Jornades de Foment de la Investigació

"THE ANALYSIS OF POETIC IMAGERY"

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INTRODUCTION

The present article is part of a contrastive study of a number of poetic works by two of the greatest poets of the twentieth century: T.S.Eliot (1888-1965) and Salvador Espriu (1913-1985). Our thesis is that Espriu and Eliot, although they seem to have little in common *a priori*, are comparable poets, especially in the components and the role of their imagery within their respective productions. We will refer to their poems to illustrate our points in the pages that follow. We would like to apologize in advance, in case the reader feels that ideas are taken from granted or if they need contextualiztion.

We will begin by considering the terms "image" and "imagery" from a theoretical perspective, which will be complemented with some notes on how they have been perceived at different periods of the history of literary criticism. In the third section, we will go through the stages of a very simple method to analyse imagery, based on the principles of "cluster criticism," as applied to the analysis of Espriu's *Final del Laberint* (1955).

1.-THE LINK BETWEEN THE HUMAN MIND AND THE EXTERNAL WORLD

Demarcating "image" and "imagery" conceptually is not easy: imagery seems to be everywhere in the poem and nowhere in particular. It is often considered along with other commonly used terminology (figurative language, symbol, metaphor, etc), the boundaries being fuzzy. Most dictionaries of literary terms begin their entries "image" and "imagery" by drawing attention to this fact: [1]

> Image and imagery are among the most widely used and poorly understood terms in poetic theory, occurring in so many different contexts that it may well be impossible to provide any rational, systematic account of their usage. [2]

But *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, from which the lines above have been taken, does provide a definition of the term "imagery" that will be our starting point: "*imagery refers to images produced in the mind by language, whose words may refer either to experiences which could produce physical perceptions, were the reader actually to have those experiences or to the sense impressions themselves*" (560).

In literature, images are triggered off by language and through them, a poet recalls or evokes instances of physical, sensual perception. Language could therefore be considered a bridge linking the external world (of which we gain awareness through perception) and the human mind (where images evocative of the sensual spring).

In its most immediate meaning, the term "image" would be closely related to (or could even be interchangeable with) syneasthesia, that is, an instance of language that refers to sensual experience: synaesthesia "*basa les seues imatges en el terreny prelingüístic de la pròpia activitat perceptiva* [as

apposed to metaphor and similar figures of speech] [...] *opera a un nivell quasibé estrictament perceptiu i, per tant, més a prop dels referents purs*" (Salvador 1986: 94, 95).

Most poets will use images to make abstract ideas concrete and easier to communicate and retain by readers. The expression of abstraction in concrete terms is what literary theorists call figuration. For example, T.S. Eliot used the image of the "The Waste Land" [3], rich in sensual evocations (aridity, drought, barrenness, heat), to represent abstract notions about the world where he lived: a hopelessness, materialism, shock following a war that had surpassed all previous wars in its destructive power.

Mental imagery has also attracted attention from psychologists, who have classified images in seven different categories: the first five (visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory) obviously refer to the five senses; the other two either include bodily processes, such as our breathing or heartbeat (organic images) or convey an impression of the subject moving (kinesthetic images) [4]. The following table contains examples from poems by Eliot and Espriu, classified according to the kind of images they produce:

Type of image	*Example from Espriu's poetry*	*Example from Eliot's poetry*
Visual	Sinera, turons de pins i vinya, pols de rials (*CS* II)	the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene (*AW* III)
Auditory	fustes sonores, cròtals, secrets tam-tams de selva (LH, "En la teva mort")	the pleasant whining of a mandolin (*WL*, FS)
Tactile	dits aspres de pluja (*FL* I)	endeavours to engage her in caresses ... exploring hands encounter no defense (*WL*, FS)
Olfactory	ella venia, sempre olorosa, amb les flors (*El Caminant i el mur,* "Les Roses Recordades")	in vials of ivory and colored glass unstopered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes... (*WL*, GC)
Gustatory	cap caritat no em llesca el pa que jo menjava (*CS* V)	they had a hot gammon, and they asked me in to dinner (*WL*, GC)
Organic	cor palpitant (*FL* VIII)	wind in and out of unwholesome lungs (BN III)
Kinesthetic	avanço per rengles i rengles de flames (*FL* XXVI)	so we moved, and they, in a formal pattern, along the empty alley, into the box circle (BN I)

