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Review of Catherine Labio, *Origins and the Enlightenment: Aesthetic Epistemology from Descartes to Kant.*

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Catherine Labio, *Origins and the Enlightenment: Aesthetic Epistemology from Descartes to Kant*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. xi +193 pp. ISBN 0801442753.

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Since the Enlightenment, European intellectuals' tales of origins have focused on human actions rather than those of the gods, on natural laws rather than miracles, on history rather than myth. At least, so goes the stereotype. In fact, this thumbnail sketch so familiar from survey courses in the history of philosophy or Western Civilization ignores the rich diversity of intellectual models at play within the eighteenth century. Catherine Labio's ambitious text denies that origin narratives have ever been clear-cut or facilely transformed. Labio's major contribution lies in reframing the work of several very well-known eighteenth-century writers outside of the "dialectic of Enlightenment," adopting instead contemporary concerns and methods as analytic categories.

Labio transports her readers to European Enlightenment debates on the subject of origins, where we encounter an astonishing variety of approaches to this inquiry. In addition to the general question—"Where have we come from?"—many writers associated with the Enlightenment explicitly engaged the more subjective question, "Can we ever know our origins?" Drawing on psychological explanations grounded in human reason and senses, they maintained nonetheless a hearty awareness of the limits of human consciousness. These authors understood that origin narratives reflected more about the possibilities and limits of human knowledge than some empirical truth about the past.

Labio's interpretation constitutes a very different sort of Enlightenment than the human triumphalism decried by (among others) Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and Michel Foucault. However, beyond an oblique reference to the dialectic of Enlightenment, Labio fails to identify any of the important thinkers who contributed to this enduring critique of Enlightenment ideals. Nor does she directly address the methodological or political dilemmas inherent within this critique, although she certainly demonstrates these dilemmas throughout the text. Instead, Labio frames her argument rather narrowly within the field of modern literary criticism, taking particular aim at Victor Brombert's 1989 presidential address to the Modern Language Association. Brombert argued that the "blurring of the notion of origins" characterized modern literary criticism (1). Labio responds that the search for origins has never been "a straightforward affair," and undertakes her survey of Enlightenment writing to prove that eighteenth-century authors were just as cognizant of the degree to which origins are human constructions as is any self-respecting post-structuralist (2). Providing the intellectual genealogy to Brombert's position would have enabled Labio to grapple with the broader significance of her own argument.

The text is tightly structured. The introduction clearly outlines Labio's central arguments and format. The author devotes one chapter to each of three figures who were pivotal in shaping the discourse of Enlightenment origin narratives: René Descartes, Giambattista Vico, and Immanuel Kant. Two thematic chapters provide a forum for the multiplicity of voices and approaches to contrast with these featured three. These chapters respond to Peter Hans Reill's warning against "jump[ing] from mountain peak to mountain peak," within intellectual history, and provide a

broader intellectual landscape for the three central figures to inhabit. The postscript provides a fascinating, if somewhat oddly placed comparison of the role of human epistemology within Vico and Kant, which seems intended as the author's instructional model for how to put the larger text to work.

Labio investigates the place of origins in providing a foundation for human knowledge among Enlightenment writers, and surveys the multiplicity of origin theories active throughout this time period. Throughout the eighteenth century, Labio tells us, the "origin could be defined as cause ... or as that which came first chronologically" (9). If the origin was defined as a cause as in medical diagnosis, it could be best perceived by adopting a synchronic model of analysis. When a patient becomes ill, the physician must first investigate the immediate environment, diet, and personal contacts to discover the illness's origin. John Locke embraced a synchronic model exclusively throughout his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. If, on the other hand, the origin was defined as that which came first, a diachronic historical model provided the best method of analysis. Etienne Bonnot de Condillac's *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* adopted this historicist methodology. The richness of Enlightenment discourse stands in dramatic contrast to our own era's "narrow linear-historicist model," according to Labio, and therefore merits a more systematic recovery (2).

Amid this diversity, however, Enlightenment authors were united in considering "the human subject as the source of all possible knowledge" which "made it possible to think about the individual, social and natural history and their beginnings in similar terms" (3). The text's second argument departs from this point. Human perception, guided by both reason and emotion, unfortunately limited and inherently fallible, produced all knowledge. Therefore, aesthetics as the philosophical inquiry into the rules guiding and training human perception became the "master discourse" of the eighteenth century. Here, Labio notes her debt to the work of Terry Eagleton in revealing the connections between eighteenth-century politics and art. Labio's purpose is instead to reveal the connection between eighteenth-century art and epistemology. She contends that "inquiries into origins both reflected and shaped key eighteenth-century propositions regarding the nature of human knowledge ... in other words, inquiries into origins made it possible for aesthetics, and one of its core constituents, the discourse of originality, to emerge" (5).

