

## CHAPTER VIII

### *The Concept of the Poet in the Aesthetics of Eighteenth Century*

The aesthetics of eighteenth century is an interesting proposition that lead us head on to an apparently contradictory ground where the strict neoclassical compulsions are challenged with sapience and critical sagacity. From the beginning of the eighteenth century to its end, British aesthetics was directed above all to the descriptive analysis of aesthetic experience and it could do its work only because 'the new way of ideas' had relieved aesthetics of its metaphysical commitments. Here Lord Shaftesbury can be our starting point. He is said to have founded 'the first really comprehensive and independent philosophy of the beautiful' (Cassirer1955:312), being as he was, a dominant figure in British aesthetics of that period. Poetry, for Shaftesbury, is no mere copying or generalised representation. The business of the poet is not just to hold a mirror to reality; in imitating he transforms. The Aristotelian 'probable impossibility' takes precedence over the possible improbability. This activates the Shaftesburian aesthetic which does not acknowledge the status in natural order alongside associationist psychology; it celebrates the living organic growth of natural order. So Hobbes and Locke come under fire – "These philosophers together with the anti-virtuosi may be called by one common name, viz. barbarians" - as beauty, virtue, and music assume their individuality to the point where beauty and order of affections are celebrated and a mechanist and an associative functioning of the mind are debunked in favour of a creative imagination which is analogous to the operations of the divine mind. (Rand 1914:178) However much Cartesian rationalism shows its disrespect for imagination — positing it at best between passive faculty that forms images and recombines images and Malebranche's scepticism in *Recherche de la Verite*, there is no denying the active principle for Shaftesbury.

But for the man who truly and in a just sense deserves the name of poet, and who as a real master, or architect in the kind, can describe both men and manners, and give to an action its just body and proportion, he will be found, if I mistake not, a very different creature. Such a poet is indeed a second *Maker*; a just Prometheus under Jove. Like that sovereign artist or universal plastic nature, he forms a whole, coherent and proportioned in itself, with due subjection and subordinacy of constituents parts. (Robertson 1900: I, 135-6).

Shaftesbury repudiates Locke's comparison of the mind with a blank sheet of paper and the belief that knowledge derives only from same experience. He holds that the mind is creative and that this power comes from God who created man in his own image.

. . . the mind conceiving of itself, can only be . . . assisted in the birth. Its pregnancy is from its own nature. Nor could it ever have been thus impregnated by any other mind than that which formed it at the beginning; and which . . . is original to all mental as well as other beauty. (135).

For Shaftesbury the human mind reflects a world of nature which is organic. His Platonism led him to believe that beyond the natural order there is a transcendent and ideal world to which this present world only approximates. But the ideal reveals itself not in the fixed and dead entities of a mechanical construction; it is embodied in the changing forms of a world which is a living and organic growth. Art, which is an imitation or representation of nature, must then also be creation in a real sense, and poetic invention must be a creative process. The poet works on the principle of plastic power that *shapes* up the raw materials into new forms. It is the modifying power that is never mechanical but gleans out a 'form' from the 'unformed' and lends a 'shape' to the 'unshaped'. Imagination, which compounds under associative laws the various units of mental experience, underline mechanical causation, something that Shaftesbury never subscribed to. Rather, the intriguing intensity of this faculty in the creative aesthetics of

the poet was the propulsive force that goaded Coleridge to distinguish between fancy and imagination. The 'indifferent' artist may produce work by bringing together from memory the bits and pieces of his material which Shaftesbury would ascribe as the injudicious and random use of wit and fancy. There is a patent emphasis on perception that does not include the compounding of the sense-data (Cf John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic*), but points to an active power of the mind with an amalgamatory or assimilatory strength. It is what Thomas Parnell would attest as the 'passive mind' in his "The Gift of Poetry" and the powers of imagination as 'celestial fire'.

