THE POWER OF FANCY: LIBERTY AND IMAGINATION IN PHILIP FRENEAU'S COLLEGE WRITINGS

EL PODER DE LA FANTASÍA: LIBERTAD E IMAGINACIÓN EN LOS ESCRITOS UNIVERSITARIOS DE PHILIP FRENEAU

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Abstract

Like other prominent members of the revolutionary generation, Philip Freneau lived his formative years against the backdrop of the imperial crisis that would lead to the independence of the US in 1776, and this would make a lasting impression on his later life and writings, especially as regards his ideas on the possibility for creativity and individuality in a time of increasing politicisation. This article examines the particular terms in which the poet's college experiences influenced his conflicted take on liberty and imagination, which remained a persistent concern both during and after his time at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton). Drawing on original archival work, the article focuses on his most extensive reflection on the matter, "The Power of Fancy" (1770), and offers an analysis of the poem in connection with several other prominent eighteenth-century philosophical and literary texts that also address the imaginative faculty. In so doing, the article reveals the workings of an anti-imaginistic tradition, instilled through the curriculum of late-colonial Princeton, in Freneau's college writings — a tradition that the poet both espoused and resisted on his quest for individual autonomy and creative expression.

Keywords: Philip Freneau, fancy, liberty, imagination, Princeton.

Resumen

Al igual que otros miembros de la generación revolucionaria, Philip Freneau vivió sus años de formación en el contexto de la crisis imperial que llevaría a la fundación de los EEUU y esto, por diversas razones, sería decisivo para su vida y escritos posteriores, especialmente en lo concerniente a la posibilidad de aseverar su individualidad creativa en una época de creciente politización. Este artículo examina los términos en los que la experiencia universitaria del poeta influyó en su forma de entender la libertad y la imaginación, una problemática que siguió siendo una preocupación persistente del autor tanto durante como después de su estancia en el College of New Jersey (ahora Princeton). Basado en un trabajo de archivo original, el artículo se centra en la reflexión más extensa sobre el tema que hizo el autor, "The Power of Fancy" (1770), comparando el poema con otros textos filosóficos y literarios del siglo XVIII que reflexionan también sobre la imaginación. Al hacerlo, el artículo revela la influencia de una tradición anti-imaginista, inculcada a través del plan de estudios del Princeton tardocolonial, en los escritos universitarios de Freneau — una tradición que el poeta abrazó y resistió a la par en su esfuerzo por encontrar la forma de disfrutar de autonomía individual y expresión creativa.

Palabras clave: Philip Freneau, fantasía, libertad, imaginación, Princeton.

1. Introduction

Notwithstanding his relative obscurity in contemporary criticism, Philip Freneau has been credited as "one of the founders of American literature" (Sayre 2017: 59) and "an author who was inextricably bound up in the political and aesthetic identity of the newly formed United States" (Gailey 2015: 14). Also known as the "Poet of the Revolution" and, by some accounts, as the "Father of American Poetry", Freneau flourished during the Revolutionary War and early national period, when he devoted his work to a staunch republican and liberal agenda in the service of patriotism and, subsequently, the French Revolution and the Jeffersonian-Republican party. At the heart of his literary as well as journalistic writings lay a profound concern with the nature of liberty and imagination, and the constraints besetting creative exploration and individual self-assertion in the newly founded republic (Broderick 2003: 7-12; Daniel 2009: 66-72; Anderson 2015: 208-213).

In 1770, just two years after his admission to the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), Philip Freneau composed "The Power of Fancy". Like Phillis Wheatley's "On Imagination" (1773), the poem examines the liberating potency inherent in the imagination (or fancy) over the poetic mind and the creative process the power

of fancy appears to enable.[1] Foremost in the text lies the idea that fancy, the "regent of the mind" (1786: l. 4), is a superior faculty of cognition, divine in nature and unlimited in scope. The "spark" (ll. 5, 7) where humankind may trace "[r]esemblance to the immortal race" (l. 10), fancy seems to provide the poet privileged access to an alternative mode of perception, one that allows him to escape the limitations of "[s]ense" (l. 82) by exposing him, "in vision" (l. 106), to "[n]oble fabrics" (l. 23), "livelier colours" (l. 108) and "[e]ndless images" (l. 143) of "[i]deal objects" (l. 145). Prima facie, such an experience would appear a form of liberation, physical as well as cognitive in nature. On careful consideration, however, engaging the power of fancy affords the poet nothing but a new form of submission, for fancy, reluctant to let him roam at will, assumes not only a mediatory but also a supervisory role in the poet's journey to her "painted realms" (l. 142). Echoing Wheatley's "roving *Fancy*" (1988: l. 9), which released the poetic mind only to have it bound into "soft captivity" (1988: l. 12), Freneau's fancy comes across as a double-edged sword — one that provides the poet with an experience of creative transcendence that, paradoxically, can be enjoyed only within set constraints.

