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THE POETIC IMAGINATION AS THERAPY ACROSS ENGLISH AND FRENCH LATE RENAISSANCE

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Abstract: *This paper explores a cross-cultural feature of late Renaissance literary theory, namely the conviction that the faculty of imagination possesses remedial and morally restorative capacities when it is involved in the production of poetry. Scholarship investigating the intellectual and cultural history of the imagination in early modernity has focused on the deleterious properties which the faculty was thought to possess - its potential to direct the passions towards vice, its propensity towards blinding the faculties of reason and will, its crucial role in generating melancholy, as well as its capacity to provoke physical deformities. The aim of this paper is to cast further light upon the late Renaissance tradition that endows the imagination with beneficial properties – a feature that transcends both English and French boundaries. Not only does this latter understanding of the imagination imply the emergence of a set of moral prerequisites for the poet, but also features the belief that poetry offers itself as a medium in which the imagination is able to order the passions and submit them to the control of reason. My paper aims to investigate the modulations that this notion undergoes in the English-French dialogue, across the late Renaissance and early seventeenth-century, with an eye for transnational features.*

In the following paper, I would like to contribute to the recovery of the therapeutic dimension of the late Renaissance notion of imagination, by arguing that, when involved in the production of poetry, the imagination was thought to possess remedial and morally restorative capacities, it was believed to order the passions and submit them to the control of reason and thus provide mental, bodily and moral health for the speaker and listener alike. Since, as we shall see, this notion surfaces and draws on the same repertoire of philosophical traditions trans-nationally, I have chosen to discuss both the English and French components in the debate.

Without detailing the cognitive processes that were believed to give birth to poetry,¹ let us begin by examining the attacks brought against the art during the late Renaissance. The early modern concept of imagination, held responsible for the production of poetry, mirrors the era's penchant for synthesizing and reconciling various traditions (i.e. it combines features from the Aristotelian, Platonic, Neo-Platonic and Hellenistic traditions, as well as from Greek and Arab medicine, Avicennan faculty psychology and classical and medieval rhetorics). As a result, the "creative" properties

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¹ For more detailed discussions on the psychology underlying the process of *inventio* see Rossky (1958), Plett (2004), Lyons (2005) or Webb (2009).

that the late Renaissance assigns to the imagination enabling it to produce rhetoric are themselves indebted to more than one traditions of thought, with consequences on the moral status of the poetic imagination. In his study, Flory discusses the contribution that classical and medieval rhetorics, with roots in Stoic psychology, brought to Renaissance (and later) notions of the imagination. His argument is that the Stoic synthesis between *phantasia* and *nous* ascribed to the imagination a set of cognitive operations which, within the rhetorical tradition, allowed the faculty to conceive what the senses could not perceive, to trigger corresponding emotional and somatic responses via the respective images and to convey these in language (Flory 151) – properties which are all present in Renaissance theories of the imagination. Nevertheless, this is not the only source that ascribes “creative” potencies to the late Renaissance notion of imagination which also inherits the properties of the Avicennan faculty named *imaginativa* (or *cogitativa* when it is guided by the intellect) (Harvey 44-5). This third Avicennan internal sense has the capacity to “compose” and “divide” the images of external objects and thus it is capable of giving life to new forms, without it being necessary that they exist in reality (Harvey 45). This Avicennan characterization of the ‘manipulative’ abilities of the imagination surfaces in anthropological, moral and medical discussions of the faculty during the late Renaissance. Both traditions of conceiving the “creative” capacities of the imagination, each with its own discourse and vocabulary, often appear side by side in late Renaissance texts, irrespective of generic categories. Moreover, this blend of traditions may also be identified in both English and French sources. For instance, La Primaudaye asserts that the imagination “changeth and rechangeth, mingleth and vmingleth” external impressions, but is also able to conceive that which “neuer haue bin, shal be, or can be” (La Primaudaye 155) and references Cicero’s discussion of *visiones*, thus echoing both traditions. A similar mixture of sources also appears in Puttenham’s treatise, where the imagination is said to be likely to produce “Chimeres” as well as “the best, most comely and bewtifull images of appearances of thinges . . . according to their very truth” (Puttenham 15). While, within the rhetorical tradition, the faculty’s capacity to produce eloquence is positively connoted, moral-anthropological discussions link the faculty’s ‘manipulative’ abilities to its cognitive failings, which are seen as conducive towards mental and bodily disruption, vice and sin. It is, I believe, the proximity, overlap and tension between these two separate discourses that ascribe ‘creative’ properties to the imagination that gives rise to controversy and debate over the beneficial or dangerous effects of rhetoric. Psychological and moral discussions on the dangers of the imagination pollinate discussions about the imagination’s poetic activity and, thus, the imagination of rhetorical creation inherits all the failings of the former: its reliance on the senses, its dangerous sway over the passions, its uncontained motion ranging from too much “volubility” to “dull levity” (Reynolds 24-8), as well as its deleterious effects on the rational faculties and over the body. Thus, it was feared that the poetic imagination might generate “busie & disordered phantasies”, “Chimeres & monsters” (Puttenham 14-5) in the mind or craft implausible images, such as “castles in the air” (Sidney 216). Poets are thus pejoratively termed “phantasticall” (Puttenham 14) men whose creations “infect the fancy with unworthy objects” (Sidney 236), thus leading others towards moral corruption. One common answer that is given by the late Renaissance apologists of poetry to