Labio opens with a chapter devoted to the place of origins, or lack thereof, in the writings of René Descartes (1596-1650). The man who wrote, "I think, therefore I am," was little interested in the origins of that "I." Origin narratives were only probabilities at their best, argued Descartes, and were therefore fruitless expenditures of intellectual energy. Humans should focus on improving their understanding of observed phenomena instead of conjecturing about hypothetical origins. In the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes observed, "If we want to understand the nature of plants or of men, it is much better to consider how they can gradually grow from seeds than to consider how they were created by God at the very beginning of the world" (16). Descartes's pragmatic empiricism results logically from this assertion. How, then, are we to make sense of Descartes's use of fables as a narrative strategy within his inquiry into natural phenomena, and of his reliance on a fictional genesis account as a thought exercise in *Le monde*? According to Labio, Descartes's fables "enable him to reach conclusions that are radically different from those of his predecessors" (n. 19, p. 25). Descartes acknowledged that

origin narratives could provide essential imaginative space, so long as we recognize their provisional and limited nature.

Descartes invited readers of *Le monde* to imagine a "brave new world," independent of everything that we think we know about God and Creation. What would we perceive first? What could we know about the world, simply based on our own sensory experiences? And to this bold query, Descartes responds rather anticlimactically: light. A startling essay on the qualities of light follows, prefaced with the warning to distinguish rigorously between "the idea of light that takes shape in our imagination by the intervention of our eyes, and what is in the objects that generates this sensation in us, i.e., what is in the flame or the Sun that is called by the name light" (26). Descartes could not simply ask his readers to forget all that they knew of the world; he had to offer them some alternative, even if he and they realized it to be a fictional placeholder for new knowledge. Labio asserts that fiction proved particularly important within Descartes's writing due to its "ability to work analogically and visually" (31). In imagining a new world, Descartes left space for his readers' old world only as a departure point. That old world was not known, nor would readers better understand the world by searching for its origins. Descartes clearly chose fiction over history, the probabilities of the senses over the perplexities of the past. His successors were not so sanguine in turning their backs on history, which became a central preoccupation within Enlightenment writing.

The second chapter focuses on Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), whose *The New Science* sought to secularize and standardize the history of the "world of nations." Like Descartes, Vico rejected the totality implied by "origins," and sought instead to fully explain the humanly knowable through "genesis accounts." This distinction enabled Vico to embrace history as a human creation concerned with human events. Labio contends that for Vico, "the study of history constitutes the only conceivable hermeneutic field because human beings cannot apprehend anything but their own production" (55). History was to provide a system by which human actions could be ordered and comprehended, similar to the order that mathematics provided for the natural world. Principles of human society could be determined, rules established, and order imposed on the seemingly chaotic events of the past. Labio introduces Vico's method through his analysis of Homeric poetry as a historical source on ancient Greece, before moving on to a broader inquiry of the strategies outlined in *The New Science*.

Labio succinctly sketches the state of pre-Vichian Homeric scholarship in a few short pages, noting how this field became an important site in the trenchant quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns. The Ancients held that these epic poems of a vanished civilization had much to teach the present age, although they might be better interpreted as allegory rather than as direct instructions for human action. After all, the crafty self-centered behavior of Odysseus provided a lamentable example to Europeans reared in the Christian values of sacrifice and abnegation. The Moderns found in Homer evidence that civilization in general, and poetry in particular, had improved in the present day. Charles Perrault dismissed *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* as "primitive and backward expression," according to Labio (41). Vico insisted that the Moderns take the epics seriously, not as models of poetic style or allegory as the Ancients would have it, but as a repository of ancient Greek history and social traditions. Vico articulated a theory of multiple authorship, asserting that "the two poems were composed and compiled by various hands through successive ages," setting the stage for modern Homeric scholarship (43). In the Homeric

epics, Vico found the interpretive key for his new approach to history. Labio observes that "it both reinforced and refined the adequation of poetry and custom and, by extension, of literature and memory expostulated in Book 2 of the *The New Science*; and it strengthened his emphasis on the relationship between language, law, and history" (44). Philology provides the methodology to recover the lost meanings and ideas of the past, providing transport into our origins as human civilizations.

