4-1-2005

The Age of Imitation

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In recent years I've been somewhat perplexed to discover that my honors freshman literature classes are far more receptive to Pope's "Essay on Man" than Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." Through most of my teaching career, the reverse was the norm, but a number of changes in popular taste have led students away from Romantic originality and led me to these reflections on contemporary culture which may, I hope, have some wider implications with respect to current issues in teaching and learning.

In the original spirit of the "essay," I would like to try out these ideas and invite response. In essence, I have come to believe that individualism and creativity have lost their currency and that we are in a new Age of Imitation. If this seems to you like the eighteenth century revisited, then you may already be on the same wavelength. If not, then I ask you to indulge me in a little background to set the stage for my reflections.

In 1774 Mark Akenside published a poem entitled "The Pleasures of Imagination," which put forward some radical ideas about poetry and originality. For most of his century, poetry had been the offspring of conscious imitation. Aspiring poets were thought of as apprentices trained to read the greats in Greek and Latin, study their rhetoric, cut their teeth on epic and imitate Homer and Virgil. No one expressed this better than Alexander Pope, the reigning master of Enlightenment poetry. Attempting to train critics to proper judgment, he wrote:

> You then whose judgment the right course would steer
> Know well each ANCIENT'S proper character;
> His Fable, Subject, scope in every page;
> Religion, Country, genius of his Age . . .
> Be Homer's works your study and delight,
> Read them by day, and meditate by night.
> —"Essay on Criticism," I, 117-20; 124-25

All this comes at the end of instructions about how to "follow Nature." Pope's conclusion was that Nature and Homer were the same, so it was wise to copy after Homer. As a poet, he took his own advice, rendering Homeric epic into closed couplets, taking up a subscription and earning enough money to be recognized as the first Englishman to make his living from writing poetry. For Pope and his contemporaries, the great body of literature that came before them was a wellspring of learning that issued from a bedrock of natural laws; he refers to this in one of his most frequently cited couplets: "A *little learning* is a dangerous thing; /Drink deep or taste not the Pierian spring" (*EC*, II, 215-16). By methodic, rational imitation of

the ancients, writers could acquire sound judgment, or "true Wit." This was frequently seen in opposition to undisciplined flights of self-indulgent "Fancy," which implied false judgment, embarrassing personal expression, mere ornamental wit and, worst of all, bad taste.

Akenside, though still admiring of the ancients, unchained "Indulgent Fancy" (I, 10) from this negative spin and gave it a good name. He cited Shakespeare as its greatest proponent and argued that fanciful poetry is a source of unconstrained delight. Undoubtedly his generation had grown bored with pedestrian imitation, which he called "dull obedience" (I, 34) and needed both freedom and inspiration. So he called on Nature's "kindling breath" to "fire the chosen genius . . . string his nerves. . . imp his eagle wings" (I, 38-40) and let him soar. In a sense, Akenside's poem liberated both Prometheus and the ravening eagle. It called for rebellion and originality. Within twenty years of its publication, William Blake had completed the metaphor that gave flight to the Romantic imagination. His "Proverbs of Hell" are open rejections of everything Pope stood for. Blake's devilish self declared, "The Eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn of the crow"; "No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings," and finally "When thou seest an Eagle, thou seest a portion of Genius; lift up thy head." (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 1790).

It remained for Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth to formulate the critical theory of originality which defined the new Romanticism. Their collaboration, *The Lyrical Ballads* (1798), rested on the agreement that poetry should observe an essential "truth to nature" heightened by "the modifying colours of imagination." Wordsworth emphasized the language and emotions of ordinary people; Coleridge concentrated on the ability of imagination to give the supernatural "the semblance of truth." Coleridge reflected on their original intent in his *Biographia Literaria* (1814)—cited above—where he went on to propose a more elaborate theory of "organic unity"—a belief in structural integrity that lasted until the Deconstructionists of the 1980s took a hammer to poetry and then tried to read the fragments. According to Romantic theory, personal life experience could finally replace ancient epic as the stuff of imaginative poetry—or even become a new model of epic as in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, which is an epic history of his own development as a poet.

Thus Romantic poetry became a form of first person expression, a poetry of the individual and original "I," an impassioned self who was no imitator. Coleridge's practice followed theory. No lines express this better than the visionary self-projection that comes at the end of "Kubla Khan":

> And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
> His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
> Weave a circle round him thrice,
> And close your eyes with holy dread,
> For he on honey-dew hath fed,
> And drunk the milk of Paradise.
>   —*KK*, 49-53

There was a time when students found "Kubla Khan" among the most enticing poems in the canon, whether it was because of drug culture or wanderlust or the visionary imagery in contemporary song is hard to say. In the 1970s it seemed a stone's throw from these flashing eyes to the demonic esprit of young Mick Jagger or from the "damsel with a dulcimer" (*KK*, 37) to the solos of Hendrix and the lyrics of Dylan. But that day is over, and what was original now seems, among students, too exotic and strange. In recent years, as I have said, they prefer to believe with Pope that straying into unknown territory can lead to danger and that "Whatever is, is Right" ("Essay on Man*,*" I, 294).