There is much in "The Power of Fancy" that may seem, a priori, puzzling, for rarely is the imagination conceived as a constraining or, for that matter, constrained mode of perception in contemporary popular use. Revolutionary Americans, however, remained deeply at odds as to how to respond to the potential for creative liberation and transcendence often ascribed to the imaginative faculty, and part of the reason for this conflict, at least for collegians like Freneau, resided in the contents underpinning higher education syllabi during their formative years — a period that unfolded against the backdrop of the crisis that would soon lead to the founding of the US. From his admission in 1768 to his graduation in 1771, the soon-to-be "Poet of the Revolution" was exposed to an ambitious program of curricular and extracurricular reforms, primarily designed to spread across campus "a spirit of liberty and free inquiry" (Princeton University 2010: 237). This course of study would lead the poet to embrace a spirit of resistance and protest during and after his college years, but it would also fuel a longstanding concern regarding the possibility for individual autonomy and creative expression in a time of increasing politicisation. It is the aim of this article to explore this conflict and to shed light on how the poet's college experience influenced his take on the imagination. Firstly, this study considers several key features of late-colonial Princeton's curricular and extracurricular organisation, with a particular focus on how it influenced students' approach to civic life and creative liberty. Subsequently, it examines the poet's response to Princeton's curriculum by analysing his best-known work on the subject, "The Power of Fancy", including in the analysis a representative selection of other prominent eighteenth-century philosophical and literary texts on the topic. In so doing, this paper reveals the

ideological foundations framing the poet's conflicted approach to the imagination, which, under the influence of Princeton's instruction and eighteenth-century convention, became a contested site in his quest for creative autonomy and individual self-assertion.

2. Princeton and Late-Colonial Higher Education

Philip Freneau's formative years were certainly exceptional. His was a time of revolution, and nowhere was this more apparent than at the college where he spent three years studying during the tenure of Reverend John Witherspoon, Princeton's sixth president and soon-to-be signer of the Declaration of Independence. A hotbed of revolutionary sentiment, late-colonial Princeton was no ordinary college but, rather, one of the most politicised institutions of higher education across the Atlantic seaboard. "No other college", as John Murrin notes, "was so nearly unanimous in support of the patriot cause. Trustees, faculty, and nearly all alumni and students rallied to the Revolution" (1996: xxi). However, Princeton was not the only college whose students (or faculty) openly challenged Britain's policies in the 1760s and 1770s — nor could this be the case, considering how far-reaching resistance to such reforms proved to be. Just like colonials from Boston to Savannah were beginning to challenge parliamentary abuse, students from Dartmouth to William and Mary were protesting on and off campus, burning tea, letters and effigies, boycotting local retailers, wearing homespun, and organising debates on subjects as varied as "Monarchy", "Patriotism", and "Liberty" (Robson 1985: 57-102; Rudy 1996: 4-18; Hoeveler 2002: 297-302; Geiger 2015: 76-87). In all these protests, Princeton remained at the vanguard, serving as one of the foremost contributors to the upcoming revolution by providing students with a privileged space to engage with ongoing polemics. For all intents and purposes, late-colonial Princeton was "the premier Patriot college" (Robson 1985: 70).

Arguably, the reason for this lay with the numerous reforms that Reverend John Witherspoon introduced during his presidency at Princeton (1768-1794). As Gideon Mailer states, "Witherspoon realized that rising tensions between Britain and the American colonies called for special attention to the instruction of young men [...] [He] believed that educated young men were increasingly likely to assume positions of public prominence in 'the present state of things'" (2017: 182). Like Aaron Burr, Sr., Jonathan Edwards and other prominent former presidents, John Witherspoon refashioned the course of study at the College of New Jersey to instill in his students a spirit of intellectual restlessness and critical inquiry that enabled them to assess and partake in the ongoing discussions. As he

argued in a 1772 address, "I would not be understood to say that a seminary of learning ought to enter deeply into political contention [...] But surely a constitution which naturally tends to produce a spirit of liberty and independence [...] is infinitely preferable to the dead and vapid state of one whose very existence depends upon the nod of those in power" (2015a: 111-112). It was this spirit that, during his administration, led him to enrich Princeton's curricular and extracurricular structure, expand the holdings of the university library, improve teaching methods and materials, and enhance academic standards — a set of reforms aimed to foster among his student body an interest in civic life and public service (Sloan 1971: 110-145; Dix 1978: 41-53; Harrison 1980: xxx-xxxii; Robson 1985: 58-74; Daiches 1991: 167; Hoeveler 2002: 297-298; Longaker 2007: 185-191; Miller 2010: 66-70; Mailer 2017: 212-214).

