



PROJECT MUSE®

Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental (review)

Bernard Freydberg

The Journal of Nietzsche Studies, Issue 23, Spring 2002, pp. 97-99
(Review)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nie.2002.0004>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/24088>

Arion, its inclusion in this collection is appropriate. Nussbaum provides an excellent reading of *The Birth of Tragedy* in relation to both Nietzsche's appropriation of Schopenhauer's views of art and appearance, while also exposing Nietzsche's rejection of Schopenhauer's idea of pessimism. For scholars interested in Nietzsche, Nussbaum's essay alone makes this collection of essays worthwhile.

Slippery Rock University

Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental John Sallis (Indiana University Press: 2000). \$24.95 (paperback).

BERNARD FREYDBERG

Even before *Force of Imagination* undertakes its preliminary tasks in its introductory "Prolusions," John Sallis lists as the very first of his "Acknowledgements" the words of Nietzsche in the Preface to *The Dawn—slow writing* (xi). Nietzsche delineated the need for slow writing in his preface to accord with the "slow saying" required to expose the depths of the life-denying morality that has governed European life since Plato, and the "slow reading" that is philology's honorable contribution. And early in his text (22–24), Sallis invokes Zarathustra's call to "*remain true to the earth*," and discusses Nietzsche's famous story "How the True World Became a Fable."

These two Nietzschean signposts can be seen as points of departure for this remarkable book. A further consideration of "slow writing" yields a third: in his *The Gathering of Reason* (1980), Sallis investigates and attempts to undermine the tie of imagination both to the intelligible/sensible distinction and to the subject as one of its faculties. These ties still bind imagination to determinations external to it. Sallis exclaims, "But let me cut the knot! Let me free it once and for all!" (175). Shortly thereafter, Sallis calls it a "'force' such as the will to power . . .," and declares that "[o]ne cannot transpose the issue of imagination into the new dimension without eventually undertaking a radical redetermination of imagination as such" (175). Twenty years and twelve books later, books in which he has treated an impressive and extensive range of topics, including artists and art as well as thinkers and thought, Sallis returns expressly to the theme that has animated his work.

The book consists of five "prolusions" followed by nine chapters, all of which themselves have subdivisions. As one reads, however, the unified insight that guides all of the disparate analyses emerges clearly: the *image*, far from being a mere copy of an original and in some way inferior to the original, in fact can *exceed* the "original." That is to say, by virtue of the power of its showing, an image can surpass in every way the "intellect" that might think its concept and the "sensibility" that might receive it, if one may speak of these even in scare quotes after the Nietzschean demolition. *Force of Imagination* contains sustained analyses of the phenomenology of imagination, of the linguistic history of the word *imagination*, of its often problematic and intriguing role in the history of philosophy, and of its relation to memory, language,

space, and time. The richness, erudition, and surprise contained in the individual analyses and in the work as a whole cannot be conveyed in a brief review. I will focus upon a few of the more striking moments.

(1) The five prolusions include, among other features, a reflection upon Shelley's poem *Mont Blanc* and on a temple of Zeus, a discourse on the phenomenology of imagination and its history, a response to two poems of Keats, an interpretation of some key moments in Plato in which the relation to the city and to the *logoi* of other human beings frames and has framed philosophy since, and finally Sallis's own suggestion that "the turn to wild nature and the elemental would remove the frame. It would contest the hegemony of ethics and politics, venturing to become, as it were, more Presocratic." The final words of this first section call for thought upon "how the things of nature—and what things are finally not somehow of nature?—come to show themselves upon the earth and beneath the sky, entrusting their secret to imagination alone" (25). This section serves as a harbinger of what is to come. For example: (a) force of imagination has a double orientation toward *sense*: sense as sensation and sense as meaning. Meaning, or "the sense of sense," is entirely given over to sensation. Intellect appears nowhere in this double orientation; (b) thus (in a meditation on Rousseau) this doubling makes itself manifest in a turning of the sensible, which can occur as "a turning . . . in early spring when one's vision is transported by force of imagination, when it is carried away toward what is not yet present but is to come" (73).

