Preface

Virginia Woolf begins *To the Lighthouse* with the description of Mrs. Ramsay's son, looking forward to an outing to the lighthouse. "Since he belonged," says the narrator, "even at the age of six, to that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand, since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallize and transfix the moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests, James Ramsay, sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores, endowed the picture of a refrigerator, as his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss."[i] Little James Ramsay is not a philosopher, nor is he an artist. When he endows the illustrated refrigerator with the joy of a future trip to the shore, he does not do, in the storyteller's view, anything especially "creative." But he *is*, within a long tradition of European culture, using his imagination. He has fused one *image* with another and blended one day with the idea of the following day, thus losing control of the present time. As Woolf describes this small event within the mind of her character, she conveys disapproval of the "clan" of those who create such confusions. This disapproval is entirely consonant with Stoic warnings about misuse of the impressions that flow through our minds. James Ramsay, had he been a student of Epictetus, would have known better.

And he would have known better if had grown up in the great revival of imaginative practice that occurred, concurrently with a rediscovery of Stoic philosophy, in early-modern Europe. Instead of confusing the pleasure of the lighthouse with a refrigerator, he might have used the picture with more awareness. As did a young French woman (who would later become a nun at Port-Royal under the name Geneviève de l'Incarnation) one afternoon in 1629 when she stepped into the church of Saint Gervais in the Marais. There

she had a series of thoughts that were part of her transformation from a lay person who pitied the cloistered nuns of Port-Royal de Paris to a postulant in that convent:

> I withdrew to a place apart, contrary to my routine, so that I would see no one and be seen by no one. From my retreat I looked at that church, which is a venerable Parisian edifice, and one of the largest and most beautiful sanctuaries that one can find. Its antiquity made me think of eternity. I pondered the idea that everything I was looking at was perishable, fragile, and ephemeral—which brought me extreme sorrow, because I very much loved this present life and these changes made me see that I was passing just as other things were.[ii]

What the young woman did in the church was not purely spontaneous but fits the pattern of a planned meditation of the kind set forth in contemporary manuals like *The Introduction to the Devout Life* by François de Sales. Meditations of this sort guided devout persons through a set of images and other purely mental sensory perceptions that supported and reinforced a pattern of reasoning and a set of values. As she pictured the "changes" that would occur in the future, as this ancient sanctuary crumbled over time, the young believer was making use of a faculty or a way of thinking that had recently been strongly promoted in religious and philosophical circles: imagination.

Now the importance of imagination in the early-modern period, and specifically between 1580 and 1680, may come as a surprise. "The Enlightenment created the idea of the imagination," correctly writes an important and informed scholar.[iii] Imagination as we know it, and as scores of books and hundreds of articles have described it, did not exist before the eighteenth century and would not have become a staple of the literary studies if Romanticism had not taken imagination as one of its crucial values. This, of course, is what we call today "the creative imagination"—a curious and even redundant expression, since imagination is often thought to be a synonym for creativity, and there would be lots of blank stares if one referred to something as "the uncreative imagination."[iv] Through imagination we are sometimes thought to reach the essence of art, the secret of poetry, the source of happiness, and the ultimate fusion with nature and the cosmos. And recent use of the term identifies imagination directly with metaphorical expression.[v]

Today, imagination is popularly considered to be a great endowment. People, and even institutions, are criticized for not having "enough" imagination

or for not using their imagination.[vi] Mary Carruthers begins her influential *The Book of Memory*, "When we think of our highest creative power, we think invariably of the imagination. 'Great imagination, profound intuition,' we say: this is our highest accolade for intellectual achievement."[vii] According to a contemporary, "The greatness of Einstein lies in his tremendous imagination . . . ."[viii]

