

What are we doing here? A Paean

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*“...for we have reached the place of which I spoke,
where you will see the miserable people,
those who have lost the good of the imagination¹.”
--- Virgil to Dante, “Inferno,” Canto III*

On a warm August afternoon, in 1837, thirteen years before he was to appear at the Cincinnati Literary Club on one of his tours through Ohio, and three years before he came to the conclusion that he could not uphold his ministerial vows, a young Ralph Waldo Emerson mounted the pulpit at the Brattle Street Church at Harvard before a small group of distinguished men and students to give the annual Phi Beta Kappa address. Substituting for the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew Wainwright, Emerson was the day’s supernumerary, as I am today. Emerson had come with a paper. And a paper it proved to be, noted enough by some to encourage its publications soon afterward, which Emerson did with 500 copies, selling out in a month.

The lecture and subsequently published essay was called “the American Scholar.” In subversive fashion, Emerson’s lecture undercut the authority of Europe and its ancient classical traditions over the virgin America mind. He called his listeners to free themselves from the anchor of European thought and unmoor the American creative spirit and give it sail. The “American Scholar” lecture came to be known, in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, as America’s “Intellectual Declaration of Independence.”²

Emerson challenged his listeners, there before him and throughout the states, to trust their own minds and literary talents. “Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close,” said Emerson. He called his hearers to be “Man Thinking,” not just “mere thinkers,” or worse, “the parrot of other

¹ In the Italian, it is actually, “intellect,” but the imagination is not far from Virgil’s intention. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Inferno, trans. Allen Mandelbaum. p. 21.

² Robert D. Richardson, Jr. Emerson, The Mind on Fire. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, pp. 262-63.

men's thinking." We must not let our imagination, drawing upon the fount of nature itself, to be governed by books ("Books are for nothing but to inspire", said he) and their tried opinions, however rich the book's history and revered the author. "Study nature. When [we] can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings." Emerson asked us to trust our own natural imagination. "In self-trust all the virtues are comprehended," he said.

Emerson's proclamation ties me to what we are doing here today. Ever since I first visited the Literary Club, I have been struck by the fact that we gather each week at an appointed time and, in ritualistic fashion, listen to someone's creation and thereby pay tribute to his imagination. We come together, in loose formality and light somberness, at what for us is, a type of sacred place – itself an imaginative construction. Promptly every Monday night we dribble in to a classical, Greek revival house, bunch up in little tete-a-tetes in the house's anterior rooms --- a library, the foyer, and the hallway, on whose walls hang photos of current and previous members, some of our distant ancestors --- or in, biblical terms, our great cloud of witnesses --- before proceeding in to hear the evening's paper, as a congregation would convene to hear a sermon. At the front of our sanctuary, our apse, is the altar with its relic, a desk and gavel. Next to the altar is the pulpit, or ambo. And not unlike a Qur'anic verse above a qibla (that spot in the mosque that points toward Mecca), there, in gold lettering, is a verse, a statement of our offering: here comes one with a paper, quietly but confidently stated as to invite reverence. We listen with respect, if not always with wakened attention, to what one's imagination has conceived and labors fashioned. And imaginative creations they are. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once opined that the imagination is most active between the ages of nineteen and thirty-five, after that it runs on fizz³; we just dip into the same well, drawing out less water each time. What I have heard since coming as a guest and now as a member, is that there may be fizz here, but it is highly effervescent.

I turn to the subject of the imagination because it has long interested me, not least because, reared in Buenos Aires, Argentina, I, as a minority, was conscious of my own identity being imagined by those not like me --- the Argentineans, who, under Peron, had had ambivalent attitudes toward Americans --- and by how I saw myself, from afar, as an

³ Lucien Price, *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead*, NY: Mentor Books, 1954, p. 70.

American through the typologies of Sports Illustrated magazines (which my uncle, who worked for Sports Illustrated sent me – sans the swimsuit edition; at least they never got to me), Archie comics, and the Sears catalogue. Who we imagine ourselves to be is often the result of others’ “forms of thought and classification,” as the Bangladeshi economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen analyzes in his essay, “Indian Tradition and the Western Imagination.”⁴

Later, stateside, I would study the religions of the world and the phenomenology of world formation. Both areas developed and broadened my interest in the imagination, for religion and the apprehension of phenomena move between the world in which we live and know and worlds which we do not know or ever will. Too much one way leads to mechanism and determinism, and too much the other way to apocalypticism and utopian fanaticism. But more on this later.

But it is not only my past experience and later studies that led me down this path of inquiry. Musing on failings and diminishment in the imagination today, drive my interest as well. To be sure, it is problematic to say the imagination is at play here but not there, that this person uses it but that person does not. Few would say they do not use their imagination. Yet, many would deny using it, or downplay its relevance, were they to take it to mean, as most do, that which is ethereal and fanciful, made up, what a realist or many a religious believer would decry.

I contend that we weaken and fail the imagination when we make it solely the domain of the artists, use it to exclude and stymie individual expression, and inhibit the proliferation of ideas. Moreover, we fail it when we do not give it the nutrients it needs to bloom. Rather, the imagination, by its very nature, should be that which invites diversity, enlarges communities to connect with those not like us, opens new levels of understanding, gives us the flexibility and creativity to navigate through life, cultivates edifying discourse, and prompts civic action. We, here, nurture such things.

Failures of the imagination

Where do we find failures and diminishment of the imagination today?

⁴ Amartya Sen, The Argumentative Indian, NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2005. The classicist, Simon Goldhill, in, Love, Sex, Tragedy: How the Ancient World Shapes our Lives, Chicago, 2004, shows how ancient Greece and Rome have shaped our cultural imagination.

