"My souls imaginary sight": renaissance poetics and the notion of imagination

"A visão imaginária de minha alma": a poética renascentista e a noção de imaginação

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Abstract: In the 16th and 17th centuries, the conceptual significance of "imagination" was indebted primarily to Aristotle's theory of the *phantasia*, translated as *imaginatio* and thoroughly discussed in treatises on poetry, rhetoric and philosophy. In this text, I intend to briefly explore some ideas concerning the historical specificity of the notion of "imagination" in Renaissance poetics, attempting to avoid a transhistorical approach to the study of poetry and its interpretation. In order to do this, I will present specific passages from Philip Sidney's *The Defense of Poetry* (1595), Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) and Shakespeare's works.
Keywords: Imagination; Renaissance Poetics; *Phantasia*.

Resumo: Nos séculos XVI e XVII, o significado conceitual de "imaginação" atrelava-se sobretudo à teoria aristotélica da *phantasia*, traduzida como *imaginatio*, em latim, e amplamente discutida em tratados sobre poesia e retórica. Neste artigo, propõe-se explorar brevemente algumas ideias relativas à especificidade histórica da noção de "imaginação" na poética renascentista, com vistas a evitar as abordagens transistóricas da poesia e de sua interpretação. Para tanto, serão comentados trechos específicos dos tratados *The Defense of Poetry* (1595), de Philip Sidney, *Advancement of Learning* (1605), de Francis Bacon, bem como algumas passagens das obras de William Shakespeare.
Palavras-chave: Imaginação; Poética renascentista; *Phantasia*.

Images appear to us even when our eyes are shut.
Aristotle, *De anima*.

[...] my soul's imaginary sight
Presents thy shadow to my sightless view.
Shakespeare, *Sonnet 27*

When, by the mid-18th century, a series of social and political transformations dismantle the rigid order of the Absolutist regimes throughout Europe, the discipline of Rhetoric - until then the master doctrine of symbolic representations - is broken down and torn apart from other disciplines which had been historically attached to it, as Poetics, Ethics and Logic (Cf. VICKERS, 1990; MACK, 2011)[1]. As Rhetoric came to be seen as an instrument of persuasion typical of the tumbling aristocratic social order and its discourses, the appeal it once had as a formative force upon literary compositions back in the age of Shakespeare, Donne and Milton, for example, lost much of its power for the new generations of artists who strove to introduce fresh conceptualizations of the arts and its domain of creation and aesthetic function. At the same time, the notion of "imagination" came to be defined as a core foundational source of poetic composition at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, in an artistic and scholarly milieu which strove to reject the traditional precepts of Rhetoric, challenging and reconstruing the previous conceptual significance of "imagination" - which had been indebted primarily to Aristotle's theory of the *phantasia*, translated as *imaginatio* in Latin by Italian scholars mainly since the 15th century. In this text, I intend to briefly explore some ideas concerning the historical specificity of the notion of "imagination" in 16th and 17th century poetics, in an attempt to emphasize the importance of avoiding a transhistorical approach to the study of poetry and its foundational categories of analysis and interpretation.

1 For further discussion on this topic, see particularly Vickers (1990, p. 715), where he discusses the isolation of critical terms (rhetoric, poetics, ethic and so on) as "a product of post-Romantic literary theory, deriving from a period in which traditional rhetoric had been banished from education". The present paper on Renaissance poetics and the notion of imagination was originally conceived for oral presentation, and intends to offer only a more schematic view of such a complex topic; for further comparative work on the imagination in the Renaissance and in Romantic poetics, a good place to start is Jonathan Bate (1989), particularly the first chapter - "Shakespeare, Imagination, Romanticism".

