cannot and should not be satisfied, limit himself and content himself with it:

OUR Heads, our Hearts, our *Passions*, and our *Pow'rs*,
 Speak the same Language; call us to the Skies;
 Unripen'd *These* in this inclement Clime,
 Scarce rise above Conjecture, and Mistake;
 And for this Land of Trifles, *Those* too strong,

Tumultuous rise, and tempest human Life;
 What Prize on Earth can pay us for the Storm?
 Meet Objects for our *Passions* Heav'n ordain'd,
 Objects that challenge all their Fire, and leave
 No Fault, but in Defect: Blest Heav'n! Avert
 A bounded Ardor for unbounded Bliss;
 O for a Bliss unbounded! Far beneath
 A Soul immortal, is a mortal Joy.
 Nor are our *Pow'rs* to perish immature;
 But, after feeble Effort, *here*, beneath
 A brighter Sun, and in a nobler Soil,
 Transplanted from this sublunary Bed,
 Shall flourish fair, and put forth all their Bloom. (7.63-80)

Yet as he advances in his quest doubts arise, objections appear, the certainties and affirmations are tempered and replaced by hesitations, questionings, *ressentiment* and reproach:

To Man, why, Stepdame *Nature!* so severe?
 Why thrown aside thy Master-piece half-wrought,
 While meaner Efforts thy last Hand enjoy?
 Or, if abortively poor Man must die,
 Nor reach, what reach he might, why die in Dread?
 Why curst with Foresight? Wise to Misery?
 Why of his proud Prerogative the Prey?
 Why less pre-eminent in rank than Pain? (7.93-100)

Why would God have conceived and created an unfinished, imperfect creature if there was no specific design and purpose? Why is man created conscious of his unfinished state and does he feel abandoned, as though in exile? What is the source of this deep-rooted and endemic dissatisfaction? Such questionings, petitions and recriminations are not unrelated to those of the puritan imagination which itself insists on the representation of life as a simple passage, as a snare, a voyage fraught with peril, temptation and suffering, the “Slough of Despond” of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, or, in a more encouraging light, as a pilgrimage. Man’s predicament is for the most part expressed in negative terms; he is a stranger to the world (and to himself), exiled from the beyond. Young (whom Hoxie Neale Fairchild calls “an emotional Christian” but also a “pre-romantic Puritan”)¹⁹ gives shape to these complex intuitions and emotions in depth and at length in *Night Thoughts*. He goes on to develop a more positive

¹⁹ Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry 1740-1780: Religious Sentimentalism in the Age of Johnson*, vol. 2 (New York: Morningside Heights; Columbia UP, 1942) 132.

aspect of his vision with freshness and insight in his discussion of originality in the *Conjectures*.

If Young is seeking solace (the poem is after all a complaint, completed and resolved by the “consolation” of “Night the Ninth and Last”), his restlessness, curiosity and essential disquiet stay with him to the end. He is suspended and not unlike Pope’s man “He hangs between.”²⁰ Like an 18th-century wotwo he moves between two worlds, in quest of compensations for the trials and tribulations of this life. He seeks an answer in religion and the divine economy, in his particular vision and version of astro-theology: “What Prize on Earth can pay us for the Storm?” (7.69) he asks. Like Ted Hughes’s wotwo he goes on looking.

Young’s “originality” is then a call to arms, a rallying cry, an invitation to man to advance, to realize his true self, to recognise, nurture, and accomplish his divine nature and vocation: “In Quest of New, and Wonderful, to Man” (9.1759). Man’s divine origin is itself the source of his originality. The latter manifests itself in a sort of poetic exuberance which counterbalances what Chateaubriand called Young’s “philosophie morbide.” In this sense it is necessarily Janus-like, looking in two directions, forwards and beyond, indeed beyond life itself, but also behind; it is circular in that the final gesture is the closing of this virtuous (Christian) circle and cycle, one of several oppositions and paradoxes that characterise Young’s life and writings. The forward, linear movement is thus ultimately a return to first sources.

A. O. Lovejoy sums up as follows this transition from the fixed and closed to a dynamic and open order in *The Great Chain of Being*:

Thus, at last, the Platonistic scheme of the universe is turned upside down. Not only had the originally complete and immutable Chain of Being been converted into a Becoming, in which all genuine possibles are, indeed, destined to realization grade after grade, yet only through a vast, slow unfolding in time; but now God himself is placed in, or identified with, this Becoming.²¹

The process of the breaking up, of the transmutation of this “closed” world, of this fixed hierarchy, is as slow as it is complex, and arguably reaches its (or an) apotheosis politically with the French Revolution, and poetically with the dawn of romanticism. Originality in this light is not then a return to a first cause so much as the advent of an order of becoming, not

²⁰ Pope, *Essay on Man*, “Epistle the Second” 7.

²¹ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (1936; Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1950) 325-26.

fixed but dynamic, not stasis but turbulence, not product but process to use Northrop Frye's distinction; the overthrow of a certain hierarchy, the *ancien régime* of the mind. Young is always instinctively aware of the plastic potential of metaphors, seizes on this change, and the scale of being becomes for him a vital metaphor, a ladder of becoming. As he writes in the *Conjectures*: "Nature herself sets the ladder, all wanting is our ambition to climb."