Images in Espriu's and Eliot's works are eminently visual; comparatively, other types of images are infrequent (gustatory images do not abound: the two examples above are perhaps not the best, since they refer to food, rather than to a tasting experience). We have deliberately chosen simple images to

illustrate each type, but readers of these authors' poems will come across very elaborate images that pose interesting ideas about human perception: for example, in Eliot's visual image "*the roses had the look of flowers that are looked at*" ("Burnt Norton" I, ll. 30, 31), sight becomes an attribute of the object seen, as it were; in Espriu's tactile image "*perdura en els meus dits la rosa que vaig collir*" (*Cementiri de Sinera* IV, ll. 8-10), touch makes it possible for us to stop the flow of time.

Both literary critics and psychologists have concerned themselves with the study of images, but we should bear in mind that our object of study is, at the end of the day, language, and the relationship between words and images is also at the heart of linguistic theory. The signified, the conceptual component of the linguistic sign (as described by Ferdinand de Saussure) can be thought of as a mental image that speakers can associate to a string of sounds, the signifier, the physical component of the linguistic sign. We could go further and state that sounds or graphemes are respectively auditory and visual images of the meanings they stand for, the meanings they make perceptible.

Some words clearly refer to things in the external world, so it seems inevitable to establish a connection in our mind between the word designating that thing and the thing itself. This link is not possible with abstract nouns and with some verbs or adjectives: what would be the corresponding image for words like "pride," "culture," "understand" or "tolerant"? There is obviously not a clear one: "[...] *there are large numbers of words where it is not possible to see what 'thing' the word refers to* [...] *Some words do have meanings that are relatively easy to conceptualize, but we certainly do not have neat visual images corresponding to every word we say*" (Crystal 1987: 100, 101).

As we said at the beginning, "image" remains a rather elusive critical term, often bundled together with many others. In literary criticism, no distinction is sometimes made between image and metaphor, as the following definition clearly shows: "*...la imagen supone una formulación lingüística de una similaridad fundada en un atributo común o imaginema que se evidencia tras el proceso reductor de un desvío semántico en un contexto dado...*" (Burguera 1994: 47). [5]

The reason why the two terms are used as synonymous might be that they function in a very similar way: the connection between the image and the experience or impression to which it refers can compare to that between the two components of a metaphor: the tenor (what is said) and the vehicle (what is meant), in I.A. Richards' terminology.

We believe a distinction can and should be established between image and metaphor. "The rose garden" and "*obscura presó*" are images that any reader would rate as characterisitic of Eliot and Espriu respectively: as we will see, they are full of evocations and their study would lead us to great works of literature in which they (or other resembling images) appear as well. But they are not metaphors *stricto sensu*, since they have not been construed on an irrational association; they are not instances of a "*violation du langage*" or of "*anomalies sémantiques*," under which Todorov classifies metaphor [6].

It might be argued that the images mentioned above are in fact symbols, since they can be considered to stand for something else: Eliot's "rose garden" is a version of Eden and therefore, it stands for togetherness with God; Espriu's "*obscura presó*," reminiscent of the poetry of the great mystics, is the place where the purgative process leading to eternity begins.

Like metaphors, symbols are based on an analogy, which Juan Eduardo Cirlot defines as a "*relación de dos hechos o proposiciones entre los que hay similitud y, por lo menos, un elemento igual*" (20). The difference between metaphor and symbol is precisely that, in the latter, something represents something else with its whole semantic weight unaltered, whereas in a metaphor, the analogy leans only on the semantic information shared by tenor and vehicle (Salvador 93) [7]. Further, in symbols, the association between the literal and the symbolic levels is often solidly maintained throughout the

poem or even the author's whole production, or has been fixed by convention. Readers may or may not be aware of this association: if they are not, symbols will remain bare images that capture physical perception, perfectly logical at the literal plain, unlike metaphors.

