On the force of human imagination: The sense of interiority in Lodovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750)

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Lodovico Antonio Muratori (1672-1750) has traditionally been portrayed as an early-
enlightenment erudite and a historian. Recently, his moral philosophy has been reappraised, and a more rounded picture has begun to emerge of Muratori as a moral philosopher well acquainted with contemporary philosophical and scientific debates. Yet Muratori has so far not been appreciated as a philosopher of mind, fascinated by the mysterious tensions and relaxations between reason, the imagination, and the senses. In this paper, I will offer some reflections aimed at addressing this lacuna.

I will investigate Muratori’s philosophy of mind, focusing on his work “On the force of human imagination”, especially on its implications both for his thoughts on the human body and the senses, and more broadly for our uneasiness (perhaps my personal uneasiness) with the constriction of contemporary reason, i.e., with the narrowing of its scope to rules of scientific method.

I begin with a celebrated operatic event, the 1787 première of Mozart’s Don Giovanni in Prague—an event that aptly epitomized the sensate eighteenth century before the final conflagration that was to tear apart the European Ancien Régime in a few years. The perfect symbiosis between Lorenzo Da Ponte’s Italian libretto and Mozart’s sublime music created the most sensate opera in the history of Western musical theater. The senses figure prominently throughout the narrative concocted by Da Ponte. At key junctures, sensory experiences imprint the vicissitudes of the characters, who are both attracted and repelled by the force emanating from the mysterious hero. A few examples will suffice. After assassinating Donna Anna’s father, Don Giovanni has hardly regained his composure when he is sensorially distracted. He bids his servant Leporello: “Quiet! I think I sniff a woman! (Zitto: mi pare sentir odor di femmina!)”. Later on, while attempting to seduce the peasant Zerlina, who is about to marry Masetto, Don Giovani says: “…those slender, candid, perfumed fingers; I seem to be touching giuncata [a soft cheese] and smelling roses (…quelle dituccie candide e odorose; parmi toccar giuncata e fiutar rose!)”. The mourning Donna Anna is puzzled when, face to face with him, Don Giovanni claims that the infuriated Donna Elvira, who has been chasing him all over the
place, is just mad. Donna Anna murmurs: “There is no appearance of madness in her manner, in her speech (Non ha l’aria di pazzia il suo tratto, il suo parlar)” After Don Giovanni has left, Donna Anna is absolutely certain: “There is no doubt about it. The last words the villain uttered, recalled to my heart the voice of that scoundrel who in my apartment... (Non dubitate più: gli ultimi accenti che l’empio proferì, tutta la voce richiamar nel cor mio di quell’indegno che nel mio appartamento...”). Further on, the would-be husband, Masetto, is disgusted at the thought of touching Zerlina’s allegedly unfaithful hand (“Cheat! Why should I let an unfaithful hand touch me?” [Perfida! Il tatto sopportar dovrei d’una man infedele?]). In the second act, Don Giovanni sings to Donna Elvira’s young maid: “You whose mouth is sweeter than honey, you who cradle sugar in your heart! (Tu ch’hai la bocca dolce più del miele, tu che il zucchero porti in mezzo il core!)”. Finally, while waiting at Don Giovanni’s last supper, the servant Leporello wryly comments on his master’s palate, highlighting his inordinate eating habits. “Ah what a barbarous appetite! What gigantic mouthfuls! (Ah che barbaro appetito! Che bocconi da gigante!)”. But it is the sense of touch, a deadly sensation of cold that seals the eternal damnation of Don Giovanni when he fatefully shakes the hand of the marble statue: “What is this deadly chill? (Che gelo è questo mai?)”.

The logic emphasized by Da Ponte-Mozart is not the logic of discursive reason. It is rather a ‘logic’ of the senses—vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. The unstable equilibrium of reason and the senses creates the tension motoring the characters in their gyrations, like eccentric planets orbiting an invisible sun. But it is in the realm of the sensate mind-body that the characters perceive (not draw) the crucial inferences that make the events meaningful to them.