It is a perception that homes in on the sense data to *create* an object, imposing an order on the disorder. This is 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am' (Shawcross 1907:I 202). This brings us to Kant's aesthetics and there is no denying the influence of Shaftesbury on Kant. Shaftesbury attributes it to the power of reason (with a respectable analogy with Kantian reason) that apprehends the truth by an immediate act of awareness. It is a power that need not be confused with mere discursive ability. It is the product of the poet's imagination, what Kant would call the 'aesthetic imagination', and Coleridge would term the 'secondary imagination'. Shaftesbury believes that an inward eye distinguishes and sees the fair and shapely, the amiable and the admirable apart from the deformed, the foul, the odious or the despicable, reneging on the principle of harmony. In fact the concept of taste for Shaftesbury is never relative as he fought shy of the schism between relativistic and absolutistic tendencies and believed that aesthetic sense makes way for universal standards of judgements. The active principle in the poet's mind which is analogous to the 'plastic nature' is the *shaping spirit of imagination* that embodies the poet's thought in sensible forms, just as the creation is the embodiment of God's thought. Indeed in likening the mind of the poet to the mind of God, Shaftesbury is not making a psychological analysis of the art of writing poetry, nor is his description of the poet something which can be directly and empirically verified as scientific statements can be.

Added to this one can point out that Shaftesbury considers the terrible and the frightening as aesthetically valuable. In an aesthetic attitude with a dose of the

neoclassical virtues of harmony, proportion and symmetry, the poet's vision accepts nature as having features that lack these attributes; it is the emphasis on the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. Such features were regarded as a revelation of God's majesty and not merely parts but necessary parts of the whole. In the poet's aesthetic vision the grand and the terrible aspects of nature are appreciated. It is the encompassing vision that perceives the ghastly and the hideous for their peculiar beauties – "the wildness pleases" (122). Shaftesbury's poet knows the difference between enthusiasm and fanaticism for he is the admirer of the kind of enchantment or magic which we call *enthusiasm*.

. . . all sound love and admiration is enthusiasm: the transports of poets, the sublime of orators, the rapture of musicians, the high strains of the virtuosi – all mere enthusiasm! Even learning itself, the love of arts and curiosities, the spirit of travelers and adventurers, gallantry, war, heroism – all mere enthusiasm! . . . 'T' is enough; I am content to be this new enthusiast in a way unknown to me before (129).

So the poet can be an enthusiast as well (a realistic revelation of this concept occurs in Thomson and Akenside). Although Akenside in his *The Pleasures of the Imagination* points out that Shakespeare pursued the vast, alone, the wonderful, the wild, and Waller sighs for harmony, grace, sublime beauty, the true poetic vision should encompass both. The enthusiasm for the true artist is diverted towards both ends. The poet need not be cramped mercilessly and unflinchingly by rules or set precepts for poetical reason is not the same as mathematical reason. The poet has an aesthetic truth in mind, a truth that is qualitatively measurable as he manifests a capacity to carry his enquiries closely into men, manners and human nature.

Hence we can refer to John Dennis's *Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* which traces the creative self where art is the expression of passion and the highest art is the communication of the most intense passion. The 'trueness' of the poet is in the expression of such strong enthusiasm which he believes are six in number: admiration, terror, horror, joy, sadness and desire. This is a throwback to Thomas

Burnet's 'sacred theory' and the appreciation of 'sublime' in creation. Dennis's state of enchantment while crossing the Alps is analogous to Burnett's appreciation of 'sublimity' in the ruins of the mountain, the old temples, fractured earth or great gurgling ocean which in their inherent magnificence raise great thoughts and passions invoking God and his greatness. They overbear the mind with their *Excess*, and cast it into a pleasing kind of stupor and admiration. Dennis's reflection in this context is worth quoting.

If these Hills were first made with the world, as has been a long time thought, and Nature design'd them only as a Mound to inclose her garden Italy's Then we may well say of her what some affirm of great wits, that her careless, irregular and boldest strokes are most admirable. For the Alps are works which she seems to have design'd and executed too in a Fury. (Hooker 1943 : 381).