We could conclude that images will not necessarily develop a symbolic or metaphoric quality, but symbols, metaphors and other related tropes (allegory, metonymy, personification, simile, synecdoche) result from the combination and manipulation of images: images are the raw material used for producing figures of speech. Cirlot quotes the Hindu philosopher Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, who defines symbolism as "the art of thinking in images" (36). Let us look closely at the components of two metaphors from the poems studied:

Tenor	Vehicle	Common semantic traits
(1) els ulls de la nit (=the stars)	the protagonist feels someone is watching him through the night	the stars and one's eyes shine, they have a comparable shape
(2) the river is a strong brown god	it is impossible for man to control the river flow	the river and God have an overwhelming force that could prove devastating

In metaphor (1), the stars are identified with watching eyes and so the night is personified; the images involved are mainly visual (darkness, the stars shining, human eyes). Metaphor (2) is a pure metaphor (A is B) and also a personification; besides from the obvious visual image (a brown river), there is also the kinesthetic image of the river flowing, implied by the adjective "strong."

2.-IMAGERY FROM HORACE TO ISER

The terminology we have used above (image, imagery or figuration) can be considered an echo of the mimetic tradition, according to which literature, like the plastic arts, is nothing but the reproduction of nature or reality. In fact, the words "image" and "imitate" derive from the same Latin etymon. The foundations of the mimetic theory of art, which will be in force up to the Romantic boom of the 18th century, were set by Plato, Aristotle and Horace. In his *Epistola ad Pisones* (1st cent. BC), also known as "The Art of Poetry," the latter compared poems to paintings:

> As with pictures, some poems the closer you stand
>
> Are more pleasing, but some more remote should be scanned;
>
> One appears best in shadows, and one in clear light
>
> Unafraid of a critic's discerning insight;
>
> And some please us once, some, an indefinite time.
>
> (Con Davies & Finke 1989: 100, ll. 361-365)

Even though Horace's formulation of this simile, "*ut pictura poiesis*," which has come to designate the vision of poetry as representation, shows an early interest in the relationship between the external world and the artistic work, the study of imagery as the major conveyor of content can be said to begin in the Renaissance.

In England, the first ambitious analyses of imagery were carried out in the 18th century and they focused on William Shakespeare. His reputation had shifted from "a successful, gifted playwright" to a "great literary author" since the First Folio edition of his plays in 1623; these were now not only staged, but published for people to read. The circulation of Shakespearean dramatic texts and their enjoying a certain success in book form towards the end of the 18th century, a new phenomenon, can be put forward as the cause for the critics' directing their attention overwhelmingly to imagery. Readers and critics of Shakespeare's plays no longer saw them on stage, but they visualised them in their minds.

With the Enlightenment, reason was enthroned and opposed to imagination. The ability to create images not rooted in reality was consequently underestimated, if not rejected. The enlightened prejudice against imagination is reminiscent of the use of the word in the King James Bible (1611), where its meaning is close to "disobedience," "defiance" or even "sin." God has no choice but to punish man because of the latter's "imaginations:"

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thought of his heart was only evil continually. (Gen 6: 5)

Romanticism brought about a new conception of literature and poetry became a means for writers to express their feelings and emotions, their internal world, rather than the reflection of the external world, as mimetic theories had argued for centuries. Imagination then regained its prestige as the creative force behind the genius.

During the 20th century, imagery continued to be at the centre of attention. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Sigmund Freud interprets dreams by using language to establish connections between waking life and oniric images, an interpretive method that operates in a similar way to that used by the literary critic studying poetic imagery; so much so, that it has been called "poetics of dreaming." According to Freud, dreams are made up primarily of visual images:

> Now dreams think essentially in images; and with the approach of sleep it is possible to observe how, in proportion as voluntary activities become more difficult, involuntary ideas arise, all of which fall into the class of images [...] Dreams, then, think predominantly in visual images —but not exclusively. They make use of auditory images as well, and, to a lesser extent, of impressions belonging to the other senses. (Freud 1991: 113, 114)

To modernist poets such as Ezra Pound, "*il miglior fabbro*," T. S. Eliot's mentor and the one responsible for the many suppressions from the original typescript of *The Waste Land*, imagery in a poem is of paramount importance, since ideas emanate from it. Eliot, modernist poet and the most eminent new critic formulated, in an essay on *Hamlet*, the concept "objective correlative," as part of his theory of impersonality in poetry:

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative;" in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such when the external acts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. [8]

René Wellek defines Eliot's "objective correlative" as *"the symbolic world which he thought of as continuous with the feelings of the poet, objectifying and patterning them"* (192); this would naturally include the imagery the poet must resort to, not only to make abstract ideas concrete, but more importantly, to avoid expressing his feelings and emotions directly.

