

CHAPTER IX

Imagination, Genius & 'Aesthetic Ideas': Apropos Kant

In Kant's critical framework Imagination is treated as a transcendental faculty, though its empirical, psychological character has also been taken into consideration. Kant, unlike Hume and Descartes has given a positive evaluation of imagination in the context of acquiring knowledge. For Plato, Descartes and Hume, it is antithetical to reason. In Hume, the imagination is associated with belief which itself results from the association of ideas. But for Kant the transcendental imagination is the ground of the possibility of knowledge. In Kant we find a distinction between the transcendental and the psychological aspects of the concept of imagination.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, there are two important issues which need a careful study. One is the distinction between the transcendental and the empirical imagination and the other is the idea of schematization as connected with the productive imagination. The real question is how do sensibility and understanding come together to give rise to knowledge? The Kantian answer is in the form of transcendental imagination which brings together the sense-manifold and the pure concepts of the understanding and thus justifies knowledge.

The actual operation of imagination in this context is called the transcendental schema. The entire discussion of schematism presupposes the transcendental deduction because it deals with the union of the sense-manifold and the pure concepts. Speaking very generally it brings about a reconciliation between the 'empirical' and the 'a priori'. Kant points out that the 'a posteriori' already has a structure. According to him, there is no pure impression as such. Anything that enters into our consciousness must be located in the framework of time. The understanding presents the categories. But it does not activate itself to embrace the manifold offered by sensibility. Rather, some 'third thing' is required whereby these two faculties can be synthesised. It is transcendental

imagination, which through the schema translates the categories in terms of time, thus giving them a natural affinity with the sense-manifold that has already been ordered in time. This is the most important function of imagination, for it is only through the combining of the sensibility with the understanding that knowledge is possible.

We can dwell on the concept of schema for a while because it may reveal certain points which are important in bringing out the role of imagination. Kant called schema the 'third thing' for obviously it could not be identified either with sensibility or with understanding. Its function was to bring about a fusion of the two. The schema is actually intended to be seen by Kant as a dual thing. For him it has a two-fold character by virtue of which it can bridge the gap between sensibility and understanding. It may be said that the productive imagination works from the concepts to the sense-manifold, whereas it is schematism which operates from the sense-manifold to the concepts. So imagination is the link between concepts and data, whereas schematism is the bridge stretched from the data, to the concepts by the structure of the data themselves, a structure bestowed on them by time. It is that what imagination does for concepts, time does for data. (Rotenstreich 1972: 34) However, according to Kant it was transcendental and not empirical imagination that was at work in schematism. Transcendental imagination, for Kant had a highly mysterious character. Its function was to give rise to schema. Kant does not make clear how exactly imagination gives rise to the schema and how the schema functions. His programme of the reconciliation between empiricism and rationalism hinges upon the function of the schema. Kant assigns an important place to imagination, which according to him brings about such a reconciliation. This makes imagination an important condition for the very possibility of knowledge. But his own account of schematism is quite sketchy and fails to offer clear answers. It may also be said that the exact functioning of the productive imagination has not been properly explained and articulated by Kant himself. Apart from the functioning and the nature of the productive imagination, there also arises another question, namely that of the relationship between the productive and reproductive imaginations. This question is important not only in the context of schematism but in the critical philosophy at large.

Kant uses the word imagination in both the technical and the ordinary senses of the term. And the problem that arises is that of the relationship between these two understandings of imagination. These two have been left unconnected by Kant himself. Nowhere does he try to offer a complete account of their relationship with each other. It becomes necessary to locate the connection between the two imaginations because one feels a lurking suspicion that the notion of the transcendental imagination is systematically misleading. The functions of the transcendental imagination seem so radically different from these of the empirical imagination that only the name imagination seems common to both. Similarly, within the context of schematism itself, Kant insists that it is the transcendental imagination which is at work. The transcendental imagination does not involve images for it is not empirical. But if it performs the function of combining sense manifolds with the help of an image it is intermediate. If this is so, the transcendental imagination seems to be functioning like the empirical imagination in some way. Levi writes about the transcendental imagination.