"A certain coloring of imagination"

The dismantling of Rhetoric as the main doctrinal source for the artistic composition in different genres was both a constituent part and a final result of the Enlightenment and Romantic projects which, in their versatile diversity, designed to unify the artistic experiences under a common creative power involving the imagination (Cf. BATE, 1989; KLEIN, 1996). In lieu of the ancient rhetorical categories that provided a distinctive method (or *techné*) for the artistic composition in each separate genre - say, the Lyric, the Epic, the Tragic, and so on -, these new projects aimed at merging the artistic expressions into the more unified realm of a dynamic creative imagination which was generally connected to an individualized process of conception metaphorized in the ethos of the "gifted artist". The idea became crystallized in several poetic propositions, such as in the famous image conceived by John Keats: "My imagination is a monastery, and I am its monk" (KEATS, 2011 [1820], p. 464). This rather verticalized idea of an inner expression which inhabits the realm of the creative imagination came to replace the more structural and rhetorically based prescriptive foundation for the artistic representations seen as external objects embodied by and through the notion of tradition (*consuetudo*).

In his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), William Wordsworth argued that poets needed to free themselves from conventional modes of artistic expression in order to let the fresh "poetry of nature" emerge; employing the metaphor of "friendship" to convey this idea, he wrote: "the power of any art is limited; and he will suspect that if I propose to furnish him with new friends it is only upon condition of his abandoning his old friends" (WORDSWORTH, 2003 [1798], p. 24). Thus, by proposing to abandon the "old friends" poets had for centuries turned to for the composition of their verses, Wordsworth is notwithstanding introducing specific poetic forms and ideas which poets were to follow, building up what would become the new conventions of the Romantic verse; indeed, one could even think here of an allegory where Rhetoric could emerge as one of the "old friends" Wordsworth is attempting to reject. In an emblematic passage of his Preface, Wordsworth spells out the procedure which was employed to compose the poems of *Lyrical Ballads*: "to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw

over them a certain colouring of imagination" (WORDSWORTH, 2003 [1798], p.7). This precept for the poetic expression, in which natural speech is seen as an empirical given to be extracted from a likewise empirical "common life" and only then subjected to "a certain coloring of imagination", is in itself a strong rejection of the rhetorical "old friend" that had for centuries prescribed a conventional selection of specific topics of invention for the poetic composition, where the "incidents and situations" were to be extracted not directly from empirical experience - which was considered to be accidental and transitory -, but from the traditional modes of representing them, by emulating and thus renovating previous literary models elected as the best examples for each genre.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the widespread definition of poetry and, indeed, of every artistic creation was strongly rooted upon several Aristotelian premises found not only in his *Art of Poetry*, but first and foremost in the treatises that constituted the basic doctrinal knowledge taught in the grammar schools and universities throughout the European courts - mainly *The Art of Rhetoric*, the *Organon*, *De Anima* and *The Nicomachean Ethics* (VICKERS, 1990; BALDWIN, 1944; MACK, 2011). Throughout the 16th century, new Latin editions of Aristotle's treatises were been put into print, enlarging, challenging and sometimes subverting the previous Medieval and Scholastic readings of the Aristotelian principles. New annotated editions, with commentaries by contemporary scholars, poets and rhetoricians from different European courts and religious background circulated widely, shaping and influencing Renaissance vernacular poetics[2]. In *The Defense of Poetry* (1595), the celebrated English poet Philip Sidney advanced the following encapsulated definition: "Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle terms it in his word *mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth - to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture - with this end: to teach and delight" (SIDNEY, 2002 [1595], p.