The imagination, for this reason, remained central to Princeton's curricular structure. Even though the concept may sound foreign to contemporary political and social discussion, British and American thinkers had been writing about the connection between public life and the imagination at least since the seventeenth century, in a direct line binding John Locke and Thomas Hobbes to Alexander Hamilton and Benjamin Rush (Holbo 1997: 22-25; Torre 2007: 136-142; Schlutz 2009: 13-14; Geuss 2010: 67-69; Frank 2013: 48-55). This explains the prominence the imaginative faculty had in the lectures given during Witherspoon's administration, which elaborated on the teachings and writings of the British Enlightenment. This tradition, admittedly, did not afford Princetonians a simple definition of the concept. Joseph Addison did not err when he argued that "[t]here are few Words in the *English* Language which are employed in a more loose and uncircumscribed Sense than those of the *Fancy* and the *Imagination*" (1982: 368, emphasis in the original). The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced a myriad of competing articulations of the imagination in the fields of philosophy, aesthetic theory, literature and medicine, to name but a few. Notwithstanding the inherent diversity that defined the concept, it is possible to discern in the writings of the Enlightenment a transition with which Witherspoon's students became familiar both in his newly founded courses on "Moral Philosophy" and "Eloquence", and in the new volumes added to the university library (Charvat 1936: 35; Martin 1961: 3-27; Sloan 1971: 103-145; Dix 1978: 41-53; Daiches 1991: 167-172; Court 2001: 30-33; Hoeveler 2002: 297-302; Miller 2010: 67-76; Cahill 2012: 13, 25-26; Geiger 2015: 72-74; Mailer 2017: 182-214). "Prior to the eighteenth century", as Michael Saler notes, "many Western thinkers defined the imagination as the mediating faculty between the senses and the understanding", a mediatory power that operated primarily as an assistant or "subordinate to human reason" (2011: 199). Up to the mid through late eighteenth century, the imaginative faculty was primarily conceived as a

secondary mode of cognition and perception, which, like memory, remained dependent on, and subservient to, reason. In essence, the imagination was regarded as a mediatory power — the mind's capacity to produce complex ideas and images out of the combination of simple ideas, memories and sensible stimuli. John Locke aptly phrased this idea when he wrote that, "[a]s simple ideas are observed to exist in several combinations united together; so the mind has a power to consider several of them united together, as one idea" (1997: 159). Such was the power ascribed to the imagination, to reconcile or, rather, mediate between a set of experiences and stimuli to provide cognitive and perceptual unity.

Through the imagination, it was assumed, the mind was capable of cognition, insofar as it enabled the individual to establish mental links between ideas. As the eighteenth century progressed, however, the imagination came to be seen less as a mediatory power and more as a creative force. Rather than depending on past experiences and sensible stimuli, it began to be conceived as a faculty enabled to establish associations conducive to ideas not previously encountered in the sensible realm. As Christine Holbo explains, "the imagination was itself coming to seem, not a faculty of mediation and moderation, but a revolutionary force challenging all limits" (1997: 23). Whereas most early conceptualizations of the imagination had underlined its dependence on external stimuli, from the mid through late eighteenth century, it was elevated to serve as a creative and liberating power, presumably equal in status to reason. David Hume would hence conclude that "[n]othing is more free than the imagination of man; and though it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties of fiction and vision" (2007b: 47). Even though the imagination remained primarily associative in its operations over the mind, in the second half of the eighteenth century, it was broadly assumed that it afforded the individual the capacity to establish an endless variety of cognitive associations, serving as the precondition for the individual to partake in a specific mode of perceptual liberation and transcendence (Engell 1981: 33-50, 65-77; Holbo 1997: 22-25; Schlutz 2009: 5-14; Cahill 2012: 39-41; Holochwost 2020: 6-11).

Such an experience, however, was vexing for eighteenth-century thinkers given its (alleged) potential for private and public disorder. In discussing the relevance of the concept of the imagination in Western philosophy, John Sallis explains that, ever since classical antiquity, discussions and debates on the imaginative faculty have been traditionally framed within these ambivalent terms: "Ever again philosophy attests that imagination has a double effect, a double directionality, bringing about illumination and elevation, on the one hand, and deception and corruption, on the other, bringing them about perhaps even in such utter

proximity that neither can, with complete assurance, be decisively separated from the other" (2000: 46). This potential for liberation and creativity, while inspiring much praise, sparked the revolutionary generation's anxieties concerning the possibility that, were it to establish associations between ideas without limits and restraints, the imagination could turn into a delusive and corrupting influence. British and American philosophers often gave voice to these anxieties throughout the eighteenth century. David Hume, who, as stated above, celebrated elsewhere the imagination's liberating and creative potency, warned, somewhat contradictorily, that "[n]othing is more dangerous to reason than the flights of the imagination, and nothing has been the occasion of more mistakes among philosophers" (2007a: 174). Rather than as the key to obtain epistemological certainty via conceptual association and perceptual transcendence, the imagination was also depicted occasionally as a potentially deranging and delusive power, which could drive the experiencing self to establish connections between ideas that could prove to be not only false, but also harmful for the individual as well as for society. In enabling the self to escape from the constraints of sensible stimuli and, by extension, reason, it could also serve as a foundation for epistemological confusion, psychological distress and social instability, all resulting from fancy's unregulated and, hence, potentially delusive and deranging operations (Martin 1961: 107-108; Engell 1981: 51-62; Holbo 1997: 23-24; Cahill 2012: 165-166; Frank 2013: 52-55; Holochwost 2020: 20).