The term imagination always connotatively close to its origins of image making should now become almost the chief inhabitant of a realm of purely logical subsistence... the manifold of appearances with its singleness and separateness of component parts recurs as the epistemic problem, and the active faculty for their synthesis again becomes the virtual imagination which produces almost simultaneously an image and a connection of impressions in time This is essentially the reproductive function of an imagination whose operations are merely empirical. (1964: 188)

This is a serious charge which can be legitimately made, for Kant has not clearly worked out the functional similarities of dissimilarities between the two imaginations. When we move from the *Critique of Pure Reason* to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, what immediately strikes one is Kant's emphatic rejection of the role of imagination in the context of morality. The reason being the distinction Kant makes between understanding and reason. We know that the faculty of understanding requires certain

material to be given to it in the form of sense manifold. The function of the understanding is to effect an ordering and systematisation. Understanding is not autonomous for it presupposes the functioning of sensibility which provides the sense-manifolds. Because understanding is not autonomous the question of its relationship with the other faculty, namely sensibility, arises. It is at this point that imagination performs its function in the first *Critique*. But reason, which is operative in the sphere of morality is not dependent upon any other faculty for its functioning. It is autonomous. It can determine a particular action or decision on its own. The rational moral will is such that it can by its own autonomy give rise to the moral action. Because of this autonomy of reason, there is no need for schema in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. For schema, as we have seen before, is essentially a bridge between two different faculties. And no such bridge is required in the second *Critique* because reason is the sole faculty which is operative in the sphere of morality.

It has been argued that the notion of type can be interpretively understood as a figurative process. Paul Dietrichson also has understood type as a figurative substitute for schematisation. Mark Johnson holds that, "it would be correct to claim that the type is a figurative substitute for a schematisation because applying the categorical imperative requires an imaginative leap by which laws from one domain (nature) are taken as acting like (with respect to their form) laws in another domain (freedom). In other words, the typification of the categorical imperative is essentially a metaphorical process, that is, a transfer of structures functioning in one realm, which is thus organised by these projected structures." (1985: 265) What becomes clear from the comment is that moral reasoning involves an act of imaginative envisionment of a non-existing world as a means for judging a proposed maxim. This whole process is clearly metaphorical, involving the process of imagination. The metaphor involves taking what we know of natural law and projecting it on to the realm of freedom so as to transform free action into naturally necessitated action. Based on this metaphorical transformation, we must then determine whether the envisioned world would involve some sort of internal contradiction. Such a metaphoric understanding is a projective process in which we employ imagination to evaluate our proposed maxim.

Finally, Kant's *Critique of Judgement* can be described as the crowning achievement of the critical philosophy as a whole. This view of the third *Critique* is based on the fact that here, Kant is essentially concerned with a massive reconciliation of two notions, namely nature and freedom which have been the guiding concepts of the first and the second *Critiques* respectively. The first *Critique* seems to yield the conclusion that nature can be regarded as an object of knowledge only on the presupposition of the pure concepts of understanding. On the other hand, the second *Critique* yields the importance of the seemingly opposed principle of freedom as a ground of moral action. These two presuppositions that of nature, (and with it, the principle of cause and effect) and freedom have been reconciled in the third *Critique*. What is important for us in this context, is to know how Kant brings about this reconciliation. For one of the key concepts used in the third *Critique* is that of the Reflective Judgement which clearly involves the use of imagination.

