



# From Psychosomatic and Maternal Fancy to Demonic and Cosmic Imagination.

Koen Vermeir

## ► To cite this version:

Koen Vermeir. From Psychosomatic and Maternal Fancy to Demonic and Cosmic Imagination. : Wonders, Imagination and Spirit of Nature in Henry More.. See also the related article: Vermeir, K. (2012) 'Castelli in aria: immaginazione e Spirito della.. 2012. <halshs-01366653>

**HAL Id: halshs-01366653**

**<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01366653>**

Submitted on 15 Sep 2016

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# From Psychosomatic and Maternal Fancy to Demonic and Cosmic Imagination

## Wonders, Imagination and Spirit of Nature in Henry More.

Koen Vermeir (CNRS)<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction: a desire for cherries

In 1648, Johan Baptista van Helmont's magnum opus, the *Ortus medicinae*, was published posthumously by his son, Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont. This monumental challenge to Galenic medicine contained repeated descriptions of the extraordinary powers of the imagination. In one favourite example, the physician and alchemist from Brussels describes the action of the imagination of a pregnant woman. At the very moment that she desired sweet cherries, this woman also scratched her forehead with her finger. As a result, a mark in the form of a cherry was formed on the forehead of the child she gave birth to. Such stories were not exceptional. In his treatise on the weapon salve, published in the same period, Sir Kenelm Digby gives a similar example of the powers of the maternal imagination. He describes how a young pregnant woman was infatuated with the fashions of the day, and she paid much attention to painting beauty spots on her face. Digby warned her that if she would focus her imagination and her desires too much on her make-up, she might give birth to a child full of such spots. His advice worked too well, because although she renounced of a make-up with beauty spots, the fear of bearing a child with a big mole on its face became fixed in her imagination. A few weeks later, the lady brought forth a girl with an enormous spot on the middle of his forehead - ironically marking the seat of the imagination.<sup>2</sup>

Van Helmont added a curious detail to his story, however. The image of the cherry that was imprinted on the skin of the baby changed colour according to the different seasons - green, yellow, red – as if a real cherry grew on the child's body. For van Helmont, this indicated that in some way, the essences of all things are hidden in us, and they can be brought forth by imagination. The imagination can produce images that become "real" in a certain sense; there

---

<sup>1</sup> Koen Vermeir, CNRS (UMR 7219, SPHERE); Univ Paris Diderot, Sorbonne Paris Cité, F-75013 Paris, France. This chapter is based on previous research, published as Koen Vermeir, "Castelli in Aria: Immaginazione e Spirito Della Natura in Henry More." *LoSguardo* 10 (2012): 99–124. It was written in early 2012 and I have not been able to incorporate material published since then. Note that, with the title of this article, I do not want to focus attention on any differences between "fancy" and "imagination", which is discussed elsewhere (e.g. *Phantasia-Imaginatio*, ed. by M. Fattori and M. Bianchi (Roma: Edizioni dell' Ateneo, 1988)). This distinction does not seem to be significant for my current argument, which is focused on the work of Henry More. Instead, I look into the differences and relations between psychosomatic, maternal, demonic, and what I here call, a "cosmic" imagination.

<sup>2</sup> Kenelm Digby, *A late discourse made in a solemne assembly of nobles and learned men at Montpellier in France touching the cure of wounds by the powder of sympathy*. London: R. Lownes and T. Davies, 1658, p. 101-108.

had appeared something that very much resembled a "real" cherry on the baby's skin. The case as related by van Helmont was even more wonderful. When this child visited Spain later in his life, the progression of colours occurred earlier in the year, according to the succession of seasons in that country. This correlation confirmed the existence of an action at the distance by some kind of spirit. For van Helmont, the imagination was some kind of magnetism that acts at a distance, or vice versa, magnets had some kind of active imagination in them.<sup>3</sup> Such stories of the wondrous powers of imagination were not just related for the effect of curiosity and wonder. They were treated as facts, attested for by many witnesses, which had to shore up specific medical and philosophical systems. For van Helmont, it was one way to show the shortcomings of the Galenic theory.

Van Helmont's story was taken up by Henry More, and it became a central example in support of More's philosophical system.<sup>4</sup> Henry More knew Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont well, Johan Baptista's son and editor, and he was strongly influenced by the medical and philosophical views of the family Van Helmont. In this paper, I will look at More's reappropriation of van Helmont's example, together with other stories of the powers of imagination, and how More put them to work in order to support core elements of his philosophy. The recent secondary literature has discussed theories of the maternal imagination in relation to animal generation and heredity, ignoring the broader context of theories of the powerful imagination.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I will show how van Helmont's story about the maternal imagination was used to explore the action of souls after death, the power of demons and the shape of paradise. Furthermore, the cherry imprinted on the skin of the fetus provided Henry More with empirical proof for the activity of the Spirit of Nature, and it was instrumental in his defence of Christianity against atheists and enthusiasts. In the end, More would attribute special powers, even a cosmic reach, to the imagination. These extended powers were made plausible or were rejected by comparing or contrasting them to the effects of the maternal imagination.

### **The power of imagination**

The idea that the imagination of a woman could have an effect on the foetus was not new. Quintillian had already referred to similar cases. If a woman had been looking at a beautiful statue of Adonis during conception, the child would be beautiful, even if the father were ugly. Or if a woman had been thinking of an Ethiopian, the child would be born black. Even in the

---

<sup>3</sup> The cherry example is elaborated in different places by Van Helmont, see e.g. Johan Baptista van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae*, 1648, pp. 40, 341, 351, 362, 538, and especially 772-3. For magnetism and imagination, see R. Poma, *Magie et guérison: la rationalité de la médecine magique, XVIe-XVIIe*. Paris: Orizons, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Henry More *The Immortality of the Soul*, chapter 7. I will refer to More's main philosophical works as follows: **AA**: *An Antidote against Atheism*; **ET**: *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus*; **IS**: *The Immortality of the Soul*. For the purpose of this paper, I am using the 1662 edition of *A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings* (London, 1662) which binds these works together. **GMG**: H. More, *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* (London, 1660). **EM**: H. More, *Enchiridion Metaphysicum in Henrici Mori Cantabrigiensis Opera Philosophica* (London, 1679).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. J. E. H. Smith, "Imagination and the Problem of Heredity in Mechanist Embryology," in *The Problem of Animal Generation in Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by J. E. H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 80–99. A. Blank, "Material souls and imagination in late Aristotelian embryology," *Annals of science*, 67:2 (2010) 187–204.

bible, this phenomenon was mentioned already in the story of Jacob. Jacob made his cattle produce striped or speckled offspring by putting patterned rods in the water troughs. Seeing these stripes affected the imagination of the sheep and the image was imprinted on their offspring. These stories became much more widespread in the medieval and early modern period, when it was taken up in medical discussions, and when the exact nature and extent of the force of the imagination became controversial.<sup>6</sup>

Early modern theories of the imagination were based on a mixture of ancient philosophical and medical traditions. In *De Anima*, Aristotle had characterised the imagination mainly as a cognitive faculty. The physiology of imagination was developed by Galen, who identified the *pneuma* or animal spirit as the instrument of the soul. The imagination was thought to consist of these animal spirits, which also transported sense perceptions to the imagination and transmitted intentions back to the body. Because of its mediating role between body and mind, the imagination is subject to physical disturbances and imbalances of the bodily fluids. This could lead to mental illness, but the imagination could also be the cause of physical illnesses. Some medieval and early modern authors attributed stronger powers to the imagination, however, going far beyond the traditional Galenic system.