The notions of Longinus contribute to the concept of the poet in Dennis's aesthetics. In fact the neoclassic 'School of Taste' in England both facilitated and in turn drew encouragement from the rising popularity of Longinus's *Peri Hupsuos*. The urging by Longinus of the psychological and emotional elements in the creation and understanding of art, his assumption that art should transport as well as persuade, and his emphasis upon boldness and grandeur of conception and upon a capacity for the pathetic – that is to say, for the raising of the passions – as all-important and inherent aesthetic gifts, served as an authoritative rallying centre for the defence of a subjective and emotional taste. The poet is the man with strong emotion and grandeur of ideas supplemented by his skills in rhetoric. Here Burke's observation is vital for our thesis:

it is not only of those ideas which are commonly called abstract...but even of particular real beings, that we converse without having any idea of them excited in the imagination; as will certainly appear on a diligent examination of our own minds. (1958:170)

The poet has his role to enact in the use of language, utilising the peculiar energies of his medium. Also Burke's distinction between a clear expression and a strong one is crucial to a proper understanding of poetic language. The Burkean aesthetics suggest a natural affinity between language and the sublime. So the poet's status becomes somewhat subservient to an 'affective sublimity'. The poet is not there to make an ideal class but to make it *affecting* to the imagination.

Thomas Warton, in his observations on the *Faerie Queene* of Spenser points out that we receive pleasure from Spenser because he is a 'romantic poet' whose work is tinged by appearances which are distinctly different from those with which we are hemmed. Spenser's work can be hailed as a work of creative imagination; it is a work whose graces please with an appeal beyond the formal reach of art where the faculties of creative imagination delight us for they are unassisted and unrestrained by deliberate judgement. This imagination in the poet is no mere receptor; rather it has a kind of power like a magnet, as pointed out by Gerard in *An Essay on Taste*. The poet's magnetic imagination draws out new combinations or ideas from the whole compass of nature just like a magnet that selects a combination from a farrago of ferruginous particles. It is an active power aided by a 'genius' in the artist, which bears strong resemblance to *Nature* in its operations. This brings into discussion Young's exegesis on the origin of art as a vegetable growth from the root of genius.

An original may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it is not made: [whereas] imitations are often a sort of manufacture wrought up by those mechanics, art and labour, out of preexistent materials not their own.  
(Young 1968:552)

A vegetable draws in moisture from the earth or nature and converts it to the nourishment of the plant which circulates through its vessels and is assimilated to its several parts. In like manner, genius arranges its ideas by the same operation, and almost at the same time, collects them. So the poet by that infallible principle of

selection and organisation, uses his imagination to summon up both the parts and the whole of an artistic design in a unique act of conjuration. The concept of the poet on this line is further substantiated by the aesthetic principles inherent in William Duff's *Essay on Original Genius*. There is a distinct hint at Coleridge's secondary imagination. The 'fancy' in the poet's repertoire is a rambling and sportive form of association and 'memory' functions to collect the materials of composition. The poet's imagination, here, is *inventive* and *plastic*, which can discover truths that were formerly unknown. For Gerard,

The Ends to which Genius may be adapted, are reducible to two; the discovery of truth, and the production of beauty. The former belongs to the sciences, the latter to the arts. Genius is, then, the *power of invention*, either in science or in the arts, either of truth or of beauty.  
(1774: 318 italics mine)

By the intense operation of the creative imagination the poet brings into existence the shadowy substances and the unreal objects. He, by dint of 'sight' and 'insight' brings them to view. It is on his exalted station and 'genius' that the advancement of the entire society in art, science and philosophy is dependent. Here, however, the poet is denied the Wordsworthian status in terms of the bonds of attachment with common humanity. Duff believes that the genius can flourish in the serene valley of bucolic tranquillity. His art is removed from the meretricious sophistication of civilisation for it is the effusion of a glowing fancy and an impassioned heart. Poetic genius has its own law that celebrates spontaneous impulse without the cramping prescriptions of restraint.

However, under the pressing demands of neoclassical modes of writing, imagination and passion have been subordinated by humanistic classicism to a rational insight into the decorum of the ideal; but a constant, though subordinate, use of them in ethical teaching and in both aesthetic creation and understanding had generally been taken for granted. It is the exhortation of Boileau (*L'Art Poétique*) that is relevant here in the sense that the poet is asked to observe 'care' and 'art' and move the passions of

the heart. However, in the concept of the poet, the essential creative faculty called 'invention' can never be ignored. This faculty of the poet helps him in the imitation of Nature as he conceives the design and order of its production. Under a pronounced rationalism, fancy or imagination of the poet is regarded as a structural adornment. Pope, in the preface to his translation of the *Iliad* points out that it is the most brief and 'single' subject that a poet could ever have chosen. With the emphasis on his power of 'invention, he supplies a great variety of incident and events, thronging the narrative with speeches, battles and episodes of all kinds. Homer's 'invention' is the imaginative force. To Homer's strength of Invention one can attribute 'Fire' and 'Rapture'. *Iliad* is lighted all throughout by a true poetical spirit as the reader is hurried out of himself by the power of the poet's imagination. The poet achieves a 'Grace beyond the Reach of Art' ("An Essay on Criticism" l.155) or Boileau's *je ne sais quoi*.

