Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature

Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English

Band: 8 (1995)

Artikel: The genius as compositor : Young's Conjectures on Original Composition and the imprimatur of romanticism

Autor: Gutbrodt, Fritz

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99909

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Mehr erfahren

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. En savoir plus

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. Find out more

Download PDF: 16.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, https://www.e-periodica.ch

The Genius as Compositor: Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* and the Imprimatur of Romanticism

Fritz Gutbrodt

> "Why should it seem altogether impossible, that Heaven's latest editions of the human mind may be the most correct and fair; that the day may come when the moderns may proudly look back on the comparative darkness of former ages, [...] reputing Homer and Demosthenes as the dawn of divine genius?"
> Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*

> "I was in a Printing house in Hell & saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation."
> Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

> "Mr Bloom stood by, hearing the loud throbs of cranks, watching the silent typesetters at their cases."
> Joyce, *Ulysses*

I. Transmissions

Young's heavenly press and Blake's printing house in hell share the 18th-century interest in the press as the main agent in the transmission of reason and imagination, literature and knowledge. Widely differing in their approach, they both develop a perspective in which poetry and authorship emerge as an issue of literary technology and poetic genius is measured by its proximity to the printing press. The original genius, one might conjecture, is a compositor.

No other author in English literature has been more radical in his resolution to exchange the writer's desk with the printer's press than the romantic poet whose career began during his partnership in a print-shop and who signed most of his works in the name of "The Author & Printer W Blake." He composed his illuminated printings by etching text and pictures directly on the copperplates, uniting invention and execution in a creative process that *performs* writing as printing. It is this performance that turns the workrooms in the "Printing house in Hell" into a visionary space where Blake breaks with, and mocks, traditional modes of literary production that separate the author from the printer and set up the press as an instrument of mere reproduction and transmission. Compared to the sublime figures of the Dragon-Man "clearing away the rubbish from a caves mouth," the Viper in the second chamber "folding round the rock & the cave," the Eagle in the third that "caused the inside of the cave to be infinite," the "Lions of flaming fire raging around & melting the metals into living fluids" in the fourth, and the "Unnam'd forms, which cast the metals into the expanse" in the fifth chamber of Blake's "Printing house," the men shown in the sixth and last chamber appear as passive recipients, as the mere archivists of poetic vision: "There they were reciev'd by Men who occupied the sixth chamber, and took the forms of books & were arranged in libraries."[1]

The co-instantaneous nature of writing and printing shows in Blake's work not only in the incidental reflections on his technique of relief etching but also, and primarily, in the fact that his method of composition necessitated a writing and drawing *in reverse*. He inscribed his texts on the copperplates in mirror-writing, the pictures were etched as mirror-images.[2] In printing, the negative and the positive are – like heaven and hell – at once closely related and radically dissimilar, and much of Blake's philosophic and visionary argument – notably his revision of *Milton* – is based on an interplay between exact correspondence and radical difference that has its counterpart in the technique of the poems' production. Central to his mythical vision, the working of the press also has clear political implications

[1] David V. Erdman (ed.), *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York: Anchor Press, 1982), 40. Henceforth cited as E, followed by page numbers.

[2] See Robert N. Essick, *William Blake: Printmaker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 206-16 for a careful as well as cautious reading of Blake's references to printing in his poetry. Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) addresses Blake's work from a pragmatic perspective, adding a great number of photographs illustrating his technique of etching. The historical significance of Blake's reproductive techniques is intriguingly presented by Morris Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992). In particular, see section IV, "Technology: The Artistic Machine," 153-272.

for Blake. "The Labours of the Artist, the Poet, the Musician, have been proverbially attended by poverty and obscurity," he writes in the 1793 Prospectus of his works, adding that "this was never the fault of the Public, but was owing to the neglect of means to propagate such works as have wholly absorbed the Man of Genius. Even Milton and Shakespeare could not publish their own works."[3] In order to become independent of the booksellers, the poet must either have the exclusive copyright on his work or he must own the means of its reproduction in print. In the absence of the former, Blake concludes that the "Man of Genius" must be his own printer. His *Milton* performs what Milton lacked. It is in both an aesthetic and political sense that the printing press sits at the centre of Blake's universe, marrying heaven and hell.

Although Young's perspective on the role of the press in the production of literature would only assign him a place in the library or archive of Blake's "Printing house in Hell," his *Conjectures* marks an important step in the intrusion of the original genius into the domain of the compositor or typesetter. The heavenly press operating in the passage cited as epigraph presents Homer or Demosthenes at the "dawn of divine genius."[4] What dawns upon Young in his essay is that their work is related to the work of modern authors like a rough draft to a fair copy or like a manuscript to the galleypage: "Why should it seem altogether impossible, that Heaven's latest editions of the human mind may be the most correct and fair?" Homer might have been writing under the influence of divine inspiration; the moderns receive their inspiration from Heaven in the form of already printed books. The invention of the printing press is what distinguishes the work of the ancients from that of the moderns, and it is not surprising that Young should focus on this progress in literary technology. Interestingly, it is precisely the "perpetuating power of the press" (II: 553) that with its reprinting of the classics fortifies the position of the ancients. Young's response to the ancients are those "latest editions of the human mind," the poets of genius, which Heaven imprints and issues as an inspiration for the moderns:

---

[3] E, 692. Blake's remark about Milton seems to rely on 18th-century accounts of Milton's unfair treatment by Simmons, the publisher of *Paradise Lost*. For a different view, see Peter Lindenbaum, "Milton's Contract," in Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi (eds.), *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 175-90, where Milton is presented as the "earliest modern professional author" in English literature.

[4] Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, in *The Complete Works, Poetry and Prose*, 2 vols. (London, 1854; rpt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1968), II: 571. Further references to Young's works are to this edition and will henceforth be cited in the text.

> 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. (II: 559)

What begins as presentation of the traditional distinction between *ingenium* and *studium* ends up in a rapturous idolatry whose cadence has gained speed and momentum in the preceding pages of the essay. "Genius has ever been supposed to partake of something Divine" (II: 556), Young writes earlier with reference to Cicero, then quickly cites Seneca in support of this supposition: "*Sacer nobis inest Deus.*" As he translates the Latin of the ancient philosopher into modern English: "With regard to the intellectual, genius is that god within. Genius can set us right in *composition* without the rules of the learned" (II: 557). In the *Conjectures*, innate genius enters the literary scene of modernity as the imprimatur of a singular and divine inspiration, as a god within. In composition, the original genius – to press this point once more – is a compositor.

