



Imagination Voltaire

SECTION I

Imagination is the power which every being, endowed with perception and reason, is conscious he possesses of representing to himself sensible objects. This faculty is dependent upon memory. We see men, animals, gardens, which perceptions are introduced by the senses; the memory retains them, and the imagination compounds them. On this account the ancient Greeks called the muses, “the daughters of memory.”

It is of great importance to observe, that these faculties of receiving ideas, retaining them, and compounding them, are among the many things of which we can give no explanation. These invisible springs of our being are of nature’s workmanship, and not of our own.

Perhaps this gift of God, imagination, is the sole instrument with which we compound ideas, even those which are abstract and metaphysical.

You pronounce the word “triangle;” but you merely utter a sound, if you do not represent to yourself the image of some particular triangle. You certainly have no idea of a triangle but in consequence of having seen triangles, if you have the gift of sight, or of having felt them, if you are blind. You cannot think of a triangle in general, unless your imagination figures to itself, at least in a confused way, some particular triangle. You calculate; but it is necessary that you should represent to yourself units added to each other, or your mind will be totally insensible to the operation of your hand.

You utter the abstract terms—greatness, truth, justice, finite, infinite; but is the term “greatness” thus uttered, anything more or less, than a mere sound, from the action of your tongue, producing vibrations in the air, unless you have the image of some greatness in your mind? What meaning is there in the words “truth” and “falsehood,” if you have not perceived, by means of your senses, that some particular thing which you were told existed, did exist in fact; and that another of which you were told the same, did not exist? And, is it not from this experience, that you frame the general idea of truth and falsehood? And, when asked what you mean by these words, can you help figuring to yourself some sensible image, occasioning you to recollect that you have sometimes been told, as a fact, what really and truly happened, and very often what was not so?

Have you any other notion of just and unjust, than what is derived from particular actions, which appeared to you respectively of these descriptions? You began in your childhood by learning to read under some master: you endeavored to spell well, but you really spelled ill: your master chastised you: this appeared to you very unjust. You have observed a laborer refused his wages, and innumerable instances of the like nature. Is the abstract idea of just and unjust anything more than facts of this character confusedly mixed up in your imagination?

Is “finite” anything else in your conception than the image of some limited quantity or extent? Is “infinite” anything but the image of the same extent or quantity enlarged indefinitely? Do not all these operations take place in your mind just in the same manner as you read a

book? You read circumstances and events recorded in it, and never think at the time of the alphabetical characters, without which, however, you would have no notion of these events and circumstances. Attend to this point for a single moment, and then you will distinctly perceive the essential importance of those characters over which your eye previously glided without thinking of them. In the same manner all your reasonings, all your accumulations of knowledge are founded on images traced in your brain. You have, in general, no distinct perception or recollection of them; but give the case only a moment's attention, and you will then clearly discern, that these images are the foundation of all the notions you possess. It may be worth the reader's while to dwell a little upon this idea, to extend it, and to rectify it.

The celebrated Addison, in the eleven essays on the imagination with which he has enriched the volumes of the "Spectator," begins with observing, that "the sense of sight is the only one which furnishes the imagination with ideas." Yet certainly it must be allowed, that the other senses contribute some share. A man born blind still hears, in his imagination, the harmony which no longer vibrates upon his ear; he still continues listening as in a trance or dream; the objects which have resisted or yielded to his hands produce a similar effect in his head or mind. It is true that the sense of sight alone supplies images; and as it is a kind of touching or feeling which extends even to the distance of the stars, its immense diffusion enriches the imagination more than all the other senses put together.

There are two descriptions of imagination; one consists in retaining a simple impression of objects; the other arranges the images received, and combines them in endless diversity. The first has been called passive imagination, and the second active. The passive scarcely advances beyond memory, and is common to man and to animals. From this power or faculty it arises, that the sportsman and his dog both follow the hunted game in their dreams, that they both hear the sound of the horn, and the one shouts and the other barks in their sleep. Both men and brutes do something more than recollect on these occasions, for dreams are never faithful and accurate images. This species of imagination compounds objects, but it is not the understanding which acts in it; it is the memory laboring under error.