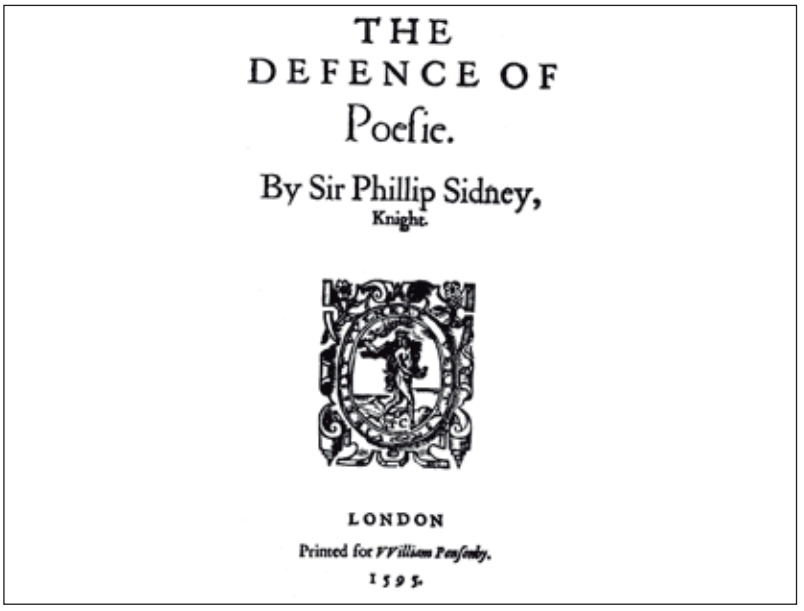
2 A good example of the wide circulation of the new Latin editions of Aristotle's treatises is Ermolao Barbaro's annotated translation of The Art of Rhetoric (1547); it is possible today to consult the copies of Ermolao's translation owned by Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo and that owned by the English scholar and poet Gabriel Harvey at the same period of time. Both copies are extensively annotated with marginalia by their owners, with references to contemporary poetry and writers, and their reflections upon the different aspects of Aristotelian rhetoric. For further on this, see Luisa Lopez-Grigera. Anotaciones de Quevedo a la Retórica de Aristóteles. Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1998; and G.C. Moore Smith. Gabriel Harvey's Marginalia. Stratford-upon-Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1913.

217). The notion of poetry as a "speaking picture" - attributed by Plutarch in his *Moralia* to poet Simonides of Ceos - became a commonplace employed throughout the 16th century, appearing in sonnets, plays, emblems and other genres. The reference behind this metaphor was mainly the Aristotelian notion of the *eikonopoiós*, that is, of the poet as a "maker of images" (*Art of Poetry*, 1995, 1460b9), but the foundational force that supported the idea came from the widely discussed Aristotelian propositions about the functionings of the mind (the complex doctrine of the organic soul), on one hand, and the conventions of rhetorical composition, on the other. Through the poetic expression, images of a fictional world emerge as a second nature mediated and sustained by the force of verisimilitude - a key constituent of the Aristotelian doctrine of mimesis[3]. Belonging to the world of symbolic representation, poetry may embody even the most fantastical images as long as it is regulated by decorum and verisimilitude, variating according to the fitness of each genre: employing, for instance, the most lascivious language in the erotic elegy, the histrionic expression of comedy, or the circumspect tone in the religious sonnet. Being ruled by verisimilitude, poetry is a "counterfeiting" art, and has no immediate claim to truthfulness: in a celebrated passage of his treatise on poetry, Philip Sidney insightfully affirms that poets can never lie. That is because, he argues, poets never intended to be speaking the truth in the first place:

> Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lies. For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false; so as to the other artists, and especially the historian, affirming many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies. But the poet, as I said before, never affirms. The poet never makes any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes. (SIDNEY, 2002 [1595], p. 235)

3 Though the Aristotelian doctrine of mimesis and its focus on verisimilitude constituted the mainstream precept guiding the composition of poetry in the European Renaissance, diverse authors based themselves on the Platonic concept then known as the furor poeticus - as expounded in Plato's Ion, Republic and Phaedrus, among others - to challenge the idea that poetry should be imitative and verisimilar. For Patrizi da Cherso, in his Discorso della diversità dei furori poetici (1553), for instance, poets should aim not at what appears to be credible or plausible, but at the marvellous (maraviglioso) attainable only through incredible images and inventions. For further discussion on this, see Vickers (1990), p. 738-740.