The fading of originality has been "blowing in the wind" for a long time, and we should have seen it coming. The playwright Caryl Churchill did, when she wrote about the stock market crash of 1987 in a closed couplet comedy called *Serious Money*, which invited direct comparison with the South Sea Bubble of 1728 and the satires of Alexander Pope and John Gay. We had another chance last year, when Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* gave us a puzzle with the clue—you guessed it—"A. Pope." It was the only mystery I have ever solved!

But still there is the bigger mystery: why did the twentieth century, full of discovery and originality revert to an Age of Imitation? I am not talking simply about literature but worldview. "I Can't Believe It's Not Butter" epitomizes an embracing of imitation that is at the core of contemporary taste. Possibly it began with imitation grape Jello and whatever Carvel might be. By now, salads adorned with imitation bacon bits and coffee whitened by non-dairy imitation cream are the norms. Whole food eaters, the last believers in Coleridge's "organic unity" as applied to lifestyle, might very well be the last Romantics. The rest of our culture is sucking down imitation foods the same way that they rally round the street hawkers to buy fake Gucci and Coach bags or made in Hong Kong shirts with phony Lauren polo players. The rest of our culture is gathering at Starbucks back into a clubbish coffee house society of the in-crowd, bound by style and taste in ways that are strikingly similar to the world of the early eighteenth century.

As in that world, imitation is once again the comfort zone, and nobody knows this better than the manufacturers of popular culture. Hence *Troy*, a media age remake of Homer, is as true to our times as closed couplets to Pope's—featuring Brad Pitt, the hero of workout and martial arts and Troy itself, a stage set of pure fantasy fit for an audience unable to locate the historic city on a map. This *Troy* becomes us, killing off Agamemnon before Achilles and thus leaving no tragedy for Clytemnestra to enact. Like the eighteenth century (during which *King Lear* was given a happy ending), we are averse to tragedy, reading enough of it in the news. So here comes comedy, song and satire in the style of eighteenth-century ballad operas, the latest of which is Stephen Sondheim's remake of Aristophanes' *The Frogs*.

Did I say remake? We are awash in film remakes: *The Manchurian Candidate, The Lady Killers, Psycho, The Stepford Wives, Eighty Days Around the World, Nosferatu, Texas Chain Saw Massacre, Shall We Dance, King Kong, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, War of the Worlds, The Pink Panther*—to name just those that trip off my tongue. What motivates remakes may not simply be the paucity of original scripts or good writing as many have supposed, and which may in part be true. There

is also the real possibility that originality is too far from the comfort zone or simply not wanted. Give them the choice of a trip to Kubla Khan's enchanted garden or Disney's Magic Kingdom and they will take the one that predictably empties out into the gift shop. Who needs a "savage place" that empties into a "sunless sea"! People want what is safe, what they already know and therefore are able to judge against a reliable yardstick. Hence the taste (as in the eighteenth century) for repetition and for sequels: *Shrek 2, Kill Bill 2, Matrix 3* and *Planet of the Apes* who knows how many!

We can guess how many times people are watching these same entertainments. The current advertisement for *Phantom of the Opera* features audience members who have seen the show a dozen times or more. With what glee they must have lain in wait for the new film version release in theaters last Christmas and in DVD format within months thereafter. This is not an audience that craves originality. With the purchase of films on DVD, one must suppose that the same movies are played again and again, like songs, for comfort. And like children with fairy tales, this audience wants exact duplication of the known—nothing new or different.

Where does this leave us with respect to teaching? For all of my academic life, I have stressed the importance of students doing original work, from first-year essays to honors theses. For most of those years students understood exactly what I meant by this. Now they seem a bit puzzled; some don't really know what I mean at all or what, in fact, it means to be original.

Of course I am not arguing that there is no original student work now or that there are no imaginative students. Both exist, and honors still cultivates these qualities. But the blank stares that also come from honors and other students suggest that we may be rowing against the tide and that we should be paying more attention to a major shift in sensibility. Imitation, I believe, has gained significant ground over originality in shaping cultural values and with them student behavior.

That students have trouble understanding what it means to be original is really not their fault. Everything in the culture trains them to imitate. Think, for example, about how students in high school are taught to write the "five paragraph essay": introduction, three "body" paragraphs, and a conclusion that essentially restates the introduction. When they come into my honors English course, getting them to stretch the discussion of a work beyond the single paragraph is horrifying to their sense of order. Getting them to push their argument to a genuine conclusion that is not a rehash of the introduction takes months. The mold is so ingrained that thought hardly enters into the formula—much less *original* thought. Indeed, the five-paragraph essay includes what they have been taught is "research": sterile, formulaic citations from secondary sources dropped into paragraphs like fruit into 50s Jello molds—tasteless and meaningless. Jello at least is more easily shaken than the students from this rigid format.