counteract these claims is that poetry, like any other art or practice, may either be put to “right use” or “abused” (Sidney 236) without finding any fault inherent to the art. The fault is thus to be placed upon those who direct the art towards an improper use. Far from settling the debate over the ethical dimension of poetry, however, such an answer does not satisfactorily account for the morally beneficial properties that the apologists ascribe to poetical inventio, but rather introduces a new set of questions. For instance, how may one distinguish between moral and immoral uses of poetry? If poetry will effect *movere*, *docere* and *delectare* upon the reader, does it follow that, when ill-used, it will inspire injurious passions within the reader and exhort him to vice and sin? And if so, are the rules regarding the moral conduct of the poet which surface throughout late Renaissance rhetorical and poetical tracts designed to regulate and prevent this from happening?

One first clue which might hope to answer these questions may be found in Reynolds’ inclusion of “Poetrie” into the category of “Artes of rationall Fancie” (Reynolds 24). Along similar lines, Bacon writes that the “duty and office” of rhetoric is to “apply reason to imagination” (Bacon, *Advancement* 220), thus suggesting that poetry involves a collaboration between the faculties of imagination and understanding. Indeed, in the second part of *L’Académie Française*, La Primaudaye elaborates on the mutual effort that reason, on the one hand, together with the imagination and the passions, on the other, contribute in order to produce speech. La Primaudaye appears to conceive the tongue as the bodily instrument of the imagination for, says he, without it man could not “inuent”, “counterfeit” or “imagine so many thinges” (La Primaudaye 101). This is the reason why the tongue is placed “neere the braine” and hence, in the proximity of “all the internall senses” (La Primaudaye 101), so that it may have access to their contents. According to La Primaudaye, the tongue must “directly followe reason” and deliver speech that is “wel weighed as it were in a ballance” (La Primaudaye 98). Thus, the role of the tongue is, guided by reason, to “articulate” or “frame” (La Primaudaye 87) the voice which, being produced by instruments that are placed next to the heart, is the “messenger” (La Primaudaye 92) of the passions. Consequently, La Primaudaye seems to suggest that speech must be made up of a mutual balance between reason and passion. Speech is the result of this double contribution in which reason must maintain control over affection. Of a similar process speaks Wright who asserts that *actio* represents a “moderation, qualification, modification, or composition” of “voice, countenance, and gesture” (Wright 176), the latter of which are conveyers of passion. The notion of a reason-guided imagination granting order and coherence to its passion-imbued materials is best captured in Puttenham’s statement that the poet’s imagination renders “his much multiformitie uniforme” (Puttenham 14). A similar description is also provided by Wright who suggests that the aim of the art of eloquence is to “perfit and accomplish the rude indigested motions of nature” (Wright 176). Here, the contrast between heterogeneity and unity of substance and the reference to “digestion” as the process which brings about the transition from the former to the latter surfaces in many Renaissance discussions that distinguish the materiality and versatility of the affections with the homogeneity of the substance of the rational soul. Hence, it appears that what the apologists are gesturing at is poetry’s ability to modulate and dispose the passions in accordance with reason’s prescriptions. This idea is further highlighted in the advice that Wright gives to speakers,

