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# **Imagination in French Classicism: The Evolution of a Concept**

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## SUMMARY

The main issue of an early modern history of the concept of imagination consists in a relative variety of fields that address the problem of the imagination, using similar terms and focusing on different aspects of the imaginative faculty. After all, during the 17th century, imagination never ceases to be a basic human faculty, and it will be therefore taken into consideration equally by philosophy, medical sciences or literary theory each time mental processes are involved. The 17<sup>th</sup>-century France is especially relevant for the early modern development of some rather different theories concerning imagination since one can notice the coexistence of both old and new views on the role of the imaginative faculty in different areas of human knowledge. For instance, the classical literary doctrine, first codified around 1620-1630, includes a specific theory of imagination that fits the prevailing epistemology of the era and allows a reinterpretation of ancient poetic theories that is consistent with the classical emphasis on imitation and expressiveness. The emergence of new philosophical and medical theories, questioning the authority of the ancient and medieval ideas on soul and perception, will have at first a minor impact on the discourse concerning literature and arts in general. Nevertheless, a late synthesis of the major epistemological views of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and of its poetics will simultaneously put an emphasis on the expressive functions of the imagination, by appealing to the authority of ancient authors, and restrain its use to certain domains, such as the liberal

arts, due to the appeal of modern theories regarding a dissociation between the scientific and the artistic manner of writing concerning their specific methods and styles. Beyond a specific evolution of the imagination in French poetics and a parallel and different development of the concept in French philosophy, especially in Cartesianism, we tried to show the manner in which the French classical rhetoric functioned as an early common denominator between the two separate traditions and eventually led to a debate about the epistemological role of the imagination and the aesthetic function of images in poetry and rhetoric.

Is it appropriate then to talk about an early modern crisis of the imagination? Undoubtedly, from the perspective of the history of philosophy, such a crisis exists. Descartes and his followers were trying to establish a model of human knowledge that was relying not so much on the senses and on the often confused images produced by the imaginative faculty, but equally on reason and on clear and distinct ideas. However, was this model adopted as such by other areas of human knowledge? How did the 17<sup>th</sup>-century poetic and rhetoric react to Cartesian dualism? We tried to build our arguments and follow the historical development of the concept of the imagination mainly from this perspective, in an attempt to solve the broader problem of an early modern shift in the meaning of the term “imagination”.

To that end, we analyzed in the first chapter of our thesis the meaning of the term as it was understood by the late 17<sup>th</sup>-century French dictionaries, respectively by those edited by Richelet, Furetière or by the French Academy. One can easily notice in the homologous entries corresponding to the term “imagination” in the subsequent editions of these dictionaries a similar structure, emphasizing both its role as a mental faculty, in terms fitting rather the scholastic epistemology than the modern, Cartesian one, and its effects or its functions, adapting for the purpose a neo-stoic criticism of the imagination as a manufacturer of erroneous representations and as an equivalent of the common opinion. This dual meaning of the imagination was incorporated in a common hierarchy of the definitions, subordinating the effects of the imaginative faculty to the prevalent scholastic configuration of the faculties; following Gérard Gorcy’s analysis, we tried to establish the manner in which this hierarchy was borrowed from the bilingual dictionaries of the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Richelet or Furetière and to define its presumable source; unlike

Gorcy, who was suggesting as a model for this hierarchy the Pomey dictionary (1664), we were able to trace it until the early 1630s-1640s bilingual dictionaries, analyzing as an example the dictionaries edited by the Jesuit Philibert Monet. Within this stereotypical structure, we were able to notice the relatively scarce emphasis put by these dictionaries on the creative side of the imagination, in conjunction with painting, poetry or rhetoric; furthermore, we were able to point up a distinctive and general idea about imagination as opposed to the rules that encompass the 17<sup>th</sup>-century view on creativity.