Most prominently lately, we failed at the imagination, according to The 9/11 Commission Report, among failures in policy, capabilities, and management, when we failed to anticipate a scenario of civilian planes commandeered as missiles to strike commercial and military centers.⁵ We failed to imagine not just the scenario but, perhaps, the mindset that would conceive of -- and execute -- such an act. In failing to imagine such evil, we failed to imagine novel ways by which others could inflict harm. A weakened imagination in one area is a stronger one elsewhere.

Hence Thomas L. Friedman, in his conclusion to his ubiquitous The World is Flat, identifies two expressions of the imagination, one meant for ill and the other for good. One of the two is an imagination determined to constrict and eliminate difference and the creative value of uncertainty – the very blood of novelty. This is the imagination of those who pulled off 9/11. The other expression, in contrast, is an imagination that values openness, inclusion, and trusts in the virtues of uncertain outcomes – of risk. This is the imagination that brought down the Berlin wall on 11/9, eliminating, in the process, a barrier that, till that time, prevented the flow of creativity and the fostering of community.⁶

On the religious scene, the imagination is undercut when the imagination is feared and imaginations to inflict fear are promoted. The riots over the cartoons of the prophet Mohammed were certainly the result of Danish cartoonists putting a brush in the eye of the Islamic taboo against all forms of representation of God's final prophet. Never mind that in Persian and Indian Islamic art there are frequent depictions of the Prophet. Certain Muslims feared, or at least were agitated by, an imagination meant to provoke debate through popular art.

Shifting religions, the uproar over the novel – thus fictional – The Da Vinci Code revealed the precariousness of many Christians' belief in the face of an imaginative (even if not high literature) expression. Many believers took the imagination too literally, believing as fact a fictional reformulation of Christian history. Not understanding the nature of the imagination, they came to condemn it.

⁵ The 9/11 Commission Report, Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, pp. 339ff.

⁶ Thomas L. Friedman, The World is Flat. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, pp. 441ff.

In the same way that many of the faithful felt offended and unnerved by Dan Brown's fictional theorizing, so have believers and the non-religious condemned the Pentecostal, dispensationalist Tim LaHaye's "Left Behind" books, a series of Christian novels that imagine the state of humanity in the end times, from the tribulation of fire, to the rapture, to the destruction of all who fail to believe in Jesus' eventual return. Similarly, Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ," crafted a religious imagination that offended and repelled and uplifted many – as it did for many Christians – and validated, to others, preexisting perceptions – as it did for many Muslims, for whom it served to confirm Jewish brutality. LaHaye's novels and Gibson's film perpetuate imaginations of fear and exclusion.

Other expressions in our society are equally ambivalent in their views of and effect upon the imagination.

Technology, forever the bane of the classical mind and of romantic affections with nature's purity, weakens the imagination as well as stimulates it into new, often dubious expressions. One questions whether the internet undercuts our capacity to imagine and trust, in Emerson's words, our own nature. Does the internet's onslaught of information, imagery, and self-indulgent "YouTube" interactivity actually enhance our natural creative powers to visualize for ourselves? Or does it only fool us into believing we are creative? "We've all heard that a million monkeys banging on a million typewriters will eventually produce a masterpiece. Now, thanks to the internet, we know this is not true."⁷ The internet externalizes all, putting it all out there in mass, and weakens the mind's self-reliance to draw up its own images and, in free play, move them about. Technology can weaken mystery, or, rather, as I learned, fabricate an illusory mystery,⁸ when it reveals too much and, thereby, dampens the soul's and mind's inner life.⁹

The speed at which we access, process, and disseminate information, leading us to expect quick and efficient outcomes, also robs the imagination of the pregnancy of time

⁷ Alice Weaver Flaherty, "Writing Like Crazy: a Word on the Brain," "The Chronicle Review," The Chronicle of Higher Education, p. 3.

⁸ By means of the internet, people can fabricate different personas without letting on, to the network buddy, one's true self; one can adopt a "second" or multiple selves. See fn. 30 below.

⁹ Joseph M. Ditta, "Imagination and Technology: Reflection on the Future of Poetry," weberstudies.weber.edu, Winter 1997, Volume 14.1, p.5.

and space it needs to grow.¹⁰ In Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, the temperature at which paper ignites, billboards are a mile long, allowing travelers, driving at accelerated speeds, to read them. No wonder that in Bradbury's fictional society books are burned and independent thinking suppressed. Malcolm Gladwell's book Blink encourages instantaneous decision making, in a blink, believing first gut impressions are more likely to be reliable than prolonged deliberation.

But is the imagination made for speed and instantaneity? For the switch: on or off?¹¹ One of the attributes of our Literary Club is that it decelerates time and banishes blink thinking. From the ease of our classical and subdued décor, to the value given to convivial conversation, to our hesitancy to rush headlong with the rest of society into the web-based era, to the time we devote to prepare and listen to papers, all these, in subversive fashion, deliberately and pridefully sacralize time --- we step out of time when we walk into this room. Do not presume, we boldly state, that speed and access are the better for the enrichment of the mind and its exercise. We would be the first to accept, aware as we are of those who've entered this sanctuary, that the life of literature and the life in service to the common weal are correlated. "Reading develops a capacity for focused attention and imaginative growth," says a former National Association of Arts Chairwoman, Dana Gioia, from an NEA study on adult literacy. It "enriches both public and private life....and all the diverse benefits it fosters."¹² Indeed, it used to be in 19th century America that by way of the lecture and essay ideas and knowledge were disseminated and the public made into an informed democracy.

But the lecture and essay suffered as the industrial revolution, the age of advertising, and, in Daniel Boorstin's phrase, public relations "pseudo-events" took hold.

¹⁰ See Saul John Ralston Saul, On Equilibrium: Six Qualities of the New Humanism. NY: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2004 on the deadening of the imagination from short attention spans, pp. 148, 153.