The exclusively textual approach of the New Criticism changes in the second half of the 20th century with the reader response theories, according to which the literary work is only complete with the reader's intervention in the act of reading. Wolfgang Iser explains how readers are confronted with gaps in the literary text that need filling. Although he focused on fictional texts, we believe that his theory also applies to poetry. Poetic imagery creates gaps that provide readers with opportunities to exercise their creativity by visualising images and referring to their perceptual or sensual experience; in so doing, they incorporate their subjectivity into the work:

> Entre els aspectes esquematitzats és on es troben els espais buits, que li donaran al lector tot el protagonisme amb la tasca d'omplir-los, la qual cosa no sempre s'assoleix. En altres paraules, els espais buits són, com ja hem apuntat, els productors de l'experiència estètica, i on el lector insereix la seua pròpia coneixença. (Guzmán 1995: 57)
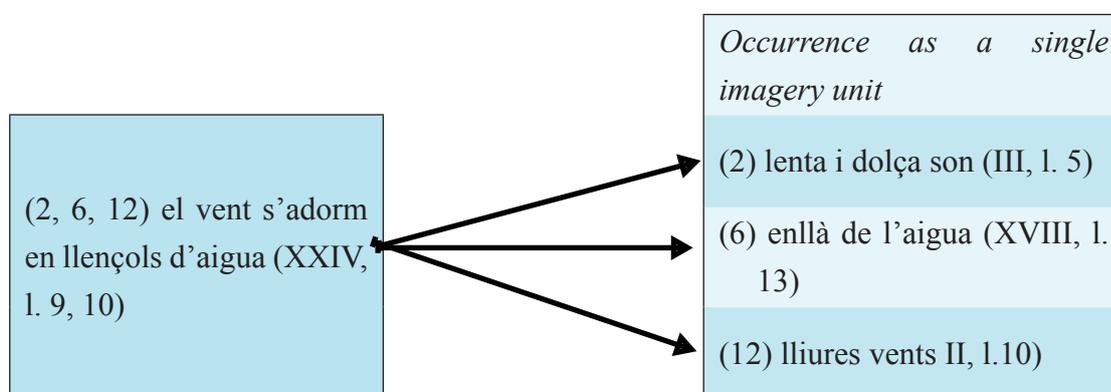
1.-ANALYSING IMAGERY

The method for analysing imagery that we propose is far from being sophisticated. What follows is a description of its stages, with examples from and references to our study of Espriu's *Final del Laberint*, a book that suits this kind of analysis wonderfully.

Our approach is that of "cluster criticism," based on two principles: (1) the relevance of images is determined by their recurrence within a work or a group of works and (2) useful information about poets and the "world" they have concocted through the means of language can be extracted from the study of their imagery (*Princeton Encyclopadia* 559, 560). But let us go through the phases of the whole analytic process:

① <u>Division into images</u>. We have first divided each of the thirty poems that make up *FL* in syntactical units (nouns, phrases, clauses or sentences) that correspond to one or more imagery units (see our sample table, with the units for poems I-VI, at the end of this section; units have been quoted literally from the poems, although they are sometimes completed with information in square brackets to foreground the meaning). Some of these imagery units are expressed in identical or very similar language throughout the book: for example, "*la llosa de l'oblit a poc a poc va caure*" (XXI, ll. 13, 14) and "*molt a poc a poc la llosa va caure*" (XXII, l. 16); others differ in their expression, but convey the same image(s): "*mudes canilles al meu encalç*" (VIII, ll. 7, 8) and "*allunyat gos foll d'un antic malson*" (XXVI, l. 3).