In the early modern period, it was not uncommon to distinguish between three or four different levels in the power of the imagination.<sup>7</sup> First, there is the psychosomatic power of the imagination on the proper body. This psychosomatic action was widely recognised, and discussions of it played a role in many discourses, prominently medical, but certainly also philosophical and religious. Images in the imagination can make one blush, or can arouse one sexually, for instance. The extent of this action was controversial, however, and physicians as well as philosophers wondered to what extent the imagination could really change the body. Michel de Montaigne writes that certain authors had attributed the stigmata of Saint Francis to the force of the imagination instead of to a miracle.<sup>8</sup> It was even suggested that the force of the imagination could change people in werewolves. Medical research into the bodily economy, the circulation of vapours, animal spirits and blood, brain research and philosophical theories of the action of the lower faculties of the soul were essential elements that challenged or supported particular versions of this notion of the imagination.

A second level of the power of the imagination was the force of the mother's imagination on the unborn foetus.<sup>9</sup> Thomas Fienus, a conservative medical professor at the University of

---

<sup>6</sup> For a brief sketch of the history of the powers of imagination, see T. Griffero, *Immaginazione Attive. Breve storia dell'immaginazione transitiva*. Firenze: Edmond Le Monnier, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Francis Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon* (E. Spedding ed.), Stuttgart: Frommann, 1989, vol. II, *Sylva Silvarum* § 944 for a three-tiered distinction: "The power of imagination is of three kinds; the first upon the body of the imaginant, including likewise the child in the mother's womb; the second is, the power of it upon dead bodies, as plants, wood, stone, metal, &c.; the third is, the power of it upon the spirits of men and living creatures."

<sup>8</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* (Pierre Villey ed., Verdun-L. Saulnier rev.) (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), book I, essay 21. Such ideas were already expressed in the medieval period; see Vauchez André, "Les Stigmates de Saint François et Leurs Détracteurs Dans Les Derniers Siècles Du Moyen Âge," *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire*, 80 (1968), 595–625; Alain Boureau, "Miracle, Volonté et Imagination: La Mutation Scolastique (1270-1320)," *Actes des congrès de la Société des historiens médiévistes de l'enseignement supérieur public*, 25 (1994), 159–72.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent account on the role of imagination in theories of the formation of the fetus during the Renaissance, see e.g. A. Blank, op.cit.

Louvain, called the unborn foetus an 'alien internal body'.<sup>10</sup> The foetus was distinct from the mother's body, but it was nevertheless physically connected with the mother. Because of the direct physical bond between them, it was not such a great wonder that the imagination of the mother did not only affect her own body, but could also alter the body of the unborn child by some psychosomatic principle. Fienus' defended the ancient notion that strong emotions influence the body by disturbing the balance of the four constituent humors, and this would also affect the unborn child. In the early modern period, the force of the maternal imagination on the foetus was generally considered a direct extension of the psychosomatic imagination. Francis Bacon even considered them under the same heading.<sup>11</sup> Because the body of the foetus was in a formative stage, and still very malleable, the imagination could more easily leave an impression on the foetus than on the mother's own body. Learned discussions focussed on the period in which the matter of the foetus was still soft enough for such impressions to take place, even if wonder stories often referred to effects of the maternal imagination just before the delivery of the child.<sup>12</sup>

Van Helmont's story of the child with a cherry imprint indicated that there was more involved, however. In this case, the maternal imagination did not just imprint an image on the body of the unborn child, but something of the essence of the cherry was also communicated. Furthermore, this cherry, created by the imagination, stood in some kind of sympathetic connection to the world outside. Van Helmont therefore conceived of a theory of a stronger, sympathetic imagination, which bound certain aspects of the world together with invisible bonds.<sup>13</sup> Van Helmont was not the only one to do this. In fact, the notorious medical reformer Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, better known as Paracelsus, had also propounded theories of a strong imagination. For Paracelsus, the imagination was a central element in healing, but the troubled and excited imagination of a dying pregnant woman could also create contagious diseases and could even cause the plague to imprint itself on a victim's vital spirit.<sup>14</sup> The power of the maternal imagination becomes thus part of a larger dynamic of the powers of the imagination, including effects on external bodies and persons.

The third level of the force of the imagination was therefore on things outside the body, sometimes even far away. Some scholars thought that the imagination could create apparitions in the sky or influence the growth of plants or the movements of shuffling cards in a deck. On the fourth level, the imagination affects the body and mind of other people. Phenomena such as fascination, the evil eye, contagious diseases and witchcraft were explained by some in

---

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Fienus, *De Viribus imaginationis Tractatus*, Louvain: Gérard Rivius, 1609.

<sup>11</sup> Bacon, op.cit., *Sylva Silvarum* § 944.

<sup>12</sup> Van Helmont reports that in 1602, during the last years of the war between Spain and the Netherlands, the pregnant wife of Marcus van Vogelaar, a merchant from Antwerp, watched a wounded soldier begging. The man had lost his right arm during the battle of Ostend (1601–1604), and he kept his blood-covered arm with him at all times, for the dramatic effect. This produced such a vivid impression on the frightened woman, that she gave birth a few days later of a girl with only one arm - at the other side was only a blood-stained scar. It is unclear, however, whether this was a premature birth. See Van Helmont, op.cit., p. 599-600.

<sup>13</sup> See G. Giglioli, *Immaginazione e malattia. Saggio su Jan Baptiste Van Helmont*. Milan: Franco Angeli, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. A. Weeks, *Paracelsus: Speculative Theory and the Crisis of the Early Reformation* (Albany: State University of New York, 1997), 69-71, 138-40; and H. Schott, "Paracelsus and van Helmont on Imagination: Magnetism and Medicine before Mesmer," in *Paracelsan Moments: Science, Medicine, and Astrology in Early Modern Europe*, ed. G. Scholz Williams and Charles Gunnoe Jr. (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2002), 135-47.

terms of a powerful imagination. Others believed in a 'mastering spirit', by means of which one could control the mind and will of others.<sup>15</sup> This was very controversial territory, however. Stories and explanations involving the force of the imagination were at the limit of what was deemed possible and acceptable for experiential, epistemic and religious reasons. One important reason why this idea of the strong force of the imagination was suspect is that it was used to explain alleged miracles and the divine power of holy objects in natural terms. A second reason is that ideas of a 'mastering spirit' are problematic from the perspective of orthodox views on free will. Finally, some of the theories of the powers of imagination had their roots in highly suspect intellectual traditions.<sup>16</sup>

When Henry More wanted to enlist such accounts of the wondrous power of the imagination, he felt he had to navigate between the Scylla of atheism and the Charybdis of enthusiasm. On the one hand, he could employ such stories and facts about the strong imagination for his own argument, and he used the story of the cherry, for instance, as evidence of the existence of immaterial spirits. On the other hand, he would dismiss the theories of Paracelsus, Pomponazzi, Vannini and other central authors in the tradition of the powers of the imagination as atheist and enthusiast. He considered them to be his main opponents, in an attempt to keep at bay the many religious and epistemic dangers associated to such theories.

### **Enthusiastic imaginations**

For Henry More, the defence of Christianity expressed itself in two central preoccupations. First, More staged an attack on atheism in his *An Antidote against Atheism*. This obsession with atheism would be pervasive throughout his oeuvre. One instance of this is his accusation of Pomponazzi, Cardano, Gaffarel and Vanini,<sup>17</sup> because they argue that miracles and apparitions are the effect of the stars or of the imagination. More's second concern was the even more dangerous phenomenon of false religion, something he discussed prominently in his *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus*.<sup>18</sup> One of the reasons he was so preoccupied with enthusiasm is because of an earlier controversy with Thomas Vaughan, in which he tried to distance himself from the latter's more 'magical' philosophy. In particular, More dismisses Vaughan

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Bacon, op.cit., *Sylva Silvarum* § 940.

<sup>16</sup> Theories of the powers of the imagination were in this period often attributed to "Arab philosophers" such as Avicenna, see e.g. the ironical treatment in Meric Casaubon: '... the opinion of some Enthusiasts Arabs, as Avicenna and some others, embraced by some professing Christianity also; who did ascribe so much to the strength of imagination, as if Rain, and Thunder, and even Earthquakes might be caused by it. Certainly, they that did believe this, really, had a very strong imagination. How comes it to pass, they never did none of those miracles?' Meric Casaubon, *A treatise proving spirits, witches, and supernatural operations*, London: Brabazon Aylmer, 1672, p. 103.

