

## *Introduction*

The principal aims of this book are threefold: firstly, to reinstate imagination as a central concept in literary and art criticism; secondly, to redefine the relationship between Symbolism and abstract art in this light; and thirdly, to contribute to renovating the methodology of comparative studies of poetry and painting.

Rimbaud and Mallarmé, the Symbolist poets selected for special study here, are well known for having achieved new extremes of difficulty in poetry and for their radical questioning of the relationship between the linguistic sign, reality and coded meanings. These two writers are, of course, extremely different, with Mallarmé usually being thought of as more ‘formalist’, and Rimbaud as anticipating/influencing aspects of Surrealism. Kandinsky and Mondrian, the early abstract artists whose work I shall be examining here, are also often thought of as opposites, with Kandinsky breaking into abstraction in a lyrical outburst of colour, while Mondrian ‘geometrizes’. Kandinsky is generally regarded as the pioneer of abstraction, but although the milieu in which Mondrian worked was influenced by Kandinsky’s ideas of the ‘spiritual’ in art, the path Mondrian followed into abstraction was quite independent of and different from Kandinsky’s. It would have been interesting to include discussion of Malevich and Suprematism in this context, but considerations of space have imposed limitations. However, all four poets and painters in question here radically disrupted established codes within their respective art forms and provoked awareness of the problematic nature of the relation between sign and object. Roman Jakobson (a leading figure of Russian Formalism and of Prague Structuralism) affirmed: ‘Dans une certaine mesure aucun mot poétique n’a d’objet. Ce à quoi pensait le poète français [Mallarmé] qui disait que la fleur poétique est l’absente de tous bouquets.’<sup>1</sup> Jakobson, who was also influenced by abstract painters (including Kandinsky), declared that: ‘the tendency to make the sign indepen-

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dent of the object . . . is the grounding principle of the whole of modern art'.<sup>2</sup>

These poetic and artistic practices, then, raised new questions concerning the nature of meaning and reference, and seemed to many to be asserting the autonomy of the linguistic/pictorial sign, causing it to refer to nothing outside itself. I shall argue, however, that this disruption of communicative codes is not in fact an end in itself, but a means to new modes of signifying, in which the imagination of the receiver performs a central role. Imagination is central to all three key areas of this book, which is why I will devote considerable space to discussing it in the first chapter. Imagination, as I propose to use the term, involves experiencing according to a sensory mode of apprehension, but in a way which surpasses empirical knowledge. As a response to signifying processes which transgress logical/representational norms, imagination can operate in a manner which defies definition in conceptual and empirical terms, and gestures towards an impossible 'other' space. Imagining activity is a process which cannot take place without a consciousness, embodied in a receiving subject or subjects. As a mode of response to poems and paintings, it is dependent upon linguistic and/or pictorial signifying systems, but it is not reducible to them and cannot be equated with purely textual/pictorial features. However, there can be no question of simply substituting the autonomous consciousness of a receiver for that of a creator. Although the term 'imagination' resonates with associations that come to us from Romanticism and also from the phenomenological 'imaginaire', my project is fundamentally different from both these traditions.

My use of the term 'imaginary' is much closer to the spirit of phenomenology than to that of Lacanian psychoanalysis, where the 'imaginary' presents a different set of problems.<sup>3</sup> However, it differs from phenomenological usages in challenging concepts of imagination which are rooted in idealist/humanist models of subjectivity and meaning. These concepts had already been undermined by poetic/pictorial practices themselves, even before the recent onslaught of deconstruction. Reader-response criticism, which has been heavily influenced by phenomenology, is compatible with structuralist approaches, but has not so far met the challenges of deconstructionist critique.<sup>4</sup> It is necessary to elaborate a view of imagination which can take account of its dependence on and 'inscription' in the poetic and pictorial signifying processes and the loss of autonomy this implies. Such a view does not therefore involve return to an ethos of unity, synthesis and identity, often conveniently labelled as a 'metaphysics of