② <u>Grouping of images</u>. Some of the images have a very specific reference and admit little modification in their expression: such is the case of the threatening dogs, standing for danger. Other images (usually the most significant) can appear in a variety of forms: an example would be water imagery, which is presented as rain, the sea, a river, etc. These could have been studied as independent imagery units, but we have considered them together for practical reasons, since they have a similar or comparable symbolic function. Some images whose references in reality

are, in principle, unconnected, have also been considered as a unit: this is the case with light and height, which often appear together —references to height never appear alone. In our analysis of *FL*, images only appearing once have not been considered.

③ <u>Numbering of images</u>. Each imagery unit, either simple (unchanged throughout the book) or complex (presented in various forms or made up of simple units) is given a number, which will be the same throughout the whole book. Although they are presented in the same order as they appear in the poem, syntactic segments within the same poem that express a lone image have been grouped under the same number (see sample table). Some syntactic units are a coallescence of different imagery units that appear singly in other poems, for instance, the beautiful image "*el vent s'adorm en llençols d'aigua*:"

	Occurrence as a single imagery unit
(2, 6, 12) el vent s'adorm en llençols d'aigua (XXIV, l. 9, 10) →	(2) lenta i dolça son (III, l. 5)
	(6) enllà de l'aigua (XVIII, l. 13)
	(12) lliures vents II, l.10)

(When an imagery unit appears first in combination with other images and then on its own, we indicate so with the symbol ↓.)

④ Finally, the number of times every image appears has been counted. The following table lists the most relevant images in *Final del Laberint* (twenty-four in total), a very general interpretation and their occurrence:

Number	Image	Interpretation	Occurrence
(1)	*Physical pain, crying*	The mystic experience is traumatic	24
(2)	*Sleeping and dreaming*	Drawing nearer to God	15
(3)	*Light and height*	Attributes of God	50
(4)	*Marble, gravestone*	The frontier between the world of the dead and the world of the living	4
(5)	*Flowers*	Transitoriness of happiness	2
(6)	*Water (rain, river, lake, sea, thirst)*	God (quenches thirst, but can also make the mystic journey hazardous)	37
(7)	*Darkness*	Emptying of the self, essential to be received by God	18

(8)	*Earth, stone*	Barrenness, the temporal, as opposed to the eternal	12
(9)	*Birds (wings, flying)*	Aspiration to the eternal	11
(10)	*Trees, wood*	Man in his attempt to reach God	22
(11)	*Fire*	Purgation	8
(12)	*Wind*	The force that pulls the hero through his journey	12
(13)	*Stairs*	Spiritual improvement	3
(14)	*Words, singing, crying*	The union with God	22
(15)	*Shepherd and flock*	God and men	12
(16)	*Watching eyes*	The eyes of God, set on men continuously	16
(17)	*Hunting and wounds*	God choosing the fittest souls; men's urgency to be admitted by him	13
(18)	*Blindness*	Renunciation of the temporal	4
(19)	*Threatening dogs*	Danger and fear throughout the journey	3
(20)	*Horses, centaurs, galloping*	Freedom as one approaches eternity	7
(21)	*Bees, beehive*	The struggle for spiritual improvement	3
(22)	*Tolling bells*	Eternity approaching	5
(23)	*Shore & mountains*	Destination: eternity	9
(24)	*Nakedness*	Spiritual perfection	3

The most recurrent images must be studied in depth, unravelled into the main ideas and themes of the poem(s).