Concluding his argument with a clear-cut example, Sidney sardonically transfers the fault of *indiscretion* - in the sense of not being able to *discern* what is true and what is false - to the ignorant reader: "so think I none so simple would say that Aesop lied in the tales of his beasts; for who thinks Aesop writ it for actually true were well worthy to have his name chronicled among the beasts he writes of" (SIDNEY, 2002 [1595], p. 235).


THE
DEFENCE OF
Poesie.
By Sir Phillip Sidney,
Knight.
LONDON
Printed for VVilliam Ponsonby.
1595.

Frontispiece of the 1595 edition of Philip Sidney's *The Defense of Poetry*

"High and vaporous imaginations"

This perspective of poetry as a feigning or counterfeiting art belonging to the hypothetical realm of fantasy is anchored in yet another key Aristotelian notion: that of the *phantasia* - translated more systematically by Italian scholars from the 15th century onwards as *imaginatio*, in Latin -, understood as an innate faculty essentially independent (but not disconnected) from the sphere of judgement. In his treatise *De anima* (*Peri Psyches*), Aristotle distinguishes the intellective process which discriminates what is true and what is false, or what is right and what is wrong, from the psychic power of imagining hypothetical forms, ideas, situations and actions that appear as visions (*phantasmata*) in "the mind's eye" - the inner faculty of imagination: "images appear to us even when our eyes are shut. Neither is imagination any of the things that are never in error, as knowledge or intelligence; for imagination may be false" (ARISTOTLE, 1984, 428a15). On the

other hand, without these visions which are triggered by perception and sensorial experience, as well as by processes of reminiscence and absorbed by the imaginative faculty, no reasoning would be possible, since "the soul never thinks without a mental picture" (ARISTOTLE, 1984, 432a). A key element in the Aristotelian theory of acquiring and producing knowledge, the faculty of the imagination is the very bridge which connects perception and thought; as Frances Yates summarizes:

> The perceptions brought in by the five senses are first treated or worked upon by the faculty of imagination, and it is the images so formed which become the material of the intellectual faculty. Imagination is the intermediary between perception and thought. Thus while all knowledge is ultimately derived from sense impressions it is not on these in the raw that thought works but after they have been treated by, or absorbed into, the imaginative faculty. It is the image-making part of the soul which makes the work of the higher processes of thought possible. (YATES, 1966, p. 32)

This notion of the works of the imagination as not necessarily or primarily bound to truthfulness or empirical reality underpins the very concept of artistic productions and the creative process, particularly in the definitions of poetry and its functions[4]. In his treatise *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), Francis Bacon takes up a discussion of how the different learning processes occur in the human mind, attributing history to memory, poetry to imagination and philosophy to reason. He defines poetry in the following terms:

> Poesy is a part of learning in the measure of words, for the most part restrained, but in all other points extremely licensed, and doth truly refer to the imagination; which, being not tied to the laws of matter, may at pleasure join that which nature hath severed, and sever that which nature hath joined, and so make unlawful matches and divorces of things. (BACON, 2010 [1605], p. 135)

4 Murray W. Bundy is very assertive as to the significance of the Aristotelian doctrine of phantasia for Renaissance poetics: "Aristotle's De Anima [...] may become more significant for literary criticism than the Poetics" (Bundy, 1930, p. 536). It is a strong foundation of Early Modern ideas on psychological functionings, including the creative process; Cf. Kessler, 1990, p. 485: "Aristotle's teaching on the intellective soul (De Anima III.4-5) serves as the starting point for Renaissance discussions and, therefore, predetermines the questions raised and the answers given".

The faculty of the imagination allowed for the conceiving of images which might be insightful illusions, rightfully belonging to the realm of the hypothetical - "unlawful matches" and "divorce of things" not primarily or essentially connected to truth, judgment, opinion, discretion, prudence.