presence'. Imagination can be described in terms analogous to the signifying process as it is seen in poststructuralism, in other words, as a *process* of image production which does not culminate in the formation of a final, stable and coherent image. Imagining activity causes the fissuring of an image's presence, through awareness of what the image does not contain, its lack of totality and wholeness. An 'image', whether it be a mode of consciousness generated by a linguistic description or a visual image in a painting, is not 'imaginary' unless it negates itself by exceeding its own powers of presentation, suggesting more that it can explain or make visible. The challenge to interpretation posed by the poems and paintings of Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Kandinsky and Mondrian does not involve, as is frequently supposed, an attempt to replace represented objects in the world outside the work with the medium of the work itself. Rather, these poems and paintings evoke indefinable imaginary 'objects', which are constructed by the receiver's response to the medium. This means that their content needs to be conceptualized in a new way, which involves rethinking the projects of literary and art criticism as elucidating the interaction between the poetic/pictorial medium and the imagining activity of the receiver. I shall use the term 'imaginary space' to refer to the 'sensory unreality'<sup>5</sup> generated by this interaction. Moreover, although the medium does not become an object of reference, it does become an object of imaginary transformation: the goal of imagining activity is to effect a synthesis of textual/pictorial and imaginary space. This goal is unrealizable, however, and the medium as a 'site' of imaginary space remains both semantically and ontologically 'undecidable'.<sup>6</sup>

A considerable obstacle to the enterprise of redrawing the boundaries of imagination in this way is the extent to which canonical theories of imagination seem to point in the opposite direction to the one which I propose to take here. For many postmodernists and poststructuralists, imagination has been discredited, owing to its associations with humanist ideas of an individual, autonomous subject and with identity and synthesis.<sup>7</sup> I will therefore begin in chapter 1 below by analysing a number of 'key moments' in aesthetics,<sup>8</sup> in order to explore opportunities for dissociating imagination from humanist perspectives where the subject is in control of meaning, and where the 'image' is definable in conceptual terms. Kant's *Critique of Judgement* lays the basis for a view of imagination which is not dependent on definable concepts, and where imagination undermines its own powers of representation. I shall develop an account of imagination which draws on Kant's theory of the 'mathematical sublime', in

which imagination confronts its own limits by becoming involved in a process of ‘negative presentation’. However, Kant’s theory privileges inner mental processes rather than engaging with the subject’s relationship to external sensory phenomena, and in seeking to move beyond Kant, I shall draw on Lipps’ theory of empathy, and will argue that the supremacy of the subject can be undermined by the reflexive relationship of imagination with the medium. I will also emphasize the projective function of imagining activity which exceeds and transcends the given, transforming it into a site of imaginary space which is directed towards the not yet realized, whose im/possibility is constitutive of its imaginary character.

It has often been pointed out that there is a connection between Symbolism and the aesthetics of early abstract painting.<sup>9</sup> However, although some research has been done on the background to this connection, it has never been examined in terms of the aesthetic project which, I argue here, is shared by Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Kandinsky and Mondrian: the transformation of the medium itself through the imagination of the receiver. If the relationship between Symbolism and abstraction has not previously been examined in this way, this is partly because Symbolist poetics has not been considered in terms of how textual structures can themselves become ‘symbolic’ through their connection with a non-conceptual imaginary dimension evoked by the text, and partly because links between the work of early abstract artists and Symbolist painting have been made on the level of iconography rather than form, and have not therefore been investigated in the abstract paintings. Moreover, although Kandinsky’s and Mondrian’s theoretical writings clearly locate the motivation behind their move into abstraction in the desire to transform the spectator’s perception and experience of the medium itself, their didactic and mystical overtones have alienated many critics and have fostered a polemical response to this crucial aspect of their work.<sup>10</sup>

The significant parallels between the poetics and aesthetics of these poets and painters are connected with similarities in their intellectual backgrounds, and we shall see that the most crucial link here is the emphasis on the medium of the art work itself as an object of imaginary and aesthetic transformation. They do not, however, share a theory of imagination which they consciously apply to their work. The theory of imagination presented here to elucidate their projects is a *retrospective* construct, although it draws on the views of the poets and painters concerned. Moreover, this study of poetry and painting differs from many

other comparative projects in that its main aim is not to trace the influence of theories of imagination on these poets and painters or their influence on each other, but to explore the central role attributed in their work to the imagining activity of the receiver.