<sup>17</sup> See AA 138 and GMG 282, 334-360, reprinted separately as a book, *Tetractys Anti-Astrologica* (London, 1681), and in EM 302-307.

<sup>18</sup> On enthusiasm, see especially M. Heyd, "Be Sober and Reasonable". *The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth century* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

'preposterous and fortuitous imaginations', resorting to all kinds of abusive language that refers to the pernicious effects of mere 'imagination and phancies'.<sup>19</sup>

In the opening sentences of the 1655 edition of *An Antidote against Atheism*, as well as in the 1662 edition of *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus*, More makes clear that a strong imagination or fancy was a central cause of both atheism and enthusiasm: 'Atheism and Enthusiasm, though they seem so extremely opposite to one another, yet in many things they do very nearly agree. For, to say nothing of their joynt conspiracy against the true knowledge of God and Religion, they are commonly entertain'd, though successively, in the same complexion. For that Temper that disposes a man to listen to the Magisterial Dictates of an over-bearing *Phansy*, more than to the calm and cautious insinuations of free *Reason*, is a subject that by turns does very easily lodge and give harbour to these mischievous Guests' (ET 1). In a different sense, a strong imagination was also the sign of both atheism and enthusiasm. Indeed, it is striking that More singled out those philosophers and physicians who defended theories of a strong imagination (of level three or four in our classification) as targets for his ranting. Paracelsus, Pomponazzi, and Vanini are mentioned many times and are attacked, the first usually as an enthusiast, the other two as atheists, although they are often accused of both charges (cf. ET 33-35).

In the *Immortality of the Soul*, he puts them in the company of the notorious heathen philosophers: 'To such an extent as this have *Avicenna, Algazel, Paracelsus, Pomponatius, Vaninus* and others, exalted the power of humane Imagination.' (IS 169) He explains that they attribute so wonderful force to the imagination, that it will affect other people's bodies at a distance, that it will inflict diseases, heal the sick, cause storms (cf. Paracelsus), strike down horses and camels (an example from Algazel) and it will do all the feats of Witchcraft. More vigorously rejected these authors' theories of the powers of imagination, because they materialized spiritual phenomena, and naturalized the supernatural. On the other hand, he did not want to reject van Helmont's stories, which were recounted with so honest and credible circumstances. More's divergent reaction to different theories of the power of imagination is based on his attitude towards his acquaintances as well as on his metaphysical theories and general philosophical outlook. More is famous for integrating a Cartesian-style dualism and a particular attention to the functioning of the body with Neoplatonic tradition and with Christian doctrine on the soul. In this way, he wanted to safeguard the immaterial from radical and materialist philosophers. In order to do this, he had to develop a specific view on the imagination.<sup>20</sup>

More expresses his opposition to materialist physicians and philosophers who suggest that the theory of animal spirits is sufficient to explain the physiological and intellectual functions of man: 'that which impresses *Spontaneous Motion* upon the *Body*, or more immediately upon

---

<sup>19</sup> Henry More [Alazonomastix Philalethes], *Observations upon Anthroposophia Theomagica, And Anima Magica Abscondita*. London: I. Flesher, 1655, such observations passim, and the long quote on p. 66. For some (rather dated) literature on the controversy, see Noel L. Brann, 'The Conflict between Reason and Magic in Seventeenth-Century England: A Case Study of the Vaughan-More Debate,' *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 43:2 (1980), 103-126. Frederic B. Burnham, 'The More-Vaughan Controversy: The Revolt Against Philosophical Enthusiasm,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 35:1, 33-49.

<sup>20</sup> This section is based on my article K. Vermeir, 'Imagination between Physick and Philosophy. On the Central Role of the Imagination in the Work of Henry More (1614-1687)', *Intellectual History Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, (2008), 119-137.

the *Animal Spirits*, that which *imagines, remembers and reasons*, is an *Immaterial Substance distinct from the Body*, which uses the *Animal Spirits* and the *Brains* for instruments in such and such Operations.' (AA 36) He continues: 'And thus we have found a *Spirit in the proper Notion and signification* that has apparently these Faculties in it, it can both understand, and move Corporeal Matter.' (*loc.cit.*, my emphasis) According to More, to understand the parts of the soul, such as imagination, memory, and reason, one needs to posit an immaterial spirit that can guide the material spirits in their performance of their different functions.

In the early modern period it was widely accepted that the lower functions of the soul (perception, memory, and imagination) were material faculties constituted of animal spirits and located in different parts of the brain. Controversial, however, was the suggestion that some parts of the brain were responsible for reasoning as well. Both mechanistic and vitalist explanations of intellectual processes were threatening to More's core beliefs. If complex mechanical organisation or sentient matter could explain all physiological and psychological processes, an immaterial soul could be dispensed with. For traditional Christian philosophers, the imagination mediates between the material body and the immaterial soul, sharing characteristics of both. But the imagination, as a material faculty, might come to usurp the functions of higher faculties, or alternatively, these higher faculties may be seen as material in the same way the imagination is. The result could be the denial of an immaterial soul, the materialist and atheist conclusion More tried to prevent.<sup>21</sup>

More tries to steer away from this line of reasoning by creating a sharp metaphysical distinction between matter and soul. He strongly opposed all contemporary suggestions of sentient or animated matter as well as 'emergence' theories based on biological organisation and complexity.<sup>22</sup> More developed an original metaphysics in which matter is purely passive, and immaterial spirit is the only active principle in the world. In the *Axioms* at the beginning of *The Immortality of the Soul*, body is defined as a divisible and impenetrable substance. Spirit or immaterial substance is defined as its opposite: indivisible and penetrable. (IS 19-21) Particularly striking is More's statement that both substances are extended; they occupy a certain amount of space. More sometimes illustrates the properties of Spirit with a sphere of light. A sphere of light is extended and penetrable but one cannot cut a piece from it and separate it from the whole. Furthermore, a change in the centre of the orb, such as a change in colour or luminosity, will alter the whole sphere at once, which is an analogical demonstration of the unity of Spirit. (AA 173)

Such a strong metaphysical dualism is the first step in safeguarding the independent existence of immaterial spirit. It nips in the bud the possibility of sentient matter as well as of a real mediating faculty between body and soul. Furthermore, More's stress on the passivity of matter is a response to the suggestion that physicians and radical philosophers might not need a soul to explain psychological functions; that the mechanical workings of body, imagination, and animal spirits are enough to explain perception, thought, and action. In contrast, as a Neo-

---

<sup>21</sup> For More's reaction to Hobbes, Cartesians, and the Spinozists, see e.g. A. Jacob, *Henry More's Refutation of Spinoza* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1991). Gabbey, 'Philosophica Cartesiana Triumphata'.

<sup>22</sup> For More's attack on the vitalist physician Glisson, see Henry, 'Medicine and pneumatology'. For a discussion of Glisson, see G. Giglioli, *The Genesis of Francis Glisson's Philosophy of Life* (PhD dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2002).



Platonist, More accepts Plato's view that the brain, the corona, or the animal spirits serve only as *instruments* for an immaterial soul. He argues in detail that they cannot be identical with the common percipient or *sensus communis*. Without a soul, they cannot count as a sufficient principle of spontaneous motion. They are merely matter and cannot move by themselves.

