

# FORUM

University of Edinburgh  
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts  
Issue 01 | Autumn 2005

<b>Title</b>	Review of Catherine Labio's <i>Origins and the Enlightenment: Aesthetic Epistemology from Descartes to Kant</i>
<b>Author</b>	Joe Hughes
<b>Publication</b>	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
<b>Issue Number</b>	01
<b>Issue Date</b>	Autumn 2005
<b>Publication Date</b>	12/12/2005
<b>Editors</b>	Lisa Otty & Matt McGuire

*FORUM* claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise *FORUM* as the original publisher.

Catherine Labio, *Origins and the Enlightenment: Aesthetic Epistemology from Descartes to Kant*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. 193 pp.

It's easy, from the point of view of contemporary theory, to look back on the Enlightenment as that time of philosophical naïveté, when thought was as simple as geometry, when the abstract explained, progress was both a given and goal, truth was equated unproblematically with the Good, and origins were quite simply origins. We imagine that this naïveté required significant complication for ethical, political, or philosophical reasons and that certain myths needed to be revealed for what they are. The difficulties and discoveries of modern mathematics and set theory are integrated into thought, progress and the form of truth need to be rethought, abstraction itself needs to be explained, difference needs to be put into the origin. Catherine Labio, however, complicates these ideas from within the Enlightenment itself. She tries to show in this book the epistemological 'luxuriance' of the period and its constant rethinking of the concepts of origins and originality in particular.

In her first chapter, Labio hopes to resolve the contradiction between Descartes' relegation of origins to the unknowable and his fictional genesis of the natural world - which he presents as truth - in *Le Monde*. Origins as historical facts are unreliable knowledge in part because history itself is unreliable and in part because memory can't be counted on for an accurate reproduction of a singular event (15). It was Descartes' "militant belief that we can conceive only what we make ourselves" (33). If historical events are neither apodictic nor useful, fiction, by contrast, "creates its own truth and is therefore closer to geometry than to history" (15). "Fiction becomes a source of knowledge whose success does not depend upon its ability to imitate or approximate the real" (31). It provides an explanatory truth which takes neither the form of homoiosis nor of aletheia but of an internal production (30-1). "The certainty of a fable depends on a writer's ability to create a vision that can, on being observed, be internalized by the reader / observer who will conceive it in turn. Because he or she has conceived it, the observer will know it to be true" (31). In this way Labio resolves the apparent contradiction between Descartes' refusal to study origins and his willingness to invent them. Genesis, creativity, has its own a-historical, or synchronic, truth which has the added advantage of being independent of the particulars which compose it. Descartes, in his repudiation of origins as a source of knowledge, sets a limit to certain knowledge which both Kant and Vico inherit: we can know certainly only what we create.

But where Descartes rejected history as a fruitful enterprise, Vico embraced it insofar as it was understood to be the study of human creations, cultures and institutions, not singular events. Nonetheless, Labio finds the same emphasis on internalization and reinvention in Vico, especially in his historicization of Homer, the first poet, whose poetry is "always already belated, and forever internalized and reinvented on the basis of the traces it has left" (9, cf. 49). Out of her in depth discussion of Homer and Vico's place in the quarrel between the ancients and moderns, Labio develops a 'Vichian hermeneutics' of history whose foundational principle is that the human mind is indefinite and that knowledge is grounded in ignorance (51). Vico makes it clear "that presence is infinitely deferred" as a result of what Labio calls a "Vichian slip" (51-2), or what Vico calls "a modification of the human mind" which opens up the "position of consciousness." This is the Vichian origin: the modification of the human mind which

makes us “always already historians” (62). Labio develops the role of this modification and its “reciprocal determination” with institutions into a complex and interesting hermeneutics of history.

In her third and fourth chapters, she turns more directly to the role of origins and originality in Enlightenment aesthetics. Vico and Descartes both agreed that we can know with certainty only those things created by humans. This epistemological limit turned attention away from those things we can only know indistinctly and obscurely and refocused it on what we create: it opened the way for aesthetics as a “master discourse” (4, cf. 66-7). At the same time, aesthetic theories of originality returned to epistemology by theorizing the human subject as the source of knowledge and thus necessitating further psychological explanations and inquiry. These two chapters outline the function of origins and originality in the aesthetics of a number of different philosophers differentiated according to whether they think of origins synchronically or diachronically, a fabulous and explanatory past or a historical and empirical past. However, Labio is quick to point out that she has no intention of forcing these thinkers into a “binary straightjacket” (68).