The third *Critique* distinguishes judgement as a unique and irreducible faculty, separate from both sensibility and understanding. At the same time, in the introduction to the third *Critique*, Kant insists that judgement is very much needed for the proper employment of both sensibility and understanding. Objective knowledge requires the identification of an object under a concept which involves the working together of the sensibility and understanding. The judgement by which an instance is subsumed under a rule is called 'determinant judgement' by Kant. This is where imagination performs an 'applicative function'. It is due to this application that knowledge becomes possible. In its applicative function, imagination sees to the proper employment of rules. In this case imagination itself is rule bound, it does not give rise to rules. Rather, it takes care of the correct implication of the rules that already are. But Kant argues that even though this imagination follows rules, it is also spontaneous. It is not itself directed by any rules even though it cannot invent new rules. Thus understood, imagination is involved not only in objective knowledge, but also in moral judgements where a particular instance is brought under a general principle. Both the cognitive and the moral experiences depend upon the distinct capacity that imagination has of subsuming a particular instance under a general rule in the form of the determinant judgement. However, Kant goes on further

to speak of a 'reflective judgement' where employment of imagination does not involve application of rules. It is true that Kant discusses his universality given by the reflective judgement within the context of the aesthetic judgement of taste. In this context, Kant points out that the judgement of taste, although subjective, is not arbitrary but also claims a certain universal argument. According to Kant, such a universality is possible because when one makes such a judgement of taste, he is expressing a certain disinterested delight. This pleasure is not bound up with any desire or inclination on his part. This disinterested delight leads him to expect that all would agree with him. This possibility of agreement is the distinctive universality of taste. It is thus, due to the reflective judgement that he claims an intersubjective community. Kant also points that reflective judgement is grounded in imagination. The functioning of imagination, in this context, is to lead one from a single instance to either a rule or a concept. As far as judgement of taste is concerned, imagination opens up the possibility of an intersubjective dialogue. Imagination thus brings about an association with others. Looking at this, in the light of the idea of the kingdom of ends, one recognises oneself as a member of such a republic of subjects through reflective judgement. Both the determinant and reflective judgement reveals the objective and intersubjective aspects of the functioning of imagination.

Basically, the equation of imagining presupposes the context of perception. Hence, any discussion of imagining or of imagination is a discussion of the relationship between imagination and perception. Both Hume and Kant regard imagination as a connecting or uniting power. However, this power operates in two different domains. One is where imagination connects perceptions of different objects of the same kind and the other is where the imagination connects different perceptions of the same objects of a given kind. First is the illustration of what Strawson calls *kind identity*, that is to say, of recognising two different objects as of same kind. The second is the illustration of what he calls *individual identity*, that is to say, recognising the given object as *such and such*. It is obvious that both these functions of imagination are complementary. Strawson points out that Kant's *Schematism* and Hume's *Of Abstract Ideas* are concerned with the first, that is, with kind identity. As far as the discussion of imagination in the case of individual

identity is concerned, Kant discusses this issue in Transcendental Deduction, and Hume in the chapter entitled 'Scepticism' with regard to the senses in his *Treatise*. According to Hume, senses, reason or understanding and imagination are to be distinguished. Of the three, senses or reason by themselves do not lead us to the continued and distinct existence of bodies. What is important for us to note is that he ascribes this function to imagination; it is our belief in the continued and distinct existence of bodies which is due to imagination. Imagination confounds the similarity of temporality separated and hence non-identical perception with strict identity through time as a result of which we believe in a continued existence of perceptions where there is patently no such thing. (Strawson 1974: 49) Kant on the other hand, would argue that Hume takes a certain character of perceptions for granted. Hence, the question is not "how it can be that on the basis of perceptual experience as it is we come to have the beliefs in question, but how it is that perceptual experience is already such as to embody the beliefs in question; or, perhaps better *what* it is for perceptual experience to be such as to embody the beliefs in question." (50) The crux of the entire discussion in this regard lies in recognising that in the actual perceptions that we have there is also non-actual or possible perceptions involved in it. Imagination in one of its aspects is a faculty which represents such non-actual perceptions in the case of our having actual perceptions. This is done through images. This function of imagination, namely to represent with the help of images some non-actual perceptions in the present points out what Strawson calls a 'kinship' between the two functions of imagination as far as establishing the relationship between kind identity and individual identity. No knowledge claim will be valid or justified if we ignore the recognition of these two identities. It is in this sense that for Kant there is justification which imagination offers for making imagination necessary in the process of knowledge. In the case of Hume imagining can offer no justification for knowledge. In fact it is the transcendental approach taken by Kant that lies at the root of this basic difference between him and Hume. Hence for Kant the functioning of imagination was bound with the problem of justification of perceived knowledge. Kant assigned to imagination a role in the validation of knowledge. Also in the experience of the sublime, the imagination reaches towards reason, but the feeling this gives is only of an aesthetic idea of reason. In fact, the sublime feeling of the inadequacy of the understanding to