President Witherspoon was not oblivious to these fears and anxieties. Rather, the anti-imaginistic prejudice that informed eighteenth-century writings on the imaginative faculty dominated his lectures, where he endeavored to instruct his students on the means to contain the potential excesses inherent in the operation of the imagination — an exercise he equated to a form of civic duty. In addressing an audience, Witherspoon argued, public writers and speakers should partake in "an exercise of self-denial" (2015b: 270) and assume "[d]ignity of character and disinterestedness" (305). As he explained, "it is not easy to procure attention unless there is some degree of character preserved; and indeed, wherever there is a high opinion of the candor and sincerity of the speaker, it will give an inconceivable weight to his sentiments in debate" (305). Because they were expected to be exemplary civic leaders, Princetonians were discouraged both from showing excessive interest and passion, and from confusing the provinces of private introspection and self-expression with those of public life. As Witherspoon concluded, "[t]hey who reason on the selfish scheme, as usual, resolve all into private interest" (2015c: 188). This, in turn, explained his call for imaginative restraint. Instead of nourishing "a warm fancy" (2015b: 291), he argued, public writers and speakers were to be defined by their capacity to restrain any potentially subjective mode of expression and perception, and "keep [their] thoughts, desires,

and affections in due moderation" (2015c: 183). Even though he acknowledged the potential benefits inherent to "the creative power of fancy" (2015b: 252), he advised against its use. In addressing an audience, instead, students were instructed to assume a civic-oriented stance, presenting themselves as disinterested representatives of the public good, able to sublimate their private interests, and willing to exercise not full creative autonomy but, rather, what Terence Martin (1961) referred to as an "instructed vision".

3. Praising Fancy: Perceptual Liberation and Associationism

Philip Freneau's college poems bear the imprint of late-colonial Princeton's curriculum and, as such, they reflect the roots of a conflicted poetics, especially as regards the physical and aesthetic limitations Princetonians were instructed to exercise in conjuring up the imagination. Marcus Daniel does not err when he writes that "Freneau discovered politics as well as poetry at Princeton" (2009: 67). To this list, however, one should add the anti-imaginistic tradition that informed the authors with whom he was also becoming acquainted at the college. From Joseph Addison and John Locke to Francis Hutchinson and David Hume, the poet grew increasingly familiar with a plethora of voices that insisted that the imaginative faculty, the key to creative and perceptual liberation, was to be commended and praised but also used with utmost caution. This ambivalence arguably became central to early writings like "The Power of Fancy", where the poet addressed the constraints that hindered his poetic pursuits — a quest for meaning to realise "the Romantic sentiment of creative freedom" (Anderson 2015: 211). Such freedom and the possibility for the imaginative faculty to realise its potential lie at the center of the text, reflecting the multiple strands of conflict as well as the course of study Freneau worked through during his formative years.

At first glance, "The Power of Fancy" (1770) reads as a prototypical celebratory paean to the imagination, similar in nature and scope to the writings of British and American authors in the eighteenth century, from Mark Akenside's "The Pleasures of Imagination" (1744) and Joseph Warton's "To Fancy" (1746) to Phillis Wheatley's "On Imagination" (1773). Like these authors, the poet opens his text with an extended description of the imagination, which, like his predecessors, he personifies and genders as a female.[2] "WAKEFUL, vagrant, restless thing,/ Ever wandering on the wing" (1786: ll. 1-2), fancy is represented as an active and dynamic principle, "wondrous" (l. 3) and "unknown" (l. 6) in its workings, and vested with divine authority, presiding over the mind as a "regent" (l. 4), a role the poet assigns by virtue of her celestial origin. Twice referred to as a "spark" (ll. 5, 7), the imagination is rendered as a heavenly power, a privileged

mode of perception that affords humankind intellectual and spiritual elevation, and a distinctive creative capacity likening the poet to the divine: "THIS spark of bright, celestial flame,/ From Jove's seraphic altar came,/ And hence alone in man we trace,/ Resemblance to the immortal race" (ll. 7-10). The terms in which fancy is addressed echo eighteenth-century writings on the imagination, which was often considered the central element of cognition in philosophical and literary discussion because of its presumed capacity to link ideas and experiences into (complex) thought (Engell 1981: 3-10; Holbo 1997: 22-25; Schlutz 2009: 3-14; Cahill 2012: 1-5; Holochwost 2020: 3-11). The primacy accorded to fancy above other modes of cognition and perception in the period explains the reference to the imagination's divine nature and regal authority in the poem — a depiction that reinstates an oft-trodden portrayal that can be readily found in multiple other renditions of the matter with which Freneau became familiar at Princeton.[3]