Tracing the trajectory of this argument in Young's essay, we ought to keep in mind that it is itself a notion inspired through the example of two of his literary allies: Samuel Richardson and Joseph Addison. Young's deeply unoriginal frame of mind was always looking for exemplary models, and if one might say that his vision of the original genius writing directly into the printing press will find its romantic fulfilment with Blake, it clearly took its origin from his friendship with Richardson, the prolific 18th-century man of letters to whom the *Conjectures* are addressed in the form of an epistle. Richardson is not only the co-author of the essay, which is in fact a composite composition,[5] but also its printer. Like Blake he started out as an apprentice in a print-shop, worked as compositor, corrector, and overseer of a press, was made freeman of the Stationers' Company, and finally set up his own printing-house in Fleet Street. He obtained a contract to print the *Philosophical Transactions* for the Royal Society and, having been printer to the Parliament, even secured a law patent that gave him the exclusive right to print books dealing with the common law in his function of Law Printer to His Majesty in 1760, the year after the publication of the *Conjectures*.[6] It is more than a gesture of recognition and gratitude when Young dedicates his essay to "The Author of Sir Charles Grandison." For Richardson's career is in fact crucial to much of his argument in that he achieved as a printer

---

[5] For Richardson's share in the writing of the essay, see Alan D. McKillop, "Richardson, Young, and the *Conjectures*," *Modern Philology* 22 (1925): 391-404.

[6] On his business career, see T. C. Duncan Eaves and Ben D. Kimpel, *Samuel Richardson: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 37-86, 154-66, 498-510.

what Young never attained as a writer. Since the end of the 17th century the Royal Society had been the institution where the voice of the moderns claimed supremacy over the ancients particularly with regard to scientific and technological progress. As the printer of their *Transactions*, Richardson worked, as it were, the machinery of their ideological claims. In a similarly oblique way his contract with Parliament gave him, at the cases of his printing press, a "voice" and a "seat" to which Young, despite all his shifting of political alliances, aspired in vain. While Richardson was appointed to print the King's laws, Young was in the same year merely proposed for an appointment as Clerk of the Closet to the Princess Dowager of Wales. Public recognition came to him very late in life, and the considerable amount of money he made through his writing constituted something like a compensation. This is why the scene at Addison's deathbed looms so large in the second half of the essay. Addison was not only the first modern English author to write about genius but also the first to go public every day as a writer. We shall have to see in what way his death conceived of as the last act of moral genius articulates the problem of heritage and the transfer of originality. Suffice it to say at this point that the essay's eulogy of Addison, which has always been regarded as some incongruous addition to the topic of originality, squares nicely with the questions at issue here. For Addison's career is marked, as he puts it in the first number of the *Spectator*, by the firm resolve, "to Print my self out, if possible, before I Die."[7] This is old Young's intention in 1759. Printing out its life is in fact the only legacy the genius can confer on posterity, its only form of procreation.

Young was one of the first authors to emphasize the link between genius and intellectual property.[8] In 1741, the bookseller Edmund Curll, one of English literature's most notorious pirates, published an unauthorized edition of his collected works, depriving him of some of the proceeds from

---

[7] Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), I: 5.

[8] See the important essay by Gerhard Plumpe, "Eigentum – Eigentümlichkeit: Ueber den Zusammenhang ästhetischer und juristischer Begriffe im 18. Jahrhundert," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 23.2 (1979): 175-196, with a succinct assessment of Young and the English tradition on pp. 188-92. See also the formidable book by Heinrich Bosse, *Autorschaft ist Werkherrschaft: Ueber die Entstehung des Urheberrechts aus dem Geist der Goethezeit* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1981). The influential essay by Martha Woodmansee, "The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the 'Author'," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17.4 (1984): 425-48, drawing on Bosse's book, has helped to initiate the recent discussion of copyright in American and English criticism. See pp. 430-31 and p. 446 for references to the *Conjectures*. The immense popularity of Young in Germany has led to a peculiar re-discovery through Kant, Lavater, and German ideologies of geniality.

his writing.[9] He had to wait until 1757 for the first corrected and thus authorized edition of his works to appear in print, and the postulate, advanced in his essay, of the genius's right of ownership derives its urgency from this experience. It is also significant with regard to the fact that the printing of *Sir Charles Grandison*, the object of the essay's dedication, had to be interrupted when a pirated edition was published in Ireland, necessitating an extensive revision of the text in order to make it an original composition again. It is indeed ironic that Richardson's successful solicitation of a law patent gave him an exclusive right to print the kind of legal texts that failed to protect his copyright on his own novels.[10] Only in pursuing originality, Young argues, the poet can secure his intellectual property by the authority of his authorship:

> His works will stand distinguished; his the sole property of them; which property alone can confer the noble title of an author; that is, of one who, to speak accurately, thinks and *composes*; while other invaders of the press, how voluminous and learned soever, [...] only read and write.
> (II: 565; emphasis added)

In Young's distinction between mere writers and original authors the former appear as unauthorized "invaders of the press" while the latter seem to be able to appropriate the press as the source of their originality. While some just scribble, others compose their composition as the compositors of their own texts. Whenever the essay plays on the double meaning of composition, the original genius is not far. In this instance, Young does not miss the chance to ridicule the poet-scholar that has in fact done most to establish the authority of the author in the 18th century:

> While the true genius is crossing all public roads into fresh untrodden ground, he, up to the knees in antiquity, is treading the sacred footsteps of great examples, with the blind veneration of a bigot saluting the papal toe.
> (II: 565)

---

[9] In the same year, Curll published an unauthorized edition of Swift's correspondence, containing also letters to and from Pope, who successfully sued Curll under the Statute of Anne. See Mark Rose, "The Author in Court: *Pope v. Curll* (1741)," in Woodmansee and Jaszi (eds.), *The Construction of Authorship*, 211-29. Interestingly, Curll is mentioned and chastised by Young as early as 1731 in his *Epistles to Mr. Pope, Concerning the Authors of the Age*. In one of the couplets, "his injured purse" rhymes with "nor Curll can wish them worse" (II: 38, ll. 285-6).

