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**Matthew Maguire**, *The Conversion of Imagination: From Pascal through Rousseau to Tocqueville*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2006. 285 pp. Notes and index. \$49.95 (cl). ISBN: 0-674-02188-6.

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In the conclusion to the *New Science* (1725) Giambattista Vico drew a famous distinction between two types of barbarism that can be found at the beginning and the end of civilization. While the former type--the barbarism of sense--is associated with the thick darkness of antiquity, the latter--the barbarism of reflection--is brought about by the overuse of reason and intellect in human affairs that accompany the growing selfishness of modern man. Such a refined form of barbarism, Vico perceptively noted, appears once human beings lose touch with the natural forms of imagination and judgment tends to separate itself from memory and *fantasia*. The consequences of this process, warned Vico, are far-reaching and they ultimately lead to the decline and exhaustion of modern society as a whole. The ensuing loss of creative vitality is the high price modern individuals have to pay for the dryness of their intellect and hearts. A believer in historical cycles, Vico boldly asserted that modern society would one day return to the primitive simplicity of the first ages, when people will regain once again their purity, simplicity, and playful imagination. He went so far as to suggest that the barbarism of reflection is, in many ways, more inhuman than the barbarism of sense and prophetically predicted that once poetic wisdom and imagination wither away, the foundation of society inevitably crumbles.

With the benefit of hindsight, it would be difficult to dismiss Vico's musings as childish speculations unworthy of our consideration. The atrocity of crimes committed during the last century in the name of allegedly noble (or less noble) ideals still haunts us today. Whether or not it was the excess of reason or absence of it that made possible the existence of the Gulag and the Holocaust, one conclusion is beyond reasonable doubt: the horrors of the twentieth century have definitively shaken our belief in the doctrine of indefinite progress and have reaffirmed the importance of finding a *sensus communis* as a basis for peaceful coexistence and effective means for limiting reason's hubris.

But how can we humanize and educate reason and in what ways can imagination (and memory) contribute to this task? Might it not be the case that true wisdom is inseparable from imagination properly exercised? These are only a few questions addressed by Matthew Maguire's *The Conversion of Imagination*, a book that will appeal to those who believe that we must restore imagination to the place it deserves among the faculties of the souls. The task is urgent since humanists and social scientists hold widely different views on this issue. Although imagination has traditionally been a reference point for thinking about the self and culture among intellectual historians and students of hermeneutics, political theorists and sociologists have been slow to analyze the ways in which imagination influences our experience and gives value to our world.[1]

Addressing a wide audience of historians, political theorists, and cultural studies specialists, Maguire's book offers a thought-provoking history of imagination in French thought. By drawing mainly (though not exclusively) on Pascal, Rousseau, Stendhal, and Alexis de Tocqueville, Maguire claims that imagination must be seen once again as a dominant faculty in our experience of the world, a supreme faculty of human happiness as well as a preeminent faculty of human freedom (p. 5). In Maguire's view, the renewed interest in the power of imagination coincides with the publication of many works characterized by growing disenchantment with modernity and deep concern about the exhaustion of

creativity brought forth by the excess of reason and individualism.

Not surprisingly, the story told in these pages has a larger philosophical ambition, even if the latter is never fully articulated, as the reader would have expected. What brings together Pascal, Rousseau, and Tocqueville is their belief that a philosophy purely grounded in reason cannot give a complete account of human experience and needs to be complemented by a detailed explanation of the role and limits of imagination. The seven chapters of book trace the ways in which the accounts of human experience put forward by these French authors developed and assigned limits to the powers and possibilities of imagination, defined as one of the driving forces of history. By exploring the implications of imagination in the constitution of the self and the social and political order, Maguire's book invites its readers to resist the temptation of assigning imagination an ancillary status among the faculties of the soul. As Pascal noted, far from being the servant of reason, imagination ought to be seen as the dominant faculty of man, responsible not only for our greatest artistic achievements but also for many of our errors and illusions.

*The Conversion of Imagination* is dominated by the towering figure of Rousseau, whose writings are discussed in three chapters of the book (chapters 3-5). A subsequent chapter examines Rousseau's influence on the Restoration writers such as Constant and Stendhal (the great missing names here are Madame de Staël and Chateaubriand, who would have certainly deserved special treatment, given the amazing breadth of their literary and political writings). Maguire examines Rousseau's assumptions about imagination and spells out their relevance to his understanding of politics, freedom, love and happiness. These are arguably the most interesting and researched chapters of the entire book, drawing on a relatively wide range of writings, from the well-known *Discourses* and *Emile* to the lesser-known ones such as *Julie* and the *Reveries*. The centrality of imagination to Rousseau's conceptual vocabulary is evident to any attentive reader of his works. Maguire argues that the key role played by imagination in Rousseau's writings allows us to grasp his unique trajectory and to appreciate better his original contribution to modern thought.