Presenting himself as a loyal subject at the service of the imaginative faculty, the poet completes his celebration with a detailed exploration of the terms whereby the imagination energises or, rather, galvanises the mind. This power, the poet intimates, relies on its unique capacity to establish conceptual links between ideas. This much is suggested when the poet describes in the opening lines of the text the whole of creation as the product of divine fancy combining preexisting ideas into a complex and cohesive unit: "What is this *globe*, these *lands*, and *seas*,/ And *heat*, and *cold*, and *flowers*, and *trees*,/ And *life*, and *death*, and *beast*, and *man*,/ And *time*—that with the *sun* began—/ But thoughts on reason's scale combin'd,/ Ideas of the Almighty mind?" (1786: ll. 15-20, emphasis in the original). Like their creator's, human fancy realises its creative power through the establishment of trains of associations between "[e]ndless images of things" (l. 143) and "[i]deal objects" (l. 145), refashioned into "[n]oble fabrics" (l. 23), new "shape[s]" (l. 78) and "livelier colours" (l. 108) in her "bright, celestial flame" (l. 7). Freneau's fancy, it follows, is of the associationist kind, and, as such, conforms to the prevailing eighteenth-century theory that the imagination creates new ideas by combining memories, experiences and sensible stimuli. This theory, it should be noted, had a particular following among Scottish philosophers from the "Common Sense" school, whom Princetonians studied as part of President Witherspoon's course on moral philosophy. Through these thinkers, Freneau and his classmates learned about the imagination's boundless capacity for cognitive linking but also about the potential corruption to which excessive imaginative associations could lead the mind (Martin 1961: 3-27; Lesley 1970: 90-126; Holbo 1997: 22-27; Court 2001: 30-33; Craig 2007: 46-59; Cahill 2012: 25-26; Holochwost 2020: 3-11). This explains the poet's move to include reason as the arbiter whose "scale" (Freneau 1786: l. 19) assesses the products of divine imagination and, one would assume, the human mind: fancy, the text implies, creates through cumulative and continued association, yet under supervision.

This point is not to be taken lightly, for it directs the reader to one of the central tensions the text takes up as a theme. In the poem, after all, fancy does not submit to but, rather, resists control, which it can do quite successfully and with ease due to its perpetual, accelerated motion. "Sense", as the speaker asserts, "can never follow her" (1786: l. 82), for only fancy may strike her "SWIFT" (l. 57), though "unseen" (l. 22), course through the "painted realms" (l. 142) where, notwithstanding reason's efforts, she holds sway as the undisputed "regent of the mind" (l. 4). To prove this point, the central section of the text elaborates in detail on a "vision" (l. 106), mediated by the power of fancy and phrased in terms of an imaginary journey around the world, in which the poet, both royal subject and travel companion, joins fancy on an eastbound flight from the Atlantic seaboard to California by way of Europe, India and the Pacific Islands. Freneau's college writings often elaborate on such journeys. *The Rising Glory of America*, too, opens with a cursory view of major locations associated with Western civilisation, from Ancient Egypt to Britain through Greece and Rome, only to end up asserting that the text will sing "[a] Theme more new" (1772: l. 24), the rise of a new imperial seat in America. Exploiting one of the most recurrent tropes in late-colonial political literature, *translatio imperii*, the text vindicated America's prospective centrality in the global theater of nations by claiming that the seat of power had historically moved westwards (McWilliams 1988: 159-160; Wertheimer 2009: 21-22; Giles 2012: 142-143; Adams 2013: 394). Though resorting to the journey trope, "The Power of Fancy" strikes a different tone, thematically as well as geographically. James Engell suggested as much when he noted that the text "is a progress poem in reverse, a stunning redirection of the usual British theme of the progress of poetry westward […] The reverse progress [comes across as] a continuous eastering, an 'orienting', until fancy returns to the New World on the California coast" (1981: 194). Reversing the westward course of empires for an eastbound flight, Freneau subverts the foundations animating late-colonial political writings as he reorients the journey trope in a move that bespeaks fancy's power to transcend limitations.

This power becomes conspicuous in the journey that fancy and the poet undertake, itself a trope occasionally found in eighteenth-century poetry. David Mallet's *The Excursion* also has the reader follow a journey where fancy takes the poet around and beyond the globe: "*Fancy*, with me range *Earth*'s extended Space,/ Surveying Nature's Works: and thence aloft,/ Spread to superior *Worlds* thy bolder Wing,/ Unweary'd in thy Flight" (1728: ll. 6-9, emphasis in the original). Like Mallet, Freneau's journey with fancy is conducted both on the sensible and on the noumenal worlds. Engaging the imagination, the poet claims to partake in an experience of creative transcendence where the barriers that would otherwise define phenomenal existence collapse, enabling the poet to

perceive existence at large. Thanks to fancy, the poet may not only explore the world but also "[l]isten[ø] to the chimy tune/ Of the bright, harmonious spheres" (1786: ll. 30-31), a reference to the Pythagorean belief that the movement of celestial bodies followed a harmonious arrangement, which also informed the organisation of the cosmos. Fancy, in that sense, affords the poet an experience not far removed from what Thomas Akenside's "The Pleasures of Imagination" identified as the imaginative faculty's capacity for ontological and epistemological certainty: "[F]or with thee comes/ The guide, the guardian of their lovely sports,/ Majestic TRUTH; and where TRUTH deigns to come,/ Her sister LIBERTY will not be far" (2015: ll. 21-24). Freneau's fancy, like Akenside's, affords a privileged mode of perceptual liberation and creative self-assertion, which grants the poet the power to ascertain and alter the order of possibility. In the text, fancy comes across as a creative as well as regenerative force, a "spark" (1786: ll. 5, 7) that galvanises "[n]oble fabrics" (l. 23) and "[e]ndless images" (l. 143) into being while also reenergising "faded scenes" (l. 101) into "livelier colours" (l. 108). Elevated by fancy, the poet depicts himself as an agentive force who can perceive and recast reality at whim — an idea that anticipates Percy Bysshe Shelley's claim that "[p]oets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World" (2018: 883).