This passive imagination certainly requires no assistance from volition, whether we are asleep or awake; it paints, independently of ourselves, what our eyes have seen; it hears what our ears have heard, and touches what we have touched; it adds to it or takes from it. It is an internal sense, acting necessarily, and accordingly there is nothing more common, in speaking of any particular individual, than to say, "he has no command over his imagination."

In this respect we cannot but see, and be astonished at the slight share of power we really possess. Whence comes it, that occasionally in dreams we compose most coherent and eloquent discourses, and verses far superior to what we should write on the same subject if perfectly awake?—that we even solve complicated problems in mathematics? Here certainly there are very combined and complex ideas in no degree dependent on ourselves. But if it is incontestable that coherent ideas are formed within us independently of our will in sleep, who can safely assert that they are not produced in the same manner when we are awake? Is there a man living who foresees the idea which he will form in his mind the ensuing minute? Does it not seem as if ideas were given to us as much as the motions of our fibres; and had Father Malebranche merely maintained the principle that all ideas are given by God, could any one have successfully opposed him?

This passive faculty, independent of reflection, is the source of our passions and our errors; far from being dependent on the will, the will is determined by it. It urges us towards the objects which it paints before us, or diverts us from them, just according to the nature of the exhibition thus made of them by it. The image of a danger inspires fear; that of a benefit excites desire. It is this faculty alone which produces the enthusiasm of glory, of party, of fanaticism;

it is this which produces so many mental alienations and disorders, making weak brains, when powerfully impressed, conceive that their bodies are metamorphosed into various animals, that they are possessed by demons, that they are under the infernal dominion of witchcraft, and that they are in reality going to unite with sorcerers in the worship of the devil, because they have been told that they were going to do so. This species of slavish imagination, which generally is the lot of ignorant people, has been the instrument which the imagination of some men has employed to acquire and retain power. It is, moreover, this passive imagination of brains easily excited and agitated, which sometimes produces on the bodies of children evident marks of the impression received by the mother; examples of this kind are indeed innumerable, and the writer of this article has seen some so striking that, were he to deny them, he must contradict his own ocular demonstration. This effect of imagination is incapable of being explained; but every other operation of nature is equally so; we have no clearer idea how we have perceptions, how we retain them, or how we combine them. There is an infinity between us and the springs or first principles of our nature.

Active imagination is that which joins combination and reflection to memory. It brings near to us many objects at a distance; it separates those mixed together, compounds them, and changes them; it seems to create, while in fact it merely arranges; for it has not been given to man to make ideas—he is only able to modify them.

This active imagination then is in reality a faculty as independent of ourselves as passive imagination; and one proof of its not depending upon ourselves is that, if we propose to a hundred persons, equally ignorant, to imagine a certain new machine, ninety-nine of them will form no imagination at all about it, notwithstanding all their endeavors. If the hundredth imagines something, is it not clear that it is a particular gift or talent which he has received? It is this gift which is called “genius”; it is in this that we recognize something inspired and divine.

This gift of nature is an imagination inventive in the arts—in the disposition of a picture, in the structure of a poem. It cannot exist without memory, but it uses memory as an instrument with which it produces all its performances.

In consequence of having seen that a large stone which the hand of man could not move, might be moved by means of a staff, active imagination invented levers, and afterwards compound moving forces, which are no other than disguised levers. It is necessary to figure in the mind the machines with their various effects and processes, in order to the actual production of them.

It is not this description of imagination that is called by the vulgar the enemy of judgment. On the contrary, it can only act in union with profound judgment; it incessantly combines its pictures, corrects its errors, and raises all its edifices according to calculation and upon a plan. There is an astonishing imagination in practical mathematics; and Archimedes had at least as much imagination as Homer. It is by this power that a poet creates his personages, appropriates to them characters and manners, invents his fable, presents the exposition of it, constructs its complexity, and prepares its development; a labor, all this, requiring judgment the most profound and the most delicately discriminative.

A very high degree of art is necessary in all these imaginative inventions, and even in romances. Those which are deficient in this quality are neglected and despised by all minds of natural good taste. An invariably sound judgment pervades all the fables of Æsop. They will never cease to be the delight of mankind. There is more imagination in the “Fairy Tales”; but these fantastic imaginations, destitute of order and good sense, can never be in high esteem; they are read childishly, and must be condemned by reason.