SAMPLE TABLE: IMAGERY UNITS IN POEMS I-VI FROM SALVADOR ESPRIU'S FINAL DEL LABERINT

I➜	II➜	III➜	IV➜	V➜	VI⬇
(1) lent dolor; l'esglai del llarg crit (2↓, 7↓) somni fosc (3) aquella llum dels altíssims palaus (5) flor desfeta (6) dits aspres de pluja; el cant secret de l'aigua (7) tota la nit; obscura presó, clos recinte (8) el cor vastíssim de la terra; maternal respir fangós que guarda el vinent blat; [*les lloances de*] la gleva; secs camins (9) obertes ales amples dels ocells (10) molt piadosos arbres d'ombres esteses (11) les lloances del foc (12) [*les lloances del*] vent (13) esglaons de pedra	(7) estances de la casa on la destral del llamp no brilla mai; passadissos sense llum (1) un terrible plor, un plany elemental; aquell dolor que ja s'atansa; la sang és escampada amb ira per la roja tenebra (3) altes prades (12) lliures vents (10) boscos (7, 16↓) la nit ampla i oberta sota les estrelles (14) unes poques, fràgils, clares paraules de cançó	(14, 15) em dreça el cant a l'armenter (3, 15) el resplendent ramat (15) el pastor fa armada; herbes tendres; camins de posta (2) lenta i dolça son (3, 16↓) els ulls de la nit [*the stars*] (3) els cims [*where the sun sets*], els mercats altíssims de la llum (1) aquest petit dolor que sóc (12, 15) sempre amb ell [*the shepherd*] i amb el vent	(3, 15) ramats d'estrelles; els bous de l'alt arment [*constellation: taurus*] (12, 15) ramat del vent; amb mi quedava el vent (15) només un pastor (2) se'n van amb molta son a jaç [*the bulls*]; també volem dormir (3) el pas tan lent del sol	(3) occident (12, 15) amb el pastor venia el llarg ramat del vent; vent adormit pastura per herbes altes; l'esguard del pastor (2, 12) vent adormit; li abrigarà la son [*or tardoral...*] (3, 10) or tardoral [*gold as light*] dels arbres (6, 12) el vent i jo bevíem a poc a poc de l'aigua; set; vora del riu	(1, 6) a poc a poc beus mort: la set feia el riu maligne (6, 16) no et miris en el corrent; la teva imatge al fons de l'aigua; veure't en el mirall; l'esguard del glaç (12) no t'allunyis del vent (7) la tarda és perill, pel vespre ve basarda (10) la por del bosc (1, 17↓) s'atansaven lents passos de caçador

CONCLUSIONS

From our theoretical demarcation of the terms "image" and "imagery," from our diachronic overview of their history in literary theory and from our application of the ideas of cluster criticism to *Final del Laberint*, several conclusions may be drawn:

(i) a study of imagery cannot leave aside the study of tropes (i.e. figures of speech having to do with word choice and manipulation of meaning), even if they are not specifically dealt with

(ii) the study of imagery, as an inescapable element of the poem, has drawn the interest of literary theorists throughout the ages, however different their vision of literature or their approach to its study

(iii) an analytic method like the one described above will direct our attention to the most recurrent (and hence the most important) images in a poetic work. A closer look at these images will help as describe our author's poetic world.

Imagery pervades the whole poem: it resists systematic analysis and yet, how can the literary scholar possibly ignore it? The term could be considered synonymous with others equally as vague and intangible: atmosphere, mood, that is to say, the general impression conveyed to readers. It would seem

that meaning in poetry (or at least, in most poetic genres) is communicated largely through imagery, and from its study, we may deepen our understanding of a poet's work in particular or of his poetic production as a whole, as well as gain insight into both the creative process and the act of reading.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Chris Baldick's *Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, for example, refers to imagery as "a rather vague critical term" (121). See "Bibliography" for edition details.

[2] *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* is our basic reference for this and the following section, especially the entries "image," "imagery" and "figuration." See "Bibliography" for edition details.

[3] "The Waste Land," which we could call an "imagery cluster," was borrowed by Eliot from Jessie Weston's analysis of grail stories in *From Ritual to Romance*, as the author himself admits in his "Notes." In most stories analysed by Weston, the King's poor state of health is parallel with his land going waste.

[4] Kinesthetic images do not make reference to our *seeing* something moving (those would be classified as visual images), but to our body *experiencing* movement.

[5] Burguera draws on *Poesía y novela*, by A. López Casanova and E. Alonso.

[6] See "Les anomalies semàntiques" (Salvador 74-82).

[7] Burguera calls this shared content "*imaginema*," after Alonso and López Casanova.

[8] René Wellek includes this lines from the Hamlet essay in his chapter on T. S. Eliot in *A History of Modern Criticism*. See "Bibliography" for edition details.