¹¹ The imagination can, Daniel Gilbert shows, come to an instantaneous impression and emotion of what is to come, of the future, and yet be wrong. For instance, when asked to go to walking by my wife, as I am comfortable in my reading chair, my imagination may instantaneously project an image and feeling that I will find the walk wearing, cold, uncomfortable. Yet, there are all kinds of walks and dress for the walk, such that once on the walk, I find the walk surprisingly pleasant, not what my imagination initially imagined. Gilbert says that our brains can "fill-in" information in the present when our imagination is engaged that may prove to be inaccurate later. The imagination, therefore, can be fooled. So, time is still needed to allow alternatives to arise, more information to come in. See his, Stumbling on Happiness. NY: Alfred Knopf, 2006, pp.89f, 94.

¹² "Literary Reading in Dramatic Decline, According to National Endowment for the Arts Survey," nea.gov, July 8, 2004.

Time, thought, and activity became mechanized, specialized, and, in time, commodified. Discourse moved from the tavern, home, church and lecture hall to the newspaper, magazine, television, radio, billboard, and computer. Information, not knowledge, became the prized commodity. Information does not, like knowledge, require reflection, perspective, distance, and selectivity, but gloats on instantaneity, profusion of data, entertainment, and randomness.¹³ The imagination, we can surmise, would be duly affected, losing the mental space it needs to massage and test ideas and weigh impressions.

Here at the Literary Club we resist the peripatetic and the sound bite. Instead, we create with the pen (or computer or typewriter), setting words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into a page, one at a time. Like cartographers, we explore with the imagination an idea, giving it imaginative loft in the rough draft. If, as the neuro-linguist Steven Pinker says, we do not visualize wholes but parts of the whole, then our writing traces a segment of the map a portion of the time. Our first map is quite rough, with only a faint outline of the territory. As we explore further, our initial sketching gets sharper and sharper. There is more detail. We get a sense of belonging. Space becomes place. We take place. What was initially an unknown or faintly known landmass, our subject, becomes a defined piece of our mental landscape. To this point our imagination guided us, and from this point we imagine to the next horizon. The imagination draws upon what we know, however faint, and projects into what we do not know, however bold.

When we write for each other, we write to share verbally what our imagination has borne. Some of us write our papers as much for the eye as for the ear, for we want the paper to be read later. Others just go for the oral delivery and its impact, for the you-had-to-be-there effect. Whether we write for the eye or for the ear, or for both, in each case the imagination has its task.

When we write for the eye, the imagination ladens the page with data, with analytical, wordy evidence, taking the full breadth of the page and crafting tight paragraphs. We show progression, steps taken. When we write for the ear, our

¹³ Daniel Boorstin, The Daniel Boorstin Reader, Ed. Ruth F. Boorstin, NY: The Modern Library, 1995. See his essays, "A Flood of Pseudo-Events" and "Gresham's Law: Knowledge or Information?"

imagination crafts for the mind's recall and for surprise. The hearer cannot hear ahead or review what has transpired. Instead, we harmonize words and images, use rhythm, repetition, parallelism, metaphors, grouped associations, sentences less complex than if written, all to help the listener accompany us to where we are heading and recall from whence we have come.

It is the oral, the voice, and the enveloping sound, less so the written, the ear not the eye, that stimulates passion and captivates the senses; no wonder Plato distrusted the seductive effect of aural's "sweet and soft harmonies" that blind us from reason's sobered truth. But the world's greatest texts were firstly oral and, when eventually written, are better spoken and recited than scanned. The Homeric epics, the Rig Veda and the later Upanishads, and, as the world's longest poem, the Mahabharata, all were spoken first. Let us not forget the Hebrew Scriptures and the Psalms; the letters of Paul, and the sayings of Jesus. The Qur'an has its greatest power when read aloud. Indeed, the Qur'an is not the Qur'an until it is recited. The oral can strike like a saber; the word on the page, on the other hand, can be ignored, skipped over, as if dead.

Yet, still we write, for insight and health. As Ernest Hemingway colorfully and tersely put it, "When I don't write, I feel like shit." From the words upon our ears to our hand moving across the page or keyboard, our body is engaged and our imaginations lifted.

And so, it is to be seen whether advances in the fields of neuroscience and biology will enrich or weaken the imagination. What was previously regarded as transbiological -- consciousness, the emotions, belief, dreams --- is now being rooted in the molecular and chemical make-up of the body. The imagination is us.

While this research promises a day when we can address disease and dysfunctions of the brain and of personality, I wonder if this biological determinism will enrich the imagination any more. To take an example from the writer Mircea Eliade who depicted the following scenario: X falls in love with Y, and thinks she is the most beautiful woman of all he has seen. That she is good, intelligent, and attractive to all who see her. But she is not. Yet, because he believes she's attractive and desired, he imagines that all men are after her. He gets jealous, unhappy, and defensive. We would not understand the grip his imagination has upon him if we were to wire him to see her as

she truthfully is. She would no longer be his imaginative creation.¹⁴ Neuroscience's explanation and manipulation of the imagination may just eliminate the imagination altogether: every thing and every phenomenon becomes what it simply and unequivocally is. The MIT scientist, bio-engineer, and futurist Ray Kurzweil regards the imagination as an acknowledgement of human limits. Through bio and nanotechnology we can move closer, he says, to making real what before could only be imagined. Says he, "Imagination is nice, but the real thing --- or rather, the virtual thing --- is so much more, well, real."¹⁵

But we need the imagination. It is all we have for making our way through life. John Ralston Saul says it is one of six qualities that makes us human.¹⁶ Without it we cannot venture into new domains of knowledge, hope to understand what is different from us, or, by projecting our emotions, empathize with others. Without this capability to reach out and draw in, to include and connect, we alienate ourselves, become exclusive, and ferment ideologies of oppression. Groups, communities, not just individuals articulate a particular imagination as well. Let us look cursorily, then, at a few of these more prominent ideologies, starting with Fascism.