Also, Dryden, sees the first happiness of the poet's imagination as 'invention' where is needed a happy genius. Eliot believes that Dryden's 'invention' includes the sudden eruption of the germ of a new poem possibly, merely as a state of feeling. Next is fancy or variation which calls for the capacity of moulding thought with due emphasis on judgement that makes it proper to the subject. The third happiness of the poetic process is elocution, the art of clothing and adorning the thought in apt and sound words. In fact the quickness of the imagination is demonstrated in the invention, the fertility is exhibited in the fancy and accuracy is manifested in the expression. Dryden, it may be noted, upholds Aristotle's definition of poetry as a process of imitation. He takes pains to emphasise the other two forms of imitation mentioned in Aristotle's definition - 'things as they are said to be' and 'things as they ought to be' - apart from the principle of verisimilitude which does not have the Hobbesian strictness about it. The poet's art is qualified as a spiritual process. With a departure from the stringent neoclassic modes, the poet's imitation becomes the process of the spirit that captures the vital force needed for excellence in art and generates the 'illumination'. In *The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy*, adverting to the liberty allowed to the poet to imitate things as they are said or thought to be, Dryden defends Shakespeare's use of supernatural, founded on popular beliefs. A true knowledge of Nature gives us pleasure but a lively imitation of it, either in poetry or painting, can produce much greater pleasure for

imitations of Nature involve an 'ideality' which is wrought up to a nobler pitch. The poet presents us with images which are more perfect than life as he unites by a happy chemistry all scattered beauties of Nature without its deformities or faults. It is as much as to say, as Sidney had observed earlier, that poetry imitates not only things, which, in Plato's words, are mere copies of their ideal pattern, but the ideal pattern itself. This brings us to what Dryden thought to be the function of poetry. The poet should inform the reader about human nature – the fundamental and psychological truths without making any 'magisterial' and overly moralistic instructions. Now Plato had wanted poetry to instruct, Aristotle to delight, Horace to do both, and Longinus to transport. Dryden was familiar with them all and had his own considerable experience as a reader and writer. The poet considers delight and transport rather than instruction to be the teleology of his art; this meant no mere imitation of life but a beautiful resemblance of the whole as he points out in *A Defence of An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. Instruction comes second to delight for poetry only instructs as it delights. Dryden points out that the poet's work is to affect the soul, excite the passions and move admiration (awe or fear). Bare imitation does not serve the purpose. In fact to take every lineament and feature would not guarantee an excellent piece; what would render success is a beautiful resemblance of the whole with fancy working to heighten the beauty of the parts and hide the deformities of the rest. The poet, then, for Dryden is neither a teacher nor a bare imitator, but a creator, one who, with life or Nature as his raw material, *produces* a new thing altogether, resembling the original in its basis but different from it in the superstructure. This is what Aristotle also meant when, replying to Plato's objection that poetry gave a copy of a copy, he said that the truth of poetry need not be confounded with the truths of life. It is in this part of the poet's work that Dryden feels the necessity of fancy or what Coleridge would ascribe as the shaping spirit of imagination. In the *Epistle Dedicatory of the Rival Ladies*, Dryden believes that it is fancy that gives the life-touches which, in other words, breathes life into the shapeless material from life or Nature. However, importantly, lest it should outrun 'reason' Dryden makes sure that good sense should have it restrained by judgement or 'discretion'. The neoclassical decorum has it that the poet is the master of his own art by his rational grasp and proper employment of judgement. His role is attested by an adherence to the rules of nature