It is not at all inconceivable that the learned poet Da Ponte should have been acquainted with eighteenth-centuries philosophical debates, and perhaps with Muratori’s treatise on

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1 All citations from Da Ponte’s libretto are from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791): Don Giovanni, Heinrich Schmidt harpsichord, Philharmonia Chorus, Chorus master Roberto Benaglio, Philharmonia Orchestra, Carlo Maria Giulini, EMI Classics, libretto translated by William Murray, retrievable at: www.emiopera.com. I have altered the translations wherever they tend to depart from a literal rendering, so as not to compromise the meaning of the original.
human imagination. One could even argue that Da Ponte-Mozart’s opera stages a universe governed by the force of universal imagination, and that the orbits of the characters-planets are regulated by the tug-of-war between centrifugal/discursive reason and the centripetal logic of the senses; that is, a universe governed by the mechanics of imagination that the abbot Muratori had described in his work. I will come back to the Newtonian significance of the word ‘force’ in Muratori’s thought.

Judging by its publication history, Muratori’s treatise had an immense fortune in the second half of the eighteenth century. First printed in 1745, the book went through more than ten editions in less than fifty years (1754, 1757, 1760, 1765, 1766, 1768, 1770, 1772, 1774, 1777 (Spanish translation) 1779, 1783, 1793, 1793 (Spanish translation), 1796).

According to Muratori, human imagination is a material faculty that has its seat in the human brain, where all sensory information is carried, and which regulates mind-body interactions. It is the instrument of the intellect, which is a spiritual faculty that makes use of imagination to produce thought. Thus, Muratori construes imagination as the sense of interiority—a material substratum towards which intellect turns when reasoning and thought are to be set in motion. Muratori’s original philosophy of mind reflected precisely that renewed interest in the senses and in the human as a sensate organism that pervaded the eighteenth century. But before moving on to a fuller discussion, it is worth taking a bird’s eye view of the contents of Muratori’s treatise especially because it seems to have been almost but forgotten.

There are twenty chapters in total. The first is about the distinction between imagination and intellect. The second delves into the functions and material seat of imagination. The third explores imagination as a manifestation of divine providence. The fourth is about

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2 In his autobiography, Da Ponte recounted that with lottery money he had purchased books to donate to a public library, among which he mentioned Muratori’s magnum opus, the multi-volume Rerum Italicarum Scriptores, which Da Ponte calls “monumento glorioso della sapienza Italiana” (Da Ponte 1830, p. 59). However, it has to be noted that, as Luciano Paesani has suggested, Da Ponte was a master of the art of recasting heterogeneous materials, and that a variety of sources for his Don Giovanni have been identified by scholars. Cf. Paesani 2012.
memory. Chapters five, six, and seven constitute a small, fascinating tract on dreams. Chapter nine is an attempt at a naturalization of visions and ecstasies. Chapter ten studies the role of imagination in superstitious and/or magical practices. Chapter eleven tackles the general pathology of imagination. Chapter twelve attacks the medical superstition of the power to affect the fetus commonly attributed to imagination in pregnant mothers. Chapter thirteenth and fourteenth concern what we might perhaps describe as minor pathologies of imagination, both individual and social. Chapter fifteen is about the diversity of human imagination. Chapter sixteen investigates the (often misguided) imagination of philosophers. Chapter seventeen is wholly devoted to the mind-body problem. Chapter eighteen concerns the therapeutic powers of rational philosophy for regulating and preserving a healthy imagination. The last two chapters consider the fundamental role of imagination in the moral life.

It has recently been suggested that the originality of Muratori’s treatise is mostly to be found in his attempt to naturalize imagination by locating its seat in the human brain. It is correct that to a certain extent Muratori wishes to naturalize imagination. (However, we must set aside for the time being the thorny issue of what would constitute ‘nature’ for Muratori). Yet the idea that imagination has a material seat in the brain, and that it is at the frontier of material imagination and spiritual intellect that mind-body interactions mostly occur, was not entirely new, as Muratori himself pointed out. We find the localization of imagination in the brain for instance in the Logic of Port-Royal and in Malebranche. Furthermore, Muratori was well acquainted with the neurophysiologic researches reported in the medical literature, especially the seminal work carried out by the seventeenth-century English anatomist and physician Thomas Willis. According to Willis, the brain is the primary seat of the rational soul of humans and of the sensitive