In order to elaborate on these general views regarding the imagination, we tried to focus in a distinct chapter on the debates on the role of the imaginative faculty in the last half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. During these specific debates, in which a theological discourse was often confronting a medical theory of the body and mind, one can distinguish between several different traditions that were reinterpreting more or less polemically the Middle Age structure of the human faculties. A new idea, that of the „power of the imagination” (*force de l’imagination*), was questioning the narrow limits of a scholastic theory of perception; by following the manner in which this idea was included in a variety of texts, only to be criticized and redefined at the turn of the centuries, we tried to point out not only those features of the imaginative faculty that were essential for the 17<sup>th</sup>-century epistemology and that were mainly inherited from the previous centuries, but also those that were left aside or regarded as pure speculations. Indeed, there is little mention in the late 17<sup>th</sup>-century dictionaries of the Renaissance debates on the powers of the imagination, as it were defined by Marsilio Ficino’s *Platonic Theology* and integrated by his 16<sup>th</sup>-century followers. In large part this is due to the fact that the early 17<sup>th</sup> century had already criticized Ficino’s theory of the magical effects of the imaginative faculty and restrained the effects of imagination to one’s own body. For those demonological or medical treatises that responded critically to Ficino’s theory, the human faculties were meant to be understood according to an Aristotelian model, carefully distinguished from the subsequent interpretations of the Aristotelian doctrine of the soul integrated in the early medieval Arabic texts. For the early modern demonologists, this also meant an emphasis on the divine or demonic origin of miracles and occult phenomena. For the post-1580s medical treatises that were criticizing the powers of the imagination, imagination was

simultaneously understood according to a scholastic model, having thus the role of accurately representing the natural objects (hence the frequent comparison between imagination and a mirror) and defined according to an unnatural, distempered state, in which all its presumed miraculous effects were regarded as symptoms for a corporeal or temperamental disorder. Although demonologists such as Johannes Wier, Jean Bodin or Pierre Le Loyer or medical authorities such as André Du Laurens, Jourdain Guibelet or Hippolyte Jules Pilet de La Mesnardière were writing from different perspectives and often contested each other's work, one can notice among their main arguments a constant effort to redefine the faculties, and imagination in particular, according to Aristotle's *De anima*. As a result, a simplified model of the human faculties emerges from the debates, one that puts an emphasis on the natural activities of the soul and on the balance between imagination, reason and memory. This model can be best seen at work in the debates around the case of the possessed nuns of Loudun; as one of the best known and discussed case of the era, it provides the opportunity for a late clash between those who were still trying to define imagination in Ficino's Neo-Platonic terms, underlining its magical powers, and those who were restricting the effects of the imaginative faculty to the body of the imaginative person, following a more restrictive meaning of the Aristotelian doctrine of faculties.

Could these medical or theological debates affect the way in which literary classicism understood the imaginative faculty? In order to provide an answer to this question, we distinguished between two aspects of the problem. First, we tried to evaluate the possibility of a temperamental balance, inherent in the classical theories referring to the natural qualities of the poet. Then, by reversing the perspective, we approached imagination as the main mental frame in which the theatrical representation takes place. Equally important for the 17<sup>th</sup>-century poetics, both these aspects of the imagination had their share in defining a classical conception of the verisimilar according to the rules of the theatrical representation.

Referring to the first aspect of the classical imagination, we were able to notice the manner in which a gradual reinterpretation of the Renaissance doctrine of the poetic enthusiasm, consistent with Aristotle's *Poetics*, led to a distinct approach regarding the poetic creativity. Adopting some of the views already present in the Pléiade poetics, such