and reason for the prevalent poetics believed that such adherence cannot clog the poet's fancy but can *enlarge* and *extend* it. The poet cannot afford to be seized by an irregular frenzy for that would engender an improbable representation of the rational chain of circumstances and fill the world with endless absurdities. This fear lay in the neglect of 'probability'. So the poet's aesthetic taste is never built on unbridled emotion, but on 'judgement' that Dennis would ascribe as the fine discernment of truth. The poet's ear rings with the supreme commandment: 'be thou clear' that avoids the confusing colours of rhetoric, the spacious tropes and figures of imaginative writing and alluring enchantments of enthusiasm. The poet is a man who grows a native easiness and brings also a near mathematical plainness. It is an allegiance to *decorum* (the word has all the significance that Neoclassical tradition attaches to it) where the exuberant flourishes of Baroque period are undermined and a control over creativity is exercised with impressive coherence. Under the Horatian code, the poet is expected to be a man who prunes his superfluous branches, moderates the force of the winged's horse's flight to keep his harp in tune.

Under the sabre of scepticism, imagination comes to hold a key position in Hume's theory of knowledge. He shows that our customary transition from cause to effect and vice versa is nothing but an expression of the principle of imagination. Hume speaks of the operation of imagination in terms of separating the simple ideas and uniting them in what form it pleases. The operation of imagination does not become wholly unpredictable because it is guided by some universal principles, which render it, in some measure, uniform with itself in all terms and places. Imagination is a more free faculty, and hence the uniting principles among ideas in the operations of imagination cannot be an inseparable connection. Imagination is described by Hume as the principle of separation and transposition of idea, but it is also to be considered as uniformly guided in the union and cohesion of its images. The union and cohesion of distinct images cannot be regarded as an inseparable one, for an 'inseparable connection' is a 'real' connection. And a 'real' connection is one whose contradictory status is inconceivable. Hence the distinct elements of a complex image will be united only by the force of association; a force of attraction which Hume in effect compares to the

attraction of gravitation. As distinguished from phantasy, imagination is the principle of postulation, anticipating an outline of the future. Postulation of imagination contains the presuppositions related to matters of fact and existence. Sense-perceptions are transitory and the logical picture of the world is atomic and evanescent. But the world in which we believe is permanent and regular. Thus supplementation is necessary in order that the world of perceptions is understood. The supplementation of the characters of permanency, regularity etc. are the work of imagination. The *supplementative function* of imagination makes the world of experience possible. Also, as opposed to reason, it becomes the source and ground of the principle of custom, habit and belief. And as custom, habit and belief are synthetic principles, and since they depend upon imagination, imagination becomes one of the constructively creative principles of human nature.

Addison and Akenside lay strong emphasis on imagination as the faculty of artistic creation. It is the faculty of the poet who by apprehending beauty, greatness and novelty evokes the aesthetic pleasure. For Addison (in the eleven papers between Nos. 411-421), the pleasures of imagination are two fold: primary or those which proceed completely from the objects existing before the eye and the secondary or those that flow from the ideas of visible objects (objects that are nonexistent before the eye) called into memories or conjured up into vision of things that are either absent or fictitious (Spectator no. 411). It may be noted that it is the secondary pleasures of imagination that are aroused by works of art and literature. Whether it be painting or sculpture or literature, pleasure arises from a comparison of the copy with the original: the copy often making a stronger appeal to the imagination than the original. Addison admits in Spectator no. 416 that words when they are well chosen, have a greater impact and description, offers more lively ideas than the mere sight of things. However, the poet need not always be faithful to fact for, his ideas of pleasure may not be answered by any sight in Nature. So the poet's imagination can fancy to itself things that are great, strange and beautiful than what meets the eye. The poet can use his imagination by mending and perfecting nature when he describes a reality.

The fancy must be warm to retain the print of those images it hath received from outward objects: and the judgment discerning, to know what expressions are most proper to clothe and adorn them to the best advantage. A man who is deficient in either of these respects, though he may receive the general notion of a description, can never see distinctly all its particular beauties; as a person, with a weak sight, may have the confused prospect of a place that lies before him, without entering into its several parts, or discerning the variety of its colours in their full glory and perfection. (Das, Mohanty 1985:24)

To Addison, therefore, imagination is no more than that faculty of the mind which enjoys works of art for the ideas they recall of what it has seen in life. It is pleased more by what is great, strange or beautiful – huge mountains, oddities of Nature, or her lovely sights – than by what is merely common. His recognition of it, however, pointed the way to an aesthetic approach to literature – to its enjoyment by its appeal to the imagination rather than by its proximity to a moral or social end, or observance of formal rules.

