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*THE ASSOCIATIVE IMAGINATION AND DIVINE PASSIONS IN MARK AKENSIDE'S THE PLEASURES OF THE IMAGINATION (1744)*¹

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Abstract: *Mark Akenside's The Pleasures of the Imagination (1744) demands the attention of intellectual and cultural historians, if only on account of its eclectic reconceptualization of the "creative" imagination. Here, the "poetic" imagination takes over a set of moral remedies formerly ascribed to the faculty only in psychological, medical or moral philosophical discussions – remedies which, moreover, undergo a series of developments due especially, but not exclusively, to Hume's assignment of the process of association to the imagination and to emerging notions of "taste". This paper argues that the "creative" imagination thus conceived allows Akenside to define poetry as equally suitable, alongside science, for the cultivation of religious passions and virtues. Akenside's main argument in this sense is that the cognitive and affective practices which are involved in the production of poetry (and which are guided by the imagination) allow the poet to discover and cultivate the 'triggers' of appropriate emotion and virtue which God has placed in nature. The poet thus gains access to privileged states of "raptur'd vision" and comes to possess the affective make-up of divinity. I would like to shed light upon the ways in which, according to Akenside, the "creative" imagination contributes to the cultivation of such "divine" emotions and thus to highlight the moral and spiritual dimension of mid eighteenth-century notions about literary creation.*

In the following paper I would like to examine a particular set of features belonging to Mark Akenside's notion of imagination - features which have received little attention so far² - and to argue that it is in light of these that the Akensidian imagination and its products become capable of improving man's moral and spiritual condition. That the imagination, in Akenside's definition, bears a spiritual or religious dimension is nothing new. However, while scholarship so far has focused on the Neoplatonic inheritance³ of this dimension, I would like to discuss a different set of properties which not only belong to distinct traditions, but also to disciplines

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² Aldridge, for instance, inventories the classical (Plato, Longinus, Epitetus, Marcus Aurelius, Lucretius etc.) as well as modern (Leibnitz, Locke, Shaftesbury, Addison etc.) sources of Akenside's text, but does not address the impact of these on Akenside's views regarding the proper conduct of the imagination.

³ See, for instance, Aldridge, Dix, Shaw or Fairer.

other than aesthetics⁴. My argument will be divided into three main sections. First, I would like to suggest that Akenside assigns to both the “psychological” and the “poetic”⁵ instances of the imagination an ensemble of features which were developed in psychological, medical or moral philosophical rather than rhetorical or poetic discussions of the faculty. Secondly, I would like to examine these properties in greater detail. And finally, I would like to point out the way in which these render the imagination capable of affording spiritual or religious growth. What I would ultimately like to suggest is that Akenside’s poem gives out the formula for a type of natural theology that can be arrived at through art, rather than science. The main primary text under survey is Akenside’s *The Pleasures of Imagination* (1744), with attention to the body of the poem, as well as Akenside’s annotations.

The first question to ask is what instance of the faculty of imagination does Akenside’s text deal with. Across the early modern period, the imagination stands as the object of interest of several disciplines and genres, from rhetorics or poetics to natural philosophy or medicine, to name only a few. As a consequence, several “imagination” emerge: each discipline or genre describes the faculty in its own terms, in identifiably distinct ways, even though these descriptions might resemble, overlap or inform one another. In rhetorical tracts, the manipulative⁶ capacities of the imagination are subsumed under its ability to produce *enargeia* and bring absent objects before one’s very eyes, while books of practical psychology or practical moral philosophy use predominantly Avicennan vocabulary in describing such powers. This is what Rossky means when he draws the not entirely felicitous, but nevertheless useful distinction between the “psychological” and “poetic” imagination⁷ in the early modern period – a division which Akenside himself inherits to a certain extent. Thus, the quickest answer to our question would be that Akenside touches upon three main dimensions of the faculty which appear under various guises from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. In his poem, we may identify what Rossky would call (1) a “psychological” account of the imagination as primarily a faculty of perception and of judgement whose role is to receive and evaluate the images of external objects and, on their basis, trigger various affective responses and (2) a “poetic” or “aesthetic” account which is two-fold, in that it surveys both (a) the imagination of the writer or poet, as well as (b) the imagination of the reader or spectator. What is interesting, however, is that, although all three instances of the imagination may be identified throughout the poem, they appear to collapse in terms of the mental operations which they are ascribed, which is in

⁴ The term “aesthetics” must, nevertheless, be used with caution since it is not in use along the early modern period.

