

The Destructive Potential of the Imagination

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ABSTRACT

Two contrary concepts dominate our understanding about human imagination—this all-but-undefinable human faculty. While one tradition contrasts the creativity of the imagination, on the one hand, and the perception of reality, on the other—often suggesting that fact (reality) and fiction (imagination) are mutually exclusive—the counter-tradition defines imagination as integral to the creation/perception of reality, what Edith Cobb calls the “preconfigurative imagination.” Drawing on these theoretical-philosophical considerations, the essay takes an interdisciplinary approach to probe the inherently adverse nature and the destructive potential of the human imagination in action. With examples from literature, cultural history, politics, and diplomacy the analysis offers the case in point and demonstrates the ways destructive imagination, impervious to rational argument, may render our ability void; as Henry James put it in “The Art of Fiction,” “to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the piece by the pattern.” (ÉM)

KEYWORDS: theories of imagination and perception, creative imagination, sentimental romance, melodrama

In Edith Cobb’s *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (1977), one phrase, “the genius of childhood,” takes pride of place, and she exploits that phrase for all its connotative and ambiguous riches: the genius or spirit which presides over a person or a place; the peculiar character or inherent nature of a person or place, together with its peculiar associations, histories, traditions; the mental endowment peculiar to an individual; and (less frequently, but always a shimmering possibility) genius as extraordinary mental endowment. But that favorite phrase also has its dangers, among them the danger of idealizing or overestimating the benignity of the genius of childhood and underestimating the child’s nascent capacity for cruelty. The “spontaneous and innately creative imagination of childhood” (15) has its dark underside in the destructive potential of the human imagination in action.

In the English-speaking world two contrary concepts of the imagination dominate and tend to polarize our thinking about that elusive, all-but-undefinable human faculty. One tradition posits a dichotomy between the creativity of the imagination, on the one hand, and the perception of

reality, on the other: fiction is the province of the imagination; fact is the province of perception. At its most radical this tradition suggests that fact (reality) and fiction (imagination) are mutually exclusive. The counter-tradition defines imagination as integral to the creation/perception of reality. This is what Cobb calls the “preconfigurative imagination,” echoing Coleridge’s remark that the eye is preconfigured to the sun (72) and echoing Shelley’s contention that if one cannot imagine something before encountering it, one could not perceive it as real when encountered (“Mont Blanc”).

In a much-quoted speech in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Theseus, the Duke of Athens, asserts the tradition:

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing
A local habitation and a name. (5.1.7–17)

And in a little-quoted Yes-But, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons and Theseus’ wife-to-be, replies with a qualified assertion of the counter-tradition: in the course of the mid-summer night just concluded the two pairs of young lovers have undergone a discernible psychological change, and that change (and the audience’s ready belief in the “aery nothing” of the play by Shakespeare that she does not know she is in) belie, because they are believably real, the traditional view that imagination produces only empty toys, what she calls “fancy’s images” (5.1.25).

In both the tradition and the counter-tradition there is a dark underside to the imagination. In the traditional view the imagination, at its worst, produces not “fancy’s images” but fictions, fantasies which, from a Puritanical point of view, are the instruments of Satan; from a practical-utilitarian point of view they are misrepresentations, lies, and distortions. In the counter-tradition the at-its-worst is much more subtle: if the imagination is indispensable in the creation/perception of reality, then it is also capable of perverting perception, of creating dangerous and destructive realities. In

the traditional view the scientist, the inventor, the politician, the merchant-industrialist-banker-economist occupy the house of fact. Across a more or less antagonistic divide, the lunatic, the lover, the poet (and the con-man) occupy the house of fiction. In the counter-traditional view, the scientist, the poet, and all the others occupy various rooms in the reality-making house of the imagination. In the houses of fact and fiction, contraries are mutually exclusive: as in time versus eternity, love versus hate. In the house of the imagination, contraries are mutually dependent: as in time/eternity, tragedy/comedy, love/hate, and creation/destruction.