Spoken about much these days, particularly in qualifying a type of Islamism, Fascism is an ideology that concentrates power around a mythos and a charismatic leader --- "Mussolini ha sempre obbedire" ("Mussolini is always right")¹⁷. Fascism draws upon the "mobilizing passions" of the primacy of one's group and its purity and a leader whose instincts override "abstract and universal reason," passions evident at some level "within all democratic countries --- not excluding the United States," says Robert Paxton, in The Anatomy of Fascism.¹⁸

Communism, classically, is less nationalistic and mythos driven. It, through education and struggle, aims to create a new world order.¹⁹ It does not elevate the

¹⁴ Mircea Eliade, No Souvenirs. Journal, 1957-1969, Trans. Fred H. Johnson, Jr. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977, p. 211.

¹⁵ Ray Kurzweil, The Singularity is Near. NY: Viking, 2005, p. 318.

¹⁶ John Ralston Saul, On Equilibrium: Six Qualities of the New Humanism. NY: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2004.

¹⁷ Hans Kohn, Political Ideologies of the Twentieth Century, 3rd Ed. NY: Harper and Row, 1966, p. 150.

¹⁸ Robert O. Paxton, The Anatomy of Fascism. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, pp. 219-20. Paxton lays out nine characteristics that define Fascism

¹⁹ Kohn, pp. 174-75.

individual and racial group to transcendent status. Its sentiment is more earthly, collective, focused on subsuming the individual to the welfare of the group. Whereas fascism is the individual transcendent writ large, deified, communism is the group immanent with nature, not deified – hence its atheism – but organic, terrestrial. Whereas fascism is given to hubris --- think of Benito Mussolini’s lifted-lip cockiness--- communism is given to baseness and a false humility.

Fascism fails the imagination by its incapacity to imagine outside of the group and see the group as a collectivity of creative individuals with rights, rights not subordinated to the paranoiac egotism of the leader. Communism fails the imagination, too, when it subsumes the individual to the institution and to, as Leszek Kolakowski, says, “institutionally approved opinions.”²⁰ The Russian novelist, Yevgeny Zamyatin captures well the authoritarian State’s repression of the imagination in his novel We, in which the authorities of the “One State” discover a medical procedure to surgically remove the subversive imagination. “The latest discovery of State Science is the location of the center of the imagination – a miserable module – and you are cured of imagination --- Forever!,” reports the One State Gazette.²¹

Like fascism and communism, Islamism aspires as well to have a global impact and transform society. Unlike these, however, Islamism is eponymously linked to a particular religion (Islam) and its heritage and is able to set itself against the secular West because of Islam’s intertwined contentious history with the West and its predominant religion, Christianity.

Islamism’s religious, socio-political all-encompassing worldview makes Islamism a far more different force than fascism and communism, which, when it is all said and done, were associated with a particular nation, Italy then Germany for fascism, and the Soviet Union for communism, and have far less authoritative resonance with individual desires for personal meaning. An Islamist leader in Morocco said to George Parker, of the New Yorker, “If I go into the streets and I call people to come with me to a demonstration, and I talk to them about Che Guevarra and Lenin, nobody will go out.

²⁰ Leszek Kolakowski, Marxism and Beyond, On Historical Understanding and Individual Responsibility. Trans. Jane Zielonko Peel. London: Pall Mall Press, 1968, p. 194.

²¹ Jacoby, Picture Imperfect, p. 23.

But if I start talking about Mohammed and Ali and Aisha and all the prophets of Islam, they will follow me.”²²

Islamism, therefore, cannot be addressed through cold-war scenarios of nation states, and, so, by bringing to heel one country or two, thereby suppress it. It is a failure of the imagination not to see and take into account the entire and multifaceted history of Islam, Arabism, Middle Eastern scenarios, and Islamic religious practices and cultural and ethnic sensibilities. It is also a failure in not seeing it as a conversational partner.

And it is Islamism’s own failure of the imagination to think that it and Shari’a law can be but political, economic, and legal templates for all settings and historical circumstances. Tariq Ramadan is one of the more prominent Islamic theorists today who recognize that Islam must and can adapt, in critical exchange, its core principles with modern thought and ways if, together, Islam and the west are to move forward to a new future.²³

Democratic capitalism, an ideology our Americanism promotes more than anything else, encourages entrepreneurship and states the link between individual freedom and economic growth. Its failure of the imagination occurs in over commodifying life. Everything, processes, objects, activities, space and time themselves, can be, are, commodified, that is, brokered as a commodity up for sale. An analyst at Goldman Sachs calculated the time saved and earnings gained when flat monitors replaced the large, deep-set monitors on employees’ desks. Desk space is quantified to the dollar. When all is commodified, our imagination dries up. It is unable to appreciate the inefficient drives of subconscious values, cultural aspirations, and the aesthetics and ethics of excess. What most worries peoples, societies, religions, and communities about capitalism is its flattening of the world. The world may be flat to Thomas Friedman, but it is not, really.

There are differences among societies and lumps and valleys of economic disparities within and between economies. Failing to address these disparities gives rise to the very anti-globalization imaginations that Friedman decries. Capitalism leads to

²² George Parker, *The New Yorker*, September 11, 2006, p. 67.

²³ For the above points see Graham E. Fuller’s discussion in his chapter “The Future of Political Islam: Its Dilemmas and Options” in his *The Future of Political Islam*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. And see, Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2005.

sameness and a leveling (though Communism can do this, too). Ideologies of exclusivism lead to tribalism and barriers. Both orientations, from different angles, reject the integrity of and relation to the Other.

To admit to failures of the imagination does not mean there is no imagination; indeed there can be an excess of it. The political philosopher Judith Shklar speaks of excesses of the imagination as contributing to all forms of fanaticisms and tyranny.²⁴ It is just that there is a failure of the rightful use and understanding of the imagination, of failing to see creative connections that harmonize disparate elements and hold in balance the seen and known with the unseen and unknown.

