

LITERARY IMAGINATION: CRITICISM AND RESEARCH

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Summary

In this chapter, I examine how contemporary literary criticism (in particular, comparatist criticism) examines the question of the relationship between literature and the imagination. Different approaches to the notion of “literary imagination” within the Comparative Literature tradition may then be identified.

1. Introduction

According to Seamus Heaney, poetry is the “imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality”: the imagination is at the heart of poetical endeavour. The characterization of literary imagination is however a complex process, which calls on various extra-literary elements and a simple focus on what is called the “critique de l’imaginaire” will not suffice. For although the work of G. Bachelard, J.-P. Richard or Gilbert Durand is clearly of central importance, research on the literary imagination has taken many forms and espouses radically different critical approaches. It might be argued that the criticism of consciousness known as the Geneva School is just as much a critical approach which is founded on the idea of literary imagination as is the “critique de l’imaginaire”. Likewise, the question of the conscious and unconscious imagination are central to what is deemed psychoanalytic criticism. The literary imagination has also recently been examined according to its geography to its colour or indeed according to its sexual identity. The way in which criticism deals with the issues of the imagination and the imaginary make it possible to shed new light on questions of literary history and criticism.

I. Literature, Imagination and Literary Creation: How the Imagination Is Linked To the Possibility of Invention

The relationship between invention and imagination dates from the 18th century. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) claims that in this period, the poet's invention and imagination were made dependent for their materials — their ideas and 'images' — on the external universe and the literary models the poet had. Towards the end of the 18th century however, writers and philosophers put forward the idea that the combination of elements taken from nature might be assembled in new ways in order to create something new, which might overtake or even transcend nature.

2. The Romantic Movement

Whereas classical and medieval philosophies limit imagination to a mimetic role (its function as mediation between reason and perception), the debates on the imagination as developed by the Romantic movement, particularly in Germany and England, assert the rights of the imagination. The Romantics promote the literary imagination against the analytical function assigned to the intellect in other branches of 18th century thought and develop the role of the imagination in creation. The poet thus acquires a particular power: his or her imagination becomes the rival of nature. For Blake, in *A Vision of Last Judgment*, the world of the imagination is the world of eternity, a divine power. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), Frederick Schiller underlines the separation between imaginary and real and evokes the role of the imagination in creating an unreal. Shelley (in 1821) claimed that poetry may be defined as "the expression of the imagination". The examination of the notion of creativity allows us to consider the imagination as an operative mechanism, that is, a force which makes it possible to produce images which are not to be found in visible reality. Subsequent readings of literary production as other than mimesis take root in this shift in thinking about the role of the imagination. The "critique de l'imaginaire", for example, is one such critical orientation which may be seen to take root in a particular reading of Romanticism. Gaston Bachelard's philosophy conceives the production of knowledge as an open process and against scientific rationalism, postulates that reality is fashioned by the imagination. In *La Poétique de la rêverie* (1960), he maintains that "reverie", the state of mind that allows the imagination free course, is the highest state of mind.

3. Literature, Imagination and Literary Symbol: The Imagination as a Means of Highlighting or Constructing Symbols

Once the imagination is recognised to be a creative rather than a "decaying sense" as Hobbes believed, the possibility of using the imagination to create literary symbol becomes possible. Coleridge's writings on imagination and fancy, symbolism and allegory embody this approach, in which the imagination is envisaged a means of elaborating symbol. After Schelling, Coleridge analyses the imagination's power to "form the many into one" (*Biographia Literaria*, 1817, chapter 10) and insists on the separation between creative imagination and mimetic representation. The historical and critical force of these ideas about the imagination may be measured by the importance assigned to them by literature and writing in the 19th and 20th centuries. The distinction made between allegory and symbol which are underlined by Northrop Frye, for

example, in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957, p. 89: “The contrast is between a ‘concrete’ approach to symbols which begins with images of actual things and works outward to ideas and propositions, and ‘abstract’ approach which begins with the idea and then tries to find concrete images to represent it.”) are close to those of Coleridge (which echo the discussions of A. W. Schlegel in *Die Kunstlehre*). Northrop Frye, following Coleridge's analysis, underlines the difference in process (from the image to the thing or the opposite) but also points to a fundamental difference in the nature of allegory and symbol. The Symbolists take the reflexion on imagination and symbol a step further and present a theory of the process of symbolization which relies on the imagination's capacity to see the "soul of things" (Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, 1899, p. 10) and to present it in literary form through the use of symbol. It is then through the use of symbol that the play of presence and absence is truly realized. The concept of symbol allows the reader to reappropriate the production of meaning that was previously the property of an external *auctoritas*.

In his studies on the imagination, Gilbert Durand (*Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*) considers the symbol to be a signifying phenomenon which is linked to an infinite and inaccessible signifier. In his view, the symbol derives from the refusal to be content with a single sense. Gilbert Durand thus explicitly rejects allegorical dogmatism and the limitations of hermeneutics.