The dark underside of the creative imagination

The dark underside of the creative imagination is easy to demonstrate (to the point of grisly caricature) in that branch of science and invention called weapons design, where the imagination is commissioned to create realities that defy the imagination: booby traps that cannot be disarmed, including nuclear booby traps that will fit in a diplomat's attaché case; anti-personnel devices "that inflict wounds as terrible and terrifying as possible" (Keegan 323)—metal cubes, jagged metal and plastic fragments, flakes of phosphorus, and napalm paste to produce wounds that will defy the utmost skill of modern surgery. That creative enterprise also produces elaborate plans for the waging of (and survival of) nuclear war. These imaginings, these creations of deliberate inhumanities, tempt one back toward the traditional view. Such imaginings must exist only in the house of fiction. But no: they occupy a prominent room in the reality-making house of the imagination. In that room, ingeniously called "Defense," the devisers of those destructive realities imagine themselves to be the servants of an enlightened democratic humanitarianism.

The destructive potential of the weapons-design imagination is obvious; also obvious are the blinders that the practitioners of that imagination must wear. The destructive potential (and the blinders) becomes less obvious as we move along the scale toward inventions we habitually regard as benign in themselves and in relation to our personal eco-systems. Even those apparently friendly inventions may have ambiguous or destructive side-effects in the larger eco-systems beyond our immediate view. The combined and symbiotic inventions of the automobile and the concrete highway offer a case in point. The benefits to our lives are extraordinary: the freedom of movement, the expansion of our range, the incredible gift of the ability to make contact with an endlessly stimulating variety of other human beings, institutions, natural and man-made niches and worlds. But did the

inventive imaginations combining and recombining to develop and improve the automobile/highway system foresee the price? Not just the price in traffic accidents and random deaths but also the disruptive impact on the human scale of our places of habitation, the over-concentration and over-sprawl of our populations, the disruption of landscapes and cityscapes, the physical pollution of local and world environments, and the geo-political pollution produced by our petroleum dependencies? In other words, are those inventive imaginations, locally intent on elaboration and refinement of the automobile/highway system, aware of, informed by the possibility of a far more complex, historical, all-embracing vision that might be called the ecological imagination? Obviously not, and even our attempts at all-embracing (time and space, human and nature, past and present) imagination must strike us as fallible, flawed to the point of hopelessness. But in the disparity between the inventiveness of localized imagination and the comprehensive vision of the ecological imagination lurks the possibility of a destructive asymmetry between personal, local benefit and communal, global disarray.

If we turn from the preconfigurative imagination of the scientist-inventor to the preconfigurative imagination of the lover, other vistas open. Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* offers a splendid and exemplary exploration of a tragic balance between the destructive and creative imagination in action. Isabel Archer, the lady being portrayed, is a young, handsome, intelligent American woman, unmarried and intensely involved in her discovery of Europe. A third of the way into the novel (and after she has already refused offers of marriage from two relatively admirable young men) a fortune is added to her attractiveness. She becomes a "catch." A practical-minded American friend labels her a "romantic," and from the beginning her portrayer makes it clear that she is intensely imaginative: "Her imagination was by habit ridiculously active; when the door was not open it jumped out of the window" (*The Portrait of a Lady* 39). But for all imaginativeness, she had never "known anything particularly unpleasant" (39).

In the first half of the novel her imagination, her dream of achieving a life of "freedom and nobleness," collaborates with a designing woman and man (the "villains") to deceive her into marriage with the man. Their intent: to prey on her attractiveness, her emotional generosity and her wealth. The second half of the novel opens after a gap of two-plus years. During those two years she has given birth to and lost a child and has awakened to the "particularly unpleasant" nature of her marriage. In the first half of the novel, her hyper-active imagination has badly served what James calls her

“judgment” by encouraging her to dream of an ideal marriage that proves to be a nightmare. In the second half of the novel, her imagination, spurred or rather converted by her experience of the “unpleasant,” enters the service of her judgment and enables her to explore what in her innocence she would have called the “unpleasant,” what we as readers and what she in her maturity recognize as the profound moral evil of her entrapment. Her triumph is that she realizes to the full not only the villainy of others but also her own complicity in the tragic impasse of her life.

