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IMAGINATION AND THE IMAGINARY, DIFFICULTIES OF DEFINITION. BETWEEN SEMANTIC TRADITIONS AND INNOVATIONS

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Abstract: *To have a rich imagination today is one of the most appreciated qualities of the human being. Nevertheless, conceptually speaking, things have not changed in the sense of a reasonable definition of imagination. In the past it was considered a faculty that was sometimes subordinated, sometimes equal to the other ones. At present it is considered a process, because the dynamic of the domain is important, and its results, included in the imaginary. The excellent appreciation that imagination and the imaginary have did not result in a complete understanding of the unknown aspects of these two very complex qualities.*

Key words: *Imagination, imaginary, literature, faculty, process, mental.*

One of the terms that are positively valorized nowadays is that of imagination, but the interest in this area full of promises is not new at all. Ancient times explored it, looking at it trustingly, or with lack of trust. Later the philosophers' adepts of Cartesianism, and not only them, judged the effects of an imagination uncontrolled by reason upon the individual and the community. The romantics, to which we carry on the ideals and some of the aspirations, refused to see in imagination a danger for clear and healthy judgment, pleading for encouraging the forays in the world of one's own fantasy and that of the artists, without the demanding censorship of reason. They are the ones inviting us to be partners in the adventure of their creativity, a creativity freed from the rigors of conventions, and encouraged, cultivated, preferred to the harshness of rigorous, scientific thinking. Theoreticians, but also philosophers draw our attention towards the ambiguity and vagueness of the concept of imagination. The difficulties come from the fact that we are in front of a reality that cannot be charted minutely with the instruments of logical thinking, and that is why it is not clear if this area is autonomous or depends on another faculty, like reason, for example. "The question of how it works, Wolfgang Iser writes, remains unanswered and becomes critical when one seeks to explain the production of new images fashioned out of "sensation" (Iser 178)**.** Therefore the situation is simple when imagination is explained or has its source in sensation (it is seen by some as a reminisce of sensation), but everything is complicated when imagination does not have direct connections with sensation or perception. Imagination, it is said, is born out of nowhere or out of nothing or "from elsewhere": "Everything in the imagination

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has come from elsewhere, and ultimately this means that the imagination is not self activating but needs activating stimuli from outside itself." (Iser 180). The categorisation of imagination has been difficult as well, which made it very difficult, if not impossible to invent variants to be included under the same definition. Today it is seen either as a function that produces the image in us, or as a process generated by the image, a real *ars combinatoria* of images. Combining images has not always been considered a creative capacity. On the contrary, the suspicion at the end of the 17th century about imagination, tropes and figures, that would be damaging to the process of knowledge, went into the 18th century.

Imagination was seen then as a mechanical operation where we use already existent data, images taken from reality, that are rearranged afterwards. Nevertheless, in the same century, the point of view towards this operation had nuances as well, the idea of different, heterogeneous elements united by this "magical faculty" became more and more important. In 1780 Herder noticed that the faculty we are referring to is one of the least known and that "in fact it represented the real link between body and mind." In this way imagination started its way towards gaining prestige. It was associated with thinking, with the process of knowledge, from which it had been separated for centuries, theoretically speaking, but quite severely. Focusing our attention on the categorial aspect, the most familiar label has been that of *faculty*, a faculty of the sensitive, the heart, opposed to that of thinking, which meant an equivalence with the inferiority position it had occupied for a long time. The romantics contributed seriously to the changing of this perception, with their appreciation of everything connected to imagination, creativity, free genius, spontaneity. In the new theory of imagination that they proposed there appeared an essential element: the discovery of truth. Until then imagination had been seen as dangerous for thinking, and also far away from the profound meanings of life. For William Blake imagination was the world of eternity, Keats spoke about the truth in imagination, Coleridge emphasized the magical power of the poet, and Shelley saw in the poetic truth not only the development of what each of us had *in nuce* since childhood, but, in its full expression, a kind of mystical illumination.

The crowning of this vision about the powerful creativity, in which the engine is in reality imagination, is achieved by Baudelaire, following the path open by the romantics, with a definition that imposed in the memory of the creators and theoreticians, preoccupied by the mechanisms of imagination. Baudelaire called it "the queen of faculties", having admiration for its capacity to elevate the human being. This was so because it created the new, and it created the world itself that it ruled, mastering truth and opening the way to the infinite. Imagination is surrounded by an aura of mystery. What is the source of this emphasis on the idea of imagination being impenetrable? The explanation consists in the few concrete data that we have in order to define it, and in the fact stressed by Baudelaire: imagination resembles other faculties, even reason, and yet it is itself. The certainty that we are in front of an autonomous faculty, unsubordinated to others and independent of the "carnation" that other faculties would give to it did not remain unshaken from Baudelaire on, and Iser raises another issue, very important in this sense:"whether one faculty can be a plurality of faculties, or whether this plurality in fact shows that the imagination as such can never be objectified." (Iser 181). Iser himself, not incidentally, quoted one of the 1728 assertions of Zachary Mayne in *Two*