According to More, the soul itself is an extended substance, expanded over the whole body so that it can guide the animal spirits. It is the *soul* that does the perceiving, by moving and directing the subtle matter of the animal spirits. It is the *soul* that imagines, by playing with the forms impressed on the animal spirits in the fourth ventricle. For More, the crucial distinction is not between a lower material soul and a higher immaterial soul but rather between a material instrument and an immaterial soul which perceives, imagines, reasons, wills, and remembers: 'That which *imagines, remembers and reasons*, is an *Immaterial Substance distinct from the Body*, which uses the *Animal Spirits* and the *Brains* for instruments in such and such Operations.' (AA 36) In this way, More tries to keep the strict distinction between soul and body in place. The animal spirits and the brain are part of the complex but passive armamentarium that constitutes the body, which the soul uses in order to perform her functions.

This is an original view in the early modern debates on the imagination. It is different from the traditional distinction between a material organic (vegetative and sensitive) soul and an immaterial intellectual soul. It also stands in contrast to Cartesian dualism. In Descartes' system, motion is a *modus* of matter and can be transferred to other matter in a collision. This made Descartes' animal machine possible: the body and the lower faculties up to the imagination could function mechanically without the help of a soul. Humans had a rational soul that was joined to the body but had no material substrate. This Cartesian dualism was unacceptable for More. He argued that matter is absolutely passive. Any change in the direction of motion is the result of an act of an immaterial substance on matter (for movement in nature, this is the Spirit of Nature). In humans this means that not only reason, but also perception and imagination cannot be material and are functions of an immaterial soul.

How exactly the soul can interact with matter, however, remains mysterious, also for More. More writes 'that a firm union of *Spirit* and *Matter* is very possible, though we cannot conceive the manner thereof' (IS 33). It is like a mathematical paradox: 'we must acknowledge there is some other Substance besides the *Matter* that acts in it and upon it, which is *Spiritual*, though we know not how *Motion* can be communicated to *Matter* from a *Spirit*.' (AA 135) In *The Immortality of the Soul*, More tries to elucidate this in another way. He notes that the unity of body and soul is not mechanical but vital. 'Vital congruity' is a property of both soul and matter that makes matter a congruous subject for the soul to reside in. Matter thus modified sends out 'rays of subtle reek' to allure the soul. More calls it a '*Magick-sphere* [...] that has this power of conjuring down Souls into *Earthly Bodies*'. Matter is brought in harmony with the 'plastick' part of the soul. Both are bound together in an 'unresistible and unperceptible pleasure' (IS 121).<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> This is also the way the soul descends into the body, when the matter of the fetus is properly formed after conception, by an irresistible attraction to it. (IS 121)

## The malleable body

The plastick part of the soul is the deepest or lowest power of the soul, which regulates the heartbeat, respiration and other biological functions of the body. These biological functions follow the laws of nature, that is, they follow the direction given to them by the spirit of nature. According to More, it is not only this plastick power that is implicated in the union of spirit and matter, but this unity is also determined by the imagination. It is clear, More asserts, that imagination will bring real and sensible effects to pass. Some have raised diseases in their own bodies by too strongly imagining them; at remembering a filthy thing they started vomiting; or at the imagining of a potion they had a purging. More extreme reports are those recounting changes in the shape of the body, such as growing horns on it, or becoming gray after being scared. For More, this indicates that the free imagination assists the plastick power of the soul and can do wondrous things. (IS 169)

The power of the maternal imagination on the fetus best elucidates this process. According to More, the plastick power in the fetus is 'directed' or 'seduced' by the force of the mother's imagination. In this way, the body, or part of the body, of the unborn child takes on the form of the image that was fixed in her imagination. Even the most careful physicians like Fienus admits that the imagination of the mother may change the figure of the fetus, More writes, creating resemblances with all kinds of animals, producing all kinds of excrescences that resemble horns or hoofs, and changing the size and number of the body parts. More gives some classical examples of monstrous births, admitted by Fienus as real effects of the imagination,<sup>24</sup> including a child whose skin and nails resembled those of a bear; a child with many excrescencies colored and figured like those in a turkey; and a child born with a frog's head.

More doubts, however, that all these wondrous effects can be really caused exclusively by the power of the imagination of the mother. It is especially difficult to understand, More writes, because there is no special measure of purification or exaltedness in the mother that we could conceive as the cause of such 'miracles, as I may call them, rather than natural effects' (IS 171). Neither the plastick faculty of the soul of the infant, nor the imagination of the mother, is an adequate cause of the formation of the fetus. More suggests that the Spirit of Nature assists them in this performance, and this would be the real cause which is proportional to so prodigious an effect. The real cause is not the mother's soul that forms the embryo, nor is it the body or soul of the embryo (in this early stage, it has not yet a body nor a soul, properly speaking). Rather, it is the omnipresent Spirit of Nature, which is responsible for enforcing the laws of nature, including biological laws of generation and formation, and it has a hand in the formation of all vital beings. According to More, the form of the fetus is changed, because 'the deeply-impassioned fancy of the Mother snatches away the Spirit of Nature into consent' (IS 172).

The imagination is thus not only a power that connects mind and body, but it has a privileged access to the powers that govern the outer world. The power of the mother's imagination can "seduce" the Spirit of Nature into doing what it desires. The Spirit of Nature,

---

<sup>24</sup> Fienus, *op. cit.*

'snatched into consent by the force of the Imagination of the Mother, retains the Note, and will be sure to seal it on the Body of the Infant.' Once this process is started, the Spirit of Nature will continue it wherever the child is brought. The Spirit of Nature is present everywhere, and is engaged to exert her formative powers everywhere alike, where the matter and circumstances are exactly the same. This also explains well the curious story of Van Helmont. If it is a real cherry that is imprinted on the skin of the child, and not just an image of a cherry, it will be susceptible to the seasons, because the Spirit of Nature works on it. This spirit exerts her formative powers everywhere, whether the child is in Spain or in Flanders, even if the timing might be different. The Spirit of Nature is responsible for the succession for the seasons, and the cherry, planted by the Spirit of Nature herself on the skin of the child, will be subject to seasonal variation.

The role of the imagination as a mediating faculty between body, spirit and the environment is most clear in More's description of how spirits, demons, and genii act on their aerial bodies. Indeed, according to More, all spirits have their proper bodies, and demons and genii are enveloped in a body of very subtle matter. More laughs at the 'ordinary and idiotick misapprehension' that spirits are devoid of any substance as the shadows on the wall (IS 153). Spirits have no less body than we have; only their body is more 'spiritualised'. Our soul moves our fingers and mouth by directing our animal spirits, but the vehicle of the spirits' soul is actually nothing else but subtle 'spirits' (IS 150). The vehicle of aerial spirits is made of a kind of vaporous air, purer and finer than the rest, and they can condense this air in order to become visible:<sup>25</sup> 'But their Bodies being of *diaphanous Aire*, it is impossible for us to see them, unless they will give themselves the trouble of reducing them to a more *terrestrial consistency*, whereby they may reflect light.' (IS 161) Crucially, it is by means of the power of their imagination that these demons and genii can direct, form and condense their bodies.

More understands this power of spiritual beings to give form to their aerial bodies in parallel with the power of the psychosomatic or maternal imagination. It is the widely accepted stories of the maternal imagination that need to lend credence to his account of spirits. More writes of the union between the imagination and the plastic power of the soul. If the imagination of the mother can affect, influence and guide the plastick power of the fetus, it should surely be able to affect the plastick power of her own soul. The effect of this is only less visible than the effect of her imagination on the fetus, because the matter of her terrestrial body is grosser and less flexible than the malleable body of the fetus. In the case of demons and genii, we have a completely different situation, however, because their body consists of very subtle air. Therefore, the effects of the imagination of aerial spirits, working on their own subtle body, a body which is, furthermore, exquisitely pliable, will be incomparably greater than the effects of the mother's imagination on the fetus. 'So the Efformative virtue in Souls separate and the Genii may be governed and directed or perverted by the force of their Imagination' (IS 170). This prerogative of the soul, having the power to shape her vehicle at will, may seem very strange because we do not see the effects of it before our eyes. Nevertheless, More claims, it is not more wonderful than the effect of the maternal imagination on the fetus

---

<sup>25</sup> More distinguishes different degrees of purification, degrees of aerial or ethereal envelopes, depending on the spiritual perfection and on the location in the cosmic hierarchy.

or than the fact that we can move the parts of our body merely by our will and imagination (IS 168).