Locke, Pope, and Young are the three primary representatives of a synchronic theory of origins. Locke “is not concerned with origins as moments in time but with the kind of certainty that obtains outside history. ... For Locke, the genealogical method is not going to yield the original, which can only be arrived at synchronically” (70-1). The only origins he admits are, not surprisingly, the objects of sensation and the objects of mental reflection. With Pope Labio develops the relationship between originality and imitation and returns to the quarrel between the ancients and moderns. Originality functions as a criterion of selection and judgment (74) which works to separate not only the legitimate copy of an original from the copy of a copy, but also Shakespeare from Homer (79, 78). This view persists through to Young for whom imitation is “inferiority confessed.” Here originality becomes the organic product of genius which belongs directly to its creator: it becomes “a matter of property” (84). It was Young who turned “originality into an unavoidable aesthetic category” (82) which contributed, via William Duff, to the expressionist aesthetics of romanticism (86), privileging the organic, the individual (genius), and his or her rights to the product.

Condillac, Rousseau, and Adam Smith are the spokesmen for the diachronic point of view, and each in some way or another reintroduces the past as a significant element in thought. The theme of the origins of language comes to the foreground and mimesis takes a secondary position. Condillac wavers between synchrony and diachrony in his account of our knowledge of origins. Historically, language was originally physical and eventually became verbal. Synchronically, these stages correspond to different faculties: the physical to the imagination, the verbal to memory. By positing a progression and a continuity between the faculties he was able to claim that we still possess knowledge of earlier forms of language, only these are functioning latently in less dominant faculties (98-101). Setting all facts aside, Rousseau wavers even more violently. For Rousseau, the origin is the moment which separated us from our static prehistory. It is the fall from grace and all that is left is history. It is possible to return to the origin in imagination, but this is only a negative homecoming and the nothingness which subtends it empties it of its content. This too works its way into his origins of language: the gesture and speech stand in as prehistory, the idealized, followed by a slow fall through painting and

hieroglyphs to alphabetic writing (105-08). Similarly Smith's labor theory of value articulates a conception of originality founded in production whether it be poetic or economic (120). Labor is the origin of value ascribed to things, and the current way of working has its own origin in modes of production more closely linked to nature. The early modes of production in Smith become idealized in the same way Rousseau dreamt of a prehistorical stasis, and this origin stands in as the ground from which we can derive values and make evaluations (123-24).

Kant gave a new richness to the concept of originality which had been losing its influence in Germany (157). Labio concentrates primarily on the cosmological origins in Kant's early *Universal Natural History*, notions of permanence and causality in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, and on the function of aesthetic originality and purposiveness in *The Critique of Judgment*. Originality is productive, not eductive. As in Descartes, originality is neither homoiosis nor aletheia, but production. The product has to become exemplary, it has to be something new which we can imitate and which gives the rule for judgment.

...since mechanistic explanations cannot encompass the origin, we need to posit something outside mechanism and history. That something is Purposiveness, of which the most exemplary instance is originality. Antithetical to the spirit of imitation, it provides a complementary alternative to regressive thought and a criterion of judgment that emphasizes the product rather than the educt (153-54). Originality is freedom. It is a production "which indicates the possibility of generation without constraint" (159). It frees the product from the past and from the constraint of rules but nonetheless remains subject to exemplarity and being (159). Kant puts a familiar limit on what can be created and known, on what this product can be, – it must be something created by humans. Kant specifies: "Only the painter of *Ideas* is the master of fine art" (160); he turns "to concepts as the only sound epistemological basis..." (34, cf. 169).

Labio neatly ties up the primary themes developed across the course of the book in this chapter on Kant and in her postscript by emphasizing three ideas which tend to structure Enlightenment epistemologies: knowledge is grounded in some form of ignorance; limits can be drawn to mark out the domain of certain knowledge; we can know only what we create. (167-68). Descartes, Vico, and Kant, in their thinking on origins and epistemology, followed this general framework in different ways and Labio draws out their respective differences brilliantly.

She begins and ends her book with reference to contemporary theory as "epistemologically challenged" and suggests that her study of 18<sup>th</sup> century epistemology demonstrates a richness and variety of thought which contrasts "what [she has] come to view as our own epistemic paucity" (167). If she succeeds in multiplying the differences between competing theories and showing their respective originalities, this richness does not, in any direct way, rival contemporary theory. Indeed, the diversity of 'images of thought' within just one of the many different general theories – phenomenology, psychoanalysis and clinical psychology, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, the 'philosophy of mind' – is so rich with so many competing theories that when, in earlier periods, there might have been an anxiety of influence and a burden of the past, we have to deal with something like a burden of the present and an anxiety of competition or support. Labio's goal isn't, however, to argue for the primacy of one period over another

– an argument this book would not support with its short, but very interesting, engagements with Lacan, a footnote or two devoted to Derrida (along with the observation that for Vico, at least, “writing came before speech” (55, 110)), and nominal references or slight allusions to other theorists – but to defend the Enlightenment from reductive attacks and broad dismissals, to show that there was never a time when origins were clear and accessible. And so she closes her book wondering “what has happened between the Enlightenment and the twentieth century that could make us suppose that, as a concept, origins ought to be, or ever have been, clear” (174).

Joe Hughes, University of Edinburgh