urging them to deliver their matter “as grauely, as prudently, as solidly as may be” and advises against a long list of vices which includes “leuitie”, “rashnesse”, “imprudence”, “inconsideration”, “immortification” and “precipitation” (Wright 178). The same injunctions echo in Charron’s list of rules that all speakers must abide by, which recommend “Temperancy”, ‘modesty’ and ‘chastity’ of speech against “vehemencie” (Charron 585). Furthermore, both La Primaudaye and Charron advise men to be “feldome” (Charron 585) in speech and keep silent when the circumstances recommend so, stressing once again the command that reason must keep over discourse. What is more, Puttenham claims that the poet’s imagination resembles “a glasse or mirroure” which neither distorts, nor embellishes the images it presents, but calls impressions to the mind in a manner that is “well proportioned and so passing cleare” (Puttenham 14). Thus, Puttenham implies that the poet’s imagination lacks the cognitive errors that it is usually attributed and, therefore, it is found in agreement with the rational faculty. Hence, we may infer that, in order to give birth to poetry, the imagination must work closely with that of reason and allow itself to receive the latter’s guidance. As Roach points out, during *inventio*, the imagination is primarily concerned with conjuring up images that carry strong and thus, potentially dangerous passions. As a consequence, while the imagination must still essay to summon up potent passions (in order to meet the constraint of *enargeia*), it must at the same time carefully bridle them with the help of reason (Roach 52). Not only must the imagination be careful not to trigger passions that are found at either ends of the spectrum, but it must also grant order and coherence, carefully chisel and modulate the materials it works with. It is “this sorte of phantasie” with which “all good Poets” (Puttenham 15) are endowed.

Nevertheless, certain questions still remain unanswered. Even though it appears that poetry must result from the collaboration between the faculties of imagination and understanding, it is not yet clear whether this feature is inherent to poetry or if it merely depends on whether the poet performs a “right” or “wrong” use of the imagination. Although this argument remains prominent throughout rhetorical treatises, the apologists of poetry also gesture in another direction. In his compendium of knowledge, La Primaudaye asserts that speech works as a mirror for the entirety of man’s soul. It will thus reflect the nature and condition of man’s internal senses, rational faculties, appetites and affections, as well as that of his body (La Primaudaye 89-90). As a consequence, man’s discourse will reveal “howe all these partes are affected” and whether they are “sound” or possess any “defect” (La Primaudaye 89). This means that if a man’s faculties do not function as they should or are not properly trained, his speech will likewise suffer and he will possess a “bad vtterance” (La Primaudaye 90). Puttenham appears to agree on this matter, stating that if the mind is disturbed and corrupted, it will ‘hinder’ “the discourse of man” (Puttenham 14). Such flawed discourse consists of “ill”, “slower” or “improper” speech, of the use of words that do not apply “fitly” to the matter, that are not “set in good order”, nor “well knit or agreeing with one another” (La Primaudaye 90). As we may discern, what La Primaudaye is describing is the failure to properly execute the five members of a rhetorical act and to respect the rule of decorum, namely that of maintaining perfect proportion and concordance between the elements of one’s speech. This is what will occur if the poet or orator does not possess “a ripe and stayed reason,

nor temperate or settled senses” (La Primaudaye 90). As La Primaudaye clarifies, he who produces such error-ridden speech cannot be called “eloquent”, but a “great babbling pleader” (La Primaudaye 90). Contrariwise, if the speaker should have “reason and iudgement ready at hand”, he will then possess the capacity to “conceive well in his spirite and minde” that which he wishes to invent and also to “expresse it well” through “apt words” and sentences that are “well tied and knit together” (La Primaudaye 90). Only if the speaker possesses the command of reason over the other faculties and parts of his soul will he be able to adequately perform *inventio* and thus meet the necessary constraints involved in the rhetorical act.

As a consequence, we may deduce that the condition of the poet’s faculties determines the nature of his final products. If his faculties are in a frail condition, if his imagination is left unassisted by reason and his nature is corrupt, the poet will be unable to carry out the three (or, in particular cases, five) members of any rhetorical act. Hence, not only will his final product disregard rhetorical constraints, but, consequently, his power to enact *move* upon his readers or listeners, which is the very purpose and defining feature of poetry (Vickers 730), will suffer. To recall La Primaudaye’s words, the poet’s product will thus be unable to rightfully carry the name of “eloquence”. It now becomes clear that poetry issuing from a morally corrupt nature will lose in its capacity to “move” the audience or readership. While this view is not consistently expressed throughout late Renaissance discussions of rhetoric, it may be said, as some indicate, that because of this, poetry was thought to possess less power to move to ill, than to good. Bacon is one such defender, arguing that “speech is much more conversant in adorning that which is good, than in colouring that which is evil” (Bacon, *Advancement* 221). Consequently, he goes on, man’s nature is not “so unfortunately built, as that those powers and arts should have force to disturb reason and not to establish and advance it” (Bacon, *Advancement* 220). Thus, we may infer that the use of “rationall Fancie”, i.e. of an imagination disciplined by the faculty of reason, may be understood as an inherent feature of poetry, according to late Renaissance thought, despite apparent inconsistencies in treatises dealing with this subject at the time. As a result, it appears that a broad section of genres, from treatises of rhetorics and poetics to handbooks of practical moral philosophy, become concerned with training and strengthening the poet’s virtues in order to ensure the proper execution of the rhetorical process. Nevertheless, in the following section, I would like to argue that not only does the poet require a sound moral nature in order to give birth to poetry, but that the process of rhetorical creation itself is conceived as a method of further ordering the mind and passions, cultivating virtue and achieving wisdom - for poet and reader alike. Roach makes a similar point, arguing that, since the process of rhetoric involves working with strong and thus potentially harmful passions and humours, the poet was required to bridle his imagination with the help of the faculty of reason as a form of “preventive medicine” (Roach 52). However, I would like discuss the ways in which achieving cognitive, affective and moral health was itself one of poetry’s aims. The inclusion of sections discussing speech, rhetorical and poetical invention or acting in genres such as handbooks of popular psychology or books of practical wisdom is one first clue as to its strong moral implications. Similarly, Plett too suggests that during the process of poetical creation, the poet’s imagination was believed