Frontispiece of Francis Bacon's *Of the Advancement and Proficience of Learning* (1605)

Specifically, imagination was understood as one of the internal perceptual faculties located in the sensitive soul, not in the intellective soul - where the faculties of the intellect and the will would then process the images formed in the mind's eye. This creative capacity of imagination intensifies the psychic power of being able to continually visualize and feel the forms and emotions which are not immediately present to the external senses. In *De Anima*, Aristotle develops this idea of the ability to see things even with eyes closed - being awake or dreaming. It is a way of activating reminiscence, but of transcending it as well, through the creative contours given to recollected forms, emotions and ideas. Such a topic was thoroughly explored in lyric poetry throughout the Renaissance, and gave a doctrinal basis to many poetic images of love and longing. In Sonnet 27, Shakespeare takes up the imagery of a mental journey which is able to materialize, through the faculty of imagination, the absent body of the persona's lover during a dream:

Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,
The dear repose for limbs with travel tired;
But then begins a journey in my head,
To work my mind, when body's work's expired:
For then my thoughts, from far where I abide,
Intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee,
And keep my drooping eyelids open wide,
Looking on darkness which the blind do see:
Save that my soul's imaginary sight
Presents thy shadow to my sightless view,
Which, like a jewel hung in ghastly night,
Makes black night beauteous and her old face new.
Lo! thus, by day my limbs, by night my mind,
For thee and for myself no quiet find.
(SHAKESPEARE, 1975 [1609], p. 1195)

The "imaginary sight" of the mind's eye is able to recreate in absence the forms and objects which the external senses had absorbed in experience, stirring new modes of emotion and animating what an otherwise "ghastly night" would relentless offer as a vacuous deprivation of love and comfort. Imagination, in Shakespeare's sonnet, becomes the very "darkness which the blind do see": the perceptual faculty which exists only in "sightless view", but that nonetheless is able to rekindle and awaken the absent objects of desire.


SHAKE-SPEARES
SONNETS.
Neuer before Imprinted.
AT LONDON
By G. Eld for T. T. and are
to be solde by
1609.

Frontispiece of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (1609)

Throughout the Renaissance, it was a commonplace to refer to imagination as one of the "five inner wits" - usually listed as common sense, imagination, fantasy, estimation, and memory - which corresponded to the five external senses: vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch (PARK, 1990). As an inner wit, imagination gives rational beings the power to picture sensations, external forms and ideas which may be beautiful or monstrous, good or evil, holy or obscene - the vast array of possible visualizations which spring up from the human faculty of imagination, categorized and discussed in terms of "icastic" and "fantastic" images. This recurring distinction of the poetic image in the Renaissance appropriated Plato's use of the terms *eikastiké* (imitative) and *phantastiké* (fanciful, imaginary) in the *Sophist* in order to distinguish between good and harmful artistic compositions (Cf. VICKERS, 2003, p. 371). Philip Sidney summarizes the distinction as follows: "I will not deny but that man's wit may make poesy, which should be *eikastiké* - which some learned have defined: figuring forth good things -, to be *phantastiké* - which doth, contrariwise, infect the fancy with unworthy objects (SIDNEY, 2002, p. 236). However, the contrast between these two types of poetic image more commonly develops into a discussion of decorum - the aptness and propriety involving the invention and employment of ideas in poetry, as propounded by Horace, for instance - and not into an ethical restriction concerning the truthfulness or not of poetry.

Furthermore, poetical images were bound by the precepts of mimesis to work through verisimilitude in order to be translatable, as it were, from the nascent spring of imagination to the comprehensible channels of speech as conceived and codified by Rhetorical invention. This is a journey from the particular to the collective domain of artistic creation understood as such only after the individual works of the imagination become artfully translated into poetic language - which is the domain of tradition. This operation can be perceived, for instance, in the famous image of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595):

> The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
> Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
> As imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name.
> (SHAKESPEARE, 1975 [1623], V.1.7-12)

