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Phenomenological Studies of Imagination in Poetry: An Introduction

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Abstract

The broad and dominant discipline of phenomenology has produced many studies of imagination. Phenomenological studies examine imagination as a dimension of language and explore the creative role of imagination in the creation of new meanings in language. This exploration has many implications in poetry where language is used creatively and new meanings emerge from the creative and unexpected use of language by the poet. This paper aims to describe a phenomenological account of imagination in poetry by introducing the concepts that appear most relevant to imagination in poetry within the domain of phenomenological studies. In order to do this, the study focuses on the main tenets of phenomenological studies relevant to imagination in poetry, namely the concepts of ‘metaphor’ and ‘intentionality’. The discussion highlights the level of creativity of imagination in poetry in comparison with the reduction of imagining to perceiving in language. Likewise, the poetic image in poetry is also introduced as an image which is not a resume of the old meanings of perception. Phenomenology of imagination in poetic creation takes us beyond the previous analyses of the characteristics of imagination as a creative faculty and helps to establish a link between creativity, meaning and imagination.

Keywords: hermeneutic phenomenology, creative imagination, metaphor, intentionality, poetic image

A Phenomenological Overview of the Imagination

Smith (2008) in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines ‘phenomenology’ as the study of phenomena; the “appearances of things, or things as they appear in our

experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience” (What is Phenomenology, para. 9). Phenomenology investigates the structure of various types of experience such as imagination, thought, memory, emotion, desire and perception. Casey (1967) states that phenomenological method in philosophy aims to make things that have been overlooked and taken for granted in human experience “more thematic” (p. 8). Many phenomenologists such as Husserl, Sartre, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, Bachelard, and Ricoeur have discussed the concept of imagination and attempted to conceptualize its features. Before Ricoeur’s hermeneutic approach, the phenomenology of imagination focused on the role of “imagination as vision, as a special or modified way of seeing the world” (Kearney, 2004, p. 35). Imagination was thus defined in terms of its relation to perception using ‘description’ as a phenomenological method, such as in studies by Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. In the hermeneutic approach which was developed by Ricoeur, imagination is considered more in terms of language and less in terms of vision. Studying imagination in terms of language is what Ricoeur calls ‘semantic innovation’. This means that “imagination is assessed as an indispensable agent in the creation of meaning in and through language” (Kearney, 2004, p. 35). Ricoeur’s hermeneutic approach investigates the “linguistic functioning of imagination, that is exploring the creative role of imagination in language,” in any form such as symbols, myths, poems, narratives or ideologies. Ricoeur (1981) poses a question which embodies the hermeneutic turn in studying imagination in phenomenology:

Are we not ready to recognize in the power of imagination, no longer the faculty of deriving ‘images’ from our sensory experience, but the

capacity for letting new worlds shape our understanding of ourselves?

This power would not be conveyed by images, but by the emergent meanings of our language. Imagination would thus be treated as a dimension of language (p. 181).

The move toward language ascribes imagination with different features. Imagining does not mean reproducing former perception of things, but rather it provides a situation anew where things are rephrased in such a way that “the situation is transformed or realized anew” (Murray, 1987, p. 203).

Ricoeur’s hermeneutic exploration of imagination as a dimension of language and as a medium in creating new meanings have many implications in poetry, where language is used creatively and new meanings emerge from the creative and unexpected use of language by the poet. Ricoeur’s implementation of hermeneutics as “the art of deciphering indirect meanings” recognizes the creative power of imagination (1973, p. 90). This paper aims to describe a phenomenological/hermeneutic account of imagination in poetry by introducing the concepts that appear most relevant to imagination in poetry within the domain of phenomenological studies. In order to do this, the study focuses on the main tenets of phenomenological studies relevant to imagination in poetry, namely the concepts of ‘metaphor’ and ‘intentionality’. The discussion highlights the level of creativity of imagination in poetry in comparison with the reduction of imagining to perceiving in language. Likewise, the poetic image in poetry will also be introduced as an image which is not a resume of the old meanings of perception. Hermeneutic phenomenology of imagination in poetic/artistic creation takes us beyond the previous

analyses of the characteristics of imagination as a creative faculty and helps to establish a link between creativity, meaning and imagination.

This paper is structured into two main sections. In the first section, imagination is discussed from the vantage point of the concept of ‘metaphor’. The second section moves on to examine and describe how the concept of ‘intentionality’ in phenomenological studies introduces imagination as an act of consciousness in creating new meanings in language and in poetry.