[10] However, as Eaves and Kimpel point out in *Samuel Richardson*, 507, "there was some dispute about what rights it gave to print those [books] dealing with statute law." Existing copyright laws were statutory, and Eaves and Kimpel report on a controversy over Richardson's right to print a quarto edition of the Statutes at Large, 508-9.

Denouncing the scholar and imitator of ancient works as a catholic stooping to kiss the "*papal* toe," Young treads on the toe of *Pope*, whose translation of Homer started the splendid career of a poet that "more than any other writer of his day [...] behaved like a literary entrepreneur and made a fortune from his verse."[11] Looking to Richardson, who as prosperous master printer and sentimental letter writer seems to exemplify his fantasy about the original genius as a compositor perfectly, Young turns a blind eye to Pope, who even as a child seems to have shown an unusual interest in print. Joseph Warton relates the anecdote that, "He was taught to read very early by an aunt; and of his own indefatigable industry learned to write, by copying printed books, which he executed with great neatness and accuracy."[12] Soon he would reproduce his copious handwriting in print.

Young's polemic against Pope is part of the waning controversy between the ancients and moderns whose most clamorous English battle-cry was raised by Swift in his *Battel Fought between the Antient and the Modern Books in St. James's Library* and published in 1710. The *Conjectures* stage the controversy one last time as a stand-off between the original genius and its imitators. While Swift's armies clash in a manner that makes Homer's war scenes pale in comparison and brings the narrator so close to the frontline that the report about the war gets itself wounded by gaps inflicted on the manuscript, Young presides over the strife between original works and mere copies like a general observing the battle from a distant hill. What makes this detachment possible is the different weaponry Young brings to the combat. In Swift's library the main weapon on both sides is the quill used to attack the enemy at close quarters:

> Now, it must here be understood, that *Ink* is the great missive Weapon, in all Battels of the *Learned*, which, convey'd thro' a sort of Engine, call'd a Quill, infinite Numbers of these are darted at the Enemy, by the Valiant on each side, with equal Skill and Violence, as if it were an Engagement of *Porcupines*.[13]

In the *Conjectures*, the moderns spill their ink mainly by means of the printing press, which allows Young to withdraw to what he calls the "sweet refuge" of his library: "With what a gust do we retire to the disinterested and

---

[11] Mark Rose, "The Author in Court: *Pope v. Curll* (1741)," 216.

[12] Joseph Warton, *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, 4th ed. (London: Dodsley, 1782), I: 81. The book is dedicated to Young.

[13] Jonathan Swift, *The Battle of the Books*, in *A Tale of a Tub*, ed. D. Nichol Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 221.

immortal friends in our closet" (II: 550). In his *Epistles to Mr. Pope, Concerning the Authors of the Age*, written in 1731 on the occasion of the publication of the *Dunciad Variorum*, Young had with great sympathy addressed the poet at Twickenham as someone patiently turning "the volumes of the wise and good" (II: 31, l. 2). In 1759, Pope's work seems to disturb the peace enjoyed by the retired rector of Welwyn although the heavily edited and annotated *Dunciad Variorum*, a book to end all books, would make a splendid addition to his library. In her historical account of copyright in the 18th century, Ross gives an assessment of Pope's achievement that comes close to Young's endeavor of presenting the act of printing as an instance of original writing: "Caught at this turning point of history, Pope helps to authorize the individual's possession of authority as an *effect of print*, even as he attempts to prevent this process by printing satires against individually possessed, self-proclaimed authorities."[14]

It does not seem altogether accurate to say that the 18th century marks a momentous turning point in Western history with regard to its system of establishing public authority. For centuries, the bible had represented supreme authority as the Book or the Scriptures, had led to a hermeneutics based on the letter as law and had collaborated in the analogous establishment of political power by decreeing and canonizing the laws as letters. The invention of print did not fundamentally change this structure. One might rather maintain that, far from being "an effect of print," the power of textual or literal authority *diminishes* with the advent of modern technological changes in its modes of reproduction. It diminishes not so much because the mass production of printed matter introduced a plurality of opinions competing for some measure of authority, which is to be considered only as a contingent effect of quantity, but it decreased mainly because the public market of publications works or functions according to the principle of a *division of labor*. This is true for any market economy, and the business of authors trading some work, poem, or treatise for recognition, admiration, or respect paid in the form of an honorarium or royalties is no exception. Before the advent of desktop publishing, the author wrote and the publisher printed. The questions of copyright and intellectual property became a prominent issue in the 18th century precisely because the authors did not have sufficient authority or control over their work. For someone else – the bookseller or printer – could make their work also his work, and often did so without authorization. The publishing business is a joint

[14] Marlon B. Ross, "Authority and Authenticity: Scribbling Authors and the Genius of Print in Eighteenth-Century England," in *The Construction of Authorship*, 247. Emphasis added.

venture, and in the 18th century many a pirate was plotting an unfriendly takeover.

The division of labor in the writing and printing of a work raises the question of who is actually talking. Until the end of the 18th century spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and typographical layout were considered the domain of the printer, who owned the letters or the type and did not easily tolerate authorial interference in those matters.[15] Who is the author of a work thus written by several hands? The emergence of the original genius at the forefront of aesthetic theory first of all touches on this crucial question, and the debate about copyright is primarily concerned with a redistribution of the rights pertaining to the author's and the printer's respective labor. In his tract on unauthorized reprinting, "Von der Unrechtmässigkeit des Büchernachdrucks," Kant thinks he can solve the legal questions surrounding the problem of piracy by sorting out the different voices of the author and the publisher. "In einem Buche als Schrift redet der Autor zu seinem Leser; und der, welcher sie gedruckt hat, redet durch seine Exemplare nicht für sich selbst, sondern ganz und gar im Namen des Verfassers."[16] The printer appears as a mere transmitter of an author's word. He does not speak in his own voice but on behalf of the author, and in this sense he is *mute*. At the same time, however, he creates "in seinem eigenen Namen das stumme Werkzeug der Ueberbringung einer Rede des Autors an das Publikum" (81). Distinguishing what the publisher or printer does in his own name from what he does in the name of the author, Kant arrives at the following conclusion:

> Das Exemplar, wornach der Verleger drucken lässt, ist ein Werk des Autors (*opus*) und gehört dem Verleger, nachdem er es im Manuscript oder gedruckt erhandelt hat, gänzlich zu, um alles damit zu thun, was er will, und was in seinem eigenen Namen gethan werden kann; denn das ist ein Erforderniss

---

[15] Roger Lonsdale's preface to his edition of *The Poems of Gray, Collins, and Goldsmith* (London: Longman, 1969), xiii-xviii is still a good introduction to the problems attending editorial and printers' conventions. With regard to the significance of typography and Young's *Night Thoughts*, see Nicolas Barker, "Typography and the Meaning of Words: The Revolution in the Layout of Books in the Eighteenth Century," in Giles Barber and Bernhard Fabian (eds.), *Buch und Buchhandel in Europa im achtzehnten Jahrhundert / The Book and the Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Hamburg: Hauswedell, 1981), 134: "The problem is – who *is* responsible? Was it just the compositor 'following copy,' or following a house style? Or was the layout dictated, even drawn out, by another hand, the author, the master-printer, or someone else?"

[16] Imanuel Kant, "Von der Unrechtmässigkeit des Büchernachdrucks," in vol. 8 of Kant's *Werke*, Akademieausgabe (Berlin and Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1923), 80. Further references are to this edition.

> des vollständigen Rechts an einer Sache, d. i. des Eigenthums. Der Gebrauch aber, den er davon nicht anders als nur im Namen eines Andern (nämlich des Verfassers) machen kann, ist ein Geschäft (*opera*), das dieser Andere durch den Eigenthümer des Exemplars treibt [...]. (84)

While the author retains the power of addressing the public in his own voice, only the publisher can claim the title of proprietor. He is "Eigenthümer des Exemplars" and thus properly owns the author's work. How are we to understand the author's exclusion from his work if, as Kant so vividly emphasizes, the presence of his voice is the condition for the printer's silent operation? Curiously, the author remains the sole *subject* of his utterance at the price of selling out to the publisher who reproduces his utterance as an *object* in his possession. The author is at once given a voice *and* muted by the publisher; he is granted an authority *and* exempted from the exemplars of his own work. Kant's give and take works according to an economy based on his distinction between *Sachenrecht (ius reale)*, *persönliches Recht (ius personale)*, and what he calls *dinglich-persönliches Recht (ius realiter personale)*. He elaborates this distinction in the first part of his *Metaphysik der Sitten*, inserting a special paragraph on the question of the book, "Was ist ein Buch?",[17] where he argues that the book as a thing belongs to the *ius reale* while as utterance it is at the same time governed by the *ius personale*. His warning not to confuse those two realms of jurisdiction cannot forestall Hegel's critique that he in fact is to be blamed for a confusion when he tries to intermix (*kunterbunt zu vermischen*) categories that do not belong together: "Objektiv ist ein Recht aus dem Vertrage nicht ein Recht an eine Person, sondern nur an ein ihr Aeusserliches oder etwas von ihr zu Veräusserndes, immer an eine Sache."[18] Hegel's concept of ownership as a person's exclusive right over a thing makes copyright laws possible. As Kant states explicitly in his essay written in the spirit of his time, he only envisages the protection of the publisher from pirates.

What, then, is a book? Is it a mute thing or is it utterance? Kant's essay is most pertinent to this question precisely because it creates the confusion it seeks to sort out. Sketched out twelve years before the *Metaphysik der Sitten*, his argument hinges on the difficult distinction between *opus* (the work), and *opera* (the act of utterance). As we have seen, the *opus* is a thing that can be both appropriated and alienated, which affects the publisher

---

[17] Kant, *Metaphysik der Sitten*, *Werke*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1956), 8: 404-6.

[18] G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, *Werke*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 7: 99 and 100.

when he buys a manuscript to print it or, respectively, when a pirate usurps his right by printing an unauthorized edition. The status of the author is the same in both instances. His right over the utterance the publisher or pirate mutely conveys is grounded in his person or personality and as such cannot be alienated. However, as we have also seen, this precludes that he can properly own the reproduction of his utterance. He has no copyright, and Kant rigorously argues that it is in fact the essence of works of art that they can be copied:

> *Kunstwerke* als Sachen können [...] nach einem Exemplar derselben, welches man rechtmässig erworben hat, nachgeahmt, abgeformt und die Copien derselben öffentlich verkehrt werden, ohne daß es der Einwilligung des Urhebers ihres Originals [...] bedürfe. Eine Zeichnung, die jemand entworfen, oder durch einen andern hat in Kupfer stechen, oder in Stein, Metall, oder Gips ausführen lassen, kann von dem, der dieses Producte kauft, abgedruckt oder abgegossen und so öffentlich verkehrt werden; so wie alles, was jemand mit seiner Sache *in seinem eignen Namen* verrichten kann, der Einwilligung eines andern nicht bedarf. (85-6)

Originality in and as a *thing* can be copied. Kant's focus on the plastic arts is embedded in the 18th-century notion that copies of statues, engravings, and similar objects are akin to originals in that their reproduction is not mechanical. Unlike the mass production of books they are independent works of art rather than multiplications of identical copies. Addison, on the other hand, sees the revolution brought about by the publishing industry precisely in its capacity to present something like original copies. A printed text is not a copy in the sense of an imitation but an *Exemplar*, as Kant puts it, of the original work. Addison's *Spectator* essay on the exemplary originality of books is important here because he articulates the question of original property, or the properties of the original, in economic terms. Comparing the work of authors to that of artists, he writes:

> The Circumstance which gives Authors an Advantage above all these great Masters, is this, that they can multiply their Originals; or rather can make Copies of their Works, to what Number they please, which shall be as valuable as the Originals themselves. This gives a great Author something like a Prospect of Eternity, but at the same time deprives him of those other Advantages which artists meet with. The Artist finds greater Returns in Profit, as the Author in Fame. What an inestimable Price would a *Virgil* or a *Homer*, a *Cicero* or an *Aristotle* bear, were their Works like a Statue, a

> Building, or a Picture, to be confined only in one Place, and made the Property of a single Person?[19]

Although the original does not lose its proper value in the process of printing, the books issued by the press lose in market value due to the output of a high number of copies. In the age of mechanical reproduction, originality is no longer a question of scarcity. This makes the problem of piracy such a sensitive issue. Addison's vision of a book held in one place and retained as the property of one single person materializes in the printer's name and place of publication on the title page. Kant's essay gives this vision a legal foundation.