⁵ I’m using the distinction between the ‘psychological’ and ‘poetic’ imagination which has been introduced by Rossky.

⁶ I am using the term “manipulative” as used by Park 67-8 in her discussion of the early modern properties of the imagination.

⁷ It should be noted that Rossky also uses the two terms in order to distinguish between two different valuations of the faculty in the early modern period – the diseased imagination of (the melancholy) man (i.e. the psychological) and the healthy and virtuous imagination of the poet (i.e. the poetic) which, he argues, was believed to receive the guidance of reason.

contrast to earlier discussions of the faculty. In other words, the imagination of man, writer and reader all work in the same way. That the first and third dimensions of the imagination can be easily reconciled is clear. As Akenside claims, man's desire to "recal the delightful perceptions" (Akenside 1) triggered by external objects gave birth to the "imitative or designing arts" which merely "copy the external appearances which were admired in nature" (Akenside 2). In this sense, no distinction is made between nature and art in that both serve to present the imagination with images that shape one's passions. The only difference between the two would be, as Akenside suggests, that art is designed to compensate for the absence of particular objects before one's very eyes. There is no difference, thus, between the psychology of the reader and that of a man contemplating nature. As far as the "poetic" dimension of the imagination is concerned, it too is described in similar terms. According to Akenside, the poet's labour appears first and foremost to involve a process of contemplation and selection of particular objects in nature. The poet must: "explore,/Through secret paths, erewhile untrod by man,/the fair poetic region, to detect/Untasted springs, to drink inspiring draughts" (Akenside 13) and it is "nature's hand" that "[m]ust string his nerves, and imp his eagle-wings" (Akenside 12). The poet is described merely as a man "collecting" (Akenside 97) the various sense-impressions he finds in nature. Another important clue in this respect is that the contrast between the poet's and the reader's imagination does not overlap – at least not seamlessly - with the active vs. passive dichotomy. As we shall see, Akenside understands perception as an 'active' process which involves "choice" and "determination" (Akenside 21). The irrelevance of this dichotomy serves perhaps to further align the three instances of the imagination. My point here is that Akenside does not clearly distinguish between the mechanisms of the "psychological" and of the "poetic" imagination, although he appears to focus on the latter, which renders both apt to lead one towards spiritual advancement by means of the mental operations which they perform – as I intend to argue.

With this in mind, let us now examine the Akensidian imagination in greater depth and trace its most important features. What I would first like to draw attention to is the fact that Akenside assigns to his notion of imagination a set of techniques for managing external impressions which are of Stoic and particularly Epictetian inheritance. These techniques, whose history Stanley W. Jackson traces up until the nineteenth century (Jackson, *Passions* 169-75), recommend that, when confronted with an external object that triggers disturbing passions and is likely to encourage vice, one must turn his or her attention to an entirely different object in order to counteract the former's harmful effects (Epictetus 1: 349-59; Jackson, *Imagination* 347-8; Lyons 5-22). By doing so, man will be able to control his or her affective responses by gaining control over the external stimuli which reach his or her imagination and trigger emotion. As Jackson also points out, this technique is based primarily on the principle of contraries, meaning that one will be able to temper or even entirely remove an unwanted passion only by turning his or her attention to objects of a contrary nature (Jackson, *Passions* 151-5). In a footnote, Akenside explicitly points towards the Stoics', particularly Epictetus' and Marcus Aurelius' prescriptions for the "right management of the fancie" (Akenside 79). It is these recommendations that underlie the vocabulary of 'search' and 'selection' which