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3 Muratori 1745, pp. xiii-xvi.
4 Claudio Pogliano, in his Introduction to Muratori 1995, p. 20, claims that “[q]ui a ben vedere, risiedono la peculiarità e l’originalità del saggio, nel sottoporre cioè ad un vaglio d’ordine prevalentemente medico-naturalistico forme e funzioni della fantasia. Quella fantasia che Vico aveva associato al momento ‘eroico’ dello sviluppo dell’ umanità, quando è ancora devole il raziocinio, Muratori vincola alla struttura del cervello, che differisce da individuo a individuo generando il variare delle prestazioni”.
5 “Tuttavia abbastanza abbiamo per asserire col consenso de’ migliori filosofi l’esistenza della fantasia nel capo dell’ uomo; e per riconoscere che specialmente in essa consiste il commercio dell’ anima col corpo”. Muratori 1745, p. viii.
6 For a precise summary, see the entry Phantasie, in Eisler 1910, ad vocem.
soul of animals. For, Willis states, the brain is the ‘driver’ [Ἐλατήρ] of the animal machine, the origin of all motions and thoughts [motuum et conceptuum omnium origo et fons]. The immediate companions of this driver must be the functions of imagination, memory, and appetite [imaginatio, memoria, apetitus]. For Willis, imagination is a certain undulation of the animal spirits, originating in the ‘mediterranean’ [meditullius] of the brain and expanding outwards in all directions. On the other hand, the act of memory consists in a regurgitation of the spirits from the outermost regions of the body towards the center of the ‘mediterranean’. Finally, appetite arises when animal spirits, stirred up in the ‘mediterranean’ in any way whatever, propagate outwards towards the furthermost branches of the nervous system.

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7 Willis 1664, p. 121. More precisely, Willis assigned “the common sense to the corpus striatum, the imagination to the corpus callosum and memory to the grey matter” (Arikha 2006, p. 159).
8 Willis 1664, p. 121.
Fig. 1 A seventeenth-century illustration of the human brain. From Thomas Willis’s *Cerebri anatome: cui accessit nervorum descriptio et usus* (cf. Willis 1664, facing p. 25).
What appears to be genuinely original in Muratori’s philosophy of mind is a bold attempt to investigate the ‘celestial mechanics’ of human imagination, the fantastic orbits crisscrossing the sense of interiority, within a broadly conceived, Newtonian framework of ideas. Willis himself had described the motions of the spirits along the labyrinthic meanderings of the cerebral tissue, its *placae et convolutions*, in terms of orbits (see figure 1).\(^9\)

But Willis was not a Newtonian *avant la lettre*. For, “the observation of anatomical structures was not close to shattering older assumptions about cognitive processes. No one could afford to question the division of the soul into, broadly, at least a cognitive—sensorial—and a rational part. Willis took up this dual theory, without, nonetheless, jumping whole-heartedly onto the Cartesian bandwagon, which […] was not of direct use to physiological or anatomical work. A member of the Oxford group of Harveian experimentalists […] Willis described his research as a way to ‘unlock the secret places of Mans Mind and to look into the living and breathing chapels of the Deity’”.\(^10\) To which last objective, Muratori would have assented wholeheartedly.

The implications of Willis’s suggestive description of the gyrations of animal spirits within the brain, graphically illustrated by the orbit metaphor, must have struck Muratori. Indeed, for the details of the anatomy of the brain, Muratori refers the reader to the work of the ‘famous’ Willis.\(^11\) But Willis’s orbits acquire a new significance within the intellectual framework in which Muratori operates. Though there are in Muratori’s thought some elements that can be described as Cartesian, at least in spirit, I believe that

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\(^9\) “…motusque istos per eosdem tractus sive orbitas saepe iterare debent”, Willlis 1664, p. 124. On the epoch-making transformation from representations of astronomical phenomena in terms of orbs to trajectories conceived as orbits, with a focus on Johannes Kepler, see Goldstein and Hon 2005. “Kepler transformed theoretical astronomy that was understood in terms of orbs [Latin:orbes](spherical shells to which the planets were attached) and models (called hypotheses at the time), by introducing a single term, orbit [Latin:orbita], that is, the path of a planet in space resulting from the action of physical causes expressed in laws of nature” (ibid., p. 74)

\(^10\) Arikha 2006, p. 164.