To summarize our failures of the imagination, Barry Lopez's concluding paragraph from his essay, 'Landscape and Narrative,' could not be more apt: "[T]ruth," says Lopez, "reveals itself most fully not in dogma but in the paradox, irony, and contradictions that distinguish compelling narratives. Beyond this there are only failures of imagination: reductionism in science, fundamentalism in religion, fascism in politics."²⁵

Meaning of the Imagination

What, though is meant by the imagination? The imagination is a hard word to define because it is so broad in how it has been interpreted and applied. It has been referred to as an "onomatoid," a "namelike word which in fact designated nothing because it signifies too broadly."²⁶ Nevertheless, we have a general sense of it to give it a working definition.

Roughly, the imagination is the mind's inner eye, a description carried over from the Middle Ages. It is that capacity of our mind to extend from what we know and experience into what we do not know and have not experienced. The philosopher Mark

²⁴ Judith N. Shklar, Political Thought and Thinkers. Ed. Stanley Hoffmann, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998.

²⁵ I want to thank, my friend, John Tallmadge for referring this quote to me after he and I had discussed my topic over lunch. Barry Lopez, "Landscape and Narrative," in Crossing Open Ground. Vintage, 1989, p. 71.

²⁶ Eva T.H. Brann, The World of the Imagination: Sum and Substance. Maryland: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, p. 23.

Johnson says the imagination is “the capacity to mold experience, to bring something new out of the old, or to sympathetically project oneself into the position of another.”²⁷

The imagination is related to but it is not fantasy, hallucination, or memory. It is similar to fantasy in that both visualize what is not presently real to us or known. Unlike fantasy, the imagination is more rooted in reality, falling within the realm of the possible and the conceivable. Reality and the possible are completely absent when we hallucinate. We are disconnected from reality.

As to the memory, the imagination is very intertwined with it, to the point that memory has often been equated with the imagination. In a nut shell, their difference lies in the degree to which each is anchored in the past. Naturally the memory is, drawing as it does upon what has entered our consciousness surreptitiously or by direct experience. The imagination, in contrast, is not dependent on the past. Whereas the memory deals with the past and perception with the present, the imagination deals with the future.²⁸ The imagination, therefore, can bring forth what we have not experienced. It has more autonomy from the senses than our memory does. Dreams are said to arise as the re-organization of the memory into new patterns, thus creating an imagination of an “autonomous self.”²⁹

As Peter Gardenfors explains in How Homo Became Sapiens: On the Evolution of Thinking, the imagination works off of “detached sensations.” Influenced by composites from the memory, the imagination creates “representations” of something beyond sensations. The imagination, in other words, creates a new map of what we know and do not know.³⁰ The memory can only recall what we have experienced³¹ and must often draw upon the imagination to recreate the past. The imagination draws upon the past or the present or both to project then an image into the future.

²⁷ Mark Johnson, The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 141.

²⁸ Gilbert, pp. 117ff.

²⁹ Arnold H. Modell, Imagination and the Meaningful Brain. Cambridge, MS: The MIT Press, 2003, p. 58-62.

³⁰ Peter Gardeenfors, How Homo Became Sapiens: On the Evolution of Thinking, NY: Oxford, 2003, pp. 47-53.

³¹ I will not for this paper consider Buddhist or Hindu conceptions of varsanas, latent memories carried over from previous lifetimes, ours or another’s.

For instance: using my memory, I can recall playing baseball in little league as a young boy in Argentina, the shouts, dust, and color of the uniforms and the exhilaration of being on the mound, taking my time to throw the pitch. But it is through my imagination alone that I am able to visualize and come to feel, nearly, what it is like to be a player for the Reds, though I have never been a major league player or even walked onto the field and donned one of their uniforms.

It would make sense, then, that in the evolution of cognition, memory precedes the introduction of the imagination.³² The imagination stretches from the past and present, from the senses and the memory, to move beyond these anchors to new horizons and options from which we can make choices and bring into effect.

According to Paul Harris, the imagination entered human consciousness around 40,000 years ago, when paleontologists noted cave paintings during the Paleolithic Period showing a discrepancy or mismatch between the actual world of the cave artist and what the artist actually drew. The artist created something new. The artist moved from the physical constraints of his subject to an abstraction of his subject.³³

In our own personal development as infants and children, the earliest manifestation of the imagination is in the “early production and comprehension of pretend play,” says Paul Harris.³⁴ Pretend play is in the beginning of the mind’s capability to think outside of the memory and the limits of the senses. Pretend play enables the child to empathize with others, to have her feelings extend into the setting of another, thus establishing a bridge between the child and what is not the child. Child psychologists find that autistic children, from early on, have difficulty engaging in pretend play. They are emotionally unable to empathize with other children. A value to pretend play is that it creates alternative models of reality in the head and tests them before --- if ever --- implementing them in reality.³⁵ In philosophical and psychological

³² First, in the sequence, come “sensations,” our sensorial connection to the world around and underfoot. Then “attention,” then the “emotions.” Next comes “memory,” followed by the “imagination.” After imagination comes “planning,” then “self-consciousness,” then an awareness of “free will,” and finally “language,” our capacity to communicate. Whether language comes at the end of the sequence is debated. Gadenfors, pp. 4-9.

³³ Paul L. Harris, *The Work of the Imagination*. Oxford, England: Blackwell, 2000, pp. ix-x.

³⁴ Harris, pp. 190-91.

³⁵ Harris, pp. 6-7.

parlance, pretend play is a form of simulation theory, whereby, through the imagination, we simulate scenarios of “what if.”