abounds in Akenside's poem. The imagination 'scans', 'glances', 'explores', 'conducts' 'detects', 'discloses', 'unveils' and even 'culls' the various images it finds in nature (Akenside 12-106). As Akenside claims, it "touch[es]" the poet's "ear/With finer sounds", it "heighten[s] to his eye/The bloom of nature, and before him turn[s]/The gayest, happiest attitude of things" (Akenside 12), thus pointing towards the process of selection that the faculty performs by considering only those external stimuli which incite the most pleasurable passions. What is even more striking is that both Akenside, in the introduction to his poem, as well as the lyrical persona claim that the role of the poet is precisely to guide the reader to those objects in nature that bear the most agreeable effects over man's passions: "I will guide thee to her favourite walks/And teach thy solitude her voice to hear./And point her loveliest features to thy view" (Akenside 16). Allusions to the cure of contraries are also to be found throughout the poem. The consequences of this search for particular external objects is that the painful passions one feels are replaced or modified by pleasing ones. The passions, is said, are "gently sooth'd away./Sink to divine repose, and love and joy/Alone are waking" (Akenside 16). The belief that opposite passions interact in such a way as to moderate one another may also be discerned in Akenside's assertion that "fair-inspired delight" renders passions "chaster, milder" and brings them to a "more attractive mien" (Akenside 107-8).

What I would now like to suggest is that Akenside further develops this originally Stoic technique by appealing to late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century notions regarding the formation of habits, the doctrine of association and the emerging notion of 'taste'. In a footnote, Akenside claims that, if constantly or repeatedly contemplated, an object will become disagreeable or will, at least, lose much of its effect over the passions. However, the reverse is also possible. If the imagination engages in mere "passive" or "involuntary" (Akenside 21) perception, Akenside suggests, it is likely to lose its interest in the object. On the other hand, if the faculty gazes at a particular object in a way that involves "choice and activity" and with "conscious determination" (Akenside 21), it will be able to modify the emotional impact of the said object. "Familiarity", says Akenside, turns objects "agreeable" or, at least, "acceptable" (Akenside 21-2). Akenside's claim may perhaps be better understood if we consider that elsewhere he states that even when experiencing 'painful passions', the very activity of the mind will afford man pleasure (Akenside 48-9). Another reason why this technique is able to work is that by repeatedly examining a particular object, one may realize that it is not, in fact, displeasing or harmful, as one might originally have thought (Akenside 21). I would point out here that this assertion also appears to have Stoic roots since, in his *Discourses*, Epictetus claims that it is possible to change the emotional impact of an impression by modifying one's value judgment concerning it (Epictetus 2: 61-3). In Akenside's version, however, this remedy seems to lose its cognitive dimension since it presupposes merely an 'active' and deliberate type of perception, rather than rational reassessment. We might recall here Locke's discussion on the possibility of modifying the "agreeableness" or "disagreeableness" we feel towards objects either by means of "due consideration" or "practice, application, and custom" (Locke 180). Although Locke's and Akenside's discussions run along similar lines, what is striking is that Akenside emphasizes the role of the imagination in this process,

particularly in its “poetic” capacity. At this point, the doctrine of association comes in and further modifies the above strategies. If associated with “pleasing circumstances”, an object which is initially disliked may in time become pleasant (Akenside 22). The process of association is described as “[g]uiding the wanton Fancy to her scope”, suggesting that one could take advantage of the associations subsisting between different objects in order to deliberately call various images to mind and modify his or her passions (Akenside 96). This view is clearly spelled out by Akenside, when he claims that the process of association may be taken advantage of as a last resort, if we still find particular external objects disagreeable: “Or lastly, though the object itself should always continue disagreeable, yet circumstances of pleasure or good fortune may occur along with it. Thus an association may arise in the mind, and the object never remembered without those pleasing circumstances attending it” (Akenside 22). In this respect, it is important to remark that the Akensidian imagination appears to inherit Hume’s assignment of the Lockean process of association to the imagination⁸.