On numerous occasions, Rousseau pointed out that without imagination human existence is not only unbearable but simply impossible. How else could one survive in a world in constant flux and without any enduring form, which allows human beings little or no certainty, and confronts them with a great deal of confused ideas and perceptions? According to Rousseau, everything is enveloped in imagination, from beauty to justice, and all our efforts must be directed toward keeping imagination alive, so that reason does not end up suffocating imagination. As Maguire reminds us, Rousseau repeatedly argued that the excess of reasoning combined with an unguided or suffocated imagination withers our souls, strengthens individualism and egotism, and in so doing, saps the true foundations of society. Unbound imagination also allowed Rousseau to grasp how political order can arise from social chaos and prompted him to rewrite the development of civilization and history, as it were, from a privileged vantage point, meant to secure access to a source of beauty and justice nowhere to be found in a world dominated by suffering, injustice, and uncertainty. Presenting Rousseau as an "authorial legislator" (p. 110), Maguire examines the political implications of Rousseau's understanding of imagination that are linked to his theory of lawgiving, the general will, equality, fraternity, legitimacy, and happiness (pp. 97-102).

*The Conversion of Imagination* also sheds light on the ways in which, in a purely Romantic move seeking to radicalize the steps initiated by Pascal and Hobbes, Rousseau redefined the relationship between imagination and reason. Commenting on Rousseau's complex attitude toward the Enlightenment, a *locus classicus* in the secondary literature on Rousseau, Maguire notes that it would be incorrect to describe Rousseau as unreservedly critical about reason. Yet, he acknowledged time and again that reason's most important decisions always depend on imagination and the passions, illusions, and desires elicited and extended by imagination. "The real world has its limits," Rousseau wrote in *Emile* (anticipating the later German Romantics), "the imaginary world is infinite."<sup>[2]</sup> It is imagination, stimulated by pride, which

constantly generates finite forms and new desires and manifests itself as “an infinite power that shapes the finite possibilities of the self” (p. 81). Moreover, it is imagination properly exercised and energized that allows us to differentiate virtuous illusions from disordered and harmful ones. But, if this is true, then it might be argued that this restless imagination might easily turn into an obstacle to happiness since it often begets an inner disequilibrium inimical to happiness. Fortunately, as Rousseau claimed in a key passage from *Emile*, a solution to this paradox does exist: “It is by diminishing the excess of desires above the faculties that we can achieve peace and happiness rather than by expanding our faculties or cutting down our desires.”[3]

As Maguire perceptively notes, in Rousseau’s writings, imagination is also linked to moments of pure perception of existence (this is the case of the famous fifth chapter in the *Reveries*) which afford a few moments of bliss in the midst of an always changing reality. Maguire’s analysis of the complex relationship between perfectibility and imagination leads him to conclude that a certain *modus vivendi* between the two can be achieved. If imagination does not necessarily move into the real, a durable, if fragile, equilibrium between imagination and the real is possible, with desires being realized within the imagination. It is in this way that human beings can enjoy moments of happiness without the imaginary excesses arising from an inflamed and unbound imagination. As Rousseau claimed in *Emile* (quoted by Maguire), imagination expands for us the measure of the possible either for good or for evil, and consequently excites and nourishes the desires by the hope of satisfying them. Anticipating one of the most penetrating insights of Tocqueville’s description of the democratic man, Rousseau bemoaned the fact that we often exhaust ourselves without arriving at the end. In other words, the more we gain enjoyment, the more happiness moves away from us.

Not surprisingly, Maguire devotes an entire chapter (“The Gravity of Illusion”) to exploring the role and limits of imagination in democratic times by focusing on Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and (to a lesser extent) *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. Tocqueville is a great choice for any intellectual history of imagination because on numerous occasions, both in his published works as well as in his private correspondence, he expressed deep concerns about the mediocrity of life in democratic ages (he also famously claimed to have read every day a few pages from Pascal, Montesquieu, and Rousseau). More than any other political thinker, Tocqueville’s insights into the complex nature of modern democracy and the democratic soul remain highly relevant to our time and continue to provoke us intellectually.

Yet, the greatness of Tocqueville does not lie in any single doctrine that he may have espoused or promoted but in the ambivalent—or critical—ways in which he analyzed the multiple facets of the emerging modern democracy. Maguire calls our attention to the seminal distinction drawn by Tocqueville between aristocratic and democratic freedom, and suggests that for the Frenchman, true freedom was “persistently associated with the proud imagination” (p. 189). This amounts to arguing that modern equality and democracy are inevitably “in tension with the energies of proud imagination” and that “the imagination’s desire to take flight is increasingly thwarted in ages of equality” and general leveling (pp. 191-2). Special attention is paid to Tocqueville’s important chapter on the sources of poetry in democratic times in which he argued that during these periods, “the imagination is not extinguished, but it devotes itself almost exclusively to conceiving and representing the real” (p. 192).