4. Taming Fancy: Creative Autonomy and Imaginative Restraints

The poet's response to the power that fancy affords is presumptively positive. Presiding over the creative process, fancy is the recipient of much praise and commendation. This image, however, is consistently, though subtly, questioned as the poet begins to detect flaws in fancy's operations. In the conclusion to the text, as a case in point, the speaker claims as follows: "Fancy, to thy power I owe/ Half my happiness below" (Freneau 1786: ll. 147-148). The quantifier "half" in the passage invites discussion, for it is not rare to locate similar suggestions of fancy's partial or, rather, defective nature. As he celebrates the experience of perceptual transcendence that fancy makes possible, he yet again suggests that, through her mediation, he can "[l]isten[ø] to the chimy tune/ Of the bright, harmonious spheres" (ll. 30-31), which he is nonetheless quick to qualify as a flawed endeavor, for he can listen only to "[n]otes that half distract the mind" (l. 40). The idea the text advances is that fancy affords an experience that cannot be fully enjoyed, as if the imagination ultimately failed to achieve the elevation the poet seeks. John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" elaborates on a similar idea as the poem, also a vision mediated by fancy, concludes, "Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well/ As she is

fam'd to do, deceiving elf" (2018: ll. 73-74). The idea that fancy is deceitful, which was prevalent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writings, is one that, admittedly, Freneau would address more explicitly in later publications. Like Keats, however, the poet presents the imagination as a limited and, to some extent, limiting power, which brings about a much less gratifying experience than it first appeared.

The reason for this flawed performance, the poet intimates, has to do not so much with an inherent defect as with the terms in which fancy exerts its power. The central section of the poem provides evidence as to the underlying power dynamic that animates the relationship between the imagination and the speaker, and his reaction to what he perceives as an oppressive demand for subservience. As the "regent of the mind" (Freneau 1786: l. 4), fancy expects the poet to submit to her command, forcing him to follow her lead on the allegorical voyage they both conduct in her "painted realms" (l. 142). Rather than moving alongside him and enabling him to explore her domains at will, fancy controls the path as well as the pace of the journey, so much so that the speaker struggles to follow and is occasionally forced to ask his guide for assistance: "Lo! she leads me wide and far,/ Sense can never follow her—/ Shape thy course o'er land and sea,/ Help me to keep pace with thee" (ll. 81-84). That the poet struggles to follow fancy seems like an interesting point to make but one that should not come as a surprise, for fancy "[b]ears" (l. 111), "[l]eads" (ll. 35, 81, 113), "[p]laces" (l. 116), and, in essence, drags him around the world, supervising the poet's exposure to her "[i] deal objects" (l. 145) and, hence, controlling the extent of his creative potential. Literally carried by fancy, the poet comes across on closer examination not as an agentive force but, rather, as a passive observer at the mercy of the "Fickle Goddess" (l. 65) he acknowledged as regent in the opening lines.

It is difficult not to see in the poem traces of the same conflict Wheatley took up as a theme in her own take on the matter. In "On Imagination", the poet begins what reads at first as an ode to the imagination with a praise to a faculty she also identifies in royal terms as an "imperial queen" (1988: l. 1). For the two poets, the imagination presides as a monarch over the mind, enabling the experiencing self to transcend sensible limitations by releasing him (or her) in visions that, as Wheatley puts it, "amaze th' unbounded soul" (l. 22). The terms of reference the poets use become telling when one considers the context in which the texts were composed. As colonial resistance to imperial authority spread, Freneau and Wheatley see a monarch at the helm of human cognition and perception — a move that leads them to struggle with the same tensions late-colonial Americans experienced with power and authority beyond the domains of poetry. These struggles manifest in "On Imagination" in what Wheatley, much like Freneau, identifies as the imagination's insistent demands for submission: though seemingly

a liberating force, the imagination ultimately attempts to "bind" the mind with "silken fetters" (l. 11) into a "soft captivity" (l. 12). Edward Cahill provides a lucid analysis of how this conflict manifests in Wheatley's text, writing that,

> [i]nsofar as the "soft captivity" of aesthetic pleasure enables liberty of imagination, it might be read as a bold expression of abstract liberty and a dangerous form of self-authorizing individualism, especially for a slave. But insofar as the poem emphasizes the imagination's authoritative role as the "ruler" of her "subject-passions", it functions as precisely the kind of Cato-like bracketing of selfhood demanded by republican virtue. (2012: 60)

This contradiction, which Wheatley veils in what reads at first as a paean to the imaginative faculty, remains central to her approach to the imagination, and parallels Freneau's own rendering.