The third chapter investigates synchronic methods of inquiry and the ideal of "originality" as presented by John Locke, Alexander Pope, Edward Young, "William Duff, Alexander Gerard, Charles Batteux, and others" (67). This chapter aims to come down off of the "mountain peak" of the philosophical canon, and for that reason might introduce some of these lesser-known figures to the reader, rather than assuming familiarity with them. Synchronic approaches to origins stressed the role of the senses and reflection in approaching the truth, or the Original. These urged individuals to look inside of themselves, prize originality, and trust in innate responses to recognize beauty.

The fourth chapter pursues the question of "originality" further, relying more on a diachronic model as articulated in works by Etienne Bonnet de Condillac, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, and Robert Wood. The third and fourth chapters incorporate a range of texts "that cut across a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, literary criticism, and political economy" (8). Our own academic divisions certainly did not bind eighteenth-century writers, and the modern scholar can only attend to the holistic systems of thought created in the century by ignoring disciplinary conventions. Within these works, the Original exists less in the mind of the subject than in actual time. However, these authors disagree on whether that Original existed in the distant past, or might be evident within the enlightened present.

The final chapter moves to Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) study of origins and the ideal of originality. Kant strictly circumscribed the subject of origins, and so "freed them from the shackles of chronic time, infinite regress, and freewheeling associationism and anchored them in purposes or freedoms that are subject to the rules of communicability and all this implies, including a community and a tradition" (13). Kant created an intellectual framework capable of acknowledging that human reason is limited and flawed, but may be improved, systematized, and communicated. This framework prized originality as evidence of the productive capacity of the human imagination. Aesthetic judgment thereby became the central arbiter of epistemology.

Labio seeks to contextualize Kant's *Critique of Judgment* within his own work, as well as within the broader intellectual landscape of the eighteenth century. She observes that similar to "his predecessors, Kant contrasts originality to imitation and sees it as the necessary attribute of genius. Yet in the *Third Critique* these views acquire a new resonance as Kant uses them to redefine nature's primacy" (154). The artist of genius discovers original means to represent the beauty of nature, uniting rather than opposing art and nature. Labio contends that this principle of originality extends to the whole of the *Third Critique*, enabling Kant to "let heterogeneity and synthesis coexist." On the edge of the interpretive abyss, Kant insists that knowledge is possible: "originality negatively demonstrates the primacy of judgment while the imagination in its productive capacity functions independent of experience" (166).

Finally, Labio offers a postscript in which she reviews the transformation of the role played by origins in epistemology over the eighteenth century. She systematically compares and contrasts the Vichian and Kantian approaches to the question of the "limits and possibilities of human epistemology" (167). Ultimately, Kant's approach is more familiar to present-day readers, but Labio's purpose here is less to trace modern intellectual methods than to suggest the intellectual possibilities proffered by a rich proliferation of systems. How different might contemporary battles over origins sound if we could find avenues out of the dialectical standoffs between God or science?

In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno lamented the Enlightenment human-centric impulse that they perceived had resulted in political totalitarianism. They followed Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Enlightenment philosophy as an attempt to demystify the world, which ultimately destroyed key elements of human psychology. Horkheimer and Adorno observed that "the myths which fell victim to the Enlightenment were themselves its products. The scientific calculation of events annuls the account of them which thought had once given in myth. Myth sought to report, to name, to tell of origins—but therefore also to narrate, record, explain." When humans placed themselves at the center of the universe, they lost access to the more holistic and mysterious explanations of the universe and its workings. Political totalitarianism became possible in this intellectual environment that substituted human authority for divine power, and willingly subordinated some humans to an all-powerful leader.

Michel Foucault similarly criticized the Enlightenment compulsion to investigate and order the human subject and its origins. Attributing a lock-step historicism and a human-centered egotism to the Enlightenment search for origins, these theorists have struggled to revive alternative methods for understanding the world and its inhabitants. Deconstructive theorists followed suit, striving to de-center the human subject, to question originality as a possibility, and to stress the continued presence of the unknowable within human inquiry. Labio contests the representation of Enlightenment discourse as, in general, totalitarian, and what she terms "the so-called dialectic of the Enlightenment" in particular. Her account stresses multiplicity over dialectic at every turn. She argues that intellectual modesty rather than hubris motivated Enlightenment philosophers to focus on the realm of human action. These authors sought not to replace God with Man, but to systematically distinguish between God's realm, which is unknowable, and humans' realm, which must be studied and perceived to be known. For humans to fail to investigate their realm to the best of their limited abilities represented a moral failing, according to these writers. When Enlightenment thinkers investigated "origins"—whether of the Earth, human society, or individuals—they ventured near that boundary between human and divine realms. The answers that they developed sought to posit the beginnings of what is humanly knowable, and in the process defined what was knowably human.