\(^11\) Muratori 1745, p. 10. He also mentions Nicolaus Steno, Humphrey Ridley, and Raymond de Vieussens, all of whom, according to Muratori, would have found some errors in Willis’s work.
much stronger Galilean and Newtonian influences have been underestimated. The universe of human imagination, the inner space of the sense of interiority, is not encumbered with Cartesian vortexes, pressurizing the mind via mechanical action. The vortexes had been mathematically disproved by Newton. Perhaps the inner space of interiority is rather empty. The mechanics of mental images—vying with each other for intellect’s attention in this space, sometimes clustering together to form complexes, thus swaying the intellect by their force of aggregation, sometimes disturbing the course of reason as single fixations, periodically returning like comets—is better captured by the attractive forces that govern the intercourse of intellect and imagination, very much along the lines of Newton’s Principia mathematica.

This rational-mechanical approach to human imagination, the senses, and the dynamics of interiority is clearly expounded in the part of Muratori’s book devoted to dreams, which, as I pointed out, constitutes a small treatise in its own right. The conundrum that fascinates Muratori is this. Does reason take part in dreaming, or is dreaming just a state of the soul in which imagination has free rein freedom? If the latter, it is difficult to explain how occasionally dreams can be rational, ingenious, and wholly capable of leveraging rational cognition, such as when we dream of speaking eloquently, or when, as it happened to Muratori himself, a Latin verse is conceived in a dream? If the former is the case, namely, if reason does play a role in dreaming, how is it then that dreams can turn out to be fantastic, chimerical, absurd, ultimately wholly intolerable to the rational soul of humans? Muratori solved the riddle by having recourse to the metaphor of the balance, or imbalance of forces, as the case may be.

“About this one has to consider that God has united in the head of living humans the two powers that have been described above, that is, the rational soul (whose principal faculty is mind) and imagination; the former spiritual, the latter material. Their intercourse is clearly established by experience. The plan of nature, or rather of the creator of nature,

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12 In a fundamental study on Newtonian currents in the early Italian Enlightenment, Vincenzo Ferrone has argued that Muratori’s thought was very much sensitive to Cartesian methodological norms even though eventually Muratori came to oppose Cartesian physical doctrines. According to Ferrone, “…tutta l’opera Muratoriana risentiva del metodo filosofico cartesiano” (Ferrone 1982, p. 243). I think, however, that Muratori was never a Cartesian methodologist in any important sense and that Ferrone goes too far.
appears to be as follows. Mind commands, imagination obeys. For, while we are awake, mind chooses the images that she needs to form her reasoning, to combine ideas together. However, the truth is that these two powers have been endowed with their own force. It is this force that decides the preponderance between the two of them, it being impossible to deny that the material part occasionally causes disorders in the spiritual part.”

While we dream, neither the spiritual soul nor the material imagination are fully at rest. Motion always prevails as in the Newtonian universe. If the moon and the planets were ever to come to a complete rest, they would all collapse towards the sun and the solar system would cease to exist. The experience of dreaming testifies to the continual unrest that reason and imagination must undergo. But what kind of unrest is this? While we dream, says Muratori, the state of reason is different than during wakefulness. Reason does not fall asleep but is in a state of ‘voluntary repose’.