In Spectator no. 418 he proposes that art may excel nature, and in Spectator no. 419 he discusses art wherein the poet, in the event of losing his sight of Nature, entertains his reader's imagination with characters and actions, most of which are nonexistent. This is what Dryden would ascribe as the Fairy kind of writing. This kind of writing is difficult for the poet must work altogether out of his own *invention* to bring to life his imaginary beings and personified abstractions. The poet displays his imagination with a power that makes a new world of its own, leading the reader to a new creation. This claim is repeated in Spectator no 421 where Addison points out that the power of the poet's imagination has something in it like *creation* for, it makes additions to nature and lends a greater variety to God's works. Shakespeare, for Addison, thus qualifies as the greatest master of the fairy way of writing by his noble extravagance of fancy. He combines his genius with the powers of imagination to succeed artistically in those areas where mere genius would have faltered. This genius, it may be noted, is the natural genius, that is never shackled by the clamping rigours of

rules of Art. (Addison distinguishes between the natural genius and the genius developed by study in Spectator no. 419). Genius, which Édward Phillips in the preface to *Theatrum Poetarum* refers as something unattainable by any study or industry and can never be perfectly apprehended, is the prerogative of the true poet, the man of *taste*. Temple, Gildon, Farquhar, Dennis and others emphasise this in varying degrees. Addison, supporting genius (Spectator no. 592), underlines the need of deviating from the rules of art sometimes than in adhering to them jejunely (Spectator no. 409). The poet with genuine taste that demands a full exertion of the mind, perceives the ideas and cultivates his exemplary ability to communicate the 'ideal' in its final production.

With a moderate enthusiasm for the abilities of 'genius' ("we are sure that in the hands of a man of genius it is capable of inspiring sentiment, and of filling the mind with great and sublime ideas" Weitz 1959: 46-7) the poet under Reynolds's aesthetics should know that he cannot exist on his own potential talent alone. For Reynolds, the artist has a quest of his own; the idea of the beauty that we are in search of resides in the breast of the artist who is under the perpetual labour to impart. This is the struggle of Reynolds's artist whose communication has the power to raise the thoughts and extend the views of the spectator. Reynolds admits the presence of 'genius' but does not subscribe to the view that art is produced by 'chance'; the artist must have a cause for his art which, is a clear indication of the presence of rules. However, 'genius' is the power that produces excellence and is sometimes beyond the reach of rules, something that precepts cannot teach and industry fails to acquire. It is the artist's inherent ability to select, digest and methodise. The artist of genius will permit the lower painter like the florist or the collector of shells to exhibit the minute discriminations which distinguish one object of the same species from another while he like the philosopher, will consider nature in the abstract and represent in every one of his figures the character of its species. (Wark 1975:50) So the artist is remarkably similar in his function to the poet described by Imlac at the beginning of the chapter ten of Johnson's *Rasselas*. It is interesting to observe that the painter who takes nature as he finds it is no better than the prose historian. Rembrandt's penchant for exact representation of individual objects does not support the argument that his imitation of nature is more

faithful than what the idealising Raphael does. The painter of the ideal landscape has the cherished independence and the remarkable power to 'select' his material which bears an analogy with what the poet does. Reynolds's painter or the *poetical painter* varies and combines his material to correspond with the general idea of his work and the elevation of the theme: "a landskip thus conducted, under the influence of a poetical mind, will have the same superiority over the more ordinary and common views, as Milton's *Allegro* and *Penseroso* have over a cold prosaick narration or description; and such a picture would make a more forcible impression on the mind than the real scenes, were they presented before us." (Weitz 1959:44) Reynolds argues:

Shall reason stand in the way, and tell us that we ought not to like what we know we do like, and prevent us from feeling the full effect of this complicated exertion of art? This is what I would understand by poets and painters being allowed to dare everything; for what can be more daring, than accomplishing the purpose and end of art, by a complication of means, none of which have their archetypes in actual nature? (42)