The second part of active imagination is that of detail, and it is this to which the world distinguishingly applies the term. It is this which constitutes the charm of conversation, for it

is constantly presenting to the mind what mankind are most fond of—new objects. It paints in vivid colors what men of cold and reserved temperament hardly sketch; it employs the most striking circumstances; it cites the most appropriate examples; and when this talent displays itself in union with the modesty and simplicity which become and adorn all talents, it conciliates to itself an empire over society. Man is so completely a machine that wine sometimes produces this imagination, as intoxication destroys it. This is a topic to excite at once humiliation and wonder. How can it happen that a small quantity of a certain liquor, which would prevent a man from effecting an important calculation, shall at the same time bestow on him the most brilliant ideas?

It is in poetry particularly that this imagination of detail and expression ought to prevail. It is always agreeable, but there it is necessary. In Homer, Virgil, and Horace, almost all is imagery, without even the reader's perceiving it. Tragedy requires fewer images, fewer picturesque expressions and sublime metaphors and allegories than the epic poem and the ode; but the greater part of these beauties, under discreet and able management, produce an admirable effect in tragedy; they should never, however, be forced, stilted, or gigantic.

Active imagination, which constitutes men poets, confers on them enthusiasm, according to the true meaning of the Greek word, that internal emotion which in reality agitates the mind and transforms the author into the personage whom he introduces as the speaker; for such is the true enthusiasm, which consists in emotion and imagery. An author under this influence says precisely what would be said by the character he is exhibiting.

Less imagination is admissible in eloquence than in poetry. The reason is obvious—ordinary discourse should be less remote from common ideas. The orator speaks the language of all; the foundation of the poet's performance is fiction. Accordingly, imagination is the essence of his art; to the orator it is only an accessory.

Particular traits or touches of imagination have, it is observed, added great beauties to painting. That artifice especially is often cited, by which the artist covers with a veil the head of Agamemnon at the sacrifice of Iphigenia; an expedient, nevertheless, far less beautiful than if the painter had possessed the secret of exhibiting in the countenance of Agamemnon the conflict between the grief of a father, the majesty of a monarch, and the resignation of a good man to the will of heaven; as Rubens had the skill to paint in the looks and attitude of Mary de Medici the pain of childbirth, the joy of being delivered of a son, and the maternal affection with which she looks upon her child.

In general, the imaginations of painters when they are merely ingenious, contribute more to exhibit the learning in the artist than to increase the beauty of the art. All the allegorical compositions in the world are not worth the masterly execution and fine finish which constitute the true value of paintings.

In all the arts, the most beautiful imagination is always the most natural. The false is that which brings together objects incompatible; the extravagant paints objects which have no analogy, allegory, or resemblance. A strong imagination explores everything to the bottom; a weak one skims over the surface; the placid one reposes in agreeable pictures; the ardent one piles images upon images. The judicious or sage imagination is that which employs with discrimination all these different characters, but which rarely admits the extravagant and always rejects the false.

If memory nourished and exercised be the source of all imagination, that same faculty of memory, when overcharged, becomes the extinction of it. Accordingly, the man whose head is full of names and dates does not possess that storehouse of materials from which he can derive compound images. Men occupied in calculation, or with intricate matters of business, have generally a very barren imagination.

When imagination is remarkably stirring and ardent, it may easily degenerate into madness; but it has been observed that this morbid affection of the organs of the brain more frequently attaches to those passive imaginations which are limited to receiving strong impressions of objects than to those fervid and active ones which collect and combine ideas; for this active imagination always requires the association of judgment, the other is independent of it.

It is not perhaps useless to add to this essay, that by the words perception, memory, imagination, and judgment, we do not mean distinct and separate organs, one of which has the gift of perceiving, another of recollecting, the third of imagining, and the last of judging. Men are more inclined, than some are aware, to consider these as completely distinct and separate faculties. It is, however, one and the same being that performs all these operations, which we know only by their effects, without being able to know anything of that being itself.

SECTION II

Brutes possess imagination as well as ourselves; your dog, for example, hunts in his dreams. “Objects are painted in the fancy,” says Descartes, as others have also said. Certainly they are; but what is the fancy, and how are objects painted in it? Is it with “the subtle matter”? “How can I tell” is the appropriate answer to all questions thus affecting the first principles of human organization.