In dreams the function of reason is that of a spectator of the images that imagination brings forward, but a spectator who has been deprived of the faculty of judgment. The impaired spectator cannot discern the truth of the images, or their order, or disorder. In this case, reason is reduced to a passive power. In dreaming reason occasionally gravitates too close to imagination, the latter’s attraction prevailing on the former’s inertial force. But then, why do we sometimes appear to exercise the powers of reason, thus prevailing over imagination’s own force, even while dreaming? Newton’s celestial mechanics offers mathematical principles that afford precise mathematical descriptions of the orbits of the planets. These descriptions presuppose, as a given, the distribution of masses, hence the distribution of the reciprocally attractive forces that regulate the

13 “Intorno a ciò a mio credere si dee considerare, aver Dio unite nel capo dell’ uomo vivente le due sopra descritte potenze, cioè l’anima ragionevole (la cui principale facoltà è la mente) e la fantasia; quella spirituale, questa materiale. Il loro commercio si trova chiaramente comprovato dalla sperienza. L’istituto della natura, o vogliam dire dell’ Autore della natura, si scorge essere questo, cioè che la mente comandi, la fantasia serva. In fatti vegliando noi, essa mente va scegliendo que’ fantasmi, che ella vuole per formarne il ragionamento, per combinare insieme le diverse idee. Contuttociò la verità si è, che queste due potenze han cadauna la lor propria forza; e questa forza è quella, che determina il predominio tra esse, non potendosi negare, che l’empito della parte materiale, sia talvolta cagione di gravi disordini alla spirituale” (Muratori 1745, p. 57).
14 Muratori 1745, p. 59.
15 Muratori 1745, pp. 61-62.
motions in the universe. Newton’s *Principia* does not explain the genesis of the universe that leads to a certain configuration of the masses present in the universe. Accordingly, Muratoro’s analysis of the states of mind presupposes the distribution of the reciprocal forces of reason and imagination as a given. To be sure this balance of forces is constantly shifting, depending on whether we are awake or asleep, and on whether, for instance when sleeping, we are having ‘rational’ or ‘irrational’ dreams. But there is no explanation as to why under certain circumstances the balance of forces is such and such. The celebrated, impotence dictum, *hypotheses non fingo*, that Newton must confess as to the cause of universal gravitation might have been voiced by Muratoro as well. As to why nature has ordained her plans, so as to leave us in constant danger of succumbing to the overwhelming power of irrationality, to the autonomous force of imagination, no hypothesis seems to be conceivable.

Thus the sense of interiority, as construed by Muratoro, is open to multiple experiences, to both the sublime and the abject, the finite and the infinite. I am convinced that Muratoro’s philosophy of mind has something to teach to those like myself who are worried about the narrowing of the scope of reason that has occurred over the last few centuries. The universe of the sense of interiority is not an orderly totality, a cosmos in the Greek sense. Of course it is not a chaos either, a random tussling of images before the inquisition of discursive reason. So firstly the question arises as to whether a celestial dynamics of imagination will have to contemplate the possibility that this strange universe might periodically collapse, imploding towards a singularity that could not possibly be described. Secondly, the follow-up question arises as to whether such a collapse, rather than being the negation of reason, is a necessary condition for reason to flourish. It is then legitimate to doubt whether the rules of scientific method, to which Western reason has been reduced since the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, have the power to illuminate the mechanics of such a universe. Of course to this question I do not claim to have an answer.

The violin virtuoso Giuseppe Tartini recounts how in a dream the devil played for him a most beautiful piece, and that when he woke up he only had to write it down. Thus the
celebrated *Devil Sonata* was born by dint of benign imagination (if we believe the anecdote). We do not know much about Mozart’s composition habits, and if they had anything to do with dreams and devils. Yet, to return one final time to the mysterious orbits followed by the characters in *Don Giovanni*, we might imagine that the centripetal ‘logic’ of the senses that powers the opera, that plays havoc with discursive reason, and which finally must be routed in a cliché happy ending,\(^{16}\) is but a theatrical representation of the celestial mechanics of imagination that Muratori had boldly attempted in his work *Della forza della fantasia umana*.

\(^{16}\) *Questo è il fin di chi fa mal, e de’ perfidi la morte alla vita è sempre uguale!* [This is the end which befalls evildoers, and the death of scoundrels is always equal to their life!] sing all the characters after Don Giovanni is engulfed in hell. Yet Da Ponte’s line is somewhat ambiguous. It can mean that bad people always prize death as much, or as little as life. But it can also indicate that life and death, discursive reason and unreasonable imagination, are forever implicated with each other.


