

Interpretation

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Eva T. H. Brann, *The World of the Imagination: Sum and Substance* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991), xiv + 810 pp., \$75.00 cloth, \$35.00 paper.

WILL MORRISEY

“[D]edicated to the salvation of the obvious” (p. 5), this book examines the mind’s most philosophically neglected faculty, the imagination. The obvious fact in need of saving is the imagination’s status *as* a faculty, a capacity for “internal representations” that depict “absent objects as present” by means of resemblance (p. 5). This obvious fact needs saving because “in current life the traditional precedence of original over image, both in time and in dignity is perturbed: We tend to see the images of people and things before the originals and to have our views preshaped by the former” (p. 9)—as when we watch television, or read books written by ‘postmodernists.’

Eva T. H. Brann divides her book into six main parts. She considers the imagination as discussed in philosophy as a faculty of cognition, in psychology, in logic “as a peculiar amalgam of being and nonbeing” (p. 6), in literature, in the visual arts, and in the world (that is, in religion and politics).

Philosophy seeks imagination’s nature. Brann agrees, in large measure, with the ancients who understand the imagination as ‘the mind’s eye,’ “subject and ancillary to thought” (p. 201). Both anti-imagistic rationalism (as in Hume) and imagination-worshipping Romanticism finally denigrate the imagination by denying its connection to the world outside the mind. These apparently opposing conceptions share a common root, Cartesianism, which claims that the mind is a *res cogitans*, a thinking thing whose preeminent attribute is willing, not thinking. A thinking thing “can know itself by itself, without the mediation of the imagination” (p. 72) representing the outside world. Descartes opposes the older concept of the human being as a rational animal for whom “contemplative illumination” comes at the *end* of thinking (p. 78).

Psychology investigates the way we have images. The ‘cognitive’ school of psychologists attempts to reduce consciousness, and therefore the imagination, to unconscious or subconscious states. It cannot explain the having of images except analytically, and analysis proves difficult because “measurable evidence” is hard to extract (p. 209). “Most people have the incorrigible sense of seeing internal likenesses, however behaviorally inaccessible and formalistically inarticulate they may be” (p. 222). The limits of psychological materialism or reductionism may be seen in the observation, “Claiming that the

brain imagines is like saying that the mouth eats—a suggestive metonymical figure but not a sufficient account” (p. 266).

“What does it mean anywhere and everywhere to be an image?” (p. 388). This is the question addressed by logic, the science of affirmation and negation, being and nonbeing. Brann judges Plato’s *Sophist* the best discussion. “To be an image is a curious conflation of being” (p. 388)—it is not that thing. A sophist is an imitation wise man who does not even aim at likeness; his speeches are not likenesses but appearances, deliberate deceptions. A sophist can be caught only if the hunter knows the quarry. “To say what is not,” as the sophist does, “is not to say nothing but to say something other than the truth” (p. 394). Similarly, an image “is-not the original,” and “does not exist as fully or truly as its original” (p. 394). This formulation leaves room to measure whether the image is mostly true or merely deceptive, an important task because “Fictions have force” (p. 426).

Literature translates imagistic fictions into words, inviting the reader to translate the words back into images. Why then is literature not inferior to visual arts, which require no such cumbersome process? Because words better direct one’s interpretation of the pictures. A talking picture says things a dumb picture cannot; “the first and dominant poet of the West” (p. 471) was blind. Brann accordingly has some astringent remarks about Romanticism, whose literary talk apes divine logos in its creativity. Platonic myths, by contrast, are “corrective counter-myths, myths of truth,” and “Lincoln is . . . to political what Plato is to philosophical mythmaking” (p. 555). “True myth is not willful or desirous, since it is not told or enacted as private desire” (p. 564).

There are two kinds of imagined depictions: geometric and esthetic. Ancient geometry concerns ‘contained’ figures; “their unlimited exterior field is not the subject of attention” (p. 596). Modern or Cartesian geometry shifts attention to infinite space. “Kant will regard geometric figures as delimitations of infinite space” (p. 596); as in modern thought generally, *willed* reality dominates. Imagination more nearly resembles Euclideanism, as seen in the “human, reworked nature in which we largely live,” a world of lines and circles, rectangles and triangles (p. 612).

Esthetic depictions show that we recognize the distinction between original and image even if we do not want to admit it. In looking at a picture of a lion, “we see two things at once: a lion and a picture” (p. 655). Even ‘abstract’ painting must abstract from something.

In the world, imagination is at its most dangerous and its most valuable. It can impose spurious meanings or help to discover significance. Theologians object to “the willfulness and the creative autonomy of imaginative life”—its tendency to idolatry (p. 685). God made man in His image, so man is ‘imagable’ by God; it doesn’t work the other way around. (The rabbis say it differently: theology is man’s thoughts about God, but Torah is God’s thoughts about man, and altogether superior for that reason.) As with so much concerning this

mercurial faculty, however, some religious men find in imagination “a pivot between world and spirit” (p. 707).

In politics the moderated imagination lends itself to a “soberly ardent” patriotism (p. 712). Unmoderated imagination is “the chief cause of political harm” (p. 712). In Plato the cognitive faculty of the imagination corresponds to the psychological faculty of *thumos* or spiritedness. Therefore, when Brann writes that “Tyranny and imagination are archenemies” (p. 791) one wants to add, ‘Except in the mind of the tyrant.’ (Is the mind of the tyrant his own worst enemy? In the words of one of Oscar Levant’s friends, “Not while I’m alive.”)

“The ancients gave to the imagination the mediating work, performed well up-front, of bringing the appearances into the soul; the moderns have assigned to it the radical function, performed in the abyss, of constituting the world itself’ (p. 779). Brann on the whole concurs with the ancients, concluding that the imagination is “a prelude to action, an incitement to reflection, and an intimation of paradise” (p. 798).