The process of poetic composition based upon the mimetic conventions cannot be a direct expression of the imagination - of the illusional realm of visions and "things unknown" - without the work of the instrumental pen, which translates into the collective domain of a shared tradition what was latent in the individual mind as an "airy nothing": a form without conventional shape in the subjective perception. Likewise, Francis Bacon identifies the necessary and laborious process of transforming what appears in the faculty of imagination into something capable of being expressed: "So whosoever shall entertain high and vaporous imaginations, instead of a laborious and sober inquiry of truth, shall beget hopes and beliefs of strange and impossible shapes" (BACON, 2010 [1605], p. 163). It could indeed be argued that the faculty of the imagination by itself was not understood in Renaissance poetics - at least not in a predominant mode - as a sovereign, independent and creative potentiality able to produce poetic truthfulness without the aid of judgment, reason and discretion. Philip Sidney, in his treatise, emphasizes both the fictional realm of poetry and its dependence on the numerous precepts guiding the "profitable" poetic invention, which involves the imagination but is not a direct expression of it:

> If then a man can arrive to that child's age, to know that the poets' persons and doings are but pictures what should be, and not stories what have been, they will never give the lie to things not affirmatively but allegorically and figuratively written. And therefore, as in history looking for truth, they may go away full fraught with falsehood, so in poesy looking but for fiction, they shall use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention. (SIDNEY, 2002 [1595], p. 235)

Sidney's notion of an "imaginative ground-plot", just as in Shakespeare's image of the "airy nothing" and Francis Bacon's reference to "vaporous imaginations", develops the idea that the visions ignited by imaginative processes in the mind's eye - that which Aristotle calls *phantasmata* - could only be materialized in the artistic production after being transformed into that which possessed the qualities of a "profitable invention". Thus, even when writers stress the fundamental relevance of imagination in the creative process, they are not claiming that poetry - or any of the mimetic arts, for that matter - could ever be a direct expression of this perceptual faculty of the sensitive (not intellective) soul.

In contrast, in the historical context of the turn of the 18th to the 19th century, the fresh theorizations on the aesthetic experience driven by the works of Kant, Schiller, Friedrich Schlegel and others set forth a new perception of the foundations of artistic production and the place of the individual artist in relation to the poetic creation (BATE, 1989). In his essay *A Defense of Poetry* (1821), Percy B. Shelley introduces this celebrated definition:

> Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be "the expression of the imagination": and poetry is connate with the origin of man. Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Æolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. (SHELLEY, 2006 [1821], p. 2)

The Romantic stress on sensorial "impressions" processed through the creative imagination was at the same time influenced by and influential in the contemporary theorization of a subjective individuality which is conceived as aware of the historicity of human experience, even when affirming its transcendence. In this context, the faculty of the imagination is affirmed as a sovereign potentiality able to process the versatile experiences of perception, transforming them into a possible image of poetic truthfulness: "to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word, the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression" (SHELLEY, 2006 [1821], p.4). The agency of imagination in the creative process became a widespread notion in the Romantic discourses on poetry, advancing a new perspective on the artistic productions to some extent still powerful today - including how one reads and absorbs the notion of imagination in poetry. In his meditative essay *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge defines the imagination primarily as "the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and is a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (COLERIDGE, 1996 [1817], p.750). In this proposition, Coleridge affirms, at the same time, the historicity and the transcendence of the subjective "I am", able to infinitely reduplicate an ever-moving creative process which is imprinted in the individual faculty of imagination. Different from the Aristotelian

notion of *phantasia*, which, as we have seen, was bound to the realm of hypothetical conjectures not necessarily connected to truthfulness, the Romantic proposition sees imagination as the very agent that brings together, discriminates and transforms into poetic truth what had been scattered in the spheres of physical and sensorial impressions. As John Keats insightfully affirms: "I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination. What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth - whether it existed before or not" (KEATS, 2009 [1820], p. 480). In different historical periods, the creative process behind the poetic composition is understood and defined in distinctive particular forms, depending on variant, profound conceptions of the human faculties, senses and perceptions, including imagination.

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