Nothing enters the understanding without an image. It was necessary, in order to our obtaining the confused idea we possess of infinite space, that we should have an idea of a space of a few feet. It is necessary, in order to our having the idea of God, that the image of something more powerful than ourselves should have long dwelt upon our minds.

We do not create a single idea or image. I defy you to create one. Ariosto did not make Astolpho travel to the moon till long after he had heard of the moon, of St. John, and of the Paladins.

We make no images; we only collect and combine them. The extravagances of the “Thousand and One Nights” and the “Fairy Tales” are merely combinations. He who comprises most images in the storehouse of his memory is the person who possesses most imagination.

The difficulty is in not bringing together these images in profusion, without any selection. You might employ a whole day in representing, without any toilsome effort, and almost without any attention, a fine old man with a long beard, clothed in ample drapery, and borne in the midst of a cloud resting on chubby children with beautiful wings attached to their shoulders, or upon an eagle of immense size and grandeur; all the gods and animals surrounding him; golden tripods running to arrive at his council; wheels revolving by their own self-motion, advancing as they revolve; having four faces covered with eyes, ears, tongues, and noses; and between these tripods and wheels an immense multitude of dead resuscitated by the crash of thunder; the celestial spheres dancing and joining in harmonious concert, etc. The lunatic asylum abounds in such imaginations.

We may, in dealing with the subject of imagination distinguish:

1. The imagination which disposes of the events of a poem, romance, tragedy, or comedy, and which attaches the characters and passions to the different personages. This requires the profoundest judgment and the most exquisite knowledge of the human heart; talents absolutely indispensable; but with which, however, nothing has yet been done but merely laying the foundation of the edifice.

2. The imagination which gives to all these personages the eloquence or diction appropriate to their rank, suitable to their station. Here is the great art and difficulty; but even after doing this they have not done enough. . . .

There is an astonishing imagination, even in the science of mathematics. An inventor must begin with painting correctly in his mind the figure, the machine invented by him, and its properties or effects. We repeat there was far more imagination in the head of Archimedes than in that of Homer.

As the imagination of a great mathematician must possess extreme precision, so must that of a great poet be exceedingly correct and chaste. He must never present images that are incompatible with each other, incoherent, highly exaggerated, or unsuitable to the nature of the subject.

The great fault of some writers who have appeared since the age of Louis XIV. is attempting a constant display of imagination, and fatiguing the reader by the profuse abundance of far-fetched images and double rhymes, one-half of which may be pronounced absolutely useless. It is this which at length brought into neglect and obscurity a number of small poems, such as “Ver Vert,” “The Chartreuse,” and “The Shades,” which at one period possessed considerable celebrity. Mere sounding superfluity soon finds oblivion.

Omne supervacuum pleno de pectore manat. (Horace, *Art of Poetry*, 837)

The active and the passive imagination have been distinguished in the “Encyclopædia.” The active is that of which we have treated. It is the talent of forming new pictures out of all those contained in our memory.

The passive is scarcely anything beyond memory itself, even in a brain under strong emotion. A man of an active and fervid imagination, a preacher of the League in France, or a Puritan in England, harangues the populace with a voice of thunder, with an eye of fire, and the gesture of a demoniac, and represents Jesus Christ as demanding justice of the Eternal Father for the new wounds he has received from the royalists, for the nails which have been driven for the second time through his feet and hands by these impious miscreants. Avenge, O God the Father, avenge the blood of God the Son; march under the banner of the Holy Spirit; it was formerly a dove, but is now an eagle bearing thunder! The passive imaginations, roused and stimulated by these images, by the voice, by the action of those sanguinary empirics, urge the maddened hearers to rush with fury from the chapel or meeting house, to kill their opponents and get themselves hanged.

Persons of passive imaginations, for the sake of high and violent excitement, go sometimes to the sermon and sometimes to the play; sometimes to the place of execution; and sometimes even to what they suppose to be the midnight and appalling meetings of presumed sorcerers.

Voltaire. “Philosophical Dictionary.” *The Works of Voltaire: A Contemporary Version*. Trans. William Felming. New York: E.R. DuMont, 1901.

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