Metaphor and Imagination

In its zenith of conceptualizations in the Romantic period, creative imagination in poetry was associated with the emblematic language of nature (Zalipour, 2009). In the modern period, Ricoeur’s semantic innovation in the hermeneutic approach focuses on the creative role of imagination in relationship with meaning. Approaching imagination as a dimension of language highlights that the creative element in imagination is not located in images as was conceptualized by the previous studies of imagination, but in the emergent meanings in language (Ricoeur, 1981). To explain this phenomenon, imagination is studied by the phenomenologists from the perspective of the theory of metaphor. Metaphors are largely used in poetry and utilized by the poet/author to bring his/her literary imagery to life. Using the example of metaphor is appropriate as it epitomizes the way in which imagination contributes its creative role in making new meanings in language (literal level) and in poetry (poetic/literary level). The following

discussion uses the metaphorical utterance as the unit of studying imagination in language and poetry.

A good metaphor, as defined by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, is understanding and identification of similarities. The innovative power of imagination in language is defined by Ricoeur as the ability to establish similarity in dissimilarity. The example of metaphor in poetry epitomizes the way in “which imagination conjoins two semantic fields, making what is predicatively impertinent at a literal level into something predicatively pertinent at a new level” (Kearney, 2004, p. 49). In the following poem, *Dream* by Langston Hughes, we can see how the poet deviates from the established use of language and creates new meaning.

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow

– From *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951)

In the metaphor of ‘Life is a broken-winged bird’ Hughes deviates from the semantic use of ‘bird’ as a kind of natural creature. The poet’s imagination establishes

similarities or relations between ‘life’ and ‘a broken-winged bird’ in some way. Generally, in metaphor the first subject (life) is described in terms of the implicit or explicit attributes of the second subject (a broken-winged bird), which then enhances the description of the first (life). In metaphor-making process, “Imagination is the apperception, the sudden glimpse, of a new predicative pertinence, namely a way of constructing pertinence in impertinence” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 172-3). This means that the essential task of the metaphorical utterance and the resultant innovation lie in the production of a new semantic relevance by means of an irrelevant attribution. In the example above, ‘life’ and ‘bird’ are irrelevant at the literal level, while the poet’s imagination establishes them as relevant in a new semantic field. Therefore, life figuratively becomes a bird whose wings have been broken and it cannot fly. Being able to fly and having wings are the essential features of birds which are now attributed to life. This metaphor implies how life could fly when its wings have not been broken. In the context of the poem, this attribution and its meaning becomes clearer – that life can fly, referring to our success and happiness only when we have dreams, but when dreams are shattered the wings of life will be broken and flying is no longer possible. At the figurative level, the semantic field of life has joined or changed to another semantic field that is of the bird. The restructuring of semantic fields results in the extension of meaning. Imagination offers its specific role of mediation at this moment, that is, when a new meaning emerges from the remains of literal predication (Ricoeur in Kearney, 2004). The mediation of imagination is the moment of what Ricoeur calls ‘the shock of contradiction’, which is the cause of the dismantling of semantic fields. Kearney (1998)

refers to this as “semantic shock” in creation of meaning in metaphors (p. 4). In the coming together of the already-made perceptions and experiences, imagination mediates and abolishes the logical distance between the previous dissimilar semantic fields in order to produce the semantic shock, which, in its turn, creates the meaning of the metaphorical utterance.

In poetry, the process of creation of new meanings through the medium of imagination is more innovative both in terms of conjoining semantic fields and production of semantic shock. The level of creativity of imagination involved in creation of meanings can be discussed by examining metaphors in poetry as in the above example and in language. In a commonplace metaphor like ‘life is a journey’, the first subject (life) is equal to the second subject (journey) in some familiar and comprehensible way. Here the joining of semantic fields occurs at the literal level; however, in some metaphors semantic fields move to the level of figurative language. It is especially the case for creative metaphors in poetry. In addition, the semantic shock resulting from the synthesis of dissimilar elements in poetry is more severe and intense. In this way semantic shock brings about the genesis of the new meaning. While words have multiple meanings through semantic innovation at the literal level, by placing words in relationship to one another in the context of a poem/literary text, imagination produces something new. Ricoeur (1975/1978) states that his attempt in hermeneutic phenomenology of imagination has been “to show how language could extend itself to its very limits forever discovering new resonances within itself. There is a linguistic imagination which generates and regenerates meaning through the living power of metaphorotcity”

(Kearney, 2004, p. 50). Figurative language and poetic metaphors in poetry are examples of the very limit of language extension where linguistic imagination appears more creative in poetry.