Our easy and enthusiastic acceptance of imagination is, however, a stumbling block when we attempt to understand writers of earlier periods because the word "imagination" was associated for centuries with a sharply different set of powers, achievements, and challenges. For us, the central quality of imagination is its creativity—Carruthers's reference to the "highest creative power" is eloquent—its capacity to innovate, to foresee, and to produce ideas rapidly and effortlessly. To say of someone "she is very imaginative" is the equivalent of saying that she is creative and does not lack for new ideas. In early-modern Europe, however, imagination was neither the highest and most prized intellectual gift nor was it, above all else, creative. René Descartes defined imagination very concisely, in 1637, as "a special way of thinking for material things" (*une façon de penser particulière pour les choses matérielles*).[xi] In other words, people would use their imagination when they needed to think about physical things, about things that they could see, smell, touch, hear, and taste. Sometimes, of course, these things might be new, or at least new combinations of things. But they might also be old things, things that we remember and for which imagination restores the sensory detail.

This book is a brief account of the importance of imagination before the Romantic promotion of this way of thinking as a kind of panacea and before critics of this faculty—anti-Romantic rationalists—had seized on imagination as the enemy, the eternal foe of reason and civilization. In a broader historical perspective, we can see the Enlightenment "creation" of imagination as the resurgence of polarized Platonic views of thought that gained renewed currency in the sixteenth century and achieved even wider influence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This study is devoted to the culture of imagination in a single century—there are already an immense number of studies that trace the theory of imagination from the pre-Socratics to the twentieth century—because the hundred years or so after the publication of Montaigne's *Essays* constitute an exceptional and neglected moment in the history of imagination.

It is worth repeating and stressing Descartes' definition of imagination: "a special way of thinking for material things." Most people, Descartes writes,

do not raise their mind "beyond things of the senses" and thus think exclusively by using imagination. Of course this is only a partial description of imagination, but it is important to recognize Descartes's consistency in telling us that we *imagine*, strictly speaking, only when we think about *material* things, things that we perceive, seem to perceive, or could perceive with our senses. The very fact that we find it difficult to avoid the broader, more modern use of the verb "to imagine"—meaning to speculate or to contemplate alternative possibilities—may be a result of Descartes' own success in rehabilitating imagination. He writes in the second meditation that "imagining is nothing other than contemplating the figure or image of a bodily thing."[x] This statement follows the traditional view of the act of imagining, by which the mind registers and combines sense data, received from the senses through the "common sense" for processing by the faculties.

Associating imagination with the perception of the physical world, Descartes adheres to a broad view of imagination common to philosophical schools from the pre-Socratics up to the seventeenth century. Imagination, *phantasia*, is a type of thought that concerns sensation.[xi] The status of imagination, whether it is good or bad, has rested on more basic attitudes toward the nature of reality. If the material world is seen as bad or fallen, thought that is based on the perception of the material world is itself bad. In European thought through the centuries, the theory of imagination has usually been divided into Platonic and Aristotelian currents. The Platonic current rather dualistically sees imagination both as a dangerous faculty linked to the deceptive material world (following the *Sophist* and the *Theaetetus*) and, on the other hand (following the *Phaedrus*), as an almost numinous source of inspiration. The Aristotelian current takes a nonjudgmental, rather pragmatic approach toward imagination, seeing it as an inevitable part of most thought processes.[xii] Everything that we think of as material—whether remembered, perceived in the present, conceived as fictitious or hypothetical, expected, or dreamed—is thus, in the broad tradition of imagination (*phantasia*) the work of imagining. Conversely, thoughts that do not take the form of sense perception (or the simulation of sense perception) do not make use of imagination.[xiii]

The close association of imagination with the senses, and therefore with the body, has become so foreign to the post-Romantic world, that the early-modern way of using the mind to simulate bodily experience is often very strange. It might be best, then, to think of this study as a prehistory of imagination, for it describes a world of thought so radically different from the one we know that it is sometimes hard to hold together the contrasting things

with the same word. Some readers may protest that the *word* "imagination" was simply used in the early-modern period for an entirely separate cultural practice. Others may complain that since reason and imagination are antithetical it makes no sense to write about the latter during the "age of reason," when imagination could only have been obscure and marginal.