While the general interpretation of Tocqueville is correct, it can be argued that Maguire tends to make Tocqueville more aristocratic than he really was, thus overstating his sympathy for aristocracy, without adding the necessary nuances. To understand Tocqueville’s complex persona, a better use of his correspondence and notes (in Eduardo Nolla’s critical edition of *Democracy in America*, soon to be published in English by Liberty Fund) would have been necessary.[4] As Tocqueville himself argued in a letter to Henry Reeve from 1837, he belonged neither to aristocracy nor to democracy. Instead Tocqueville sought “to cast calm glances on both sides,” not feeling “naturally and instinctively attracted toward neither the one nor the other.”[5] As I have argued elsewhere, Tocqueville was a

political moderate who put forward a valuable strategy for moderating democracy predicated upon the idea that the preservation of pluralism is essential for the survival of liberty in democratic societies.[6]

Yet Tocqueville's moderation was unorthodox, as was almost anything else in his restless personality. Combining political moderation with his desire for greatness created an almost insurmountable tension between Tocqueville's calculating mind and his powerful ambitions. As his rich correspondence brilliantly shows, Tocqueville's political moderation was married to an immoderate heart that longed for unforgettable adventures and greatness in the midst of an increasingly egalitarian and democratic society that only wanted to become more tranquil and prosperous. His imagination easily climbed to the summit of human grandeurs and gave him romantic *élans*, without ever being able to offer him anything that pleased or seized him completely.

As Tocqueville himself put it in a letter to Madame de Swetchine, "vague restlessness and an incoherent agitation of desires have always been a chronic malady with me." [7] While his mind was cold, prudent, and calculating, his passions were ardent and violent. Much like Rousseau, he was, "a repressed romantic," perpetually aware of the distance between the real and the ideal, a melancholic spirit who was also consumed by a tenacious ambition to become a successful political man (alas, this last aspect of Tocqueville's personality is unduly understated in Maguire's analysis). [8] In this respect, much like Rousseau, Constant, and Stendhal, Tocqueville believed that the frantic activity of modern life reveals a deeper problem and that "constant political engagement is required to prevent this frantic lassitude from becoming an inescapable cultural situation" (p. 214). The fact that Tocqueville was tempted at times to espouse an "aestheticized vision of politics" should not make us lose sight of his unwavering political moderation that ultimately led him to criticize in unambiguous terms any form of literary style in politics (p. 215). In this regard, he was the opposite of Rousseau, and Maguire goes too far when arguing that "Tocqueville appears to stand on the threshold of a late modern aesthetics of violence" (p. 216). He belonged to a different political and spiritual horizon than Rousseau and his followers.

In spite of his anxieties about mediocrity in democracy, Tocqueville never lost his belief in the possibility of moderating democracy by working with the elements and forces of democracy. Among the effective democratic remedies to democracy's problems, Tocqueville listed education, religion, and self-government. Democratic legislators, he suggested, must constantly strive to elevate souls and cultivate a taste for the infinite, a sentiment of greatness, and a love of immaterial pleasures. Tocqueville's advice is more relevant than ever today, in an age dominated by economists and calculators, in which we need to cultivate imagination as a means of re-enchancing our secular world. Along with freedom, imagination properly exercised can "tear people from the worship of Mammon and the petty daily concerns of their personal affairs" and give them a sense of larger vistas. [9] This is another way of saying that imagination properly exercised and educated might be an effective means of staving off the barbarism of reflection that Vico anticipated three centuries ago. The merit of Maguire's stimulating book is to remind us (in Vico's footsteps) of the key role that imagination plays in making us feel at home in the world.

## NOTES

[1] On the intellectual history of the imagination see John Sallis, *Force of Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); J.M. Cocking, *Imagination: A Study in the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1994); and Gillian Robinson and John Rundell, eds., *Rethinking Imagination: Culture and Creativity* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[2] Rousseau, *Œuvres Complètes*, IV, eds. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raynaud (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), p. 305.

[3] Ibid, p. 304.

[4] For a good analysis of the importance of Tocqueville's letters, see François Furet, "The Passions of Tocqueville," *The New York Review of Books*, June 27, 1985, 23-27.

[5] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. and trans. Roger Boesche and James Toupin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 115-16.

[6] Aurelian Craiutu, "Tocqueville's Paradoxical Moderation," *The Review of Politics* 67, No. 4 (2005): 599-629.

[7] Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, p. 348. The importance of Tocqueville's letters to Madame de Swetchine (published in Tocqueville, *Œuvres Complètes*, Vol. 15, Part II, ed. Pierre Gibert [Paris: Gallimard, 1983]) can hardly be exaggerated. They provide one of the best angles for understanding his deepest religious and philosophical convictions. On Tocqueville's Pascalian side, also see Peter Lawler, *The Restless Mind* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), pp. 73-158.

[8] To borrow the expression from Françoise Mélonio, "Tocqueville entre la révolution et la démocratie," in Tocqueville, *Lettres choisies. Souvenirs*, eds. Françoise Melonio and Laurence Guellec (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 27. Also see the following confession of Tocqueville: "J'ai la tête très froide, et l'esprit raisonneur, calculateur même; et, à côté de cela, se trouvent des passions ardentes qui m'entraînent sans me convaincre, domptant ma volonté en laissant libre ma raison," Tocqueville, *Lettres choisies. Souvenirs*, p. 238.

[9] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, 2 vols., trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), I: 88.

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