Books are different from other works of art, we remember, in that the publisher or printer does not speak in his own name but on behalf of the author as another person. Reprinting an unauthorized edition, the pirate violates that other voice and name: "Denn es ist ein Widerspruch: eine Rede *in seinem Namen* zu halten, die doch [...] die *Rede eines andern* sein soll" (86). This is where a lacuna opens up in Kant's argument. Why should the relationship between the pirate and the author be any different from that between the authorized publisher and the author? The pirate does not infringe upon the rights of the author, as the passage cited seems to suggest, but rather on those assumed by the printer. For we remember that the publisher too acts in his own name, creating "in seinem eigenen Namen das stumme Werkzeug der Ueberbringung einer Rede des Autors an das Publikum" (81). Both the author's and the printer's name appear on the title page, and like the author Kant's publisher can claim to perform an action in his own name, an unassailable and inalienable *opera* grounded in his person. But what is this personal action? It is, precisely, his reproduction of the original *opus* as several identical *opera*. The essay concludes with the mute difference between the singular *opera* and the many *opera* it prints as originals:

> Der Grund also, warum alle Kunstwerke anderer zum öffentlichen Vertrieb nachgemacht, Bücher aber, die schon ihre eingesetzten Verleger haben, nicht nachgedruckt werden dürfen, liegt darin: daß die erstern *Werke* (*opera*), die zweiten *Handlungen* (*operae*) sind, davon jene als für sich selbst existirende Dinge, diese aber nur in einer Person ihr Dasein haben können. Folglich kommen diese letztern der Person des Verfassers ausschliesslich zu; und derselbe hat daran ein unveräusserliches Recht (*ius personalissimum*) durch jeden andern immer *selbst* zu reden. (86)

[19] Addison, *The Spectator*, no. 166, II: 154.

Books are different from other works of art because they are at once things that can be copied and acts of an utterance whose originality and singularity consists in the power to bring forth and appropriate its own copies. Kant's emphasis that the author expresses himself – his self – through all the others that may speak on his behalf cannot quite suppress the notion that the identity of the self is in fact constituted by others. Romantic authorship will act out this tension by shifting the emphasis on the otherness or estrangement of the self. To the philosopher writing in the 1780s it is important to stress the possibility of a continuity between the self and the other that also and foremost includes the status and stature of the author as a model to be imitated. He has a right to this, and as Kant reiterates in a footnote to the question of the author's ownership it is, as a *ius personalissimum*, an innate or indigenous right, "kein Recht in der Sache, nämlich dem Exemplar [...], sondern ein angebornes Recht in seiner eignen Person" (86). Only the contract between the author and the publisher makes the continuity and dissemination of the author's voice possible and gives it the desired permanence: This is the insight at which Kant's essay arrives. While the former lends the book resulting from this alliance the force of authorship, the latter secures its claim to ownership. In this sense, the author and the publisher make an ideal pair. Just as the author's right is innate, "ein angebornes Recht," the genius is presented in Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* as "die angeborne Gemütsanlage (ingenium)."[20] The Third Critique still labors over the problem that the genealogy of genius entails the threat of extinction. If the genius as author has strictly speaking only a personal right over his work, its voice would not be likely to survive its own death if it wasn't for the impersonal but "perpetuating power of the press" (II: 553), as Young puts it. "Books are the Legacies that a great Genius leaves to Mankind, which are delivered down from Generation to Generation, as Presents to the Posterity of those who are yet unborn,"[21] Addison writes in his essay. Like Young and Addison, Kant suggests that the original genius can only hand down its work to posterity, and thus survive, if it takes control of the mechanical printing press. In his *Metaphysik der Sitten*, Kant refers to the ancient notion of the genius as a tutelary spirit presiding over the house or *oikos*.[22] If one were to think of ownership as an exclusive right over things, Kant argues, one would have to refer any unfounded claim to

[20] Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, *Werke*, X: 241-42.

[21] Addison, *The Spectator*, II: 154.

[22] For a detailed history of the genius, see Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, *Genius: Zur Wirkungsgeschichte antiker Mythologeme in der Goethezeit* (München: Beck, 1978).

authorship to the spirit of a guardian genius that "gleich einem die Sache begleitenden und vor allem fremden Angriff bewahrenden *Genius*, den fremden Besitzer immer an mich weise."[23] Bizarre as this imagination may be, in the collaboration of author and printer it materializes. The true genius is a compositor.

"Mr Bloom stood by, hearing the loud throbs of cranks, watching the silent typesetters at their cases."[24] If Young's *Conjectures* can be said to wage the last battle in the controversy between the ancients and the moderns, we see Homer's Ulysses once more return in Joyce's Aeolus episode, where the wind of change blows heaviest in the printer's workroom.[25] What Kant calls "das stumme Werkzeug der Ueberbringung einer Rede des Autors an das Publikum" fills Joyce's narrative with a deafening noise. The compositors are silent, but their rotating press speaks:

> Sllt. The nethermost deck of the machine jogged forwards its flyboard with sllt the first batch of quirefold papers. Sllt. Almost human the way it sllt to call attention. Doing its level best to speak. (123)

Young's fantasy of a modern Homer dwelling among the compositors comes true in Joyce's utterance or speech as the source of an originality whose imprimatur calls attention to the machine of literature assembled in the late 18th century. "How is a literary composition different from a mechanical invention? It was precisely the theoretical problems raised by the copyright struggle that Romantic theory resolved."[26] Whether or not Romantic theory indeed managed to resolve this tangled question, Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* is the first work to address its problematics.

---

[23] Kant, *Werke*, VIII: 371.

[24] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 122. Further references are to this edition.

[25] On Joyce's fight for copyright protection of *Ulysses*, see his paper delivered to the P.E.N. Congress in James Joyce, *Critical Writings*, ed. E. Ellsworth Mason and R. Ellman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 274-5.