grasp the ideas of reason is only produced by the completeness of the imaginative representation of these ideas. Kant writes:

The poet ventures to realize to sense, rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, hell, eternity, creation, etc.; or even if he deals with things of which there are examples in experience – e.g. death, envy and all vices, also love, fame, and the like – he tries, by means of imagination, which emulates the play of reason in its quest after a maximum, to go beyond the limits of experience and to present them to sense with a completeness of which there is no example in nature. This is properly speaking the art of the poet, in which the faculty of aesthetical ideas can manifest itself in its entire strength. But this faculty, considered in itself, is properly only a talent (of the imagination). (Bernard 1951: 157-58)

So the poet's imagination can frame an idea of reason only through a representation; it is the productive faculty of cognition that *creates* another nature out of the material that actual nature gives it. This is the *remoulding* of experience not merely in accordance with the analogical laws but with principles which occupy a higher place in reason. The poet enjoys a 'freedom from the law of association (which attaches to the empirical employment of imagination)', so that the material he is supplied with by nature is 'worked up into something different which surpasses nature.'(157)

However, no discussion on imagination can be deemed complete without an elucidation of what Kant means by *genius*.

Genius is the talent (or natural gift) which gives the rule to art. Since talent, as the innate productive faculty of the artist, belongs itself to nature, we may express the matter thus: Genius is the innate mental disposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art. (150)

This innate mental disposition is bound to vary from person to person. No definite rules can guide the production of beautiful objects as the artist is not conscious of how he creates them. So, for Kant, originality is the essential characteristic of genius. From *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* we may point out that originality itself has two aspects: the first is 'non imitative production' and the second is 'discovering what cannot be taught or learned'. Such originality although rare, is potentially fanatical since it is by definition disciplined by neither an object nor a canon. Consequently, Kant attempts to limit it by proposing that 'originality of imagination is called genius when it harmonises with concepts', a thought which he expanded and developed further in the third Critique. (Caygill 1995: 213) The power of artistic creation is vitalistic or organic. Talent cannot be learnt; it is imparted to every artist immediately by the hand of nature and so it dies with him, until nature endows another in the same way, so that he only needs an example in order to put in operation in a similar fashion the talent of which he is conscious. (Bernard 1951: 152) Although the product of beauty cannot be imitated, yet the ideas of the artist as expressed through his work, can stimulate another artist provided he is endowed with the genius. This means the excitation of the productive capacity of another person who does not imitate (*Nachahmung*) but follows (*Nachfolge*) in an 'original' way. However originality cannot be the absolute condition for fine art. 'Now since the originality of the talent constitutes an essential (though not the only) element in the character of genius, shallow heads believe that they cannot better show themselves to be full-blown geniuses than by throwing off the constraints of all rules; they believe, in effect, that one could make a braver show on the back of a wild horse than on the back of a trained animal. Genius can only furnish rich *material* for products of beautiful art; its execution and its *form* require talent cultivated in the schools, in order to make such a use of this material as will stand examination by the judgment.' (153) In fact *Geist* for Kant, is the power of the creative genius. It is a capacity that brings under its coordinated sway the transient and the momentary play of human feelings. It is worthwhile for us to note that empirical laws cannot give birth to the subtleties of expression and imagination. The *Geist* has its own form of expression and the artist endowed with it communicates universally. Makkreel points out that this spirit holds an important place in Kant's aesthetics. It is the enlivening principle of the mind, a detailed