as the role given to imagination in the process of invention, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century poetics also assumed the limitations of the imaginative faculty, as it were theorized from Ronsard to Pierre de Deimier. The poet, according to Ronsard or Deimier, should be inventive or imaginative, but he should also avoid all the excesses of a melancholic imagination, distorting irremediably the aspect of the objects represented in the poetic work of art. A similar caution is to be found in the most important theoretical texts of the French classicism. Since the early stages of the development of a classical doctrine, in Chapelain's generation, and continuing with new theories of classicism, after 1670, numerous texts can be found assigning an important role to imagination, while insisting on its natural use and limitations. The balance between human faculties is the most common feature of these theories, while at times this equilibrium is meant to polemically disassociate the nature of the classical work of art from its foreign (Italian or Spanish) equivalents or from its 16<sup>th</sup>-century heritage. Evolving into an idea of an "equitable temperament" (*juste temperament*), this balance between faculties will find its outspoken adherents in René Rapin and Dominique Bouhours, initiating at the same time a number of minor quarrels over the right natural qualities appropriate for the poet; we tried therefore to trace the evolution of such an idea, emphasizing its importance for the classical doctrine of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.

As the French classicism also embraces a representative and expressive function of the imagination, essential to the debate around the classical unities, we tried to define an ideal model of communication between the author (poet) of the classical drama, the actor and the public. Regarding the public, imagination is mainly attached to two of the key terms of French classicism, verisimilar and (theatrical) illusion. On the other hand, a rather disparate reflection on the expressive role of the imaginative faculty, manifested mainly in La Mesnardière's *Poetics* (1639), offers the reader a glimpse of a different nature of the classical imagination. Since classical drama is built not solely on rules, but also on a veridical and effective representation of the passions, imagination becomes the proper medium for communicating the passions and moving the audience. We tried to show to that effect how classicism, infused by the late 16<sup>th</sup>-century reflections on Aristotle's *Poetics*, was able not only to stress the importance of the imaginative faculty,

but also to reinvent imagination as one of the key elements of human creativity, in a manner that went beyond specific classical rules.

Besides defining the natural limits for the imaginative faculty, the early modern medical discourse also provided a specific pattern for understanding the relationship between imagination and the different arts. Generally speaking, over the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, all the imitative arts are connected with the imagination, due to its representative function; the painter, the poet or the composer translate into images their subject matter, while the audiences perceive it in a sensible manner, through senses and imagination. Beyond the specific artistic theories assigning such a role to the imagination, we have tried to trace the influence of a general theory of the arts, defined by their relationship to specific human faculties, due to the work of the Spanish physician Juan Huarte, *Examen de ingenios para las ciencias* (*The Examination of Men's Wits*). First published in 1575, Huarte's treatise was subsequently translated in three editions in France (1580, 1655, 1672); Huarte's hierarchy of the arts and sciences, assigning to imagination most of the imitative arts and some of the mechanical arts, according to four different criteria (appearance, correspondence, harmony and proportion), will become an important part of the reflection on knowledge during the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Following Gabriel-A. Pérouse's influential treatment of Huarte's French reception, we distinguished an early influence of Huarte's ideas, to be found in treatises such as Pierre Charron's *De la sagesse* (*On Wisdom*) or in Eustache de Refuge and Jean de Silhon's political writings, from a late dissemination of his system of the arts into minor works or within specific Parisian erudite circles. Even if Huarte's theory of the human faculties is hardly a topic of debate in the major philosophical works of the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, according to the published papers of some of the open-to-the-public academies, such as those founded by Théophraste Renaudot, by Jean Richesource or by Pierre Boudelot, the view of an imaginative faculty responsible for poetry, rhetoric, painting, astronomy, astrology, the art of governing and everything connected to one's social skills seems to prevalent among the anonymous members of these social circles. Besides being vulgarized to a great extent by the Galenic medical discourse of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, some of Huarte's ideas might have been integrated by a specific tradition of Cartesianism which discusses temperamental theories and provides an explanation for the varieties of



imagination similar to Huarte's views; we tried thus to trace the possible influence of Huarte's theories on French Cartesianism and, lastly, we pointed out the emergence of a new model of the hierarchy of the sciences, to be found in the reflections concerning the method present in the writings of the "géomètres", which will end up replacing the one provided by Huarte.