This analogy between the maternal imagination and the imagination of demons is not so farfetched, because these faculties are essentially the same in More's system. According to More, the soul has three vital congruities: terrestrial, aerial and celestial. After death, when the connection with the terrestrial body is broken, because the body is not fit anymore to house the soul, the soul will leave the body. On that moment, the aerial vital congruity is activated, and when the soul slips out of the terrestrial body, it will connect with a part of the vital air that pervades the lower world and it will assume an aerial envelope (IS 123-5). Note, however, that this aerial congruity is not completely inactive during human life, because the animal spirits that organize the body and are the main instrument of soul are akin to an aerial body which performs its functions within a terrestrial body. This continuity between the terrestrial life and the aerial life of the soul also makes it easier to imagine a transition between them. Indeed, More accepts as true the stories of experiences of ecstasy, noctambulism and witchcraft in which the soul is able to go outside the body and come back later. Although the soul cannot leave the body at will, desire and imagination play a central role in bringing about this separation. A strong passion has such an effect on the vital temper of the body that it can effectuate a separation of body and soul, and the power of imagination may carry the Soul to the place intended (IS 127-129). It is crucial to understand that it is the soul herself who travels to distant places, rather than sending out animal spirits. Indeed, this is the core difference between More's theory and that of his opponents, who believed that the imagination acts at a distance by sending out vapors.<sup>26</sup>

Demons and genii are like wandering souls after death, and they have the same kind of aerial body. The vehicle of demons and aerial spirits is akin to a human being's animal spirits, but because of the subtlety of the aerial body (compared to a terrestrial body), they could also alter its shape: 'And verily, considering the great power acknowledged in *Imagination* by all Philosophers, nothing would seem more strange, then that these *Aiery* Spirits should not have this command over their own Vehicles, to transform them as they please.' (IS 168) In More's spirit theory, the soul can act via the imagination on a quasi-material substance (such as the animal spirits, or an aerial vehicle), give it form and direct it.<sup>27</sup> By means of their imagination, genii and spirits can become visible and give the shape they want to their aerial vehicle, 'for these Aëreal Spirits appear variously clad, some like beautiful Virgins, others like valiant Warriours with their Helmets and Plumes, of feathers.' (IS 168) The Aerial Spirits usually take a human shape because this is the most natural for them; only debased spirits appear more easily in animal shapes.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> How such a process works is clearly described in Della Porta's explanation of fascination: 'Thus it comes to pass, that a young man, being full of thin clear, hot, and sweet blood, sends forth spirits of the same nature. For they are made of the purest blood, by the heat of the heart. And being light, get into the uppermost parts of the body, and fly out by the eyes. And wound those who are most porous, which are fair persons, and the most soft bodies.' Giambattista della Porta, *Magia Naturalis* (Naples, 1558), Book 8, Chapter 14. (The quote is from the 1658 English edition.) See also Bacon, *op.cit.*

<sup>27</sup> On the status of this quasi-material substance, see Koen Vermeir, "Imagination between Physick and Philosophy. On the Central Role of the Imagination in the Work of Henry More (1614-1687).," *Intellectual History Review*, 18 (2008), 119–37.

<sup>28</sup> On the shape of aerial vehicles, see IS 151, 153, 176-177.

## Castles in the air

Reports of wondrous apparitions were crucial for Henry More, because they provided factual proof of the existence and activity of spirits. Such reports were at the core of his philosophical system, because his account of apparitions served to prove central Christian truths, such as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. Those who denied these stories of fantastical apparitions were not the most threatening for More, however. Instead, More considered those who provided competing explanations for apparitions to be his most dangerous opponents. Rhetorically, he states that it would have been better to have denied the narration of the facts, than to give 'so slight and unprobable reason of the *Phaenomenon*' (IS 130). He does spend long sections in each of his important books vigorously arguing against these 'slight and unprobable reasons' that explain away apparitions, however. His opponents are these 'besotted Atheists' who think apparitions are just the effect of a powerful imagination, instead of seeing them as genuine spiritual phenomena. Indeed, theories of the powers of imagination had such an explanatory power that they could be used to explain all kinds of incredible phenomena and miracles. More treats Vanini in particular as the notorious culprit whose 'besotted' ideas have to be countered by a veritable Christian philosophy.<sup>29</sup>

According to More, the atheists call upon different kinds of imagination as an explanatory strategy in order to make their case. First, they claim that these apparitions are not real, but just figments of the imagination. The imagination was widely seen as responsible for all kinds of fictions, distempers and diseases of the mind, from illusions to delusions and outright madness. For some authors: 'all *Apparitions* being with them nothing but the strong surprisals of *Melancholy* and *Imagination*' (IS 133). The reports of apparitions are therefore rejected, not because these reports are false, but because they only reflect the state of mind of the witness. Such an explanation is insufficient for More, however, because it ignores the fact that many witnesses give similar testimonies about an apparition. These ghosts and spirits appear and 'cannot onely be felt and seen, but heard to discourse, and that not onely by them whose Imagination created this airy *Spectrum*, but by other by-standers, whose Fancy contributed nothing to its existence.' (IS XXX Ch5 §12)

Of course, it would be possible in such a case to flatly deny such testimonials. Therefore, More wants to build a philosophical system, because he thinks his critics will not be able to counter his logic, reasons and deductions. They cannot say that there is a fallacy in his work, 'unlesse they can shew the Sophisme: which they cannot doe, where it is not' (IS 133). He is therefore confident that he will be able to convince those who try to deny the facts by metaphysical reasoning. More difficult to counter, however, are those who give new (and often changing) explanations of apparitions. When their astrological theories, or theories of a melancholic imagination, which creates illusionary apparitions, are refuted, they propose another kind of imagination with miraculous powers: 'being beaten off from this slight account, for that many see the same thing at once, then they fly to so miraculous a power of

---

<sup>29</sup> Cesare Vanini, *De admirandis naturae* (Paris: Perier, 1616); Cesare Vanini, *Amphiteatrum aeternae providentiae divino-magicum* (Paris: de Harsy, 1615).

*Phansy*, as if it were able to change the Aire into a reall shape and form, so that others may behold it, as well as he that fram'd it by the power of his *Phansy*' (AA 137).

A notable example of such a theory is Pietro Pomponazzi's explanation of the apparition of Saint Celestin in the Italian village of Aquila. During extraordinary and devastating heavy rains, the people of L'Aquila, a rich village in the Abruzzi, started to pray to their patron, Saint Celestin. They prayed in large groups, continuously and piously; and their prayers were duly answered. The gathered crowd saw the clouds being scattered, and they all witnessed that Saint Celestin himself appeared multiple times in the humid air. This apparition and the ceasing of the rainfall was the rumour of the day and it was widely perceived to be miraculous. This event happened shortly before Pomponazzi composed his book *On Incantations*, around 1520. In this contentious work, he tried to give natural explanations for this and similar extraordinary phenomena. As a strict Aristotelian, Pomponazzi tried to deny the existence of devils and angels and contended that God used natural means to govern the cosmos. His God was a Christianised Aristotelian God, which could not be moved or affected. But as an immovable mover, he gave order to the cosmos. Miracles, in the strict sense as a direct divine intervention in the order of nature, were impossible, but – following an old astrological tradition – Pomponazzi thought that wondrous phenomena were caused by the stars. In the case of the miracle of L'Aquila, Pomponazzi argued that the power of the heavenly bodies could have been stronger than usual, and instead of impressing only the imagination of the gathered faithful, causing an imaginary vision, it was possible that the air too became impressed with the image of the Saint, forming a real apparition.<sup>30</sup>