characterisation of which occurs in the *Reflexionen zur Anthropologie*. This spirit is not a special talent but that which activates all talents. This is what is truly creative and is applied not only to the artist's mind but also to the work itself. (1990: 97) In fact Kant finds the spirit of an art as a systematic method which contains a comprehensive idea (*zusammenhangende*). Cassirer prefers to render it as 'soul'.

Geist is simply that which brings about this harmony of the faculties of the mind (subjective or formal purposiveness). It gives life to the work of art, and a work of art which is *ohne Geist* is lifeless since, although in accordance with the rules of taste, its representation does not make us feel the harmonious relation of our mental powers. As long as the artist does no more than not disobey the rules of taste he cannot produce a genuine work of art. He himself is soulless (*ohne Geist*). What he lacks is *Geist*, the animating principle of the mind. (1938: 278-79)

It thus produces the harmonious motions of the powers of the mind (*was die Gemüths Kräfte zweckmassig in Schwung versetzt*). In fact the life in a work of art is provided by it and what is soulless (*geistlos*) forbids the experience of a harmonious relation of our mental powers. So art need not merely obey the rules of taste for that renders it *ohne Geist* and it is this that vitalises the workings of imagination and understanding. Kant finds a certain relation between imagination and understanding which constitutes genius. It expresses itself in the free harmony between imagination and understanding and presupposes a proportion and disposition of these faculties that are not guided by mere obedience to rules but are produced by the nature of the subject.

In the employment of the imagination for cognition, it submits to the constraints of the understanding and is subject to the limitation of being conformable to the concept of the latter. On the contrary, in an aesthetical point of view it is free to furnish unsought, over and above that agreement with a concept, abundance of undeveloped material for the understanding, to which the understanding paid no regard in its

concept but which it applies, though not objectively for cognition, yet subjectively to quicken the cognitive powers and therefore also indirectly to cognitions. (Bernard 1951: 160)

Genius thus properly consists in the happy relation between these faculties. It shows itself in the enunciation or expression of aesthetical ideas and in contradistinction to reproductive or the productive imagination thus, represents the imagination as 'free'. Art, hence, gains a new rule and talent manifests itself. The poet as the genius revels in the free employment of his cognitive faculties. He is a favourite of nature, a rare phenomenon who produces his own rules of teaching that emanate from the peculiarities of the products of his spirit.

In this context we can profitably bring in the discussion of Kant's concept of 'aesthetic ideas' and 'metaphor'. There is much in Kant to recall what Aristotle had said of metaphor, that its use is by far the greatest thing, it is the token of genius. The metaphor raises questions concerning the origins and limits of knowledge. Plato, we all know, has employed myths or extended metaphors, when it appears that literal language cannot bear the strain of his insights. Myths might have been for him an economical and moving method of communication. But there have also been vehement critics of imagist language, such as Hobbes and Locke. Figurative speeches, said Locke, insinuate wrong ideas and thereby mislead the judgement. The early rationalists, like Descartes and Spinoza, were as wary of the metaphor as were the early British empiricists. Metaphorical language they held, is the deceptive fruit of the imagination. Pure reason speaks in clear and distinct ideas. Kant exhibits no such fear of the artistic imagination. It is not, for him, the source of unclarity or falsehood. He conceives of the role of 'aesthetic ideas' as helping to bring reason into harmony with itself. Accordingly, 'aesthetic ideas' stand distinguished from both rationalist and empirical conceptions of metaphor. Kant's 'aesthetic ideas' is a generic term, and may be taken to include similes, metaphors, poetic analogies, postulates of practical reason and religious language. Productive imagination combines and rearranges the data from the senses according to the laws of association.