Like in "On Imagination", in "The Power of Fancy", the imagination is not presented merely as a benevolent assistant but as a despotic figure, insofar as she allows the poet to participate in an experience that requires him to submit to her guidance and command. Although quick to engage and praise her power, the poet, aware of fancy's demands, seems unwilling to endorse full submission and, instead, attempts to reclaim authority by commanding, rather than obeying, fancy, such as when he demands through accumulated imperatives that she "[w]aft [him] far to southern isles" (Freneau 1786: l. 73), "[s]hape [her] course o'er land and sea" (l. 83), and, as the text concludes, "stop, and rove no more" (l. 124). There is an element of predictability in the fact that a British colonist, on the brink of the Revolutionary War, purports to rebel against a figure explicitly associated with monarchic authority — a figure that, contrary to his contemporaries, Freneau astutely identifies not as a "queen" but as a "regent", curtailing her claim to absolute power.[4] Though still carried by the imaginative faculty, the poet resists full submission to her authority, managing to redirect the course of the creative process originally spurred by the power of fancy so that it continues to unfold on his own terms. Fancy and the poet's struggle for power, however, is never fully solved, so much so that, by the end of the text, they continue to vie for creative authority. This may explain the poem's concluding lines, which, to some extent, come across in this light as a call for reconciliation: "Come, O come—perceiv'd by none,/ You and I will walk alone" (ll. 153-154). This is not the only instance in which the poet tries to appease fancy and encourage her to join him, not as his regent but as his equal. Earlier in the text, the poet urged fancy neither to command nor to obey but to walk alongside him so that, working in tandem, they might "wandering both be lost" (l. 119) and retire "to some lonely dome" (l. 35), where the creative process, a theme of the poem, may go on unmediated by external or, for that matter, internal constraints.

"The Power of Fancy", hence, points to a potential compromise between fancy and the poet's competing demands for authority — a compromise defined by a foundation of shared sovereignty. Such a compromise remains elusive, as does the possibility for the poet to exert the power of fancy without restraint. Rather than a "conventional view of imagination" as a "cooperative" faculty (2005: 66), to use a phrase from Annie Finch, Freneau ends up taking a highly ambivalent position on the limits of the imagination, which becomes a restraining force precisely when the individual attempts to conjure up its creative and liberating potential for a private purpose. Given the nature of late-colonial Princeton's curricular and extracurricular organisation, that the poet should have remained conflicted as to the private application of the creative powers of the mind may come as no surprise. Witherspoon explicitly argued in his "Lectures on Eloquence" that, when "kept in great moderation" (2015b: 291), and when directed to serve a public cause, the imaginative faculty could have a positive influence but, otherwise, "[i]magination is not to be much used" (2015b: 291). Elaborating on the anti-imaginistic discourse that informed much of eighteenth-century Anglo-American philosophical, literary and aesthetic thought, Witherspoon exposed his student body to a civic paideia that problematised the pursuit of private modes of self-representation and expression. In texts like "The Power of Fancy", Freneau addresses the extent of its creative expectations and, hence, questions the burden and limitations it imposed on the poetic mind.

This query is phrased, however obliquely, in the context of a battle of the sexes, a power struggle between the male and female forces operating in the text, namely, the poet and fancy. The explicit gendering of fancy as a female figure in the opening lines and the ensuing battle for autonomy that pits the imaginative faculty against the poet, an implicitly male figure, is not rare among eighteenth-century writings. Barbara C. Freeman examined how this dynamic informed the works of Immanuel Kant, particularly his understanding of the sublime, which, for him, "presupposes an interplay between two highly personified faculties of the mind, the imagination and the reason. This dyad is in fact a barely disguised hierarchy that provides the grounds for debasing one half of the couple at the expense of the other" (1997: 69). As detailed in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Freeman continues, "the attainment of the Kantian sublime is dependent upon a sacrifice; its cause is the collapse of the imagination's capacity to connect empirical reality with the realm of abstract ideality" (1997: 69-70). This collapse unfolds in Kant's discussion as the imagination (gendered as female) battles for control with reason (gendered as male), a process that required the latter's victory to enable the experiencing self's perceptual and cognitive transcendence via the sublime. As Freeman concludes, "what is at stake is a certain violence that imposes a hierarchical relation whose paradigm is achieved through a self-sacrifice by the putatively weaker partner" (72).

This dynamic, which would become prevalent in the writings of the Romantics, is anticipated in "The Power of Fancy". Unlike his counterparts in Europe, Freneau's take on the matter fails to bring about the collapse that Kant envisioned. Admittedly, the dynamic established between the female and male drives in Freneau's poem is not one that can be pinned down to an allegorical rendition of imaginative and rational forces in battle. Be that as it may, the break that would result in the self's liberation in the Kantian tradition via sublime transcendence does not occur in Freneau, who, despite his resistance, endeavors to find common ground with fancy and negotiate a compromise, which never fully materialises neither in this text nor in later writings.[5] In the absence of this break perhaps lies the poet's inability to transcend the barriers of the imagination, attain creative autonomy, and escape from, as Wheatley would put it, fancy's "silken fetters" (1988: l. 11).