The goal of transforming the receiver's perception of the medium is by no means common to all Symbolist poets or to all abstract artists. Within Symbolism, it is the culmination of a process involving the transformation of the subject-object relation through imagination, which has roots in Romanticism and in German Idealism, and which, in Rimbaud and Mallarmé, comes to be focussed on the poetic medium itself. In abstract art, on the other hand, this aim furnishes the initial impetus, the motive and the justification for an art without objects. The pioneers of abstract art were acutely aware that only the spectator's imaginative response to the pictorial elements of form and colour could prevent them from being seen as purely material marks on the canvas. Their goal, which is characteristic of early Modernism, is to elevate the function of the medium itself to a means of transcending the immediately visible, not through subject matter (as in the case of religious iconography, for instance), but by challenging the limits of logic and of experience through new forms of signifying.

In Rimbaud's and Mallarmé's poetry, the challenge to conventional logic and to interpretation comes about first of all on a semantic level, through poetic imagery which has a sensory – mainly visual – content, but which defies logical and empirical categories. Imagining does not involve representation of known images, but rather innovative activity which remains open-ended. Analogies between rhythmic features of the imaginary space evoked and visual and spatial patterns in the text enable the latter to be experienced as sites of imaginary space. The reader's recognition of metapoetical implications in the imagery draws his/her attention to the relationship between the textual and the imaginary, and causes imagining activity to become reflexive. In Kandinsky's and Mondrian's semi-abstract and abstract painting, the pictorial images do not represent known objects, and can be experienced in terms of imaginary rhythms and relationships which exceed the purely visual and enable the spectator to experience pictorial space itself as a site of imaginary space. Metapictorial implications within the paintings, as well as titles and theoretical writings, encourage reflexive awareness of this interaction.

Two key characteristics associated with imagination since the Romantics are involved here. Firstly, imagination is activated

through suggestion of relationships which defy definition in terms of particular concepts or objects and which are non-finite. Secondly, imagining activity creates connections between consciousness and sensory objects: here, the medium itself. Instead of being a 'sign' of absent ideas or objects which could exist independently of it, the medium is perceived as a 'mirror' of the imagining process of the receiver. Through this reflection, the poetic/pictorial medium can be experienced as imaginary, while at the same time it undermines the autonomy of imagining activity. The transgression of linguistic and figurative codes is not an end in itself, but a means of altering the receiver's perception of poetic/pictorial space.

The approach adopted in this study has been evolved by relating personal experience of the works concerned to relevant theories of imagination and of signs, and remodelling the latter in the light of this experience. I have also sought to take account of what might be called the 'ideal receiver' constructed by the work itself (not primarily by the theories of its creators, though I shall also discuss these). The character of the 'ideal receiver' is in fact inseparable from the circumstances of the art work's production and from prevailing cultural attitudes. Moreover, the ideal receiver is not gender-free and could in many cases be demonstrated to be (predictably) male. A wider-ranging study would have devoted more space to these highly significant issues and would also have debated the gendering of imagination itself.<sup>11</sup> To discuss such questions in depth would have strained the limits of an already very broad and diverse agenda. However, there will be some discussion in chapter 6 below of the ideal receiver, including gender, in relation to the utopian dimension of the work of Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Kandinsky and Mondrian.<sup>12</sup>

This project also has significant consequences for the methodology of comparative studies of poetry and painting. My discussion of the interpenetration of the textual and the imaginary in Rimbaud and Mallarmé both draws on and develops the implications of David Scott's *Pictorialist Poetics* concerning the 'auto-illustrative' nature of certain poetic texts.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, many interesting attempts have been made to analyse visual images using semiotic models derived from linguistics.<sup>14</sup> However, it emerges clearly from the analyses undertaken here that logico-linguistic structures do not constitute a suitable model for aesthetic modes of signification and reception, and that comparisons based on seemingly direct parallels are in fact undermined by the radical semiotic differences between the mediums of poetry and painting.