[26] Mark Rose, "The Author as Proprietor: *Donaldson v. Becket* and the Genealogy of Modern Authorship," in Brad Sherman and Alain Strowel (eds.), *Of Authors and Origins: Essays on Copyright* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 52-3.

II. Transplants

Returning from Kant's silent law office and Joyce's busy caseroom to the "sweet refuge" and "lettered recess" (II: 550) of Young's library, one might ask whether the conjecture that the original genius is a compositor is not pressing the point too much. "With what a gust do we retire to our disinterested and immortal friends in our closet" (II: 550). Young makes his entrance on the scene of learning with the customary grand gesture of someone holding intimate conversations with the wise men bound in vellum waiting to be picked from the shelf. If the library is the place where the doctor of divinity seeks and finds consolation in "the pleasures of the pen" (II: 550), his other pleasure spots are the "monumental marbles scattered in a wide pleasure-garden" (II: 549) to which the door and window of his study open. Not the printing press but ancient ruins and the abundant growth of flowers seem to map out the territory on which Young stages his battle between the ancients and the moderns. The *genius loci* protecting this garden is the original genius:

> 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. (II: 551)

The critic has something of a botanist plucking flowers for classification. Young's herbarium gathers two species that under close scrutiny turn out to be some kind of crossbreed: the original and the imitation. Originals are imitative and imitations are originals if they copy nature and are thus endowed with the idea of a "perpetual spring" Young springs on the reader of literature. His distinction between art as a mimesis of nature and works that merely take other works as a model, thus "increasing the mere drug of books" (II: 551), is in itself nothing new, but his emphasis on the organicism of the original certainly adds a fresh element. It is important to note, however, that the bud the romantics will unfold is something that to Young remains mysterious and inexplicable. "I shall not enter into the curious inquiry of what is, strictly speaking, original" (II: 551), a somewhat perplexed botanist admits. What he does, instead, is to put his herbary on top of the growing pile of books.

After more than one hundred years of inquiry the *Conjectures* have been enlisted as an important document in the genealogy of romanticism, as a

citation from M. H. Abrams's influential book *The Mirror and the Lamp* shows. The citation begins with what is perhaps the most famous or notorious passage in the essay:

> 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.
>
> The passage might almost serve as a précis of Coleridge's basic distinction, half a century later, between mechanical making and organic growth, between the reordering of given materials by artificers like Beaumont and Fletcher, and the vital emergence of an original form in the plays of Shakespeare.[27]

While Abrams points out that Young was by no means the first to denounce the mechanical aspect of art's artifice in favour of an *ingenium* or the innate powers that would give poetry a life of its own, he does give him credit for having employed the metaphor of the vegetable nature of genius to describe the creative process of art and poetry in an original fashion:

> Young's innovation is first, in setting up the growth of a plant as the contrary of mechanical manufacture, and second, in using the plant unequivocally as the analogue for the process, and not only the product, of genial creativity. In thus transferring the emphasis to the development of a work of art, Young imports from vegetable life certain attributes destined to become important concepts in organic aesthetics. As opposed to objects which are "made" by "art and labour," the original work is *vital*, it *grows*, *spontaneously*, from a *root*, and (by implication) unfolds its original form from within outward. (199-200)

What the passage unfolds – "(by implication)" – is a reading that has its roots already in the soil of romanticism rather than showing Young's essay to be the ground from which an organic aesthetics could be said to grow. Ironically, Abrams's allusion to "Coleridge's basic distinction [...] between mechanical making and organic growth" points to a text that vividly demonstrates the tangled problem of originality. This is what Coleridge writes in the notes for his lecture on Shakespeare:

---

[27] M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Norton, 1958), 199. Emphasis in the source.

> The form is mechanic when on to any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material – as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we ~~like~~ wish it to retain when hardened – The organic form on the other hand is innate, it ~~form~~ shapes as it developes itself from within, and the fullness of its developement is one & the same with the perfection of its outward Form.[28]

The privileged position Coleridge assigns to the organic form is of particular interest here because the note is an almost verbatim translation from A. W. Schlegel's *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*. Citing and translating from Schlegel, he seems to present what Young calls "a sort of manufacture wrought up by those mechanics, art, and labour, out of pre-existent materials not their own" (II: 552) rather than the "original form" whose "vital emergence" Abrams seeks in his lecture. Since the idea central to the distinction is not Coleridge's intellectual property, the note can hardly be called an "organic form" that would be "arising out of the properties of the material." Yet, it is precisely within the folds of his translation-as-imitation that Coleridge tries to demonstrate how the organic "shapes as it developes itself from within." His translation *is* this shaping and development. These are Schlegel's words: "Die organische Form hingegen ist eingebohren, sie bildet von innen heraus, und erreicht ihre Bestimmtheit zugleich mit der vollständigen Entwickelung des Keimes."[29] While Coleridge follows Schlegel in the first part of the sentence, he transforms the "perfect development of the *germ*" into the "perfection of its *outward form*." In a most literal sense, the translation "developes itself from within" in that it is an "outward form" growing from the seed of the original. Thus, Coleridge's translation appears at the same time as mechanical imitation of a "predetermined form" *and* as an "organic form" that yields the fruit or unfolds the flower hidden in the original.[30] While Young might be said to

---

[28] Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 on Literature*, vol. 5 of the *Collected Works*, ed. R. A. Foakes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), I: 495. Further references are to this edition and will be cited as LL.

[29] Cited from G. N. G. Orsini, "Coleridge and Schlegel Reconsidered," *Comparative Literature* 16.2 (1964): 102. The article gives a detailed history of the controversy about Coleridge's apparent plagiarism. Foakes, the editor of the Bollingen edition of LL, follows Orsini when he points out that the only change Coleridge makes to Schlegel's text occurs in the passage about the shape given to "a mass of wet clay," which translates "einer weichen Masse." *Clay* is a soft mass, and we might note that it comes to retain the impression of letters from the translator's name: Coleridge and Taylor.