Although he considered this to be a plausible explanation, it could be objected that it did not take the prayers into account, and it would be a too remarkable coincidence that the apparition (caused by the stars) coincided with the prayers just by chance (that is, not to mention the impiety of the assertion that the prayers had no effect at all). So Pomponazzi embarked on a new explanation, which would incorporate the efficacy of the prayers. Pomponazzi accepted the special power of the imagination, in which it can affect and shape external objects. According to him, physicians often cure patients, not by their suspicious remedies, but by the insensible vapours they exhale, which affect and cure the patient. The imagination can also affect inanimate objects; when the imagination is strengthened by credulity or faith, for instance, the 'spirits' are affected and vapours are emitted. If prayers are fervent and if they come from the bottom of the heart, Pomponazzi argued, they will affect our emotions and our body. When the faithful prayed to Saint Celestin, their imagination was impressed with his image; and this image was further communicated to their spirits. This subtle vapour, in turn, could escape their body, and the image of the Saint could have been impressed on the surrounding air, which was humid and fit to receive an imprint. This explains, according to Pomponazzi, how the Saint could appear in the clouds. The imagination of the faithful was exteriorised and created a real apparition. Vanini was one of Pomponazzi's students, and he discusses Pomponazzi's theories of the imagination e.g. in his *Amphitheatrum*.<sup>31</sup> Because both

---

<sup>30</sup> Pietro Pomponazzi, *De naturalium effectuum causis sive de incantationibus* (Basel: Henricus Petrus, 1567) 159-167.

<sup>31</sup> Vanini, *Amphitheatrum*, p. 52, pp. 67-78. See also Vanini, *De Admirandis*, p. 373 for apparitions.

gave natural explanations of Catholic miracles, they would become known as arch-atheists, and Vanini would end his life burned at the stake.

Henry More considered these explanations as much more incredible than all the magical metamorphoses of devils and witches. He believes that it is far more easy to understand how an animate aerial being is able to form the air in a certain shape, than to conceive 'that the *Imagination* of man, which is but a Modification of his own mind, should be able at a distance to change it into such like Appearances' (AA 138). Even if we suppose that the imagination could shape the distant air in all kinds of forms, the question is whether it can also *animate* the air, because these apparitions speak and answer questions, they put things into the hands of spectators, all feats that have been reported as facts. Furthermore, More finds it hard to believe that the human imagination can project appearances as high as the clouds. Yet it is exactly in the high clouds that often large armies are seen fighting with each other. Vanini explains such apparitions by referring to the power of the imagination, as well as by referring to vapors emitted by the earth and by human bodies.<sup>32</sup> These vapors rise and can create apparitions, sometimes taking with them the image of the men from which they rise, forming the image of people and even of whole battles in the sky. Vanini also considers that reflections of objects and events on earth, projected in the clouds, may be an explanation for these perceived battles and castles in the air.<sup>33</sup>

Henry More, however, objects to these explanations. Even if bodies would emit vapors that rise to the sky, would the horses, the armor and weapons also emit vapors that rise in perfect order as to create an aerial semblance? Would all these vapors not be mixed up in the air? And would these vapors really start fighting with one another, even if there is neither life nor soul in them? More offers a long analysis showing that these airy battles cannot be a mere reflection of battles that are being fought on earth. If the spectators don't hear the battle being fought, it will also be too far away to see a reflection of it in the skies, More thinks. Furthermore, the clouds are never so smooth and polished that they can actually reflect anything. In any case, if they could, they should reflect all kinds of things, not just battles in the sky (EM Ch. XXVI). Cardano and Vanini are fools, according to More, to think they can explain all these apparitions by referring to vapors and imaginations. In Iceland, it is reported that specters of the dead appear in such lively form to the living that they can salute and embrace them. Pomponazzi or Vanini would attribute this to the thickness of the air, and to the foul food and gross spirits of the Icelanders. This implies, More explains, that their fancies are so strong, 'as to convert the thick vaporous aire into the compleat shape of their absent and deceased acquaintance, and so perswade themselves that they see them, and talk with them, whenas it is nothing else but an aiery Image made by the power of their own Fancy' (IS 130). More agrees that the density or 'spissitude' of the air is an important element in the apparition of specters, because the denser the air, the more easily it will be reduced to a visible consistency by the specter. But this airy envelope can only be shaped, More insists, 'not by the fancy of the Spectatour, (for that were a monstrous power) but by the Imagination of the Spirit that actuates its own Vehicle of that gross Aire.' (IS 130).

---

<sup>32</sup> See Vanini, *De Admirandis*, p. 368-379

<sup>33</sup> For the castles in the air, see *ibid.*, p. 370

Apparitions are a core element of More's philosophical system and they are crucial factual confirmation of the existence of immaterial spirits. The main problem he encounters is that some physicians and philosophers have explained away these apparitions by propounding theories of a strong imagination. Nevertheless, More himself has to take recourse to theories of a strong imagination in order to explain the phenomenon. Pomponazzi, Vanini as well as More refer to the power of the maternal imagination on the fetus to make their case that there exist stronger powers of the imagination that can act outside the body. In a crucial passage, More even refers to the theories of Pomponazzi and Vanini to justify his own account: 'And verily, considering the great power acknowledged in Imagination by all Philosophers, nothing would seem more strange, then that these Aiery Spirits should not have this command over their own Vehicles, to transform them as they please.' (IS 168). The crucial difference between More, Pomponazzi and Vanini is that for More, only an animated immaterial spirit can direct and control the vaporous air that it covers by its extension, by means of its imagination. For Pomponazzi and Vanini, the human imagination can act on considerable distances and shape vaporous air in all kinds of shapes. For them, the imagination can be interpreted as a material faculty with special powers, and this threatens More's argument that some immaterial spirit must be involved.

### **Seducing the Spirit of Nature**

Actually, More attributes very strong powers to the imagination of demons and genii. Indeed, in order to explain all the incredible phenomena that were reported in the witchcraft trials, More needed to create his own theory of strong imagination. Only, in his case, this strong imagination was not human, but it belonged instead to aerial spirits, demons and genii. In the same way as they made themselves visible, by condensing their aerial vehicle, they could condense this vehicle even further so that it acquired solidity. Such a strongly condensed vehicle could hit people, take and carry things. The imagination of demons could even make large solid bodies, including humans, levitate. The condensed vehicle apparently did not diminish the demon's agility, nimbleness and preternatural powers, including flight. More considers the imagination of these demons so strong that they can mold material objects and change the bodies of humans. He accepts the often corroborated testimony that men have been turned into wolves, and he acknowledges that they have committed savage cruelties upon children, women and sheep. These werewolves attest to be very weary after the transformation, and sometimes, when wounded, they carry the same wound after being transformed back to their human form. For More, 'it is more naturall to conclude they were *really* thus *transformed*, then that it was a mere *Delusion of Phansy*.'

More explains this phenomenon as follows. He thinks the devil can get into the body of these men, and by his subtle substance, which is more operative and searching than anything else, can melt the constituents of the human body into such a consistency that he can mold and form it by his imagination. In this way, it is almost as easy for the devil to work solid bodies into whatever shape he desires, as it is to shape his own airy vehicle into the forms he normally assumes (AA 184; see also AA 122). This is a striking opinion, however, especially because



almost all of More's contemporaries denied the possibility of real lycanthropy.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, it is not so clear why the human imagination cannot do with its own body what the demon's imagination can do with this human body.<sup>35</sup> It is true that in More's system, a demon has a subtle aerial vehicle with which he can change solid substances if it is condensed enough, but humans also make use of subtle substances, the animal spirits, with which they ordinarily direct and affect the body; but this is possible only within certain limits. Furthermore, the main reason why a demon can take on any appearance was because his aerial vehicle is so soft and malleable. It is unclear how it is that he can still do this so easily with a solid terrestrial substance. (We should not forget that for More, such a demon is nothing else but a soul without its own terrestrial body). Nevertheless, according to More, it is not more difficult for him to mollify what is hard, than it is to harden what is so soft and fluid as the air. In reading these discussions, one does not escape the suspicion that More tries to limit the power of the human imagination by giving even stronger powers to demons. He needs to limit the force of the human imagination in order to exclude the naturalizing and materialist discourse of a Pomponazzi and Vanini. Positing demons with very strong imaginations does not seem to pose a problem of naturalization or materialism, however, because in this case, it is presupposed from the start that some immaterial spirit or soul is involved; and the existence of these spirits was exactly what More was trying to prove.