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Dissertations Concerning Sense and the Imagination: the imagination is "like the Chameleon of which Creature it is reported, that it changes its Hue according to the Colour of the Place where it happens to be." (173) We have two possibilities, but it is difficult to say which is closest to the truth. Either imagination imitates the appearance of other faculties, combining their elements in an ingenious way. Thus it is a plurality of faculties, its quality being this unification all the more admirable as each faculty has its own identity. And so its own features and defining aspects, which makes them difficult to be placed at the same level. Or we refer to a faculty that is independent of others, but which, through the deceiving similarities it evokes, cannot be objectified in an instant, as Iser remarked. It is certain today that imagination is considered indispensable to thinking, reason, and more than this, it is necessary in the evolution of the human species. It is in itself a process and not an entity or a faculty. Nothing tells us that the contemporary meaning given to imagination will be definitely accepted, beyond time and space, beyond culture, so much more as contemporary theories admit their limits suggesting areas of future research among other things. For example, identifying the factors that determine the formation and transformation of images. It is noticeable today that the term imagination is competed and even outrun by the term imaginary, with great success in the postmodern period, when it is not perceived as its synonym. The explanation of the interest towards the concept of imaginary, to the detriment of that of imagination, although one cannot be understood without the other, is in a reminiscence of a structuralist conception, a bygone philosophical current that tried to cast away the subject as author of representations. Imagination as a faculty was replaced by multiple manifestations of the imaginary. Logically if the notion of imagination has so many unknown spots, the term imaginary will be shadowed, in the sense of a full conceptual knowledge. This term gives us the result, better said the images and their combinations, but the process that leads to their creation and the process that gives its dynamism are less known. The starting point is obscure and the interest for the imagistic ensemble leaves aside the mystery and the impenetrable, which is not outside the conceptual area. Therefore the interest today lies more in the production in itself or the world of images, with their features, with the impact the images have, than in imagination, that is « the faculty of producing and using images. » When we talk about the imaginary we do not think only about the imaginary of an individual, but equally to that of a community and we have in mind a large diversity of the component elements, starting from dream, reverie and hallucinations and arriving to fiction, myth or the novel, that is everything that has to do with the image, from the simplest elements, to the most elaborate constructions. The definition that Jean-Jacques Wunenburger gives to the imaginary can be a useful instrument:

> "We will call imaginary an ensemble of mental productions, or productions present in works, based on visual images (painting, drawing, photography) and on language (metaphor, symbol, short story), making coherent and dynamic ensembles with symbolical function". (Wunenburger 10).

The imaginary gets different shapes depending on the terrain it is on and which models it differently from case to case: as perception, idea, dream or hallucination... That is why the identity of the imaginary is problematic too. The diversity of its components makes it like this and, also the

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indetermination of the functioning process. Yet the connection with consciousness seems certain: "The imaginary alludes to intention, to a purpose of consciousness. That is why everything can become imaginary, even what is real, because the imaginary is for the consciousness a concrete, absent, unactualized content." (Wunenburger 63). The chameleonic aspect of imagination is combined with this capacity of taking and converting the outside elements in a world of the present-absent because the images do not have the concreteness of what is palpable. Sometimes they are extremely vivid, we operate with them every moment and yet they do not have their own substance, they replace the absent objects. Despite this, the imagination has the power to produce "the unimaginable", the surreal, to give life to absence, dressing it with the appearance of life and combining the real with the impossible, as Iser rightfully noticed. Consciousness contributes decisively (if not as the main source) to the dynamic of imagination and the imaginary. The obvious trust in the privileged position imagination holds in the collective and individual mind, in the justification of many of our decisions, not only of our day-dreams, is not enough for the complete accreditation of imagination. It is given to it a significant role in everyday life, but not all its productions are looked at with the same enthusiasm when putting them in practice, or in considering them as indispensible parts of everyday life, for example. We have in mind here the most important manifestation of imagination: the art that never receives the heuristic value it deserves: "No philosopher starts by saying: "Let Mozart's Requiem be a paradigm of the Being; let us start with this." Why can't we start by taking a dream, a poem, a symphony as paradigmatic instances of the plenitude of the Being, considering the physical world as a deficient world of the Being, instead of seeing things the other way round, instead of seeing in the world of imaginary existence, that is human a way of being deficient and secondary?". The concrete, the physical, material world will always have pre-eminence, it seems, even in the conditions in which we have to admit the importance imagination has gained in thinking, reason, and in our existence as such. Nevertheless, we have to understand that, when it comes to imagination, we do not refer to the same reality all the time. The difficulty of defining imagination, and of fully understanding it, comes from the heterogeneity of the elements that make up its identity. When we think, imagination is absolutely necessary, therefore the logical, rational operations need imagination as well. But imagination is the one that produces the delirium, hallucinations, the one that gives wrong solutions, hallucinating variants to our problems. The line between error, mistake and the genius quality of a miraculous solution given by imagination is so thin that it is almost impossible to mentally construct that subtle instrument of identification of productions of imagination that are sure sources of "improvement" for the human being, from those that are simply false solutions or aberrations.

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