Yet careful consideration of the culture of early-modern Europe helps us understand why imagination, as the form of thought that mediates between the body and the intellect, was central and crucial to themes that are widely recognized as typical of this period. We know that writers of the late Renaissance and the seventeenth century were often concerned with such themes as concealment, disguise, sociability, interiority, and mortality. For example, the development of an "inner" life of the mind, so often supposed to be a spiritual quest motivated by religious aims, is not really so distinct from the development of the tactical or strategic imagination necessary to the courtier.[xiv] In both cases, religious and worldly, the mind produces images and other sensory representations that are different from the world immediately present, and these images are frequently guarded carefully from the other people present. On reflection it seems unsurprising that both worldly and religious innerness is intensified during the same epoch since individual initiative in both religion and politics was "privatized" and partitioned in a way that made social interaction a skill of veiling, withholding, and mirroring.[xv] Not being able to take direct initiatives to control the world made it desirable to create inner alternatives to the outside world. So that the seventeenth century took for granted a general absent-mindedness—that is, the habit of supposing that people were always thinking something that they were not saying. People were in some important sense not *present* and engaged in their physical surroundings because they were expected, and even taught, to keep their minds on something else. It was this classical absent-mindedness that led to the Romantic revolt in favor of sincerity and spontaneity, a complete reversal of the seventeenth-century concept of civility. Such an absent-mindedness is recommended by religious authors (like François de Sales) as well as by secular ones (like Nicolas Faret and the Chevalier de Méré) and accompanies advice on developing the inner faculties, including imagination.[xvi]

As we consider contemporary seventeenth-century accounts of this inner life of the imaginative mind, we can discern the early stages of the movement toward the reconfiguration of thought that ends by setting up the opposition of reason and imagination and splitting the "creative" imagination, often assigned to an élite of prophetic and (or) asocial artists, from the practical imagination as experienced by a wide variety of people. Among the paradoxes

that result from this glimpse of the early-modern period is the assertion that "classical" French culture is actually more egalitarian—more inclined to empower a broad cross-section of the population—in many respects than the Romantic culture with its disdain for the ordinary and the practical. Significantly, it is toward the end of the seventeenth century that imagination begins to appear in texts that include the term "genius" (*génie*) just before the eighteenth century assigns a quite different role to imagination than the one dominant before the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns.

This study begins with the renewal of the third great source of ideas about imagination, alongside Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines, the Stoic philosophy that had such great impact on European writers like Michel de Montaigne in the late sixteenth century. Stoic thought, which survived in rhetorical as well as philosophical texts, was a major force when the *Essais* appeared (1580) because of its emphasis on individual practice and self-reformation. Even if Montaigne's early and enthusiastic adherence to Stoicism may have became nuanced and complicated as the writer matured, he gives vivid illustrations of the way imagination could form part of everyday life through the daily Stoic practice of imagining death. The practice that Montaigne developed under the influence of Stoicism may not seem to everyone to be an orthodox Stoicism, but this is a strand of thought that took root and flourished during the following century. This Stoic and secular practice blended with Christian influences in the work of François de Sales (as it had earlier in Ignatius of Loyola) in one of the true bestsellers of the French tradition, the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, which showed how thoughts based on intense sensory experience could be used for inner religious purposes.

After Montaigne and François de Sales imagination, as a deliberately cultivated part of daily life, never lost its association with death during the seventeenth century. Is this because the mind's relation to the body is, throughout that period, inevitably colored by religious admonitions about the soul's separation from its material frame? Is it because death is a unique challenge to thought? Is it because the verbal and visual representations of death were both central to the arts—in the forms of elegy, epic, and tragedy in literature, and paintings and statues of martyrdom and, above all, the Passion—and subject to practical and doctrinal limits? Although the imagination of death is not the focus of this study, it is a recurrent part of the account that we trace, alongside the imagination of love, of material inventions, of the cosmos, and of the minute processes of the body itself.