So Reynolds equates the power of the poet and the painter in his study of Michaelangelo. Compared to Raphael, Michaelangelo has more genius and imagination. This is the energy, a Promethean fire as noticed in the aesthetics of Shaftesbury. With more poetical 'inspiration' his ideas grew vast and 'sublime' which is the highest excellence a human composition can attain to. In the fifteenth and the last *Discourse*, Michaelangelo is singled out for praise as he is said to possess a 'poetical part' with the virtue of an elevated imagination; he is ranked with Homer and Shakespeare, highlighting the power that explores the unknown regions of imagination. "So far therefore is servile imitation from being necessary, that whatever is familiar, or in any way reminds us of what we see and hear every day, perhaps does not belong to the higher provinces of art, either in poetry or painting. The mind is to be transported, as Shakespeare expresses it, *beyond the ignorant present to ages past.*" (ibid) However, the artist's sublimity should not transgress the limits of classical decorum – a celebration or vindication of rational firmness which is the true testament of a sound and true genius.

It is a Longinian state of transport that accentuates the *vigour* in a firm realisation of the ideal or the *beau ideal*. So in the matters of imitation, Reynolds does not subscribe to a work that is a mere copy of Nature. Imagination, for him, is the "residence of truth". (38)

Upon the whole, it seems to me, that the object and intention of all the arts is to supply the natural imperfection of things, and often to gratify the mind by realizing and embodying what never existed but in the imagination. (48)

The art of the painter or the poet is addressed as the highest province for, by evading any correspondence with the gross senses, he can summon the sparks of divinity that reside within all of us. So selective imitation and industry with an 'unfrigid mind' would never consider rules as oppressive.

As with Reynolds, so also with Johnson, for he, like Goethe, considers anything that emancipates the spirit without a corresponding growth in control as dangerous. Dr. Johnson held that the poet's art lies in writing *pleasure with truth* by summoning imagination to the aid of reason. In the imitation of truth, his art is guided by reason and affords pleasure by imagination. The novelty in the poet's art is something that he never denies; the aesthetic pleasure is also never disclaimed. But the poet needs to distinguish between 'to please' and 'to direct'. Truth, to be poetic, has to be pleasure-giving. In fact the poetic purpose holds morality to be at a higher station than pleasure. 'The end of writing', he says in the *Preface to Shakespeare*, 'is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing'. (Thomas 1999:15) Johnson's view of the poet's role is in consonance with Horace and the French neo-classicists. Poetry, in the first instance, is an imitation of life which represents not merely the particular with which it deals, but, through it, the universal. "Shakespeare," he says, "is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; . . . they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always

find'.(10-11) Here with Shakespeare as his immediate subject, Johnson actually explains the meaning of poetic imitation. It is a representation not of what just a few people think, speak, or do but of what most people in most ages think, speak or do: in a word, the emphasis is on the 'general nature'. The truth of poetry therefore is universal truth – an observation that is ultimately Aristotle's. The poet must write as a being superior to time and place. Homer, it may be noted, survives because his representations are natural with very little dependence on local and temporary customs. The poet's imitation must then have a universal appeal. For the reader recognises in it his own thoughts, words and deeds "those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated and the whole system of life is continued in motion" (11) and language that seems "to have been gleaned by diligent selection out of common conversation and common occurrences".(12). It is from this "wide extension of design", (11) that he believes so much instruction can be derived.

"It is this which fills the plays of Shakespeare with practical axioms and domestic wisdom. It is said of Euripides that every verse was a precept; and it may be said of Shakespeare that from his works may be collected a system of civil and economic prudence." (11)

True to his neoclassic wisdom, Johnson is quick to clarify that the poet should entertain a conscious design to enforce moral lessons. It is true of Shakespeare as he sacrifices virtue to convenience and is so much more careful to please than to instruct that he seems to write without any moral purpose. However, it is always the poet's vocation under the Johnsonian principles of art, to make the world better. Perhaps this moral proviso does not quite attune with the definition of imitation. If a poet is to imitate life as it is in most countries and ages, how can he give it a moral turn unless it is supposed that life itself is organised on a moral basis? As this is not true in all cases, what Johnson means is, perhaps, an imitation of those aspects of life only which satisfy both his requirements of verisimilitude and morality. The Johnsonian aesthetic puts the emphasis on a rational grasp of the immutable ideal and the unalterable standard, something that can fructify through protracted study, greater compass of experience and