In order to explain phenomena that were really incredible, More could always refer to the common belief that demons can create fancies in men. This is also possible in More's system, because 'their whole Vehicle is haply at least as thin and moveable as our Animal Spirits.' (IS 166) This kinship of the spirit's vehicle with man's animal spirits allows them to easily affect the imagination of man.<sup>36</sup> By means of their vehicle, demons can create the wildest fantasies in the imagination of their victims. This is not More's favourite explanatory strategy, however. In fact, he criticizes Wier for wanting to explain all praeternatural phenomena away as an illusion projected by a demon in the imagination of man.<sup>37</sup> The problem with this kind of explanation is that this is again a means to explain away wondrous phenomena as imaginary. It would mean that in the end, maybe none of the praeternatural phenomena that More so eagerly

---

<sup>34</sup> For lycanthropy in early modern England, see e.g. Hirsch, B. 2011. "Lycanthropy in Early Modern England: The Case of John Webster's *The Dutchess of Malfi*." In *Diseases of the Imagination and Imaginary Disease in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Y. Haskell, 301–340. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers.

<sup>35</sup> I will show elsewhere how the human imagination can be strengthened, according to More, by a "magical tincture", which explains the strong imagination of witches.

<sup>36</sup> More specifies this process in a letter to Hartlib: Spirits, '(bad spiritts especially whose vehicles are more gros,) do not work upon mans imagination immediately, but by descending into their bodyes, and so into their braine, and there they figure the braine, into what representation they pleas'. The demons thus work on the material of the brain and the animal spirits, but 'the soul being so intimately united with the body must of necessity perceive those figurations, and so she reades them and adventures to prophesy being thus possessed and abused by the stranger.' More considers this a plausible cause of much of the enthusiasm of his time ('those deliria in our dayes'). Nevertheless, in most cases, these spirits do not pass easily in a human body, and are uncomfortable there (they 'can no more enter into any body, then we dare putt our heads into a hott oven'), especially if the man is pious, because 'evill spiritts are as afraid of the brightnes and majesty of a vertuous and pious soul, as wild beasts are of flames[altered] of fire.' The Hartlib Papers: Letter, Henry More To Hartlib, 2 February [1652?], 18/1/9A-10B: 10B BLANK

<sup>37</sup> Cf. 'Wherefore *Witches* confessing so frequently as they do, that the Divil *lyes with them*, and withall complaining of his tedious and offensive *coldnesse*, it is a shrewd presumption that he doth lie with them *indeed*, and that it is not a mere *Dream*, as their friend *Wierus* would have it.' (AA 125)

collected might be real. Even if Wier still postulated a demon as the cause of these illusions, it would only be a small step to believe these illusions were caused by an overheated brain. (Wier's explanation also faces the problem that praeternatural phenomena were corroborated by a considerable number of credible witnesses; although one could suppose that the demon could create the same illusionary imagination in many peoples' heads at the same time). More is adamant in his conviction that witchcraft is not an illusion of a melancholic imagination, however: 'I demand concerning these Witches who confess their contract and frequent converse with the Devil; some with him in one shape, others in another; whether meer Melancholy and Imagination can put Powders, Rods, Oyntments, and such like things into their hands, and tell them the use of them, can impress Marks upon their bodies, so deep as to take away all sense in that place, can put Silver and Gold into their hands, which afterwards commonly proves but either Counters, Leaves, or Shells, or some such like useless matter? These real effects cannot be by meer Melancholy. For if a man receive any thing into his hand, be it what it will be, there was some body that gave it him. And therefore the Witch receiving some real thing from this or that other shape that appeared unto her, it is an external thing that she saw, not a meer figuration of her Melancholy Phansie.' (AA 101)

More has another explanatory tool to explicate exceedingly wondrous phenomena, however. As we have seen, he considered the imprint of cherries on the skin of the fetus too wonderful an effect to be caused only by the mother's imagination. According to More, the mother's imagination was assisted by the Spirit of Nature, who actually made the imprint on the unborn child. It is this spirit of nature which is capable of producing the real wonders of nature. Again, this is crucial for More's philosophy, because it is from these wondrous, praeternatural instances that he is able to derive empirical proof for the existence of spirit activity. As we have seen, according to More, matter is absolutely passive, and a spiritual being is needed in order to explain change and direction in motion. This is true for motions in the human body, but also on a macrocosmic scale, for the motions in the world and the universe. In its most general interpretation, the Spirit of Nature is responsible for the dynamics of the universe; and as a universal spirit that acts the same everywhere, it enforces the most important laws of nature. At some point, More even calls the Spirit of Nature the 'immediate instrument of God' (IS 184). He stresses in particular the non-mechanical powers of the Spirit of Nature, because it makes particularly clear that the universe cannot be reduced to a clockwork of mechanical motions. Instead, there must be a spirit, that is, an incorporeal substance that animates the world. He writes: '*The Spirit of Nature* therefore, according to that notion I have of it, is, *A substance incorporeal, but without Sense and Animadversion, pervading the whole Matter of the Universe, and exercising a plastical power therein according to the sundry predispositions and occasions in the parts it works upon, raising such Phaenomena in the World, by directing the parts of the Matter and their Motion, as cannot be resolved into meer Mechanical powers.*' (IS 193)

It is these non-mechanical powers in the world, such as magnetism, gravity, biological generation and growth, but also all kinds of sympathies and antipathies, that have to be explained in reference to the Spirit of Nature. Also the more extraordinary phenomena, such as the weapon salve, are an effect of the action of this universal spirit. More explains: 'From this Principle, I conceive that not onely the *Sympathy of parts* in one particular Subject, but of

*different and distant Subjects*, may be understood: such as is betwixt the party wounded, and the Knife or Sword that wounded him, besmeared with the Weapon-salve, and kept in a due temper: Which certainly is not purely Mechanical, but Magical, though not in an unlawful sense; that is to say, it is not to be resolved into meer Matter, of what thinness or subtilty soever you please, but into the *Unity of the Soul of the Universe*, and *Continuity of the subtile Matter*, which answers to our *Animal Spirits*.' In this way, More is convinced, several strange things may be effected, and this is the real source of magic (IS 103). The Spirit of Nature is also the cause of real prophecy (ET 40), all kinds of sympathies, apparitions and divinatory dreams (IS 129).