I have had many discussions with my faculty about the rigidity of honors students.

This extends beyond their written work into a reticence that may individually have something to do with shyness but socially has much more to do with self-image in a group and the fear of being different. Same is the Game! And whether this means working in Windows or wearing Gap clothes, everything around them cultivates

20

sameness. So it shouldn't be surprising that students want to say the *right* thing and give the anticipated answer. They are most comfortable repeating the patterns their professors have presented. In short, they have been cultured to imitate rather than risk expressing ideas of their own.

And where would original ideas come from in this age? Everything around us teaches students to copy. They Xerox book pages and articles as instructed. To be sure, one very important difference between our age and the eighteenth century is that we are not much of a book culture any more. So rather than make copies of book pages, students much more naturally go to the Internet for their "research." What they find, of course, are more examples of imitation. On any given topic, the first few entries will take them to websites with pretty much the same information and perspective. From this, they easily conclude that "Whatever is, is right," and so they see everything on the Internet as simply "common knowledge," TRUTH, which they believe is free to use—without citation.

Thus, along with the disappearance of originality as a value is the disappearance of intellectual property as a concept. That is why students feel so free to plagiarize. They can't grasp the idea that actual people presented their own unique thoughts, thoughts that belong to them. So long as students see all websites as posted facts all equally true and there for the picking, then the discrimination among ideas will remain hopelessly muddled. It was hard enough to get them to take a stand on books and argue against the printed word, which seemed true in its age. How much harder it is to get them to argue against words in hyperspace that have equal probability of coming from faculty, high school students, or companies selling papers as if they were just helping out. What's the difference, they think. It all looks alike and therefore must all be true.

In general, the plagiarism that has evolved from this perspective is a *pastiche* of sentences and paragraphs taken (and sometimes altered) from various sources. The form itself goes back to eighteenth-century aesthetics and the taste for compositions formed from a loose medley of sources linked together in a style that deliberately imitated a particular author or musician. Our students are consummately familiar with the musical variety, which they much admire as a genre called "Sampling," a genre that raises the question of copyright in the same way as other varieties of plagiarism. It is not surprising that an Age of Imitation should find this habit of composition comfortable. The *pastiche* is their quilt, their security blanket. Rather than taking it away from them, I suggest, we must adapt to working with the taste. That means teaching proper citation of works quoted but most of all teaching students to go beyond the elements of *pastiche* by developing their own controlling prose style. In this effort Alexander Pope's "Essay on Criticism" can provide a useful model. Students uncomfortable with the pressure to be original can grasp perfectly well the possibility of writing,

> What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed;
> Something, whose truth convinced at sight we find,
> That gives us back the image of our mind.
>
> —II, 298-300

The Age of Imitation

They can do that, and in the process they can develop a prose style that has much greater clarity (Pope's "true Wit") than the one they started with. In my own program, shifting the emphasis from originality to clear thoughts well expressed might be a matter of survival. Each year more students seem to withdraw from honors when faced with the thesis. The prospect of doing research and writing an "original" fifty-page study has become utterly overwhelming, and it was not until I started thinking about their habits of mind that I began to understand why.

While English is my field and I can describe the current state of mind most easily with reference to my own subject, it is clear that the propensity toward imitation extends across disciplines and throughout our culture. I am describing not complaining about this. We simply are, as I see it, in an Age of Imitation, and we need to address this by teaching to the age rather than struggling against it. Certainly there are some disciplines in which imitation will get students no place. The sciences come to mind because without original thought there can be no breakthroughs. I would like to say that the arts demand originality, but my colleagues in art complain of students appropriating imagery ("sampling" again) without reference—in fact, plagiarizing from past masters. Oddly enough, one of the most popular courses among my advanced honors electives is one entitled "Creativity in Business," with a reading list as long as a short book, all having very little to do with business and much to do with the history of ideas. It would be greatly ironic if Business, which has always been an uneasy bedfellow with honors, could show us the way to useful adaptation.

That imitation itself might have a transforming effect on a person or a culture seems perfectly clear from some recent models in business. Think of outsourcing. In India the imitation of an American or British accent can help a person get a job in one of the outsourced airline or credit card companies that are swelling Mumbai. Just as eighteenth-century Scots learned a London accent to gain employment and elevate their station in the world, so individuals in India are inventing their future by accent imitation. On a global scale the imitation of American culture has inspired development in some countries and unleashed the wrath of others. We can't take any of this back, and so we have to deal with it and go forward to see where these patterns of imitation will lead us.