At the novel’s beginning Isabel Archer is blessed (or rather cursed) with an imagination “she was not accustomed to keep behind bolts” (39). By the novel’s end she has achieved something approximating the disciplined imagination, the “cluster of gifts,” that James says he admired in the novelist George Eliot: “The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it” (“The Art of Fiction”).

Isabel Archer’s youthful imagination prompts her to see the world of Europe as “just like a novel” (27). Her imagination has about it an aura of sentimental romance, informed by an optimistic over-emphasis on the goodness of humanity. She expects not only the “happy marriage” that is the characteristic happy ending of sentimental romance; she also expects the achievement (her ideal) of a “perfect middle” between American practicality and moral rectitude, on the one hand, and European aesthetic vision, on the other. Disillusioned, she does not excuse herself or settle for the cynical pleasures of self-indulgence. She settles instead for the distinctly unpleasant pleasure of being undeceived. The final irony of her achievement: the free-wheeling imagination that has been her downfall has enabled her morally to transcend that downfall.

The destructive potential of imagination

If sentimental romance can school the imagination in preparation for a life of tragic or pathetic incompleteness, its stable-mate, melodrama, can prepare the imagination for even more sinister adventures. Sentimental romance encourages us to simplify and soften our expectations, to emphasize the good and the benign, to brush aside evil as “something unpleasant.” Melodrama encourages us to simplify and harden our expectations, to prepare for a world in which there are clear-cut and radical oppositions between flat character types: utterly pure and noble heroes and heroines, utterly malign villains, the good guys always recognizable in their white hats, the bad guys

easy to spot in their black hats. All oppositions between the white hats and black hats are conflicts to be resolved through confrontation and violence en route to the all-but-inevitable victory of the good guys.

Sentimental romance and melodrama were dominant imaginative modes of Hollywood movies in their heyday, and they are nowadays dominant modes of American television. Between them they shape the popular imagination and its expectations of domestic and foreign realities. When the president of the United States consoles the bereaved families of the astronauts who died in the *Challenger* disaster and calls those passive victims of wrongheaded engineering “heroes,” his sentimental-romantic imagination is presiding with, as the Irish song puts it, “a tear and a smile in thine eye” (Moore). When the melodramatizing imagination takes over, the United States president portrays the Soviet Union as an “Evil Empire,” determined to expand throughout the world, to (and eventually within) our shores. In that scenario “We” become the endangered good guys in white hats; “They” are “the other,” the “enemy,” the bad guys in black. We are the virtuous, peace-loving, honest humanitarians; they are the vicious opposite of all we stand for. They are malicious, war-mongering, untrustworthy, repressive, and cruel (and they are nine feet tall). When they advocate peace, they are believed only by the naïve and cowardly among us because clearly they advocate peace only to mask their warlike dedication to conquest.

The melodramatizing imagination never pauses to wonder whether they, in what look like their black hats, are really wearing grey—as some of us, not too secretly, recognize that the hats of our brace champions are mottled black and white. “We” never pause to wonder whether “They” might melodramatize us as we do them—seeing themselves as the champions of virtue, us as the champions of vice. Such a moment of insight would boggle the melodramatizing imagination and leave it bewildered in a hall of mirrors. The melodramatizers avoid that trap and carry beyond to even starker simplicities. It is, they assure us, “a dangerous world out there,” a jungle in which the enemy is unprincipled, single-minded, and adept. We, by contrast, are ill-suited for the dangers of that jungle because we are of many minds and hampered by our principles. So the chosen among us, those with the whitest of white hats, must make the ultimate sacrifice of abandoning our democratic principles and virtues in favor of the jungle warfare necessary to the defense of those principles and virtues. And those of us who do not buy that triumph of melodrama are, of course, wimps, cowards, dupes of the Evil Empire.