As we have seen, the spirit of nature can be "seduced" to deviate from the common course of nature, and can create monstrous or marvelous things. Indeed, this happens when the mother's imagination seduces her to imprint cherries on the skin of the unborn child. There are more extreme stories, however, in which the fancy of the mother is taken by an ape, which resulted in her bringing forth a monster of exactly that shape (IS 195). Or a story that was told by Van Helmont and reported by More, in which a pregnant women was shocked by a beggar with only one arm, and who had kept the other arm for the dramatic effect. As a result, she delivered of a baby with just one arm; on the other side of the body was only a bloody scar. There exists a strong affinity between imagination and Spirit of Nature. Indeed, More explains the action of the Spirit of Nature by referring to its similarity to the imagination. The phantasm or imagination is to our soul what form is to the Spirit of Nature, More explains: 'the tenour of our Spirits (which are but subtile matter) will cause the *Soul* immediately to exert it self into this or that Imagination, no knowledge or premeditation interceding; so such or such a preparation or predisposition of the Matter of the World will cause the *Spirit of Nature* to fall upon this or that kinde of *Fabrication* or *Organization*, no perception of consultation being interposed.' (IS 12)

By means of the imagination, the soul creates a concrete image, which is impressed on the spirits. When the spirits are in a certain state, however, e.g. because of violent passions, they will affect the imagination, creating specific images. These phantasms of the imagination, in turn, will affect the spirits and the passions.<sup>38</sup> Will and reason have no say in this process. Similarly, by means of a "formative" faculty akin to the imagination, the Spirit of Nature creates forms, which it imposes on matter (e.g. in generation, the Spirit of Nature forms the fetus into a human being). If the matter found by the Spirit of Nature has a particular constellation, it can also influence the Spirit of Nature into creating certain forms. The interplay between the predisposition of matter and the formative power of the Spirit of Nature is a dynamic process. The Spirit of Nature cannot form a human being out of a rock. In the case of the fetus, the matter in the womb is well prepared, and the matter of the fetus is predisposed to receive the form of a human being. The Spirit of Nature will be triggered to continue this formative process until and even after birth. This formative power, whose forms are akin to the phantasms of the imagination, can be put off track by other imaginative powers, such as the maternal or demonic imagination. This is when monsters are generated, or when a real cherry is formed on the skin of a fetus, because the images of the imagination became in

---

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Vermeir (2008).

some way mingled with the forms of the Spirit of Nature. The image of the cherry in the imagination of the mother became the form of a real cherry, which the Spirit of Nature created on the malleable and predisposed matter of the fetus.

It is in analogy with the power of the maternal imagination that More has conceptualized the power of the imagination of demons and aerial spirits. Because the Spirit of Nature is seduced by their imagination, and works in consort with it, and because their matter is subtle and positively predisposed, the Spirit of Nature creates for them the most extraordinary effects. As More writes: 'This Opinion therefore of *Plotinus* is neither irrational nor unintelligible, That the *Soul of the World* interposes and insinuates into all generations of things, while the Matter is fluid and yielding. Which would induce a man to believe, that she may not stand idle in the transfiguration of the Vehicles of the *Daemons*, but assist their fancies and desires, and so help to cloath them and attire them according to their own pleasures: or it may be sometimes against their wills, as the unwieldiness of the Mothers Fancy forces upon her a Monstrous birth.' (IS 172).<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, More clearly distinguishes the power of will and imagination, and he is aware that many imaginations and desires are not controlled by our conscious will, which does not mean that the imagination is the less effective for it. Everything in the aerial world is done much more perfectly, however, because the aerial body is wholly obedient to the imagination of the mind.

More describes with gusto how the lower and superior demons feast. The inferior demons create banquets to which wizards and witches are admitted. In this depraved perversion, all beauty is inverted into bestial deformity. These demons create all kinds of marvelous food out of the air, directly by means of their imagination, or with the help of the Spirit of Nature: 'But how the Aire is moulded up into that form and consistency, it is very hard to conceive: whether it be done by the meer power of Imagination upon their own Vehicles, first dabled in some humidities that are the fittest for their design, which they change into these forms of Viands, and then withdraw, when they have given them such a figure, colour, and consistency, with some small touch of such a sapour or tincture: or whether it be the priviledge of these *Aerial Creatures*, by a sharp Desire and keen Imagination, to pierce the *Spirit of Nature*, so as to awaken her activity, and engage her to the compleating in a moment, as it were, the full design of their own wishes, but in such matter as the Element they are in is capable of, which is this crude and vaporous Aire; whence their food must be very dilute and flashie, and rather a mockery then any solid satisfaction and pleasure.' (IS 183)

More is not sure whether the inferior demons create wonders by means of their psychosomatic imagination or by "piercing" the *Spirit of Nature*. In contrast, the imaginative power of the superior demons is much more elegant and wonderful. They do not need to struggle with gross vapors, but they inhabit ethereal regions that neither storm nor tempest can reach. Their imaginations also seem to have a better command of the Spirit of Nature, and as a result, they are able to create things much more perfectly. Indeed, the Spirit of Nature sends forth whole gardens and orchards of most delectable fruits and flowers. The transparency of these objects adds a particular luster to them. More calls this a 'Superiour Paradise' (IS 183),

---

<sup>39</sup> For the comparison with the maternal imagination, see IS 195: 'the *Spirit of Nature* is snatcht into consent with the imagination of the Soules in these *Astral* bodies or *aiery Vehicles*.'

the splendor of which he describes in detail: 'For such certainly will they there find the blood of the Grape, the rubie-coloured Cherries, and Nectarines. And if for the compleating of the pleasantness of these habitations, that they may look less like a silent and dead solitude, they meet with Birds & Beasts of curious shapes and colours, the single accents of whose voices are very grateful to the ear, and the varying of their notes perfect musical harmony.' (ibid.) It is the Spirit of Nature, which enriches the fruits of these aerial paradises. These castles in the air, created by demonic imaginations and the Spirit of Nature, far transcend the most delicate refection of the Epicureans, according to More, and this without all satiety or oppressiveness. They are filled with nothing but Divine Love, Joy, and Devotion.

## Conclusion

Stories of the maternal imagination, imprinting images on the fetus or deforming it, were commonplace in the early modern period. Such stories, proposed for explaining monsters and other curious phenomena, show the possibilities and limits of the explanatory frameworks available. In this case, the maternal imagination was not only invoked to resolve questions related to family resemblance, animal generation or monstrosity. In the early modern period, it also became a touchstone, and could serve as an occasion for reflection on stronger powers of the human imagination, acting outside the body, and for discussions of a stronger demonic imagination. The work of Henry More is an excellent resource for uncovering what was at stake in these discussions. His account of the power of imagination shows the importance of the theories of a powerful imagination for contemporary debates about witchcraft, atheism and materialism. More specific to Henry More, however, is that these stories were also a crucial opportunity to help elucidate the nature of spirit, be it the human spirit, demons or the Spirit of Nature.

More starts with the power of the maternal imagination on the fetus as a paradigmatic case, and uses it to explain, by extension, the workings of demonic imagination. Demons are spirits, with imagination and body, just like a human being. The crucial difference is that their aerial or ethereal body is more malleable, and more apt to respond to their imagination, so that it easily changes its form, texture and density. By means of their imagination, they can form and direct their subtle body, which can penetrate objects. In this way, demons can work on objects even from the inside out, or they can create new objects from surrounding matter. Demons also act on humans: not only on their imagination, but also on their bodies, molding them according to their whim. For More, this explained the typical somatic effects of witchcraft as well as the transformation of some men into werewolves.

By exploring these extensions of the maternal imagination, More undermined the neat classifications of the powers of imagination proposed by some of his contemporaries (cf. section 2 of this chapter). In essence, psychosomatic, maternal and demonic imagination did not differ. The relevant difference is the malleability of the matter acted on by the imagination: both the aerial vehicle of a demon and the developing body of the fetus are flexible and easy to shape according to the image in the imagination; in contrast, the crude and rigid body of an adult human being is more recalcitrant. Furthermore, this very same power, assisted by the

Spirit of Nature, could be extended outside the body and act on objects or on the mind and body of others.

For More, the imagination has a cosmic component. This is true, even though he strongly criticized others who attributed strong powers to the imagination. The cosmic component is due to the Spirit of Nature: this spirit is extended over the whole world, and its essential unity connects everything. More also considers the limits of the powerful imagination, however. The efficacy of the maternal imagination is limited, for instance, working especially on the fetus. Nevertheless, as van Helmont's story showed, its effects can remain active long after the child is born. Furthermore, the magical imagination of a witch can act at a distance and effectuate far more wondrous things. The cosmic power of the demonic imagination is much stronger still, even if the disposition of the matter on which it acts may pose constraints. It is especially in the higher demons that the imagination reaches demiurgic proportions. By its aptitude to entice the Spirit of Nature into consent, the demonic imagination is even able to create a "Paradise".