

THE CULT OF ORIGINALITY

Travel back twenty millennia. You dwell in what is now southern France, and you have just entered a cave with the intention of painting an equine on its walls. You are not the first—your predecessors have been painting equines on these walls for years, decades, perhaps centuries. Do you avert your eyes and create your equine purely from memory or imagination; or do you study the walls, take a tail from here, a mane from there, a topline from somewhere else, and create an image of an equine at once borrowed and new.

1. A Parlor Game

The redactors of the Book of Genesis rewrote not only one other, but also prior near Eastern creation myths. Milton rewrote the Book of Genesis in *Paradise Lost*, and Mary Shelley rewrote *Paradise Lost* in *Frankenstein* (whose creature learns English and history from Milton's poem). Melville, too, rewrote *Paradise Lost*, mixing it in *Moby-Dick* not only with the myth of Prometheus, as Shelley had done, but also with Shakespeare, Emerson, and the *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex*, to cite just a few of Melville's influences and sources. Pauline Hopkins borrowed the Arctic trope that closes *Frankenstein* for the conclusion of her canonical romance of slavery and freedom, *Contending Forces*; and Philip Roth borrowed the invocation that opens *Moby-Dick*—"Call Me Ishmael"—to open *The Great American Novel*—"Call Me Smitty."

Shakespeare pillaged history and literature for the plots of his plays, and Dante impressed Virgil into service for the *Divine Comedy*. Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and James Joyce—the high priests of Anglophone Modernism—paid unending homage to Shakespeare and Dante and incorporated references to just about everyone else who wrote, composed, or painted in the intervening centuries. Pound read voraciously, recycled what he read in his ongoing project of six decades, the *Cantos*, and became a wellspring of techniques and sources for future poets. Eliot built *The Waste Land* from the fragments of a Western culture he thought shattered by the Great War—"These fragments I have shored against my ruins," the poem concludes—fragments to which he appended eight pages of footnotes. James Joyce famously recast Homer's *Odyssey*, in *Ulysses*, as one day in the life of Leopold Bloom, a Dublin advertising canvasser and cuckold. Using Bloom to demystify Odysseus, and Odysseus to ennoble Bloom, Joyce transposed onto one plane the epic events of a classical hero's journey and the quotidian events of Dublin on June 16, 1904.

Henry James answered Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* with *The Portrait of a Lady*; and Gertrude Stein answered James's *Portrait* with *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*, and Francis Ford Coppola in *Apocalypse Now* all repurposed Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Coppola nods toward his sources when Marlon Brando quotes not only Conrad, but also T.S. Eliot alluding to Conrad). Akira Kurasawa's *The Seven Samurai*

crossed the Pacific and shifted shape into John Sturges's *The Magnificent Seven*; and Kurasawa's *Yojimbo*, disguised as Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars*, crossed the Atlantic from Italy to become Walter Hill's *The Last Man Standing*. Elvis fused rhythm-and-blues and rockabilly; Ray Charles, rhythm-and-blues and country; Patsy Cline, country and strings; Tony Bennett, strings and jazz; Ella, jazz and standards; Miles Davis, rock and jazz; and Bob Dylan, everything that preceded him. The Beatles fused rock-and-roll and skiffle; the Rolling Stones, country and blues; Cream, blues and jazz; the Byrds, folk and rock; and the Band, every genre of American roots music. Hip Hop artists, a half-century later, sample them all.

2. The Same Anew

Remixing elements *in* artworks recurred throughout twentieth-century aesthetics. Artists had referred to past art in their work for centuries, for example, when Cézanne and his Cubist successors added self-reference to the mix—painting that invoked or quoted other painting became painting *about* painting (as a medium and a tradition), with individual paintings, it follows, becoming paintings about themselves. Soon after, in 1912, Picasso and Braque introduced pasted paper, or *papier collé*, to their canvases, not only creating new dimensions of reference and self-reference, but also supplementing pigments with new and often commonplace materials—a practice that would evolve as collage and montage. Marcel Duchamp played this idea to its endgame with his “ready-mades.” Found objects (a urinal, to cite a famous example) declared to be art because an “artist” deemed them so, “ready-mades” not only undermined the artwork as privileged object and art as closed system, but also demystified the artist as creator, resulting in what the philosopher Louis Mink, with reference to Duchamp, Joyce, and their followers, called “art without artists.”