When the leaders of Iran portray the United States as the Great Satan, the enemy of all humankind, the fountainhead of all the anti-Islam, anti-Shiah

conspiracies in the world, the tables are turned. We find ourselves uncomfortably cast in flat-character parts in a melodrama being created and performed by “the others.” We strike back by melodramatizing and caricaturing them (as they caricature us), and we seek to defend ourselves by being rational. They cannot really mean that we are the Great Satan and the source of all evil. This must be just another case of political cynicism. Those leaders must be saying those melodramatic things not because they believe them but because such super-charged accusations aimed against outsiders are an effective way of gaining advantage in a volatile domestic political situation.

But if those leaders really do believe their own melodrama, if it is not just political rabble-rousing for domestic purposes, then we can fall back on the traditional separation of perception and imagination and use that separation as a rational basis for dismissing the Iranian melodrama as a fabrication which “sees” in the United States “more devils than vast hell can hold.”

In neither “rational” case do we accept their melodrama as the overwhelmingly compelling force that it has become in their national/religious life, in neither case do we enter and explore that melodrama as the meaningful to them (possibly understandable to us) construct that it is. Such an exploration would involve a consideration of the history and traditions of the Shiites: their millennial expectations of the long-delayed (now imminent) coming of the Hidden or Twelfth Imam; their sense of themselves as the chosen people (and therefore an oppressed people—the more oppressed, the more surely chosen); their consequent exaltation of martyrdom-seekers and martyrdom; their sustained legal tradition which rejects legal precedent in favor of the living authority of the law in the persons of the lawgivers; the long tradition of continuous strife (from at least 1502) between political and ecclesiastical authorities in Persia/Iran and the apparent resolution (or has it been redirection?) of that strife since the triumph of the Ayatollahs in 1979; and for good measure, the terrifying disorientation consequent on the late Shah’s determination to rationalize and “modernize” (militarize?) the country. In short, their melodramatic vision of an antagonistic world with the Great Satan as its centerpiece has a deep and vital root system, well fertilized, well watered.

Our own melodramatizers tell us that to try imaginatively to accept and understand the Iranian’s melodrama will inevitably weaken our international resolve. Not necessarily, but it should certainly sober our expectations. Our effort to understand should alert us to how difficult it will be to bargain confidently or effectively with such melodramatizers. We

should begin to see how naïve we were to expect them to abide by accepted codes of international law and diplomacy, since in their tradition the living authority of the law in the present supersedes any such codes. Hostage-taking and terrorism are the “logical” recourse of a chosen but oppressed people faced with an unreachable, remorseless, conspiratorial power; and why is not every American with pencil and notebook in hand (with hidden camera and tape-recorder) a spy in the service of Great Satan and the C.I.A.? What the constructive imagination should show us is how extraordinarily difficult (if not impossible) it will be for us to change the role “We” are cast to play in “Their” melodrama.

Melodramatic world views and those melodramatizations of religious belief called “fundamentalism” are powerful in at least two ways. The simplifications of melodrama free individual believers so that they can act with much more dedication and assurance, at times with incredible efficiency (and/or ineptitude), because they are acting in a world cleansed of the grey areas that so trouble the vision of the rest of us and give us pause. And melodramatization is incredibly infectious and long-lasting—the virus renewing its vigor generation after generation. One fascinating example of this infectious vigor is that melodramatic fiction, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

This scurrilously anti-Semitic publication was a forgery prepared anonymously in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century. Most of the materials for the forgery were plagiarized from a French pamphlet that had been directed against Napoleon III of France in the 1860s. The plagiarizers simply substituted the Jews for Napoleon III and added some spice from other nineteenth-century anti-Semitic fabrications and from the 200-year-old suspicion that, like the Jews, the Freemasons had a deep-laid plot aimed at world dominion. *The Protocols* first surfaced not in France but in Russia, where a truncated version was published in 1903. Two years later the full text was included by a Russian mystical writer, Sergei Nilus, in the third edition of his book *The Great in the Small*. This was an elegant, expensive edition designed to appeal to and influence Czar Nicholas II who took pleasure in mystical writings (and who was perceived by fervent anti-Semites as soft on Jews). The original forgers/plagiarists remain unknown, but they have been repeatedly described in compelling ways as agents of the Russian secret police stationed in Paris at the turn of the century.