(2) It is a turning "not to the intelligible, but to a profusion of sense to come, which indeed already comes by force of imagination. It is a turning within the sensible, a doubling of and within the sensible. It is the turning of imagination in an exorbitant sense allied in advance to the turning of philosophy at the limit" (73). Sallis uses "exorbitant" to mark the release from the orbit of "enclosure" and "closure" within the limits of philosophy as it has been practiced under the sway of the fundamental distinctions that have guided it until now, and also under the sway of their accompanying notions of space and time, which also require reformulation in the rubble of the Nietzschean demolition and call to be true to the earth. "The time of imagination is a time of sense. It is a time of earth and sky in an exorbitant sense" (76). The section on the spacing of imagination similarly locates space *within* the force of imagination, and not as an external principle or intuition that serves to order things within it: "There is no presence *of* the image, for the image is precisely the presence—the occurrence and location of the presence—of the thing" (108). "It always shows itself *from somewhere*. A certain spacing belongs to its showing" (109). In this way, "time" and "space" are returned to the region of their originary self-showing, or in more Nietzschean language, to the earth and its life as they are first encountered, before they receive determination from without, that is, before their deformation.

(3) Sallis combines this sense of the self-showing of the image together with the excess in which and toward which the image shines in the strange word "monstrosity." He notes its oddness (its multilingual origin, for example), and recalls the original meaning of its root *monstrare*, "to show." Recall Section 2 of the Preface to *Ecce Homo*, where Nietzsche declares, "I am . . . no bogey (*Popanz*), no moral monster (*Ungeheuer*)" but an overthrower of idols and an opponent of the "mendaciously invented world and reality" (217–18). In this light, Nietzsche's peculiar monstrousness—both more violent and more gentle than is usually suspected—is resurrected in Sallis's thought that "imagination is monstrous, before all else, in that it configures in a profoundly monstrous way the very field of self-showing, installing monstrosity on the scene of what one would—even nonetheless—call natural appearances" (143). Although his most sustained treatment of monstrosity occurs in his interpretation of the horrors of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Sallis clearly states that "a monstrosity is not necessarily something horrible, threatening, or terrifying," but rather "needs to be thought in a way that adheres rigorously to its determination as something within nature that is counter to, that deviates from, nature" (143, 143n). Thus, what Sallis calls "the field of self-showing" is prior to any determinations of reason, space,

or time, prior to any moral determination: it is the field that restricts all showing within the limits of sense, as it releases the monstrous excess of the image.

(4) Earth and sky are not things; they are *elementals*. They might best be regarded as primordial pre-constituents, which Sallis says “are joined in such a way as to grant the expanse in which all manifestation of things takes place” (181). In his final chapter entitled “Poetic Imagination,” the activity of imagination is described in another “exorbitant” word that exceeds the orbit of surface or medium, namely, *matrix* (which Sallis ties to its root word *mater*, and also means “womb”). It serves as that in which imagination “composes the artwork, brings it forth” (224), and seems to me to bear at least an analogical kinship to the Kantian schemata, although freed from any prior determinability. There is no one matrix or matrix in itself, but many matrices for the many arts and artists: matrix functions as “a kind of place before place. As such, the matrix replicates what could perhaps best be called a kind of nature before nature” (228).

To place Sallis’s achievement in scholarly terms, *Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental* is a work that has thoroughly appropriated Nietzsche’s demolition of the intelligible/sensible distinction, and has heard—as few have—Nietzsche’s call to remain true to the earth. The work offers an account of major themes, themes that have occupied philosophy since the Greeks, which does not rely in any way upon any notion of otherworldliness, or for that matter on its accompanying apparatus such as concept and intuition, perception, logic, and so forth. Its keystones are words and their depths, images and their shine, philosophical texts and what they disclose/conceal, works of art and what they show. It is a *tour de force* of philosophical acumen.

However, it is much more. *Force of Imagination* provides an *experience*, a journey of and by imagination through those images (appearances of nature, works of art and of philosophy, occurrences of language) and through Sallis’s thoughtful meditation upon them that returns the reader to a region antecedent to any philosophical determination—one might call it return to a region before regions, to earth and sky and shining.

Slippery Rock University