Remixing *of* artworks in the canon, meanwhile, also recurred. Ezra Pound demanded that writers and artists “make it new,” the “it” meaning a Western cultural tradition Pound thought moribund before the Great War and critically wounded by it. Believing that only artists who were *both* classical and original could revive and renew the tradition, Pound opposed Futurists, Dadaists, and other vanguards determined to pull the plug on culture and bury its corpse. He instead joined T.S. Eliot, who forwent Pound's bombast but shared his classical erudition and ideals and matched his technical virtuosity. Eliot formulated their position in the seminal essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” a rejoinder to revolutionary art manifestos and to Romantic ideology in general. Setting out to explore how the original artist assimilates culture and “makes it new,” Eliot proposed an evolutionary model in which “tradition” shapes the “individual talent,” whose original work then reshapes the tradition. The argument slips and slides: originality presupposes deep knowledge of canonical works as composing “a simultaneous order,” but whence originality originates, Eliot cannot or will not say.

Joyce took the remixing of artworks, traditions, and cultures to an extreme in *Finnegans Wake*. At some level a tale of a Dublin innkeeper and his family, the *Wake*

became a kaleidoscopic polyglot palimpsest of every tale ever told or tellable in any language, a vast nocturnal dream in which the innkeeper, Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker (HCE, or Here Comes Everybody), his wife, and their twin sons and one daughter, endlessly fragment and recombine as all of humanity in all of its familial, national, and other relational permutations. *Finnegans Wake*, or Finn (or *fin*) again wakes: the book opens on the second half of its last sentence and closes on the first half of its opening sentence—representing a literary universe either *closed* upon itself or *opened* to every possible interpretation offered by every possible human shaped by every possible historical moment. Joyce built this ultimate remix, moreover, on the signal Renaissance treatise on remixing—Giambattista Vico’s *Scienza Nuova*, or *New Science*—and its thesis that all history comprises repetitions of three cycles, with a fourth cycle, the *ricorso*, returning to the first, but tracing a spiral rather than a circle. History, in Joyce’s succinct formulation, is always “the same anew.”

An “art without artists” is also an art without bounds, without center or circumference, a radical conception of *remixing* as perpetual, unmotivated *mixing*. An art with original artists is an art with motive and teleology, a more restrained conception of remixing as gathering fragments to renew tradition. An art that revels in its *undecidability*, that presents itself as both unoriginal and original, as both recursive and new, and that does so with ceaseless self-reference, that is the art of *Finnegans Wake* and its postmodern progeny.

3. Chimeras and Cyborgs

Originality dates as a value to the Enlightenment and as a fetish object to the subsequent and consequent Romantic Movement. Though the O.E.D. traces English usage of the word “originality” to the seventeenth century, our current usages of it to describe an artwork as new and independent, different from what has gone before it, or an artist as inventive and creative, exercising independent thought and action—these are legacies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Romantic Movement created the cult of originality that dominated aesthetics into the late twentieth century, when it suffered debunking and demystification—artworks lost their status as new creations, and artists lost theirs as independent creators.

John Barth identified and explored the chimera of originality in his many postmodern novels, notably *Chimera*, neatly summarizing his point about artworks in the “Frame-Tale” to his *Lost in the Funhouse*. In a gesture of proto-interactivity, the “Frame-Tale” instructs us to cut out, twist, and glue together a portion of itself, forming a Möbius strip that reads, “Once upon a time there was a story that began once upon a time there was a story. . . ,” and so on in an endless recursion that Barth dates to *The Arabian Nights*. More focused on artists and readers than on artworks, Barth’s contemporary, the novelist Raymond Federman, set out in “Imagination as Plagiarism [an unfinished paper . . .],” to debunk “the false MYTHS of the sacred author and of artistic originality,” and to decenter “the text [as] an expressive entity which stems from a center: THE AUTHOR, and which is decoded by another center:

THE READER.” Instead, Federman argued, poetry or fiction is “virtual and diffuse within language itself . . . in the play of all communication.”