to receive “judgement as a corrective” (Plett 126). However, although Plett touches upon the aesthetic dimension involved in the conjunction between reason and imagination during *inventio*, he does not proceed to discuss the implications that this feature might have on the poet’s (or listener’s) mental, bodily or moral health. Rossky, who similarly surveys the late Renaissance distinction between, as he calls them, the “psychological” and the “poetic” imagination (Rossky 66), does address the moral effects of rational imagination, but does not go further than discussing the poet’s capacity to convey moral teaching to his audience by clothing abstract precepts into sensible imagery. In what follows, I would like not only to recover another dimension of the poetic imagination’s contribution to moral, mental and physical health, but also to highlight the consequences that the process of poetical *inventio* has over the poet’s own healing – a topic which, I believe, has not received sufficient scholarly attention.

As we have already discussed above, being virtuous appears to be, first of all, a prerequisite for the practice of crafting poetry. It is only men that are “modest and grave” that possess the gift of “rare invention” (Puttenham 14). However, as Puttenham suggests, the imagination’s condition does not only reflect in the aesthetic qualities of the final product and in the poet’s success or failure to abide by the full set of rhetorical constraints, but also bears significant moral consequences. Thus, Puttenham writes that the representations that the imagination brings to the poet’s mind are not restricted to this mental space, nor to the features of his inventions, but have effects over “all his ordinary actions and life which ensues” (Puttenham 15). Therefore, we are told that those who show signs of proper conduct in ‘speech’, ‘rhetoric’ or ‘poetry’, that is, those who master the ‘art of eloquence’ are, according to Charron, “more excellent than other men” (Charron 586). This is not simply to say that, since speech reflects the state of man’s faculties and affections, an adequately performed act of rhetoric will bear testimony to an individual’s virtue, but that the instance of issuing forth poetry itself produces certain effects upon the poet. In line with his discussions on the shaping and refining labour that man’s speech producing faculties and bodily instruments must enact upon his utterance, La Primaudaye asserts that the first level on which this process takes place is that of the heart and affections. La Primaudaye seems to suggest that the poet is unable to mould his inventions in accordance with rhetorical constraints unless he effects prior shaping and chiselling of his own passions. Thus, La Primaudaye writes that “before the bellows of the lungs blow to frame afterward voice & speach in the tongue and mouth, the draught must first be drawne and framed in the hart” (La Primaudaye 93). If the poet does not undergo such a process, he will “onely giue testimony, that there is litle wisdom & upright affection in the hart” (La Primaudaye 93). In a similar vein, Charron argues that the process of crafting poetry has an ordering and moderating effect upon the poet’s passions, writing that the art of eloquence “disposeth the heart and affections like certain notes to make a melodious harmony” (Charron 586). The recurring analogy with the harmony produced by musical instruments echoes discussions on the process of *dispositio*, thus suggesting that there might be a correlation between the arrangement of matter, words and sentences within poetry and the ordering of the passions. In addition to this, La Primaudaye stresses the persisting changes that the act of rhetoric exerts over the poet’s soul, by stating that

although the voice and its sound disappear shortly after the act of utterance, “the internall speach remaineth . . . in the spirite, heart, and thought that ingendred it” (La Primaudaye 89). Moreover, Puttenham contends that the disciplined imagination that poets possess, which we have developed upon earlier, is “to the sound and true iudgement of man most needful” (Puttenham 15). He thus touches upon the role that the imagination and the passions, tempered during the process of *inventio*, have in rectifying and adjusting the other parts and faculties of the soul. This notion is further stressed when it appears that the corrective effects that the poetic imagination has over the soul involve not only the affections and the rational faculties, but extend over man’s entire frame, his mind and body alike. Towards the illustration of this point, La Primaudaye invokes proverb 16:24, according to which “[f]aire words are as hony combe, sweetnesse to the soule and health to the bones” (La Primaudaye 93).