5. Concluding Remarks

Princeton University Library holds a copy of the eighth volume of *The Works of Alexander Pope* (1757), formerly part of the Freneau library. The volume contains a collection of the letters written by the British poet, in the margins of which Freneau scribbled occasional lines and reflections. Foremost among these marginalia lies a brief stanza located below Alexander Pope's letter to Richard Steele, the co-founder of the influential British magazine *The Spectator*, dated November 7, 1712. In the letter, Pope provides a translation of Emperor Hadrian's famed last words as recorded in *Historia Augusta*, where the Roman leader addresses his soul as the "pleasing companion of [his] body" and compares, rather melancholy, "[its] former wit and humour" to its current "trembling, fearful, and pensive" state (Freneau 1774: 228). Elaborating on Pope's translation, Freneau noted what comes across as a revision of "The Power of Fancy" in the margins. The fragment, which bears the date "1774", reads as follows: "Little pleasing wandring [sic] mind/ Guest and companion soft and kind/ Now to what regions will you go/ All pale and stiff and naked too/ And just no more as you were wont to do". Far from serving as the galvanising power conjured by the original poem, the imaginative faculty stands, like Emperor Hadrian's soul, in a state of decay. "[P]ale", "stiff" and "naked" (l. 4), the poet's "mind" (l. 1) or, rather, fancy has lost its vigor, leading the poet to wonder whether it can still exert its liberating and creative power as it was "wont to do" (l. 5) or, were it not to be the case, then, "to what regions will [it] go" (l. 3).

Even though the fragment was composed on a later date, its connection to "The Power of Fancy" is telling, insofar as the faculty with which the poet had struggled to come to terms during his formative years has seen its condition worsen after his

graduation. Echoing the calls for union and resistance then spreading across the Thirteen Colonies, the imperial crisis brought profound politicisation to Princeton, leading President Witherspoon to introduce an ambitious program of curricular and extracurricular reforms to raise a generation prepared and desirous to resolve the crisis. This civic paideia, however, remained a source of much conflict for the poet, whose college writings suggest multiple layers of tension underpinning his response to the demands late-colonial Princeton made for prospective public writers. In his early writings, the poet envisioned the possibility to escape from such demands through the mediation of the power of fancy. Rather than affording perceptual transcendence, however, fancy partly releases the mind, but it does so by anchoring him to a frame of reference where his creative impulses are tamed under her command. The type of fancy the poet praises but also resists in the text, in this light, responds to that "instructed vision" (Martin 1961) that Princetonians were encouraged and educated to endorse — a controlled imaginative power that Freneau fails to embrace and, instead, contests, though to no avail. In later years, the tension between the impulses that dominate college writings like "The Power of Fancy" would rapidly escalate, forcing the poet to choose between writing in the service of the American Revolution and finding a space to assert his own creative autonomy as the country came into being.[6] It was at Princeton, nonetheless, that the "Poet of the Revolution" first encountered the problem of the imagination, and it was the experiences at this institution that laid the foundations upon which his later writings would address the potential for creative autonomy afforded by the power of fancy — a power he both admired and resented throughout his career.

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Notes

1. The terms "imagination" and "fancy" have a complex history. For most of the eighteenth century, both referred to the same faculty. Although the foundations upon which nineteenth-century thinkers would mark the distinction between them were introduced in the eighteenth century, in general terms, they were virtually interchangeable by the time Freneau attended Princeton (Engell 1981: 172-183; Pyle 1995: 38-39; Cahill 2012: 246; Costelloe 2013: 195; Holochwost 2020: 9-10). This paper, accordingly, uses these terms interchangeably.

2. From classical to early modern literature, the imagination was gendered either as male or female. Beginning in the early modern period, the representation of the imagination as a woman became increasingly consolidated, becoming standard practice in late-colonial writing. See Maura Smyth (2017) for an extensive analysis.

3. . The opening lines in Mark Akenside's "The Pleasures of Imagination" provide a case in point, considering that the poet dubs fancy the "smiling *queen* of every tuneful breast" (2015: l. 9, emphasis added). Likewise, Joseph Warton's "To Fancy" introduces the imagination as a "crown'd" (2015: l. 12) figure, a "Goddess" (l. 49), later acknowledged to rule the poetic mind as "queen" (l. 129).

4. In context, the term "regent" affords two possible readings: a generic term for a person who rules or governs (OED n. 1a) and a specific term for a person vested with authority by or on behalf of another for a period of time (OED n. 2). Unlike Wheatley's "imperial queen" (1988: l. 1), Freneau's terminology affords the possibility of rebellion because fancy's authority is as temporary as a regent's.

5. Evidence supporting this idea lies in the terms framing the poet's relation to "The Power of Fancy". The full text was issued only in the 1786 edition. In the 1795 and 1809 editions, it was extensively revised and separated into two texts, "Ode to Fancy" and "Fancy's Ramble", which omit most of the central conflict of the poem. Rutgers University Library holds Freneau's personal copy of the 1786 edition (RUL, "Freneau Collection", Association Volumes, Item 8, Box 1). "The Power of Fancy" is almost entirely crossed out, which suggests how conflicted the poet remained in later years both with the text and with the ideas he tried yet failed to reconcile.

6. See, for example, "Mac Swiggen; a Satire" (1775), "The Beauties of Santa Cruz" (1779) and "The House of Night, a Vision" (1779).

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