That argument was dominating the Zeitgeist. Theorists of intersubjectivity, exploring how an author communicated with a reader through the medium of a text, concluded that author and reader in fact were co-authoring that text, making any literary text an open and ongoing process. Theorists of intertextuality, exploring how texts interacted with one another, pushed that conclusion further, eliminating text, author, and reader as independent or integral agents. “Writing,” as Roland Barthes put it, “is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin.” In the Barthesian conception of writing as an intertext flowing perpetually between an impossible origin and impossible destination—there is “no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins.” Authors and readers became nomadic points of convergence for all the literary, cultural, social, and other texts that constitute them at any particular moment; and texts (themselves already convergences of other texts) became places where authorial and readerly points of convergence converge. The “world” that texts had purported to represent, moreover, also disappeared, for the only “world” available to literary discourse is “world” already interpreted, world, as Jacques Derrida put it, “always already” mediated by language.

In asking *what is an author* and *what is a reader*, poststructuralists implicitly were asking the more fundamental question, *what is a human*. Humanists, by and large, did not like the answer. Poststructuralism pointed inescapably to a post-humanism in which the human being, who once had replaced God, was being replaced by Text, a development, depending on one’s point of view, either profane or sacred. Without individual originality, we might be like bees in a hive, individuals acting as a single organism; or, to choose a STEM metaphor, we might be cyborgs, like the entities constituting *the Borg*, the dystopian interstellar spaceship *cum* organism imagined by Star Trek. Perhaps more to the point, we are the people of the Web, but are we individual humans contributing to a vast information system, or individual cells of a vast, virtual trans-human and post-human brain? And is the Web the hell imagined in the *Matrix*, or a version of the heaven imagined by the theologian Teilhard de Chardin, the intelligence of humankind evolving into the Mind of God?

4. So What?

In the 1940s, the comparative mythologist (and student of *Finnegans Wake*) Joseph Campbell published *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell argued in it that all mythic narratives, no matter their differences, are variations on one story, “the hero’s journey,” or what Campbell called the Western “monomyth.” In the same decade, the Argentinean fabulist Jorge Luis Borges essayed one of his early fictional blends of cosmology, theology, library science, and Kabbalah. In “The Library of Babel,” Borges imagined a universe in the form of an apparently infinite library that lacks center and circumference and that stands on two axioms: first, “all books,

however different from one another they might be, consist of identical elements: the space, the period, the comma, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet”; and second, “in all the library, there are no two identical books.” The library, therefore, is “perfect, complete, and whole,” containing “all possible combinations . . . able to be expressed, in every language.”

Campbell hypothesized a narrative system in which every story has originality or the potential for it, and no story has complete originality or the possibility of it. Originality means either the introduction of new elements into a system or a new arrangement of existing elements. Borges imagined a universal library that appears to admit neither option for originality, but he tacitly offers the sly paradox that the story “The Library of Babel” had to originate somewhere. Such speculations on originality would have enraged the Romantics; engaged Pound and Eliot; delighted Duchamp and Joyce; and appeared as givens, though moot givens, to postmodernists and poststructuralists. Such speculations also raise the central question about remixing: does it admit originality and, if so, in what form? The question profoundly affects doctoral education: if everything is a remix, then nothing is wholly original, but “original research” is the foundation of doctoral education.

The doctoral enterprise, indeed, depends more on what we mean by “originality” than on what we mean by “research.” Practically, we want to determine how to safeguard research—ideas and discoveries—that we define as original and, therefore, as proprietary. Theoretically, we have to determine *how* we define originality and then identify and assess research that makes an “original contribution,” work that “makes it new.” The Web and digital technologies may vex the first task, but the Intertext wholly confounds the second.

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