Finally, Akenside’s discussion of these strategies is also informed by eighteenth-century notions of ‘taste’. In the poem, ‘taste’, also termed “relish” or “bias of the soul” (Akenside 103-8), is defined as an “internal power” susceptible to “each fine impulse” whose role is to distinguish what is “decent and sublime” from “things deform’d, or disarrang’d, or gross” (Akenside 103). It seeks the former and recoils from the latter. Otherwise put, it acts as an evaluative faculty and can be understood as an embodiment of the cognitive or evaluative component which is traditionally attributed to the imagination along the early modern period. In accordance with eighteenth-century thought, Akenside claims that ‘taste’ is innate, bestowed by God (Akenside 103), yet in need of cultivation (Akenside 104)⁹. And it is precisely ‘taste’, namely the adequate response to external stimuli, which the techniques for guiding the imagination, that I have been discussing so far, seek to develop. According to Akenside, who draws upon Platonic and Leibnizian cosmology, God has made all things “good” and “lovely” (Akenside 52) and has united ‘beauty’ with ‘good’ and ‘truth’ (Akenside 27-31). Throughout, the poem suggests that it is precisely this, the “grateful charm” of “Nature” (Akenside 94), that man must grow aware of and sensitive to. We are told that man has been designed in such a way as to be susceptible to none other than “nature’s happy cares” (Akenside 21). And, it is, as we have seen, by directing one’s imagination towards pleasant objects, by rendering disagreeable objects agreeable through ‘active’ or ‘conscious’ perception or by the help of association that man will discover the true nature of external objects – which is essentially ‘good’ and ‘lovely’ - and thus, will come to practice appropriate emotional reactions. It is only those who “have entered into an honourable familiarity with nature and her works” that are able to “discern many

⁸ See Keach 153-66 for his discussion of Hume’s impact on Akenside’s notion of imagination.

⁹ We can recall, for instance, Locke’s similar discussion of the “palate” or “relish of the mind” which man is prompted to rectify (Locke 180-1) or Hume’s thoughts on the universal “standard of taste” (Hume 228).

amiable things” (Akenside 107). For instance, when he addresses the formation of habits, Akenside suggests that the practice of shifting from ‘passive’ to ‘active’ perception is in fact a method of reevaluating and correcting one’s value judgements concerning a particular object and of realising that something which at first appeared ‘disagreeable’ is, in fact, ‘agreeable’ (Akenside 21-2). That this requires practice and cultivation is spelled out throughout the poem. As we have already observed, one has to ‘learn’ or ‘be taught’ how to discern the ties between objects and passions - to have a “well-tun’d heart” (Akenside 31) and not to entertain “young unpractis’d views” (Akenside 66). The allegory in the second section of the poem is particularly telling in this respect. It speaks of a man who contemplates nature, yet only meets desolate, almost hellish scenes which have a profoundly disturbing effect over him (Akenside 51). At one point, an apparition descends from the heavens, identified as the “Genius of human kind” (Akenside 52)¹⁰. He accuses the man of the vanity of his thoughts and asks him to examine the scene once more. He touches the man’s forehead and says: “Raise thy sight [...] / And let thy sense convince thy erring tongue” (Akenside 53). As can be foreseen, the man gazes at the scene once again and sees everything transformed: “I look’d, and lo! The former scene was chang’d; For verdant alleys and surrounding trees, / A solitary prospect, wide and wild, / Rush’d on my senses” (Akenside 53). What man is ultimately accused of by the Genius is of being unable to recognize the wisdom underlying God’s creation, the fact that he has made everything agreeable to man’s ‘taste’. It is he who ‘dissolves’ (Akenside 29) or simply remains ignorant of the “fine ties” (Akenside 101) that God has drawn between objects and ideas that is condemned to moral and spiritual poverty. And it is here that the spiritual dimension of Akenside’s concept of imagination comes fully into the picture.