Montaigne's reflections on the role of imagination in our everyday life were not limited to his own use of imagination in meditative exercises. He also wrote insightfully about the centrality of sense-based thinking in the way human beings see themselves in society, in the social control exerted by institutions, and in the views that people adopt about the world, or cosmos, in the broadest sense. This aspect of Montaigne's thought is the basis for Blaise Pascal's ideas on how to put imagination to work in everyday life. His contrast between the analytic or geometric mindset and *finesse* is at least partly a distinction between abstract and concrete ways of thinking. In recommending *finesse* for most everyday situations—and most important, for persuading people of the truth of Pascal's own, Christian message—Pascal shows how important it is to develop the skill of making mental pictures of complex and realistic situations.

Another reader of Montaigne's *Essais*, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, Marquise de Sévigné—who called François de Sales her grandfather—, is well known for her cultivation of the genre of the intimate letter and for her exemplary, even hyperbolic, performance of motherhood. Her preference for sense-based thinking appears in the descriptive detail of her letters, where her mind is always in at least two, and usually three, places at once: the scene of her act of writing, the incidents or places that she has recently witnessed or heard about and that she describes for her correspondent, and the situation of her correspondent. She urges her readers to "imagine" what she is writing about and she expresses her effort to imagine her correspondent, usually her daughter. Beyond this structure of the multiple scene of the letter exchange, common to many epistolary novels as to other collections of correspondence, however, Sévigné picks up Montaigne's Stoic invocation of the theme of change, loss, and death, seized in the concrete description of everyday life. A major subject of many of her letters is the death scene, particularly sudden death, described in exquisite sensory detail and explicitly presented as the subject for meditation.

Sévigné's letters indicate a taste for physical detail that might incline us to suppose that all her contemporaries shared her aesthetic preference for imagination over abstract conceptualization. Yet two of Sévigné's friends, Madeleine de Scudéry and Marie-Madeleine Pioche de La Vergne (Madame de Lafayette), wrote important novels based on radically conflicting views of the value of imagination. Scudéry guided her readers to imagine in detail the rich scenes she includes in her novels, as we can see in examples from *Clélie*. And Scudéry's characters use their imaginations in situations ranging from

political intrigue to sexual relations at a distance. Lafayette does exactly the opposite in her *The Princess of Clèves*, where readers are given few clues as to the physical reality of the characters' world and where the characters, if they use their imagination, suffer as a consequence.

Lafayette's anti-imaginative aesthetic is one of the first intimations of the coming Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, in which both sides of the Quarrel reject the view that using imagination is a good thing to do. The single most important text written during the Quarrel that makes abundant use of imagination, Fénelon's *The Adventures of Telemachus*, simply exemplifies its author's belief that imagination is for immature minds. Writing a pedagogical work addressed to a child, the young Duc de Bourgogne, Fénelon tactically stressed sensory detail because he believed that the brain of the young person was soft and impressionable, incapable of abstract reasoning. Several decades later, another educational reformer, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, wrote his *Emile, or on Education*, in which he definitively laid to rest the independent, active, inward-turning discipline of imagination in favor of a passive, and outward-turning receptive "sensibility."

Our investigation will draw mostly on already well-known books, texts that form part of the literary canon and the tradition of high culture. These works offer the advantage of their greater availability compared to other potential documents. By reading them with renewed attention to a specific practice, we can get a fresh look at works we may think we know quite well but that take on significantly different meaning when read with a view to the positive and concrete qualities of early-modern imagination. The use of imagination that they describe is not restricted to creative endeavors, nor does it suppose unusual mental gifts.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that this study is neither exhaustive nor encyclopedic. Many other texts could be brought forth to show how people used imagination in this period. The current of thought traced in this book is formed of *positive* views of imagination. It must be admitted that there are still, as there were for centuries before, negative portrayals of imagination as a pathology. Molière's comedy, for instance, vividly stages the experiences of its characters in the grip of an out of control imagination. *The Imaginary Invalid* still amuses theatre audiences, but it is only one of many plays, poems, and novels that show characters in the grip of a delusion. With a few exceptions, the chapters that follow unfold the less-known story of people who found imagination useful and valuable.