On a different vein, metaphor has also been studied as an image in phenomenology of Bachelard with the purpose of characterizing the qualities of the poetic/literary image. In Bachelardian phenomenological studies, the poetic image is examined as being capable of giving birth to new meanings, rather than being a reservoir of old ones. Bachelard (1943) investigates and discusses creative imagination as a subjective power, the true source of psychic and poetic production. His idea on the notion of the link between metaphor and the image highlights the mediatory role of imagination in creation of new and fresh meanings in poetry. He focuses on differences between metaphor and poetic image where metaphor is studied as an image and is not as creative, innovative, poetical and dynamic as a poetic image. He believes that contrary to the poetic image, metaphor carries the old meanings of perception. According to Bachelard (1988), metaphors, like concepts, are used by thought and reason rather than by soul; therefore, metaphors have less value to poetry because they are intellectualized images. For Bachelard, metaphors are considered as false images which lack the directness of an image formed in reverie. Probably what Bachelard means by metaphor here is identifying similarities at the literal level. He makes a distinction between metaphor as a concrete perceptual image and a poetic image as an imagined image. Studying the distinction between these two reflects the phenomenological view of imagination in poetry where the literary/poetic imagination is different from act of imagining as perception. According to

Bachelard, a poetic image “destroys the lazy images of perception. Literary [poetic] imagination disimagines to better imagine” (1948/2003, p. 26). The term ‘disimagine’ refers to Bachelard’s notion of “metaphors of metaphors” (Bachelard, 1971/2005, p. xi). The former metaphor refers to already established and recurring familiar images in our mind and the world. The latter metaphor refers to the act of imagination giving new life and reality to the old metaphors, images of perception and their meanings. For Bachelard, images must, in some way, be reactivated by imagination which animates “the elementary *correspondence* between man and the world”. The imagination must instil “a second life into familiar images”; it must create “metaphors of metaphors” (Gaudine’s introduction in Bachelard, 1971/2005, p. xi).

With reference to Bachelard’s phenomenology of imagination, further distinctions between metaphor and poetic image can be made in order to characterize the quality of imagination in poetry as being able to create fresh and innovative images. For Bachelard, metaphor is real, whereas poetic image is unreal. This means that poetic image is not bound to conceptual reality. Poetic image is original because it comes before thought and it relates to the realm of archetypes (Hans, 1977). On the other hand, metaphor is intellectual and belongs to the realm of mind. Hans (1977) characterises Bachelard’s poetic image as “variational, reverberational, valuational and dynamic” (p. 317). The poetic image does not have a past. Metaphor is apprehended once for all while poetic image is new each time it is apprehended.

The discussion on the concept of metaphor and the creative power of imagination in Ricoeur’s hermeneutics and Bachelard’s phenomenology indicates the existence of the

level and intensity in the innovative power of imagination in creating meanings in language and in poetry. The capability of language/metaphor/ poetic image to create new meanings as discussed above is the result of mediating role of imagination. Imagination plays a key role in establishing a new semantic relevance in irrelevant semantic fields. It synthesizes incongruent, dissimilar, opposites or impertinent elements and restructures new semantic fields. At the literal level, imagination puts together the already-established, recurring and familiar images and creates meaning without transferring to a new semantic field. These processes make a “semantic shock” through which (new) meanings emerge out of the ruins of literal meanings. Semantic shock is the result of mediating role of imagination in abolishing the logical distance between separate semantic fields (Kearney, 1998, p. 4). Dynamic freshness of metaphor/poetic image depends on the extent and strength of semantic shock involved in creation of meaning. In the context of poem, since the poetic image is put in relationship with other images, semantic shock leads to more innovative and new meanings through the medium of imagination.

Intentionality and Imagination

Phenomenology basically studies how we experience ranging from perception, thought, memory, desire, and so on. Imagination certainly is one of the various types of human experience which phenomenology attempts to define and conceptualize. In this section, the focus is to show how the concept of ‘intentionality’ in phenomenological studies conceptualizes imagination as the medium of creating meanings in language. In addition,

the concept of ‘double intentionality’ will be used to explain the role imagination in creation of meanings in poetry. Intentionality refers to direct meanings of things. Double intentionality refers to indirect meanings that exist behind direct meanings as mostly seen in poetry. Before proceeding to discuss these issues, it is important to define ‘intentionality’ and explain the relationship between intentionality and consciousness in phenomenological studies. In phenomenology,

The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object.

An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions (Smith, 2008, Phenomenology, para. 1).