Pretend play never does actually go away. We engage in it whenever we follow “act as if” scenarios, get absorbed in novels, dreams, and theater, and when people adopt different personas in internet chatrooms.³⁶ Rituals, most noticeably in highly formalized rituals, are a type of pretend play. Sacred rituals are humans performing for god or assuming themselves to be co-equal with the deities, as in expressions of Hinduism. Political rituals and saber rattling are forms of pretend play among nation states to convey authority and might. Indeed, political theater serves to dramatize and ventilate geopolitical tensions without having to carry them out into warfare. Perhaps if we allowed for more political theater and felt less unnerved by political posturing, we might avoid the coming to arms. We know today that Saddam Hussein acted “as if” he had more military might than he actually did.

The presence of the imagination has been a structure of human consciousness from the beginning. But, as time progressed, it would resonate differently among cultures and, in western intellectual history, be diversely understood and accepted.

So, for instance, if the imagination is marked by a separation between what the senses perceive or have perceived (from memory) and what is beyond what we presently sense, then do the Chinese, Muslims, and, of the monistic variety, Hindus, acknowledge the imagination, since in each of these they hold to a unified field? For Muslims there is nothing outside the presence and control of Allah --- everything is what it is; it is not a symbol or representation of something else. Confucian cosmology sees no transcendent realm to speak of; the unknown is disparaged. It is the known that we are to perfect. And the monistic cosmology of Vedanta Hinduism equally merges the pointer with the pointed to. We do not imagine out, we just act upon what is before us, and that will effect all other realms.

³⁶ Sherry Turkle, “Whither Psychoanalysis in Computer Culture?,” in Readings in the Philosophy of Technology, Ed. David M. Kaplan. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2004, p.420. By means of the internet people can play out different personas in different settings. One can be “BroncoBill in one online context, ArmaniBoy in another, and MrSensitive in a third,” says Turkle. Turkle goes on to say, citing the development psychologist Erik Erikson, that the internet offers a place for people (particularly adolescents) to try out different social expressions without having to worry about consequences (relatively), and, thereby, learn what makes one’s “core self,” pp. 420-21.

While not always prominent, the imagination is not absent in these traditions. In Islamic judicial interpretation, known as Ijtihad, the imagination is critical for adopting sharia law to changing social conditions. But Ijtihad has not had an uncontested tradition in Islamic jurisprudence. In Hinduism, particularly in the Vedic world of ancient India, which set the stage for Indian spirituality for thirty-five hundred years, the imagination is the means by which both gods and humans fashion a livable and meaningful world. Indeed, it is only through the imagination that we can experience the world meaningfully at all.³⁷ Confucianism got a jolt of the imaginative vision with the introduction of Buddhism in the first century common era, giving rise to the more philosophical Neo-Confucian tradition. Buddhism would jolt Taoism as well, giving rise to Zen.

To be sure, the western philosophical tradition has given the most to the study of the imagination, to the imagining of the imagination.

Historically, the imagination, as it is used today --- as associated with fantasy and artistic expression --- got its definition and breadth during the 18th century in Britain, Scotland, and Germany. According to James Engell, in The Creative Imagination, Enlightenment to Romanticism, the imagination, developing in full flower from the enlightenment into romanticism, became a way to grasp truth. It synthesized all dualisms and gave humanistic life in the face of “abstract and mechanistic formalism” of the first half of the 18th century. Engell goes so far as to say that without the idea of the imagination, Romanticism would have collapsed.³⁸

While, to the Romantic, the imagination served to synthesize all forms of knowledge, the Romantic period too exclusively associated the imagination with artistic talent, the irrational, and the inspired, that which comes from without, the transcendent, the divine, the otherworldly --- the mystical. Hence, the imagination became less part of our everyday lives. In effect, the Romantic movement actually restricted the imagination, making it the domain of the differently talented, of those who, by their very genius, stand

³⁷ William K. Mahony, The Artful Universe: An Introduction to the Vedic Religious Imagination. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998.

³⁸ James Engell, The Creative Imagination, Enlightenment to Romanticism, Cambridge: Harvard, 1981, pp. 1-9.

apart from the rest of us, and conceivably, from society itself.³⁹ When so understood, the imagination is suspect, not to be fully trusted. Michel de Montaigne so understood it this way.⁴⁰

It is from Plato that we get this view of the imagination. In the Republic, Book VI, termed phantasia and in some cases eikasia (it would be Augustine who would give us the Latinized imaginatio), the imagination is placed three removes from truth as a lesser form of cognition, below belief (pistis). Poets like Homer and Hesiod, and the mythologists all played on the transient and the subjective and, so, according to Plato, deflected peoples' thinking from the eternal, from the apprehension of truth itself.⁴¹ The imagination was a threat to the polis and, thus, should not be part of its political theory.

Religion, also fears the imagination whenever it puts dogma and order over prophecy and inquiry. Condemnations of believers for heresy almost always arise from a fear of the believer's imaginative interpretation of scripture or choice of ethic. A classic example of religious' authorities claiming heretical a believer's imagination is the case of the 16th century Italian miller, Domenico Scandella, called Menocchio, who, on 18 September 1583 was denounced by the Inquisition for proselytizing blasphemy. It is not surprising he would be condemned for blasphemy. Menocchio saw it as his special calling. "Everybody has a calling, some to plow, some to hoe, and I have mine, which is to blaspheme," said he. And blaspheme he did, at least according to the doctrinal assumptions of 16th century Europe. "The air is god the earth is our mother." "Everything we see is God, and we are gods;" "the sky, earth, sea, air, abyss, and hell, all is God," and, by the phrase for which he is most noted: you ask from where do angels come from? "they were produced by nature from the most perfect substance of the world, just as worms are produced from a cheese, when they emerged received will, intellect, and memory from God as he blessed them."⁴² Menocchio's imagination got him tried and denounced. But it is through just such exercises of the imagination that faith is expanded and staid intellectual and institutional strictures assaulted.