[30] As Walter Benjamin writes in his essay on translation, "In ihr wächst das Original in einen gleichsam höheren und reineren Luftkreis der Sprache hinauf." Describing the task of translating, the essay gathers and contrasts organic metaphors with such of fragments of a

figure in the *Conjectures* as a somewhat confused botanist unable to clearly distinguish the traits of the original from those of the imitation in the crossbreed he discovers in his "pleasure-garden," Coleridge seems to fuse the two species on purpose. As he writes in another lecture on Shakespeare and his contemporaries:

> There have been instances in the literary world that might remind ~~one of~~ a Botanist of a singular sort of parasite Plant, which rises above ground, independent and unsupported, an apparent original; but trace its roots and you will find their fibres all terminating in the root of a<nother> plant at an uns~~p~~uspected distance. (LL, II: 145)

The revision that turns "*a* plant" into "*another* plant" is significant. For it is not sure whether the discovery of the "*singular* sort of parasite Plant" leads to the registration of a distinct difference between the original and the imitation. Their roots cannot easily be disentangled, and it is hard to say which of the two concepts is parasitic. Much of Coleridge's writing enacts the originality of origins as an effect of plagiarism and citation. In his transcendental aesthetics it becomes difficult to tell the plant from the transplant.

Abrams's effort to present the organic imagery in the *Conjectures* as an early bid for romanticism has to be taken with caution. The essay's achievement lies elsewhere. George Eliot has accused Young of an "empty wordiness," and one might indeed say that the essay does little to elaborate the concepts underlying its organic imagery. But it is perhaps due to his superficial rhetoric that he lays bare the essential monstrosity of the original genius and the unnatural nature of its "vegetable nature." The discourse of romanticism will take great pains to transform organic originality into a self-generating system. In Young's essay it appears as an empty show:

> The pen of an original writer, like Armida's wand, out of a barren waste calls a blooming spring: out of that blooming spring an imitator is a transplanter of laurels, which sometimes die on removal, always languish in a foreign soil. (II: 551)

The luxuriant garden and bower of Tasso's wild enchantress, who in William Duff's textbook about the original genius is compared to the

---

vessel. "Die Aufgabe des Uebersetzers," in vol. 4 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), I: 14 and 18.

witches in *Macbeth*,[31] becomes a desolate place where spring is not the season of organic growth but rather a spell the genius casts on the reader. The bouquet of organic imagery originates in a "barren waste," is then quickly removed to die, and is finally laid to rest in the "foreign soil" of imitation. Nature withers fast with old Young, like flowers in a herbary. His citation of Armida's garden only illustrates that his essay is itself a very traditional florilegium where plants are removed from their native soil. In the end, the passage amounts to little more than a struggle for the laurels, and it remains unclear whether it is the genius or the imitator that puts them on his head. But most importantly, the passage points to the "barren waste" as the abode of the original genius, its native soil, its proper nature. Like the flowers that do not really grow but rather pop up suddenly by some kind of spell or decree, the genius has no natural genealogy. Although it is itself part of nature, something innate, it does not seem to be of natural parentage and it also seems that emerging from a "barren waste" it cannot procreate. The original genius is barren. This is Young's only original insight; Kant gives it a conceptual base in his third Critique.

In his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Kant tries to stabilize this uneasy relationship between nature and art by granting art a secure place among the faculties of the mind and within the system of knowledge. The status it attains, however, is one in which art is shown to have no recourse to conceptual understanding. Aesthetic judgement deals with the beautiful, and aesthetic beauty consists in what the German language ambiguously calls *der schöne Schein*. Aesthetic beauty emerges as a shine, but it shines by virtue of its appearance as something that is apparent in both senses of the word. Imitating nature, "die schöne Kunst" – fine art and belles lettres – seems like a part of mere nature but is itself nothing natural. Art is merely the illusion of nature:

> An einem Produkte der schönen Kunst muß man sich bewußt werden, daß es Kunst sei, und nicht Natur; aber doch muß die Zweckmässigkeit in der Form desselben von allem Zwange willkürlicher Regeln so frei *scheinen*, *als ob* es ein Produkt der blossen Natur sei. Auf diesem Gefühle der Freiheit im Spiele unserer Erkenntnisvermögen, welches doch zugleich zweckmässig sein muß, beruht diejenige Lust, welche allein allgemein mitteilbar ist, ohne sich doch auf Begriffe zu gründen.[32]

---

[31] William Duff, *Critical Observations on the Writings of the Most Celebrated Original Geniuses in Poetry* (1770; rpt. Delmar, N.Y.: Scholar's Reprints, 1973), 334.

[32] Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 45, *Werke*, X: 240; emphasis added. Further references will be cited in the text. Translations follow James Creed Meredith's edition of *The Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

While Kant's presentation of art as illusion follows traditional explanations, his emphasis on a "feeling of freedom" that is free only to the extent it is not based on rules or cognitive concepts raises the difficult question of how these works of art can be produced at all. His answer is the original genius, and in so far as it does not produce its works according to some rule or other, the genius must be part of nature. For only nature is free from the constraints of arbitrary rules:

> Genie ist das Talent (Naturgabe), welches der Kunst die Regel gibt. Da das Talent, als angebornes produktives Vermögen des Künstlers, selbst zur Natur gehört, so könnte man sich auch so ausdrücken: Genie ist die angeborne Gemütsanlage (ingenium), durch welche die Natur der Kunst die Regel gibt. (§ 46; X, 241-42)

Genius is an innate talent, something nature offers to certain artists and poets at their birth in the form of a contract. The terms of this agreement give the genius the right to produce originals freely and rule over the realm of art by setting examples that can be imitated by others that are not endowed with the same innate talent. At the same time, however, the means of production – the genius's "angebornes produktives Vermögen" – remains in the possession of nature. In other words, the original genius and its works are the exclusive property of nature. They belong to nature and as such can neither be appropriated nor be alienated. Nature secures this right by not allowing the genius to grasp what it is doing. This is what Kant means when he argues in § 45 that art provides "that pleasure which alone is communicable without being based on concepts." The genius communicates without either understanding (*begreifen*) or taking possession of (*greifen*) its own communications. Listing the properties or characteristics of the genius, Kant adds to those of originality and exemplarity the inhibition to pass its talent on to someone else. The genius is totally incompetent as a teacher, "daher der Urheber eines Produkts, welches er seinem Genie verdankt, selbst nicht weiss, wie sich ihm die Ideen dazu herbei finden, auch es nicht in seiner Gewalt hat, dergleichen nach Belieben oder planmässig auszudenken, und anderen in solchen Vorschriften mitzuteilen, die sie in den Stand setzen, gleichmässige Produkte hervorzubringen" (§ 46; X: 242-43). Ignorant of its own art, unable to impart knowledge, and thus, as it were, impotent to engender children in which their work would live on, the genius is appointed to die a solitary death. This is the fine print of Kant's contract: In contrast to the scientist whose work enjoys a continuous progress, those talents, "welche die Ehre verdienen, Genies zu heissen" suffer from a disadvantage,