Intentionality is a particular characteristic of consciousness in phenomenological studies. It is “the property of consciousness that it is a consciousness of or about something”; intentionality means ‘aboutness’, that every mental process has always a reference to a content or is directed upon an object or a phenomenon (Perus, 1997, para. 2). This means that consciousness by itself does not exist. It exists because it always “intends”, “represents” or “is directed” towards a content or an object or a phenomenon (Smith, 2008, para. 5). In phenomenology, consciousness is known as “intentional consciousness” and its acts as intentional acts of consciousness. Imagination as an act of consciousness or a mode of consciousness was first articulated by Husserl (1970). He also defined the concept of image as “a thing in consciousness, a *relation* – an act of

consciousness directed to an object beyond consciousness” (Husserl, 1970, p. 14). The following helps to understand the relationship between intentionality and consciousness:

Consciousness is defined by intentionality. It is consciousness of an object on the one hand and an inner awareness of itself on the other hand. Being confronted with an object, I am at once conscious of this object and aware of my being conscious of it. This awareness in no way means reflection: to know that I am dealing with the object which, for instance, I am just perceiving, I need not experience a second act bearing upon the perception and making it its object. In simply dealing with the object I am aware of this very dealing (Gurwitsch, 1940, p. 330).

This means that every experience has a ‘primary object’, which is external and is not in consciousness, and the ‘secondary object’, which is internal and is the object in consciousness. Thus, the secondary object must include not only the consciousness of the primary object, but also the consciousness of this consciousness. For the very same reason every intentional consciousness of a primary object must in addition include itself as its own secondary object, every intentional consciousness of a secondary object must in addition include itself as its own tertiary object, and so forth (Gurwitsch, 1940).

So far the relationship of intentionality and consciousness has been discussed. The attempt here is to define imagination as an intentional act of consciousness in creation of meaning first in language and then in poetry. Intentional act is when an act is directed towards an object under a certain aspect by its abstract content that is the meaning of that act. Image and imagination as intentional acts acquire their meanings in the process of

directedness or aboutness, that is, intentionality. Let's consider a pen and an act of imagining a pen as an intentional act of consciousness. The image of a pen is constructed in our mind as the result of imagining, when we become conscious of both the object of pen and also the act of our being conscious of it. The mental representation of the pen shapes meaning of the pen. Meaning of the pen is different from the real object. The intentional act here is imagining or image-making. This means that we do not *understand* the pen, *feel* the pen, *believe* the pen or have other *experiences* with the pen. Otherwise, the meaning of pen would be changed in terms of different experiences. Our experience is to imagine a pen. Hence the resultant meaning of a pen is specific to this intentional act of imagining. The explanation given above is an example of creating direct meaning from the perspective of the theory of intentionality. Images derive their specific aboutness from the specific aboutness of the ideas, beliefs, and intentions of their creators – the poets, for instance, in the case of images in poetry.

In imagining experience as an intentional act of consciousness, when objects are not present or when we imagine things that do not refer to any real objects in the world, the above discussion centers on the idea of double intentionality. This is mostly the case of images in poetry. How do their meanings shape? How are indirect meanings of images formed behind their direct meanings? What follows investigates the answers to these questions.

We are conscious of absent or non-existent things in the same way as for real objects according to the theory of intentionality (Siewert, 2006). The argument concentrates on the way meanings are created through the act of imagining. The example

symbol will be explained with regard to meanings of non-existent objects, absent objects or images with indirect meanings such as in poetry. Symbols illustrate how the intentional act of imagining of an image (referring to a symbol) results in meanings that embody layers of indirect meanings. The focus of discussion is that “A symbol is a double intentionality”. This means that “one meaning is transgressed or transcended by another”, which is the work of imagination (Kearney, 1998, p. 154).

Cosmic symbols are categorized as the most basic level of symbols because they include “both a thing and a sign”. Cosmic symbols refer to “aspects of the world – the heavens, the sun, the moon, the waters – as *signs* of some ultimate meaning” (Kearney, 1998, p. 151). This means that the real object is present in the world like in the case of a pen but it also has another referent. We become conscious of “water” as a thing, for instance, when our consciousness intends towards it through the intentional act of imagining. As a result, its literal meaning is formed, that is to say, water referring to its real colourless liquid. In addition, consciousness intends towards water as “sign” whose referent is not present. It is through the double intentional act of imagining that we become conscious of its significance as a symbol. As a result, its symbolic meaning is created, for example water as referring to renewed spiritual life.