It might then be argued that the critical foundations of deconstruction are to be found in a theory of the imagination and of the workings of the symbol which recognizes three main ideas: the creative force of the imagination as implemented through the symbol; the possibility of an infinite reach of meanings and imaginative possibilities; and thirdly the acceptance of the play of meanings and imaginative possibilities between text, author and reader. These ideas are founded on the recognition of the movement which considers the literary to be the source of its own theory.

4. Literature, Imagination and Image: How the Imagination is linked to the Representation of the Absent Object

Sartre's work on *L'Imaginaire* (1940) focuses on the representation of the absent object. For Jean-Paul Sartre, the image is an act rather than a thing. Sartre distinguishes between the perceiving consciousness and the imagining consciousness: the perceiving consciousness posits the object as present and real; the imagining consciousness presents an object which is absent. These two types of consciousness are mutually exclusive. The imaginary thus represents the implicit sense of the real (the imaginary is not the real. The objects I imagine are not those I perceive. They have their own existence and create a distance from the real). The work of the critics associated with the Geneva School (A. Béguin, J. Hillis Millar, G. Poulet, J.-Pierre Richard, J. Rousset and J. Starobinski) may be considered to derive from Sartre's philosophy of the imagination. Jean-Pierre Richard, for example, studies the way in which the imagination is fashioned by sensation and attempts to describe the imaginary world of writers.

In a later work, Sartre distinguishes between two types of literary writing: poetry and prose. In his view, unlike prose that is "transparent", poetic writing is based on the opacity of imagination. Poetic writing is then concerned with "enchancing" its readers, it

does not direct the reader to the outside world but is utterly focused on its own poetic vision. Unlike the Romantic imagination which strives to ignore the realities of historical existence, the existential imagination confronts the limits of its existence in the world: the autonomy and freedom of the creation of the imaginative world is founded on the willing negation of the outside world. According to Paul Ricoeur (*Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique, II* (1986)), theories of the imagination may be divided into two categories: on the one hand those relating to the object, the axis of presence and absence, and on the other hand, on the side of the subject, the axis of a fascinated or critical consciousness. In the first model, the image of the object is perceived as a trace, or, at the other extreme, is elaborated in function of the absence of what is other than present. The second axis focuses on the question of the subject's capacity to assume a critical consciousness of the difference between the real and the imaginary.

The role of the notion of the imagination in the development of a criticism that asserts the autonomy of literature may then be examined. Sartre in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948) most notably, but in his other writings also, examines the writer's relationship with society: his theories of the imagination are subjected to the rigors of this reality. Subsequent critical thinking about the imagination tends to suppose the autonomy of literature without really engaging a reflection on this question. In *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953), Roland Barthes notes that the autonomy of literature becomes evident once the writer is faced with form as a question, that is, once form has ceased to be a social code which makes it possible for meaning to be conveyed. The structuralist and post-structuralist critical models imply then the autonomy of literature and consequently the disappearance of the subjective imagination into the operations of language. This is really the challenge facing current critical paradigms: what Richard Kearney (*The Wake of Imagination*, 1988) calls the "parodic imagination" is really the post-modern imagination that figures its own extreme autonomy. The self-reflexive text may be compared to a labyrinth of mirrors where the image of the self dissolves into self-parody.

All these questions are linked to the relationship between imagination and the writing of what is possible, the imagination of possible worlds. A reflection on the literary genres, which are constructed upon the prominence of the notion of the imagination, might also be envisaged. These genres such as The Fantastic, the Marvellous, etc. rely on the imagination as a structuring force.

II. Categories of Interpretation

Different categories of types of interpretation may be distinguished. The categories suggested here are not of course rigid models: the question of the imagination is one which cannot easily be reduced to a schema.

5. Imagination, Imaginary and Anthropology

The study of the imagination forms a crossroads of the disciplines and fields of study that have influenced works of literary criticism. The works of Gilbert Durand, for example, focus on general anthropology organize the study of the imagination and the

imaginary according to structures and symbols. For Gilbert Durand, the "imaginaire" is the "museum" of all images: past, possible, which have been produced or which may be produced in the future. His seminal work, *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire : introduction à l'archétypologie générale* (1960) presents a typology of symbols in which the imaginary is considered to be part of the essence of humanity, an element which models our representation of the world. Knowledge of the import of the imagination and the imaginary is also essential to the work of ethno-sociologists, for whom it may be applied to the study of primitive peoples and their rites, or to myth, for example. For Mircea Eliade (*Aspects du mythe*, 1963), the criticism of the imagination is part of the history of religions and may be analyzed in conjunction with the study of myth, which tells in his eyes, "a sacred story".

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