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The final chapter includes discussion of the relation between Symbolism and Impressionism and of connections between experimental poetry and avant-garde art in the twentieth century. Here it is shown that despite similarities between certain aspects of the poetry of Rimbaud and Mallarmé and the work of Symbolist and Impressionist painters, differences between the mediums concerned render these parallels problematic. The same is true of developments in twentieth-century poetry which appear to have direct parallels with abstract painting. Moreover, the specificity of the poetic and pictorial mediums is vital in explaining why abstract art did not emerge sooner, and why experimentation in poetry which happened at the same time as abstract art led to very different results in terms of their effects on the receiver.

I shall begin here, in the first chapter, with a discussion of the problematic of imagination and imaginary space, which will lead into consideration of the intellectual backgrounds to Symbolism and abstract art. Subsequent chapters (2–5) will consist mainly of in-depth ‘readings’ of the works of Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Kandinsky and Mondrian, while the final chapter will focus on the utopian dimension of imaginary space.



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## CHAPTER I

*Imagination and imaginary space*

[L'imagination] décompose toute la création . . . elle crée un monde nouveau, elle produit la sensation du neuf . . . elle est positivement apparentée avec l'infini.

(Baudelaire, 'La Reine des facultés')<sup>1</sup>

The sublime . . . is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought.

(Kant, *Critique of Judgement*)<sup>2</sup>

I am proposing here an account of imagination which emphasizes its capacity to operate in a sensory mode while exceeding knowledge derived from experience, and which also recognizes its inscription in and dependence on signifying processes which disrupt access to logical meanings and definable objects. This will enable imagination to be deployed as a critical concept in discussing the reception of texts and pictures which embody such disruptive signifying processes. I shall begin by exploring ways in which existing theories allow for or even anticipate the possibility of dissociating imagination from humanist, subject-centered accounts of logic and meaning. This is not the place in which to engage in a full-scale survey of the history of imagination, and I shall focus on three main areas: the Kantian sublime, the phenomenological 'imaginaire', and the theory of empathy as elaborated by Theodor Lipps.

Kant's theory of imagination is important to my argument because imagination here exceeds conceptual definition and, in the sublime, bridges the gap between the 'sensible' and the 'supersensible'. Moreover, it is self-subverting and undermines its own powers of representation. However, it is only by reading Kant against the grain that the senses can be seen to play a positive role in the experience of the sublime. Moreover, imagination is seen here in terms of a faculty, a 'compartment' of the mind. Phenomenological approaches, on the other hand, explore the 'imaginaire' as a mode of consciousness. Sartre conceives of



the 'imaginaire' as an 'irréel' which is both sensory and unreal, like imaginary space as I describe it here. For Sartre, however, the 'irréel' remains tied to definable objects and negates material presence, whereas I shall argue that imaginary space, as a product of disruptive signifying processes, cannot be defined in terms of pre-coded, recognizable objects, and interacts reflexively<sup>3</sup> with the concrete space of the medium. Theodor Lipps' theory of empathy analyses the subject-object relation in ways which are useful in conceptualizing the interaction between the receiver and the work of art, especially because of the links between Lipps' theories and the emergence of abstract painting. For Lipps, however, the subject remains central, and I shall argue that the reflexivity of imagination undermines this position. Reflexivity and semiotic changes in the poetic and pictorial mediums will be discussed with reference to the semiotics of C. S. Peirce. I shall then move on to examine the intellectual backgrounds to Symbolism and the emergence of abstraction, with particular emphasis on the influence of theories which explore interconnections between matter and consciousness.

