

Dream, Imagination and Reality in Literature: An Introduction

All these concepts have been too much ideologised, so that nowadays it is difficult to discuss them abstracting from their ideological, political, and cultural ramifications. What can we now say about the American Dream? What about romantic imagination, and the notions of reality in socialist realism? No doubt, people will always need dreams, images and fictions of the real, but our task is to find out to what extent these hopes and desires have been manipulated by political, religious, cultural and other forces.

Despite the importance of ideological criticism I hope that it will not dominate this conference. I am convinced that there are also other approaches dealing with dream, imagination and reality (in the sense of the Lacanian Real) as powerful forces of human emotionality, compassion and love.

Let me focus on imagination. It appears to be a romantic invention which, however, had survived Romanticism with its cult of the poet's personality and self-expression, and was later developed in modernist aesthetic thought (such as I.A. Richards's *Coleridge on Imagination*, 1934, or the archetypal criticism of Maud Bodkin or Northrop Frye). At the same time, it can be said that the notion of imagination is a product of a development which lasted for millennia and on whose beginning there is Plato's notion of *maniā* or madness, which, according to the dialogue called *Phaedrus*, drives divinely inspired artists (but also bacchantes, lovers and soothsayers) to grasp the ideal, divine beauty.

In modernity, this concept of imagination was elaborated and transformed: either by means of stressing the sacred source of inspiration, as we have it in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*:

Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread;¹

or by linking imagination with the unconscious and dreams, as it is in most modern accounts. Let me quote from Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" (1821), which points out that imagination is no mere result of our remembrance (or *anamnesis*, as Socrates would have it) of eternal Ideas, but the extraordinary power of fleeting, subconscious impressions and effects, which recreate the world of our lives, including the ideals in our souls. These ideals are not only the traces of

¹ S.T. Coleridge, "Kubla Khan; or A Vision in A Dream," ll. 49-52, *Poetical Works I: Poems (Reading Text)*, ed. J.C.C. Mays, Bollingen Series (Princeton N.J. and London: Princeton University Press, 2001), 214.

noble and sublime sentiments, they are also formative experiences for our thoughts and actions:

Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists.²

Therefore the activity of imagination does not necessarily confirm the existence of the ideal world, often supposed to give meaning to the empirical reality. Imagination produces an effect, which the Russian formalists called *estrangement* of language and *defamiliarisation* of reality established by our customary perception mechanisms and value judgements. Nonetheless, in contrast to the formalists, interpreting defamiliarisation as a process alerting us to the specificity of language as a means of artistic communication, or making us aware of an independent reality of the work of art, Shelley shows how the ideas of imagination and effects of poetry can become instruments of good, if combined with human love and compassion. This does not, however, mean that ethical ideals would make poetry meaningful, as it is in the thought of Sir Philip Sidney, Shelley's Renaissance predecessor. In his essays on imagination Shelley argues in the opposite way: the aesthetic experience, whose main feature is the intensity of desire, facilitates the formation of a lasting ethical attitude.

In Shelley's theory, the shadowy play of poetry first develops relations based on tiny differences unregistered by our reason. Thanks to this endless process producing "a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought," an individual can identify with another being and many others, in order to partake in all "pains and pleasures of mankind".³ What is new here is the concept of the ethical stance based on the power of art, its aesthetic effects given by differences among imperceptible individual sensations and understood as intensities.

In this way, modern imagination is by no means understood as a general way of *representing* the world, rather, it is an independent power *recreating* the world on the basis of minute, imperceptible differences of our sensations. This approach poses serious problems to the legitimization of imagination: unlike in Plato, imagination is not a power of the miraculous stone called the Magnet, the Muse, or the Idea, that is, of the Divine Original. It becomes a force generated by the effects of untraceable sensuous or mental processes. Since the Epicureans, these effects have been called *simulacra* or *phantasms*. While the traditional

² P.B. Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in *Poems and Prose*, ed. Timothy Webb (London: J.M. Dent, 1995), 256.

³ Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," 256.

metaphysics refused them as subversive pretenders to the lawful power of the Ideas, modern philosophy since Leibniz has been giving them more and more authority. As a result, the opposed notions of fiction and reality have given way to the *virtual* of which we cannot say whether it *is* or *is not*, but which even more influences our aesthetic perceptions, emotional responses, moral and social attitudes.

A seemingly different notion connected with the working of imagination is that of “another world”, *heterocosm*, created by art. While the eighteenth-century critics, such as Addison, Breitinger or Bodmer, were merely trying to advocate the difference of the world created in the work of art, for instance, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, from the world represented by Newtonian physics, the twentieth century came with the idea of *chaosmos*, a work of art as a system of signs producing reality as an open, dynamic and heterogeneous structure. This is the way, in which Umberto Eco interpreted Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Gilles Deleuze Proust’s *A la Recherche du temps perdu*. While heterocosm could still be interpreted as a work of an ingenious, divine artist, growing effortlessly as a plant from a seed, chaosmos is often seen as a product of a “literary machine,”⁴ an assemblage of fragments functioning together on the basis of random, transversal relationships. This notion of imagination, substituting the unity of the whole by the “unity of a fragment” was already known to William Blake or early German romantics. In the twentieth century it has acquired another dimension: the interpenetration of human creativity and the power of modern media - film, video, internet and others. This development cannot be simply rejected, as Iris Murdoch did, claiming in one of her lectures that television was killing the imagination. On the other hand, it can be said that the progress of the modern media has caused a massive expansion of imagination demonstrating its convergence with technological powers of representation.

It would be presumptuous to pretend that this brief introduction has covered all the major topics of this publication: for instance, I have not dealt with a specific status of literary dreams and visions, which have always displayed tensions between the unconscious imagining and allegorical or symbolic readings. Nor have I discussed the gender-specific dimensions of imagination, imagining the cultural or racial other, or of children’s fantasies. It was also hardly possible to deal with the relation between imagination and nonsense, or with specific features of imagination on the stage and film screen. The essays which follow cover many of these topics as well as other, related problems.

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⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard, second edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 146-49.