³⁹ Saul, pp. 128-31.

⁴⁰ Michel de Montaigne, Essays of Michel de Montaigne. Trans. Charles Cotton. NY: Doubleday, 1947. See his essay "Of the Force of Imagination."

⁴¹ Gerard Watson, "Imagination and Religion in Classical Thought," in Religious Imagination, James P. Mackey, ed, Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 1986, p. 31.

⁴² Carlo Ginzburg, The Cheese and the Worms, the Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller, Trans. John and Anne Tedeschi, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, p. 55.

Although the Platonic tradition is little anchored in the senses, the material world, and is taken as antagonistic to the rational, making us, thereby, nervous with its irrationalism, lack of syllogism, and its non-constraint, the Platonic view nevertheless, by its very freedom, inspires hope, possibility, ideals, utopias, and reform.⁴³ Moreover, Plato's critique of the shadowy, the fleeting, and of that which is several steps removed from the real, applies to critiques of elements in our society today, when we have virtual realities, the pretensions of marketing, and the loss of connection between product and labor, as Susan Faludi notes in her research into the loss of the male identity.

Plato's disciple, Aristotle, took the imagination, still terming it as *phantasia*, in the other direction, into the material world, anchoring it in the senses and linking it to reason. In his "De Anima," Book 3, Chapter 3, Aristotle regards the imagination as drawing upon sense perceptions long forgotten and linking these to the rational mind, making thought possible. The imagination's groundedness in the stuff of life enables us to extend what we sense and know and feel into the life of others. We are able to empathize with and visualize that which is apart from us.

Because of its association with the senses and the material world, Aristotle's view is much more democratic. It is part of the everyday. It is less elitist and fantastical than Plato's interpretation. The imagination is less given to excess and extravagance. It is more honest, subject to validation, responsible, disciplined, human, this-worldly thinking, as opposed to evanescent and transcendent.

The Aristotelian view mitigates Platonic failures of the imagination by bringing to earth over-confident presumptions of achieving the beyond and mitigates the exuberances that yield tyrannical utopian aspirations. The Aristotelian view, however, fails at the imagination when it becomes too tied to the material world, too empirical, too mechanistic, when it becomes, in Russell Jacoby's phrase, too much of "blueprint" utopianism, of quantifiable, rigid, dogmatic, moralistic ideals.⁴⁴ There is no loftiness and artistic flights in the Aristotelian imagination, but measured, sobered procedures.

It would be Kant who would aim to merge the Aristotelian and the Platonic traditions by attaching the imagination to our practical, aesthetic, rational, and moral

⁴³ Watson, in *Religious Imagination*, p. 33.

⁴⁴ Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect, Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age*. NY: Columbia University Press, pp. xiv-xv.

judgments, that is, to how we perceive and organize data, make moral judgments about it, and take occasional creative leaps. The imagination, therefore, is a structure of the mind and is both disciplined and unconstrained.

This is for another day and paper, but, if the imagination is a structure of human thought, however we may use it, what role is there then for that which exists outside of our minds, for that which precedes us, *a priori*? Where is there the role for faith and for trusting in what we do not know? Do we fail the imagination when we say what exists is only that which we imagine, that humans make their world, that it does not exist apart from our own thought? Hence, one of the problematics of the imagination is its relation to religious belief. That is, is religious belief purely imaginative? Is what I believe in only what I myself, informed by cultures and traditions and groups of which I am a part, project, imagine? Ludwig Feurbach most famously posited the view of religion as humans projecting faces in the clouds.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ These queries can be addressed not by refuting Feurbach-like critiques of religion, but by reflecting on what these queries imply. To do so I turn to Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2ed, Chicago, 1970, pp. 11ff) and his discussion on paradigm changes. Kuhn says that discoveries occur and new paradigms result when an anomaly occurs to the existing paradigm. In order to pick up anomalies the existing paradigm must have its predictability and standardized procedures so that, when an anomaly does occur in the data, the scientist, knowledgeable of what should work and be the outcome, is able to recognize the divergence from what he was expecting to occur. If a paradigm is too flexible, too allowing for divergences, it is ill prepared to reveal a true anomaly when one does occur. Paradigms need to be relatively predictable and controlled if a discrepancy is ever to stand out.⁴⁵

To tie Kuhn's analysis to our study of religion, if the object or subject of religious belief is merely a projection of our imagination, then it is local and particular to the person or group of whose projection it is. If God is merely a projection of the imagination, then how would anyone, science included, be able to disagree with that interpretation of God or even to disprove it, since there is no single entity or concept to refute. The paradigm is too flexible. It has too much latitude; so anomalies to it would be difficult to decipher.

An overly fluid paradigm was the problem with the whole "Death of God" and "Secular City" assaults on traditional belief during the 1960s and 70s. Their philosophical and (literary) structure were too flimsy and individualized to recognize (or allow for and accept) the desire of people to have some authority and language that is greater than their everyday reality. Fundamentalist movements reasserting authority and propositional language would arise, subsequently, in the 1980s with a vengeance. If religion, God, is not a projection of the imagination, but is absolutely transcendent to us, then, when there are anomalies, the paradigm is too blind and intolerant to acknowledge or accept these anomalies, and, so, either ignores them to its peril or attempts to squash them. Such is the case today with so many fundamentalist religious expressions --- they do not accept any cracks in and opposing views to their system. The imagination, which holds in balance what we know and sense with what we do not know and sense, and finds this balance creative, is thereby suppressed by fundamentalist movements. They either crack under their own hypocrisy or go on to challenge and kill off the critics. In disqualifying the role of the imagination as what makes for religion, these rigid orientations fail to recognize the human --- and by this I mean physiological, social, political, historical, neurological --- groundedness of religion. Whether one holds that religion is solely a projection of the imagination or that it is not, in either case there are failures of the imagination.