By contrast, the chapters concerned with the French classical philosophy present a different picture of the epistemological role of the imagination during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Far from reevaluating the imagination by considering its natural capacities, classical philosophy, and mainly Cartesianism, will disassociate a rational manner of thinking from an imprecise and erroneous one, establishing intellectual certainty as a criterion for truth and developing a radical criticism of the imaginative faculty and of the confused and imprecise images produced by it. We focused mainly on René Descartes' work and we tried to argue that his *Meditations*, first published in 1641, continues and expands to some extent a critical theory of the imaginative faculty already present in the late scholastic treatises concerned with the human soul. At the same time, we tried to emphasize the originality of Descartes' views on visual perception, human physiology and the organic constitution of the soul, pointing out the manner in which they lead to a different theory of imagination and to a distinction between the images produced by the imaginative faculty and the clear and distinct ideas produced by the intellect. Beyond this radical distinction between imagination and reason, we used the polemic exchange between Descartes and Pierre Gassendi, provoked by the publication of the *Meditations*, to show one of the possible reactions to such a distinct model of knowledge. Since the critics and the defenders of the imaginative faculty in French classicism were not strictly speaking divided by their affiliation to Descartes' or Gassendi's philosophy, we singled out among the Cartesians a radical tradition, defined by the concern for theorizing a model of a "pure intellection", based solely on clear and distinct ideas and excluding imagination, and a moderate tradition, adding elements of materialism or empiricism to Descartes' philosophy and preserving for the imaginative faculty the intermediary role between the senses and reason. Therefore, the classical crisis of the imagination, whose model can be found in book II of Nicolas Malebranche's *The Search after Truth* and in some of the theoretical elaborations of his disciple, François Lamy, defines an important

segment of the Cartesian philosophy, being nevertheless counterbalanced by a synthesis between the Cartesian dualism and a logic of ideas which ascribes an active role to imagination, present in the works of Pierre-Sylvain Régis or Henricus Regius. In order to further emphasize the dual role of the imagination in French classical philosophy, we analyzed a number of letters sent by Descartes to Princess Elisabeth in the 1640s, in which one can find a consistent theory of the everyday practices associated with the imaginative faculty. In a distinct chapter, we tried to follow the same ambiguity regarding the imagination in the philosophical works of Blaise Pascal; as Pascal defines imagination equally as a source of illusion and as ground for persuasion, his theories leave future possibilities open to integration of the imagination in the rhetoric treatises of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.

We tried to define the classical rhetoric tradition from the point of view of a continuous effort to incorporate into a canonical structure both ancient theories, rediscovered during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, such as Saint Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* or Philostratus' *Images*, or new ideas, belonging mainly to the Cartesian philosophy. We were able thus to emphasize a discipline rather resistant to profound changes, a fact that becomes obvious when one determines the minor impact of the Ramist rhetoric on the French theoretical texts or the gradual replacement of the ancient model of the Aristotelian rhetoric with other ancient elaborations on eloquence. The French classical rhetoric, strongly indebted to ancient theories that assigned a role for the imaginative faculty in the invention of the discourse, would therefore be able to define in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century the inner mechanisms of persuasion according to the Cartesian physiology, without retaining at the same time the critical discourse concerning the imagination that was essential for Descartes' works.

As for the ancient sources of the 17<sup>th</sup> century rhetoric view on imagination, we have considered Philostratus' *Images*, some important fragments from Quintilianus' *Institutio oratoria*, the chapter concerning persuasion by the means of images from Pseudo-Longinus' *On the Sublime*, translated by Boileau in 1674, and the overall debates on the use of passions and expressiveness characteristic for the pulpit oratory or the rhetorical treatises inspired by Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*. The different manners in which these sources were used during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, either to define the eloquent or even

imaginative orator, or to limit the use of the imagination within a theory of the figurative language, lead to different classical theories of expression by the means of imagination and eventually to a reconsideration of the imaginative faculty as a key element in the rhetorical practice.