The Protocols purport to be a record of twenty-four lectures (or notes for twenty-four lectures) in which one of the Elders of Zion (the secret government to which all Jews owe allegiance) details a plot to achieve world dominion by deadening the Christian and gentile mind with thought-control,

by infiltrating the press, financial institutions, and key government offices throughout the world. Particularly resistant governments were to be blown up by bombs planted in the subways that were foolishly being built in their capital cities. In Russia the notorious Black Hundreds and those who made a profession of instigating pogroms adopted *The Protocols* as gospel. At the end of World War I and after the Russian Revolution *The Protocols* migrated back to western Europe, where they were to become the linchpin of Nazi anti-Semitism. Versions of *The Protocols* were spread broadcast throughout western Europe and beyond to England and to the United States, where *The Protocols* were welcomed as the ideal manual for Jew-baiting by Henry Ford and his political (anti-Semitic) propaganda machine in the 1920s and by the Reverend Charles Coughlin and other rabble-rousing reactionaries in the 1930s. Nor do the migrations of *The Protocols* stop with World War II as might be hoped. Fresh translations (and revisions) began to show up in South America after the war, courtesy of Nazi immigrants. A new translation appeared in Spain in 1963, and versions of *The Protocols* remain highly popular in the Middle East and have surfaced in extremist Japanese publications with titles such as *How to Read the Hidden Meaning of Jewish Protocol* and *The Jewish Plan for Conquest of the World*.

The mystery of the infectious vigor of *The Protocols* is still with us. The original pamphlet was a ludicrous and transparent plagiarism and forgery. Its falsity has been exposed and demonstrated over and over again, but its hold on the popular imagination survives. It remains a reinvigorated virus ready to infect new populations. The secret of that vigor seems to reside in the powerful appeal that crude conspiracy theories have for the melodramatic imagination. The crude conspiracy theory of *The Protocols* suggests that all the ills that modern flesh is heir to, all the ills of the national and international body politic can be traced to one identifiable but faceless, underground and malignantly intelligent force—not traced rationally and analytically but by a leap of faith. Indeed, rational analysis itself is suspect as inspired by the same malignant intelligence that composed *The Protocols* in the first place.

The conspiracy of the Elders of Zion “revealed” by *The Protocols* is irrefutable because those who seek to refute it are, by definition, co-conspirators. They, like us, would argue that the world’s ills are far more complex and irreducible than they seem to be in the melodramatic world imagined by true believers in *The Protocols*. The co-conspirators argue complexity only in the attempt to blind true believers to the gratifying simplicities of the world conspiracy. Believers are vigorous survivors because belief in the conspiracy reassures them by suggesting that the cause of their

disappointments and frustrations can be readily identified and attacked. Never mind that the disappointments and frustrations have not been alleviated by the attacks that have already taken place. Better luck next time because the conspiracy can still hatefully account for the continuation of disappointment and frustration and, by giving believers an inexhaustible focus for hate, can continue to encourage and excuse the sort of action that has made the twentieth century a massacre.

The destructive imagination thus feeds on itself, impervious to rational argument, all-but-impervious to its counterpart, the creative imagination. But when we find ourselves baffled by these overwhelming popular desires for black and white (or rose-colored) simplifications, we should with a combination of fear and charity remind ourselves of Friedrich Schiller's great remark: "We often tremble at an empty terror, but the false fancy [false imaginations] does bring a real terror" (5.1.105–06).

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