We have briefly reflected on examples of how we fail the imagination in our society and prevent its flourish and have noted how the imagination has been understood in our philosophical traditions and by modern psychology. What, then, should we do to cultivate the imagination and avoid its excesses?

Cultivating the Imagination

It is my contention, and on this thesis I will conclude, that, though religion is the cause of so much ill in the world, it is through the religion paradigm that we can correct our failures of the imagination. I do not want to suggest that one must therefore be religious. But, more than any other discipline, religion deals concurrently with the material and the sensorial, the world that we know, and the non-material and non-sensorial, that world which we do not yet know or know fully.

For now I would like to conclude with a brief explanation of five religious themes from this thesis to make my point on how we can deal with failures of the imagination. We find these themes expressed in many religions.

These themes are, “trust,” “imperfection or vulnerability,” the “inner life,” “play,” and the “role of the body.”

Trust, of course, is not solely of the religious. But here I refer to it as living in the assurance of the unseen or unknown, in the value of human community, and in our own genius as human beings. Failures of the imagination arise when we discount the integrity of each of these, as when we reduce the possible to what we know and sense and, thus, undercut hope, the enlargement of our worldview, and unplanned possibilities. Trust is not pie-in-the-sky fantasizing, but the ability to move forward into the unknown and to believe that human community can occur because of the dignity of every person and the value of new creations.

But trust in the unknown and unseen needs to be moderated by a recognition of imperfection and vulnerability, that is, that we are incomplete and pregnable. “If you can’t live with the implications of uncertainty,” says John Ralston Saul, “you lock yourself into the old conundrum: logic is the art of going wrong with confidence.”⁴⁶ And continues, reason’s role is “to encourage further questioning by regularizing the process

⁴⁶ Saul, On Equilibrium, p. 124.

of dissent. But to play this role, reason must be kept in discomfort; kept away from its taste for self-satisfaction; balanced with imagination in order to enjoy the uncertainty of dissent.”⁴⁷

The imagination, in order to get its full exercise, must be able to reach into that which we are not. The imagination exists in relation to the Other. We cannot alone be sufficient. We are not without error. Incompleteness, vulnerability translates into realism, a realism of self-interest, of irony, of evil, of the give-and-take, and of error. Totalitarianism, absolutism are sterile and destructive precisely because they have no imagination extending to the Other, for no Other is given legitimacy to correct it. Totalitarianism, absolutism, of all kinds recoils from uncertainty – and that’s the danger.

We also fail at the imagination when we do not draw on our inner life, on the way of meditation, contemplation, study, listening. The imagination requires us to go deep, to find our own voice. Our obsession with technology, speed of action, fear of solitude, all supplant the mind’s own creative space. The mind needs unobstructed travel. We have to do our own visualization, not have others or some software do it for us. We here write our own papers, papers of length, from personal study and reflection. And, thus, our imagination is enriched. The religious life calls for deepening into the soul, going deep so as to later surface. The mystic’s power of the imagination is great because they have spent time going into the “cloud of unknowing.”

Then there is play, free association, loosely structured and focused auto telic activity, doing for its own sake, for no external affirmation. This is a religious theme, and tied to the imagination, because, ultimately, religion is play: we don’t know...really. And, so, we “act as if,” practiced in all seriousness through right ritual, elaborate belief systems, archetypal myths, and profound symbols. In play, we are open to the freedom of discovery, the breadth of life itself, and to possibility. We fail at the imagination when play becomes synonymous with certainty, control, and order.

And, finally, the imagination is enriched when we link it to our body, to corporeality.⁴⁸ Religion more than any other field of study acknowledges the

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 124.

⁴⁸ See Arnold Modell’s chapter, “The Corporeal Imagination,” in which he says, “the body is both the initial source and the sustaining source of an autonomous imagination,” pp. 69ff.

embodiedness of the imagination.⁴⁹ From the stigmata, to penance, to mind altering drugs to enter other realities, to tattoos and body piercing, to dance, to martyrdom, and gender, we give voice to our (religious) imagination through our body. And it was through the body that we initially communicated prior to language.⁵⁰ Philosophers say that whether we ourselves feel a particular emotion or not, we can still imaginatively construct an emotion in ourselves that someone else may be feeling.⁵¹ It is through the body that we feel and express life and get our metaphors.

The connection of the imagination to the body was made very poignantly to me on a recent business trip. I was dining at the “356th Fighter’s Group” restaurant in Canton, Ohio, where my waiter, over the course of my dinner, shared much about himself (it was a slow night for him). He told me he had a number of tattoos on his body, and each tattoo represented someone important to him, or some period in his life, or some event. For instance, he had a tattoo of a broken heart over his heart to remind him of a love lost, his first girlfriend. He has tattoos of dragons to remind him of his time as a heroin addict, when he “chased dragons,” referring to his next fix. A religious person now, he says, he also has religious symbols on his body. I asked why he did not simply journal; why recall through tattoos. He said it is important for him to link physical pain (which comes with the tattoo needle) with emotional pain. More than just a mnemonic device, his body was a metaphor of his life and a way to reformulate his past for a new understanding of himself, of his relation to others, and of his future.

Now I conclude. What are we doing here? We’re honoring the imagination, by the very character and nature of this place and by the very act of our creative narratives. And, so, to this institution, this community, and, by my very own narrative, this deed, here is my paean, my panegyric, inspired by the imagination of one supernumerary one hundred and seventy years ago.

Thank you.

⁴⁹ See, Paula M. Cooney, Religious Imagination and the Body, A Feminist Analysis. NY: Oxford, 1994.

⁵⁰ Robert N. Bellah, “Finding Meaning in the Human Experience,” in the “Forum” of the “Chronicle Review, The Chronicle of Higher Education,” December 1, 2006.

⁵¹ See, Jenefer Robinson, Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 2005, pp. 276, 288, 428n.41.