incessant endeavours of mind. For the poet, imitation would be sincere attempts to portray the essential and the lasting. His study of nature must be aided and verified by the general principles of works that have successfully qualified the long hammering blows of critical examination. The poet need not imitate a particular trait of a writer for in that case it would be a travesty of artistic imitation equated with a failure. There should not be a whole-hearted reliance on unassisted genius and natural sagacity. Johnson stresses the need for reason and of a mind that reposes on the "stability of truth".(10) The poet is the interpreter of Nature and the legislator of mankind, presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations. To accomplish this end,

His character requires that he estimates the happiness and misery of every condition; observe the power of all the passions in all their combinations, and trace the changes of the human mind as they are modified by various institutions and accidental influences of climate or custom, from the spriteliness of infancy to the despondence of decrepitude. He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age and country; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state; he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same...'  
(Tillotson, Jenkins 1977: X 29).

Mere intrusion of individual feelings and a focus on the particular can distort art. Whatever is inconsistent with truth and probability cannot be good. Bouhours disapproves of "authors who do not control their ideas or their words, and leave nothing to be thought or said on the subjects they treat". (Elledge, Schier 1970:164) Whatever is inconsistent with truth and probability cannot be good. The poet should connive at the romantically 'marvellous' and subscribe to the 'probable' for that would preclude a disorganised discharge of 'inventive' energies and heal his mind from scatty 'incredibilities'. The poet or the artist in general shall imbibe the values of the toil of study, the knowledge of nature or the acquaintance with life. The poet must avoid the dominance of subjective impulse over objective insight, doing things *de justesse*; he

'does not number the streak of the tulip' (Tillotson, Jenkins 1977:28) and so never loses sight of the grandeur of generality. Johnson, though he respected the originality and learning of the metaphysicals, yet painted them with the same brush of 'generality'. The poets in their adventurous hunt for novelty sometimes clogged them with laboured particularities that scotched the sublimity accompanying the presentation of general life. The metaphysicals failed to realise the comprehension and the expanse of thought which repleted the mind with sudden astonishment to be followed by rational admiration. They never measured up to the Johnsonian dictum that great thoughts are always general and descriptions that are always analytic and fragmentary, ridden by particularities, do not suit the true nature of poetic creation. The poet,

is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features, as recal the original to every mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations, which one may have remarked, and another have neglected, for those characteristics which are alike obvious to vigilance and carelessness.(28)

The true poet or the artist must realise that the laws of nature are superior to the 'accidental prescriptions of authority'. Steering clear of individual caprice, the poet must see through the endeavour of self-authorized legislators who try to clamp fixity to rules that are born for their self serving reflexion. To highlight his antipathy towards a misplaced accent on rules, Johnson told Fanny Burney that the people who would judge her work are those who know no rules, but pronounce entirely from their natural taste and feelings or those who know and judge by rules or those who know and are above the rules. The last in this stratification is the most satisfying. This should bring us to Johnson's neostoical distrust of the imagination. The poet need not be a victim of an untutored, unbridled imagination for that would drive him away from the permanent and the ideal. Johnson believed that imagination is indispensable in any valid aesthetic creation: yet the disapprobation was directed to an imagination which was not 'informed' and 'regulated' by reality. The poet must have his imagination adequately counter balanced by knowledge and rational control. The poet's exercise of reason

holds his mind to the ideal - true with clarity - that renders an immediacy to truth. Imagination, passion and reason share a combination of poise that does not have a whole scale anti-imagination bias of Cartesian mathematicism or an exaggerated neo-classic rationalism.

However, in the age of Sensibility, exceptions to the Neoclassic system pervaded the dominant motifs of the prevalent aesthetics. Words like 'imagination', 'Nature', 'genius' and 'inspiration' began to shift from their neoclassical sense towards the romantic sense. There was no effort to replace drastically the theoretical framework of Neoclassicism with only Shaftesbury and Burke standing out to provide alternative responses. But the residual elements of Neoclassicism remain quaintly in suspension with proto-Romantic elements. Being thus transitional, the concept of the poet started to reconfigure with an internal momentum with the first winds of romanticism.