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The Roles of Imagination and Reason in Morality

Mark Akenside's The Pleasures of Imagination, like other British didactic poems written in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, celebrates man and his mind. Primarily a work discussing imagination, the poem also reflects the interest of seventeenth-and-eighteenth-century British philosophers in man's unique capacity for rational thought. Writings of some of Akenside's contemporaries, such as those of Alexander Pope's and John Locke's, had also explored reason, but a component of Akenside's work extends to exploring reason and its relationship with imagination as a way of understanding man. In The Pleasures of Imagination, Akenside sketches a reciprocal relationship between reason and imagination that ultimately shapes imagination into a property that aids man in understanding truth and morality. Imagination, when exercised with reason, thus makes man a moral, enlightened creature, and man can understand God and himself by allowing his reason to affect his imagination, and vice versa. The final stanza of the poem (Book III, lines 568-633) serves as the poet's appeal to humanity to embrace imagination, and as a result, nature and God.

Imagination is defined as the faculty responsible for deriving pleasure from recalling sensations, particularly visual sensations. From the very beginning of the final stanza, imagination is treated as a spiritual faculty, and exercising imagination is described both as a choice, and as a spiritual, rather than material, choice. Lines 568-561 compare the different benefits of imagination to the different benefits of material wealth. Language such as "the bribes/Of sordid wealth" (III, 569-570) and "gaudy spoils," (III,

570) describes material wealth, while imagination is responsible for “Those ever blooming sweets” (III, 572). Imagination is a faculty available to “whatever happy man/Will deign to use them,” (III, 580-581), and will bring pleasures to the imaginer that are far “Beyond the proud possessor’s narrow claim,” (III, 585). The sensations and visions available through the imagination are treated as possessions, but as spiritual possessions meant to arouse pleasure and an awareness of beauty. In the first half of the stanza, Akenside describes the benefits of imagination, and also attempts to provoke the imagination of the reader, a tactic employed throughout the rest of the poem. His ornate language and descriptions serve to guide the reader and to make him understand the powers of his own imagination. However, the powers of the imagination are exerted within the bounds of reason, and, likewise, the flowery language is written in blank verse and iambic pentameter, giving some structure to the poem.

Reason and man’s capacity for rational thought can be defined by ideas and knowledge, and are more complex than sheer sensations. Lines 598-605 begin to reveal the relationship between reason and imagination, and illustrate imagination’s effect on reason. Within these lines, Akenside writes that by exercising imagination, the mind will become “herself harmonious: wont so oft/In outward things to meditate the charm/Of sacred order, soon she seeks at home/To find a kindred order” (III, 601-604). As a result of taking pleasure in the outside world, the mind will begin to “meditate” and reason, discerning order and ideas; imagination leads to reasoning. By describing the mind as “harmonious,” Akenside suggests a state of peace within the mind and the man that will better man’s existence. This harmony is achieved by the soul first indulging in imagination, and then desiring the pursuit of order through reason. Such interaction

between reason and the imagination shapes imagination into a moral faculty. Within these lines, Akenside also pays homage to Pope and Locke. “Order” recalls Pope’s strong belief in the idea of a divine, universal order, and the term is applied to also reflect a Lockean idea, self-reflection. Each of these references conjures up ideas on reason that were expressed during the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

The effect of reason on the imagination is described in lines 609-615. Here Akenside argues that knowing the purpose behind an image appreciated by the imagination—here, that an “eternal majesty” has created nature and the world—makes the mind “nobler” than if the sensations alone were appreciated. Exercising reason and understanding enhances the imagination, and allows man to understand God and himself. “[M]ightier far/Will be the change, and nobler” (III, 614-615) suggests that such a reasoning and imaginative mind will become enlightened. The idea that knowledge enhances imagination, and thus leads to morality, is also found in the second book, in which Akenside describes the effects of science on the imagination. In Book II, lines 100-108, Akenside describes the amazement felt when viewing a rainbow within the understandings of light refraction and reflection. Akenside suggests that science and knowledge will lead to truths that enhance the sensations gathered by the imagination, and that man’s desire for knowledge is stronger than his sensations. Akenside’s desire to reconcile philosophy and the arts also reflects the idea that a complementary relationship between imagination and reason will lead to truth. Within man, imagination leads to a desire for understanding, and in turn, such understanding enhances the imagination. This reciprocal relationship between reason and imagination leads to an orderly mind aware of a divine presence.

If the moral quality of imagination depends on its relationship with reason, then the breakdown of reason results in folly, or the ridiculous. Folly is the pleasure resulting from the appreciation of distorted or false representations. Akenside warns against folly and its effects in much of Book III, and references this idea in lines 615-619 of the final stanza. The “forms” (III, 615) refer to those various forms Akenside accuses of catering to folly, such as the liars, the exaggerators, and the arrogant. According to Akenside, God confronts man with folly in order “to aid/The tardy steps of reason, and at once/By this prompt impulse urge us to depress/ The giddy aims of folly” (III, 262-265). The breakdown of reason prevents one from recognizing the false understanding that certain images may be based upon. False understanding fails to enhance the imagination, and this type of imagination can no longer enlighten man. Those who fail to recognize, or who ignore, false representations do a disservice to God and are as immoral as those who create folly. Such people will then “bow her down/To tame pursuits, to indolence and fear?” (III, 618-619), unable to achieve enlightenment and “be great like him [the eternal maker],/ Beneficent and active” (III, 628-629). As lines 629-633 state, only those men who are both charmed by imagination, and know the true and divine purpose behind those pleasurable images will be able to “act upon his [God’s] plan;/And form to his, the relish of their souls” (III,631-633).

In The Pleasure of Imagination, Akenside believes that, when exercised with rational thought, imagination can enlighten man, allowing him to understand God, nature and himself. The poet treats imagination as a spiritual faculty, and traces a complementary relationship between reason and the imagination. Within this relationship, imagination can lead to the pursuit of knowledge, while knowledge, in turn,

enhances the quality of the imagination. The result of this relationship is an orderly mind appreciative of a divine presence. The failure of reason, and thus, the reciprocal relationship, leads to folly, an imagination incapable of enlightenment, and a lazy, passive mind. Previous philosophers had explored reason as man's defining trait, but Akenside's work combines this idea with the imagination, suggesting that both are equally important to man and his existence.

Figure 1. *House and Figures in a Mountainous Landscape*, Thomas Gainsborough, 1727-1788.

According to Akenside, an enlightened person would appreciate the imagination of this artist, as well as the truth within this representation, and would understand that God has created nature and the land.

View photo at: http://www.shannons.com/auct_j/det/208%20Gainsborough%20J070.jpg

Figure 2. A rainbow—Akenside’s example for illustrating the idea that knowledge and reason enhance the imagination.

According to Akenside, this image will be most appreciated by the viewers who understand the refraction and reflection of sunlight that occurs within water droplets.

View photo at: <http://www.mandalas.freemove.co.uk/images/Rainbow.jpeg>

Figure 3. A portrait of the poet.

Mark Akenside (1721-1770), British poet, physician. Author of “The Pleasure of Imagination.”

View photo at: <http://clendening.kumc.edu/dc/pc/Akenside.jpg>