The intentional act of imagining becomes more creative in other categories of symbols – for instance dream images and poetic images. Dream images are images of the collective and individual unconscious. Dream exemplifies “how we can say things other than what we are ostensibly saying; how behind direct meanings there are indirect ones. Because of this double intentionality, symbols are what make ‘poets of every dreamer’ ”

(Ricoeur in Kearney 1998, p.154). Symbol in poetry reveals “the welling-up of language”, or as Ricoeur believes it is “language in a state of emergence” (Kearney, 1998, p. 154). Symbol in poetry carries the highest level of creativity in the imagining act. It is important to note that symbol may not be created if it could not be imagined, referring to imagining as an intentional experience. In other words, its meanings is formed or created through the intentional act of imagining.

The conceptualization of imagination in the phenomenological studies using the concept of “intentionality” illustrates the role of imagination in creation of meanings in poetry which is made through a double intentionality. The double intentionality of imagination in poetry characterizes this concept with a sense of communicability which it creates in the context of the poem (Zalipour, 2010 forthcoming). As discussed earlier, intentionality means directedness or aboutness. In the case of the poetic image, there is a double intentionality. According to the theory of intentionality, when consciousness is directed toward an object, that is to say, when we become conscious of an object, an image is made. This image has its specific and direct meaning with regard to its maker/creator and experience of the imagining act. When this image (with its direct meaning) is put in the context of the poem by the poet, it is directed toward another image in the poem, and in such a context the image acquires another meaning (moving to a new semantic field) through the second act of intentionality. Poetic images are capable of being directed at other images in the context of poem. In other words, they can communicate with other images through the double intentional act of imagining, which leads to the creation of new meanings. In the poem, *Place* (1988) by Merwin, for

instance, the communicability of images through the double intentionality of imagination enhances the meaning of the central image of the poem to a symbolic one.

On the last day of the world

I would want to plant a tree

what for

not for the fruit

the tree that bears the fruit

is not the one was planted

I want the tree that stands

in the earth for the first time

with the sun already

going down

and the water

touching its roots

in the earth full of the dead

and the clouds passing

one by one

over its leaves

— Merwin, *The Rain in the Trees* (1988)

In *Place*, Merwin manifests the poet's personal desire on the last day of the world. The persona of the poem desires to plant a tree that does not bear "the fruit". The central image of the poem is a tree which is impregnated with new dimensions of meaning in the course of the image-making process within the context of the poem. The central image – a tree – does not possess the characteristics of a natural tree in the literal level: a woody perennial plant that grows to a height of several feet and typically has a single erect main stem with side branches, and roots in soil. A symbolic image of a tree grows line by line and image by image in this poem, and the image of tree acquires emblematic nuances at the end of the poem. *Place* is initiated with a conceptual image of time and place: "On the last day of the world/ I would want to plant a tree" (lines 1-2). There are many sensory images in his poem that are closely related to the image of tree such as water, roots, clouds, earth, sun and fruit, the sunset, planting a tree, and bearing of the fruit. The central image of them poem, tree, becomes communicable to other images. In *Place*, all images are powerfully link to the central image so that they help the image of tree grows to a symbolic one. This becomes possible through a strong sense of intentionality. This means that the image of tree acquires its symbolic meaning in the process of aboutness as it is directed to other images in the second act of intentionality. The tree's specific aboutness is fed by the poet's intentions to create the symbolic image of the tree. The

image of the tree as an intentional act is about a real tree, but within the certain imaginary and the context of the poem it acquires its new meaning. In other words, the image of tree does not refer to the object of tree in real life. Communicability of the central image of the poem, close association of the images in terms of their meaning as well as the condensed imagery of the poem help the creation of symbolic meaning of the tree that can only be planted in the last day of the world.

Conclusion

The link between imagination and language has been addressed by the phenomenological thinkers. The crucial role that imagination plays in the creation of meaning as discussed in Ricoeur's 'semantic innovation' makes it evident that images can no longer be adequately understood in terms of their immediate appearance to consciousness and imagination is no longer the power of images to represent absent objects (Kearney, 2004). This paper examined phenomenological /hermeneutic treatment of imagination with the focus on imagination in poetry. The discussion introduced the potential properties of imagination in language and poetry in order to highlight the mediatory role of imagination in creating new meanings. The exploration of the role of imagination as a medium of creating new meanings in language by phenomenologists, takes the concept of imagination further in its developmental conceptualizations as a creative faculty of images. A more innovative and creative power of imagination in poetry is gleaned by comparing the examinations of metaphorical utterances in language and in poetry. The explanation also highlighted the level of creativity of imagination and poetic/literary

image in poetry in comparison with the reduction of imagining to perceiving. The study showed phenomenological explanation of imagination as a medium of creating new meanings which is more intense and innovative in poetry compared with language. The characteristics of poetic image also demonstrated that imagination is not restricted to the realm of perception and sensation. Creative imagination is a reverie in which poetic image is formed.

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