The phenomenal workings of the imagination are determined by Nature and by the laws of empirical psychology. But Kant implies that to gain a sense of freedom from the confines of commonplace experience and to afford a sensuous analogy of the noumenon, the poet remodels experience into something that transcends the empirical laws of understanding and fulfils the higher laws of reason. When the poet gives images that convey part of the meaning of love or death, ideas for which there is a host of indefinite concepts, but for which we can give nothing but crude verbal definitions.

Cognition for Kant, divides into understanding (*verstand*), and reason (*vernunft*). Understanding is day-to-day thinking about the phenomenal world. It is the province of the physicist, and antithetical to the province of the poet, for whom cognition has a greater depth and transcendence. According to Kant, 'aesthetic ideas' are based on analogy and are quasi-sensuous examples of analogical reasoning. The metaphor, for Kant, is not a mere ornament: it enjoys cognitive value. One does not speak of ornaments as 'profound' or 'apt', 'far-fetched', or 'implausible'. The language used to describe metaphor is generally the language of cognition and understanding. One speaks of a 'pregnant' metaphor, and a 'pregnant' idea. Both imply a fecundity of cognitive and affective implications. Poetic metaphor is one species of 'aesthetic ideas'. When they are expressed in language, we have metaphor, myth, or even religious language. When they are expressed in line and colour, Kant calls them 'figure', they become pictorial or plastic images with apparently greater significance and suggestiveness than the objects from which they were derived. When 'aesthetic ideas' are expressed in musical form, or 'play' as Kant calls them, they take on the structures and tensions of highly complex affective status which can be understood and followed *in* music, but not re-expressed *outside* music. The cognitive significance of 'aesthetic ideas' lies, for Kant, in their unparaphrasability and their transphenomenal application. It would seem that as a class, 'aesthetic ideas' give quasi-intuitive awareness of a type that empirical science can never provide.

So in terms of his notion of 'aesthetic ideas' Kant can be said to have offered a mimetic theory of art. 'Aesthetic ideas' have to be construed, Kant implies, as giving an

insight into the supersensible, though drawing from the 'literal' world. 'Aesthetic ideas', in the hands of artistic genius, the poet, reveal how moral ideas shape or inform the physical world in nature. They are artistic 'ciphers' of moral ideas expressed in non-conceptual or indeterminate ways. Although the literal and lexical meanings are played upon in metaphor or in 'aesthetic ideas' generally, because of the newness and fecundity of the combination, indeterminate connotations of the terms are brought into play. In the poetic metaphor as if two bodies of discourse is not a mechanical overlapping of two lexical meanings, but enjoys an etymological atavism that goes to the roots of language. The metaphor is not a mere selection from meanings already known: it draws from those held in the subconscious of language as well.

Kant's rejection of the translatability thesis in respect of metaphors is based on the ground that metaphor and 'aesthetic ideas' in general give a sense or subjective freedom as vehicles for the free play of the cognitive faculties, and it would be lost by spelling out 'aesthetic ideas' into determinate concepts. He is committed to the claim that because 'aesthetic ideas' express the supersensible in a non-conceptual way, they logically cannot be expressed in determinate concepts as objects of sense. Metaphorical language seems to be parasitic upon non-metaphorical or literal language. An 'aesthetic idea' could not be grasped if knowledge of the world of appearances were lacking, even though the poetic metaphor takes its genesis from literal languages, it cannot be reduced to literal language. Kant's claim is that poetic discourse is ideally ambiguous, it thrives upon its freedom of interpretation.

So for Kant, art is a solution to neither a practical nor an intellectual problem. However, Genius and Imagination, certainly contribute to the refined intellectual accretion as one delves into the inner layers of romantic consciousness and to the understanding of poetry. Genius, in Kant's discourse, has lent a special emphasis on the uniqueness of the poet; in imagination, the agent in all human perception, he boldly underlines the power to produce a distinctive language of poetry.