Aside from these ancient influences on classical rhetoric theory, we tried to focus in a distinct chapter on the relationship between Cartesianism and eloquence. Some of the Cartesians, such as Louis de La Forge or Géraud de Cordemoy, connect imagination and eloquence within a theory of the natural qualities required to the orator and outline the portrait of a generic imaginative orator, whose main features lie in the force of his speech and in the expressive quality of his words. On the other hand, we were able to point out a different reevaluation of eloquence in the Port-Royal *Logic*; even if Arnauld and Nicole don't mention imagination in their theory of style, their distinction between a simple style, appropriate for sciences and speculative matters, and a figurative, metaphorical style, appropriate mainly for eloquence and stressing not so much the clarity of ideas, but their expressiveness and on their role of communicating both the literal meaning of the words and their incidental implications, is essential for the late integration of Cartesian elements in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century rhetoric theories. Since the orator doesn't take into consideration just ideas, but also their implicit meaning (in Arnauld and Nicole's terms, their "accessory ideas"), the speech is less objective and more appropriate for reflecting both one's ideas and one's attitude towards them; this argument will thus be used by subsequent followers of the Port-Royal *Logic* to define the distinctiveness of the figurative language, in opposition with the overall demand for clarity in the canonical rhetorical treatises.

Departing from this disassociation of styles, we tried to point out in our following chapter the manner in which the late 17<sup>th</sup>-century rhetorical treatises were able to incorporate a theory of the expressive imagination within a broader reflection on figurative language. The best example for this integration and one of the major syntheses of the French classicism is Bernard Lamy's *La Rhétorique ou L'art de parler (Rhetoric, or the Art of Speaking)*. Published in 1675 and using a variety of sources, from the Port-Royal *Logic* to Cordemoy's theory of the physiological mechanisms of eloquence and Marin Mersenne's texts on the nature of language, Lamy's *Rhetoric* stresses both the expressiveness of language, assimilating figures of speech with human passions, and the

important role of the imagination in translating into images the literal and the accessory, emotive meaning of the words. We tried to compare this development of the concept of imagination with Malebranche's radical criticism of rhetoric and imagination in *The Search after Truth*; since Malebranche was able to read a preliminary version of Lamy's *Rhetoric* prior to its publication, we outlined the possible influences of Lamy's theories on *The Search after Truth* and established their opposite views as models for the later debates on eloquence and imagination of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In a final chapter, we analyzed the single most important debate on the epistemological role of the imagination and its expressive functions of the French classicism, a debate that continues the inherent conflict between Bernard Lamy's and Malebranche's views on eloquence and imagination. Started by a polemical exchange between Antoine Arnauld and Philippe Goibaut du Bois around 1695, this controversy about the functions of the pulpit oratory will soon become a general debate about rhetoric and, to a lesser extent, about the aesthetic role of images. Two models of rhetorical communication emerge from the debate; one of them, using a Cartesian terminology, stresses the intelligible manner in which the speaker should address his audience; the other model assumes a type of persuasion by the means of sensible images and imagination; these sensible images are supposed to adapt the intelligible truths to the nature of the audience and, as signs, stand for the very truth they represent. In the prolonged controversy over the proper use of imagination, lasting until 1705, we were able thus to trace in the writings of Arnauld, Fabio Brûlart de Sillery, Balthazar Gibert and Henri Lelevel a pre-modern concept of the imagination, that leave future possibilities open to an aesthetic of the images and of the imagination, based on subjective sensation and feeling and on personal taste. Far from continuing a radical distinction between reason and imagination, these theoretical elaborations react to a preeminent Cartesian tradition, represented in the debate by Malebranche's disciple, François Lamy, and define poetry and eloquence as two aspects of an expressive manner of communicating one's thoughts and feelings through imagination.