Furthermore, I would like to argue that poetry has beneficial effects not only on the poet’s moral condition, but also upon that of his readers or listeners. While scholarship on this topic has mainly focused on poetry’s capacity to instill moral teaching in others by appealing to reason with the use of moral precepts veiled in potent imagery, I would like to highlight another trajectory involved in instilling virtue via rhetoric. What I would like to shed light upon is the fact that poetry was also believed to increase virtue by directly triggering adequate passions in the readers’ and/or listeners’ hearts, without first addressing reason. As it was believed, should the poet carry out a successful act of invention, the passions that he triggers within his own soul would reach that of his audience in exact shape. Since the poet’s nature determines the properties of his inventions, the latter would be imbued with and carry the passions, virtues or vices that he possessed and would inspire the same in the listeners: “passion being conceiued in our heart, is incontinently formed into our speech” and “entreth into another” (Charron 587). Commenting upon this process, La Primaudaye writes that upon the moment of utterance the minds of the speaker and listener appear to be linked as if by “a chaine of golde” (La Primaudaye 97). Elsewhere, La Primaudaye argues that the speaker’s ability to perform *move* upon his audience, to wake up in their minds the same images and affections that he possesses within his own is due to “the agreement that is betweene the spirites and mindes of men” (La Primaudaye 89). Charron too addresses this point and describes the concordance that appears to subsist between the men’s minds as a “subtile and liuely contagion” (Charron 587). What these descriptions call to mind is a property indebted to Neo-Platonic thought and ascribed during the late Renaissance to the faculty of the imagination, namely the faculty’s power to plant images, thoughts and passions in another’s imagination through the continuum of *pneuma* that ties together the minds of men (Park 52-77). This phenomenon is often described as a form of ‘sympathy’ or ‘contagion’ that occurs between men’s faculties of imagination. By these means, the successful poet is able to place in the reader’s mind whatever passion he first raises in his own. The poet can make another “blush, wax pale, laugh, crie, tremble for fear; mad with choler, to leape for ioy” (Charron 45), claims Charron. In the fifth section of his work dealing with means to ‘move’ the passions, Wright argues that there is more than one trajectory upon which rhetoric can work to ‘move’ the passions (Wright 174-5). Either the sensible components of an act of rhetoric (i.e. images, sound, *actio* etc.) pass through

the external senses and reach the imagination where they directly trigger corresponding passions, or its cognitive component (i.e. the underlying rational argument) reaches the faculty of reason which then performs changes over the affections. Since, as we have discussed, the sensible elements of the poetical work are the result of a rational act of creation, in which the understanding is involved in the process of closely shaping, ordering and articulating mental images, voice and gestures, it appears that these will trigger adequate affections without offering reason underlying arguments to decode, but by the very means of their sensible qualities set in accordance with reason. The need for rhetoric to lay special emphasis over its sensible elements owes to the fact that, since the majority of men lack “deepe iudgement” (Wright 174), they will be much more effectively steered towards good by means of passion. Thus, poetry’s capacity to work directly on emotion is recognized throughout late Renaissance discussions on rhetoric and it is through this means that the reader may receive moral rectification. Thus, La Primaudaye writes that rhetoric has the power to “moderate” the affections (La Primaudaye 97). An even more detailed account is provided by Wright who claims that the rhetorical act functions either as a “flash of fire to incense a passion, or a bason of water to quench a passion incensed” (Wright 175). Wright thus suggests that poetry is able to diminish injurious passions and trigger those that are beneficial, thus carefully balancing the affections and adjusting them according to their necessary proportions - in conformity with the Aristotelian prescription for virtue. In Sidney’s words, the poet devises “matter for a conceit” (Sidney 232), that is, he crafts his inventions with careful attention as to the mental images, thoughts and emotions that he will secure in others. In this way, poetry is able to purge the mind of errors and strengthen the faculties. It brings men’s “troubled mindes” to “tranquillitie” (Puttenham 16) and performs the “strengthening” of “man’s wit” (Sidney 240). Consequently, during the Renaissance, poetry becomes understood as a method of healing man’s mind and body. The poet or orator is thus termed “the true Physitian of the soule” (Charron 587), according to Charron. These are perhaps the reasons prompting Bacon to prescribe “splendid and illustrious objects, as histories, fables and contemplations of nature” (Bacon, *Essays* 290) as forms of therapy in his essay *Of Regimen of Health*.

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