"weil für diese die Kunst irgendwo still steht, indem ihr eine Grenze gesetzt ist, über die sie nicht weiter gehen kann, die vermutlich auch schon seit lange her erreicht ist und nicht mehr erweitert werden kann; und überdem eine solche Geschicklichkeit sich auch nicht mitteilen lässt, sondern jedem unmittelbar von der Hand der Natur erteilt sein will, mit ihm also stirbt, bis die Natur einmal einen andern wiederum eben so begabt" (§47; X: 244).

Kant's employment of the original genius in the service of nature does not lead to an "eternal spring" as one would imagine it. Young must have had a premonition of this, and his essay, in exchanging the analogy of organic growth for the pressing issue of mechanical printing and copyright, takes account of this. At the centre of Young's "pleasure-garden" stands a fountain, "that fountain of fame (if I may so call the press)" (II: 550). It offers the original genius a perspective worth living for. For only as the compositor of his own text can the genius make a living. "Born originals, how comes it to pass that we die copies?" Young asks. "That meddling ape imitation, as soon as we come to years of indiscretion, [...] snatches the pen, and blots out nature's mark of separation [...]. The lettered world no longer consists of singulars: it is a medley, a mass; and a hundred books, at bottom, are but one" (II: 561). The passage is, to be sure, one of the many complaints about imitators to be found in the essay. But those snatching the pen of the original genius and reproducing his work in the hundreds might also be identified as the pirates reprinting an authorized edition. "Born originals, how comes it to pass that we die copies?" The answer is that there is no sufficient protection of intellectual property. "As Tacitus says of Curtius Rufus," Young writes, "an original author is born of himself, is his own progenitor, and will probably propagate a numerous offspring of imitators, to eternise his glory; while mule-like imitators die without issue" (II: 569). Ancient Tacitus is cited to deliver something like a message to modern authors: Do not die without having issued your books. Addison, whose resolve "to Print my self out, if possible, before I Die" has already been quoted, appears at the end of the essay as the epitome of the original genius because even at the very moment of his death he still works indefatigably as the typesetter of his last book: "His compositions are but a noble preface; the grand work is his death: that is a work which is read in heaven" (II: 582). It is a book not only read in heaven but also, one might conjecture, one of the volumes printed by Young's heavenly press.

It pays off to be an original genius: This is not the least valuable insight Young makes in his essay. "Virgil and Horace owed their divine talents to Heaven, their immortal works to men: thank Maecenas and Augustus for

them. Had it not been for these, the genius of those poets had lain buried in their ashes" (II: 562-3). While the ancients could rely on the support of the rich and the powerful, the 18th-century men of letters turned their attention to preferment or the publishing industry. "Thoughts, when too common, should lose their currency; and we should send new metal to the mint, that is, new meaning to the press" (II: 552). Young's remark not only connects printing and minting with regard to the profit authors may reap from the publication of their books but also indicates an affinity between an ancient and a modern form of reproduction that in the 18th century became one of the most important cultural issues. An important passage in the essay points to the change it might bring about in modern notions of genius. Imitators must travel far and wide in search of appropriate material for their work. While they "must visit the remote and rich ancients," the moderns lead a more sedentary life:

> But an inventive genius may safely stay at home; that, like the widow's cruse, is divinely replenished from within, and affords us a miraculous delight. Whether our own genius be such or not, we diligently should inquire, that we may not go a-begging with gold in our purse; for there is a *mine* in man, which must be deeply dug ere we can *conjecture* its contents. (II: 562)

Although the replenishment "from within" still echoes the organic growth of an original work from within outward, the passage translates organicism into an almost baroque, yet very modern, allegory of genius as a miner. The heart of the original genius is a purse filled with gold, and while Kant insists on the notion that genius is an innate talent, a gift from nature, it here appears as an income that is "organic" only in the sense that it can be generated by the diligent inquirer or worker. The essay's emphasis on the quality of genius as some kind of birthmark finds in this passage a counterbalance that is of particular importance to Young. For it is no coincidence that the passage about the mine cites the title of his essay. The *Conjectures* must be deeply dug to get at the contents of the purse it constitutes. The modern author will find "a mine" in himself if he can make what he writes, composes, and prints his own property: "mine."

The monetary metaphors that accompany the organic analogies throughout the essay also point to what has been called the sterility of the original genius. Aristotle's doctrine that money should not grow or bear children, that is to say interest, has a long history in Western thought. In Young's essay money appears to be something like Ovid's *Natos sine*

semine flores, the "flowers produced without seeds" which Young cites to describe the "quite-original beauties we may call paradisiacal" (II: 570). One wonders why they should be the currency of paradise. At once a horrible token of the barrenness of genius and the promise of a bloom that no longer needs nature to propagate, they aptly describe the situation of Young as a compositor. Until the end of romanticism, the position of authors remained weak with regard to the security of their own intellectual property and the return on their poetic investment. The romantics hoped to found their poetry on an organic discourse that would at least make poetry proper to itself. One of them, William Wordsworth, turned to the question of copyright late in his life. Comparing literary and agricultural property he deplores that the owners of the latter could bring in a harvest that in a comparable form was denied to the former. As Susan Eilenberg writes in her formidable book on literary possession in romanticism, "Any man could own a plot of vegetables; only a writer could own a plot of words."[33] Old Young, writing about the "vegetable genius," knew about that long before. "Some are of opinion that its [composition's] growth, at present, is too luxuriant, and that the press is overcharged. Overcharged, I think, it could never be, if none were admitted, but such as brought their *imprimatur* from sound understanding, and the public good" (II: 550). Not the flower but the insistent discourse on the power and importance of the press is the essay's imprimatur of romanticism.

---

[33] Susan Eilenberg, *Strange Power of Speech: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Literary Possession* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 204.