## KANT

In the Kantian sublime, imagination transgresses the boundaries which separate sensible experience from knowledge of the supersensible, which is the province of reason. Moreover, whereas Kant usually describes imagination and the process of cognition itself in terms of unity and synthesis, in his account of the 'mathematical sublime' (*CJ* p. 86/94 ff.), imagination is said to be unable to meet the demand for synthesis which emanates from reason. Here, imagination feels its inability to present ideas of reason, which lie outside the boundaries of experience. The weight of Kant's critical philosophy, which aims to delineate the boundaries of knowledge (he argues that speculative reason ought not to attempt to 'soar beyond' the limits of possible experience),<sup>4</sup> now falls on imagination itself. In the face of a spectacle which overwhelms the subject's capacity to represent it, imagination is made painfully aware of its own limitations. Imagination's serial mode of apprehension can continue to infinity, but cannot meet reason's demand for 'absolute totality' (*CJ*, p. 98/108): discouraged, it 'sinks back into itself' (*CJ*, p. 91/100). What is peculiar to the experience of the sublime, however, is that this very lack of presentation itself functions as a 'negative presentation' (*CJ*, p. 115/127) of what lies beyond the power of imagination to present. The mind 'feels itself raised' (*CJ*, p. 95/105) by

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the awareness of the unrepresentable produced by the recognition of its own powerlessness. In this way, imagination undergoes an ‘extension . . . by itself’ (*CJ*, p. 87/96). Its *telos* is the reflexive consciousness of the subject, which recognizes its own failure, thereby producing a ‘split’ consciousness where the breakdown of imagination can itself be objectified and transcended and where the supersensible is experienced as a negative dimension of the sensible.

As is well known, Kant maintains that the sublime is a property of the state of mind of the person experiencing it, not of an object (*CJ*, p. 89/98). Moreover, although he argues that the art of genius requires the invention of new rules (*CJ*, p. 161/180), and is therefore formally innovatory, the ‘formless’ is said to be characteristic of the sublime, not the beautiful, which must be formally pleasing. For these reasons, and because Kant links the sublime with natural spectacles rather than with art, it is often held that sublimity is not a characteristic which can properly be attributed to works of art. However, in the sublime, the supersensible is experienced by means of objects. Although imagination surpasses the sensible and reaches a negative awareness of the supersensible, this experience is triggered off by a sensory object in the first place. ‘This idea of the supersensible, which we can no further determine – so that we cannot *know* but only *think* nature as its presentation – is awakened in us by means of an object whose aesthetical appreciation strains the imagination to its utmost bounds’ (*CJ*, p. 108/120). As other commentators have pointed out, one can discriminate between objects which are liable to cause this experience and those which are not.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Kant himself says that the sublime ‘is to be found *in a formless object*’ (see epigraph to this chapter, emphasis mine). He allows for some overlap between the sublime and the realm of art, speaking of ‘the presentation of the sublime, insofar as it belongs to beautiful art’: (*CJ*, p. 170/190), although he does specify that in this case, the sublime must be toned down. ‘The artistic presentation of the sublime in description and embellishment . . . may be and ought to be beautiful, since otherwise it would be wild, crude and repulsive, and, consequently, contrary to taste.’<sup>6</sup>

The Kantian sublime is in fact doubly subversive: its ‘formlessness’ is opposed to the formal harmony of the beautiful, and its pleasure is a paradoxical one, inseparable from the pain experienced through the failure of imagination to achieve its goal. In the mathematical sublime, imagination is overwhelmed by the ‘excess’ of a sensory object, and is unable to perform its synthetic function and grasp the object as a totality. However, although the sublime is the antithesis of classical aesthetic criteria of formal