I came to this conclusion last year when my very best student in a long time, a Marketing major with broad interests in literature and the arts asked me to look at the draft of his Valedictorian address. The first few paragraphs froze me like Medusa's stare. His theme was theft, framed in a series of thank-you notes to professors whose ideas he had stolen over the years. I couldn't believe it, nor could the head of Public Relations who had also seen the draft. Together, we did everything we could to urge a different route, but he would not be shaken, insisting that "theft" had a positive connotation as he intended to deliver the speech, and that we needed to believe that tone would make everything right. In the end, he won and we sweated the day. But as he delivered his speech, it was soon clear that the audience thought him clever, witty and moral, a builder on the bedrock of ideas "taken" from his faculty. His tone carried the positive message he intended.

Then I remember an old NCHC saying—that we come to the annual conference to "steal ideas for our own program." Indeed, acknowledged imitation is a pattern we

have practiced for decades and incorporated into our own creativity. We were not the first to use this strategy. There are many variations on the commonplace "Plagiarism is the sincerest form of flattery," of which Picasso's (alleged) turn of phrase, "Bad artists copy. Great artists steal" is perhaps the most famous. Certainly his theft of visual forms—African masks, for example—led him into uncharted territory in modern art, and despite his appropriated imagery, no one doubted Picasso's originality. When I went on my own little search to verify the historic truth of this remark, friend Google led me to another string of applications. I typed the phrase and there I was among design studios, Dylan defenders, hackers' networks and business planners who had turned the expression into a personal logo. Each had taken inspiration from imitation. I rest my case.

That being said, I find myself in the oddly oxymoronic business of cultivating "inspired imitation," which requires considerable invention. In my first-year honors writing courses, I am having the students deliberately imitate the styles of various authors on subjects that interest them, and I find that it helps them become conscious of structure and vocabulary in their own work. There is nothing like a Miltonic paragraph on the hellishness of dormitory living to make them see the utility of rhetoric and assist their own evolution of written style. In my more advanced course, I have taken to another paradigm that sends them back to primary texts and diminishes their attachment to book and Internet sources. I create assignments based on the laboratory "unknown." Essentially, they are required to choose a poem that we did not discuss in class and explicate it by reference to poems by the same author that we did read and discuss. In effect, this requires them to create a *sequel*—one of their favorite forms—to previous classes, and since they are now comfortable with the works we read together in class, they are ready to go off on their own without secondary sources and the inevitable *pastiche.*

Of course one can only go so far without teaching methods of research, particularly in an English department that requires a research paper by spring of the freshman year and an honors program that requires a 50-page thesis in the major. So library instruction including Internet research is part of the freshman curriculum. But my instinct has been to shift my emphasis from working with material to working with a mentor. On the freshman level I have added a "dedicated" honors librarian, a person they can consult to work with them and show them the proper use of sources. For the thesis, they develop a mentoring relationship with the professor who takes them on for one full semester of research before they even enter into the thesis term. This means they are constantly discussing their findings with a professor and annotating their sources. Most important, they come to know a faculty member who shares their interest in a topic and with whom they can discuss their findings. This is the key: working with a person so that no matter what printed or Internet sources finally come to play a role in the work, the student's ideas and handling of these sources are discussed.

This is particularly important because this Age of Imitation includes a great deal of isolation, by which I mean students who work alone at home on their computers. Some of their shyness comes from this and much of their insecurity about revealing ideas of their own that they did not find on-line. More and more I try to get students

to go on "field trips" together—explorations modeled on City as Text©—and have them answer questions working together to find solutions. Group projects, I find, make them more open to trying out what might well be original ideas and including professors in the group. As a result of such group dynamics they are much more ready to do their advanced work with a mentoring professor who does not seem a stranger.

I can remember a time in NCHC (more than a decade ago), when we made a strong stand against producing student "clones" who would turn into the next generation of US. We talked many of them out of the academy and into the broader world, as we still do. But getting students to imprint on their mentors and, in a sense, "imitate" us may have a very different resonance in this particular age. Our students at this moment like models and find models extremely helpful. They are not rebellious and they are, to my thinking, very grateful for what we can show them about how to learn. So it might not be such a bad thing for us to "clone" at least our methodology (if not us) and see whether they can fly with the implant in order to arrive at something original.

It is impossible to predict all the forms of originality that this Age of Imitation will yield. If we are looking for originality in the Romantic, Coleridgean sense, we may be disappointed or unprepared to recognize the very different manifestations that will emerge through adaptation and evolution. I am certain that many of my colleagues have already invented creative adaptations that we can profit from. I encourage their reply and discussion. Meanwhile, I suggest, it is most important to acknowledge and work with the current taste for imitation that exerts itself as possibly the most powerful shaping force in our culture and on our students.

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