‘Taste’ does not only take its origin from God, but, by cultivating it, man contributes to his spiritual ascent. As Akenside suggests, God linked particular objects with particular passions for two main reasons. First, out of his benevolence, in order to afford man as many delights as possible (Akenside 102-3) and secondly, in order to help man discern ‘good’ from ‘evil’ and thus secure virtue (Akenside 27; Akenside 93-94). Naturally, objects that encouraged ‘error’ or ‘vice’ were made to be displeasing, while those that inspired ‘truth’ and ‘virtue’ agreeable. However, what I am interested in is not merely the function of adequate “taste”, but rather, the manner in which it is thought to contribute to man’s spiritual growth. First of all, we meet in Akenside’s poem a natural theological position common in the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, according to which knowledge of God’s creation and of the aims which underlie it, attained through the study of nature, will inspire a set of religious affections and/or virtues (Corneanu 190-7). Here, we are dealing particularly with what appears to be a set of “religious” affections directed towards “divine” objects. Akenside speaks of the “kind access of joy” or “pure delight” which men experience while they contemplate nature and “trace/Through all its fabric, Wisdom’s artful aim” or “scan the counsels of their Author’s hand”

¹⁰ Here, it might be worth to note the links between the notions of “genius” and “imagination” which are drawn at this time, see Keach 141-53.

(Akenside 47). Elsewhere, he mentions the “love and admiration” (Akenside 104), “religious awe” (Akenside 94) or the “raptur’d vision” (Akenside 100) which man experiences under similar occasions. The difference here is that, although Akenside mentions the role of science in gaining such knowledge, his text focuses on and demonstrates the relevance of imagination and poetry in attaining such familiarity with nature. Moreover, it is often suggested that it is knowledge of the links between external objects and the passions they intend to inspire that man must discover in nature (Akenside 101). Secondly, another consequence, we are told, is that man comes to possess the affective and/or intellectual make-up that God has designed for him: “[...] the winds/ And rowling waves, the sun’s unwearied course,/The elements and seasons: all declare/For what the eternal Maker has ordain’d/The powers of man” (Akenside 108). What is more, this affective make-up is the same that God himself possesses. Akenside writes that “he tells the heart,/He meant, he made us to behold and love/What he beholds and loves” (Akenside 108). As we can observe, Akenside states that it is nature that dictates the manner in which we must respond to various stimuli, which, in fact, points to the contemplative practices performed by the imagination, whether during poetical creation or not. Moreover, those who practice appropriate ‘taste’ are thought to generally assume God’s likeness: “to be great like him/ Beneficent and active” (Akenside 108). At the same time, one who is sensitive to the stimuli found in nature, Akenside suggests, is not only able to gain knowledge of God’s creation, but, in a Neoplatonic vein, the world of ideas. Akenside claims that to those of a “finer mould” God “unfolds,/The world’s harmonious volume, there to read/The transcript of himself” (Akenside 15). Familiarity with nature appears to lead one towards knowledge of the “plan”, “aim” and “conceptions” (Akenside 47; Akenside 108) that underlie God’s creation, which might suggest that it involves a further epistemological component. Ultimately, throughout the poem, it is suggested that practicing adequate ‘taste’ will result in gaining a closer connexion to God. Not only shall one climb the ladder of being (Akenside 58), but even “hold converse” with “God himself” (Akenside 108). Akenside’s argument, however, appears to build towards a Neoplatonic position, since he suggests that one must not stop at gaining familiarity with the world of perceptibles, but ultimately aim at the world of forms: “Not only by the warmth and soothing sunshine of delightful things/Do minds grow up and flourish” (Akenside 66). It is suggested, however, that the latter cannot be attained without the former.

Thus, Akenside’s text stands as an example of a less common eighteenth-century view that natural theology can be built on the cognitive and affective practices involved in imagination and poetry, apart from or alongside science. As we have seen, Akenside’s argument is that through a particular conduct of the imagination, which involves (1) directing one’s attention towards ‘agreeable’ objects or by revaluating and modifying one’s affective responses either by means of (2) ‘active’ and ‘deliberate’ perception or (3) association – processes involved in both the ‘poetic’ and ‘psychological’ instances of the imagination - one will be able to correct and cultivate his or her ‘taste’. And it is this process of ‘familiarizing’ oneself with nature and of mending one’s ‘taste’ which helps man not only understand the design underlying God’s creation and feel ‘admiration’ towards it, but, most importantly, it leads man towards exercising appropriate emotional

responses - those which God has intended him to feel and those which God himself experiences. And, as Akenside's suggests, this is what ultimately contributes to one's spiritual ascent and results in gaining resemblance with and proximity to God and the world of intelligibles.

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