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Preface

The Uses of Imagination: A Preface

... the very simple and primary things that the imagination is about: life, love, freedom, dignity.

—Northrop Frye

He who is the Lord of all things is the lord of the imagination.

—William Lynch, S.J.

In many ways, what a new journal chooses to present first says a great deal about what it intends and how it may develop. In choosing the imagination as the theme of this first issue we took up a concept that has had a troubled history, has often been misunderstood or distorted, and, on top of everything, is difficult to define precisely. Often, the imagination is erroneously dismissed as delusory and dangerous. Even Shakespeare—that quintessential exemplar of imaginative insight, identification, and sympathy—had one of his characters equate the imagination with “seething brains” and reason with coolness.¹ Thus, many were the reasons to take a more mundane topic when doing something as daunting as starting a new journal.

But any reservations were immediately allayed when we thought of all the powerful writers who have given formal consideration to the matter, especially as it affects faith: John Henry Newman, G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Dorothy Sayers, Richard Wilbur, Flannery O’Connor, and Walker Percy, to name a few. We considered also the rich engagements of faith in the poetry of such as Jill Baumgaertner, Edward Hirsch, Luci Shaw, Samuel Hazo, Denise Levertov, Diane Glancy, Mark Rozema, Annie Dillard, Dana Goia, William Stafford, and Jeanne Murray Walker (and, again, this listing, drawn from the twentieth century only, is of necessity a sampling). Likewise, when we thought about Christian novelists, any listing of which would yield at least a book-length bibliography, we were once again not only encouraged but struck by how the forms of the imagination—in this case storytelling—have been central in helping believers understand the Christian reality, especially the mystery of grace.

Thus far, I have been relating the “outward story” of this first issue, but there is a more interesting inner one. And among the characters of that inner story, four characters stand out: a theorist; an apologist who is also a storyteller, poet, and critic; a poet who has ventured into critical commentary; and a preacher/professor. They are, respectively, William Lynch, S.J., G. K. Chesterton, Richard Wilbur, and Peter J. Gomes.

How can one not be intrigued by William Lynch’s audacious assertion that Christ is “lord of the imagination”?² We know Christ as redemption from sin, as the efficacious sacrifice, as the way to eternal life and by many other titles, for in the end he defies all our powers of description and definition. Lord of history, yes—but “lord of the imagination”? Is such an appellation eccentric or is it true, and if true, what are its implications? Lynch contends that he is “lord of the imagination” because of his

obedience to reality, the ultimate goal of which is unity—the drawing of all creation to the Godhead. In this obedience, Lynch suggests, Christ shows that the imagination is not a wild but a chaste thing, a perceiving rather than an inventing power. In conclusion, Lynch asserts that “Christology stands as the model and enduring act of the healthy and successful human imagination which, if it really grasps the act of Christ, will be able analogically to transfer this act to its own plan of human life.”³ In this equation of the healthy and successful human imagination with Christ, we see rather markedly how innovative Lynch’s take on the imagination and on salvation is. What Lynch sees the imagination contributing to faith is stated with great explicitness in his 1975 preface to a new edition of his great work *Christ and Apollo*:

The Christian faith should never think of itself as a conceptual bundle of ideas which must beg imaginative support from literature and art. This faith is also a life of the imagination—historical, concrete, and ironic. There will, hopefully, never be an end to collaboration between theology and literature, but it must be a collaboration of (theological) imagination with (literary) imagination. Otherwise theology loses its nerve and does not have the strength to collaborate with anything.⁴

Less formally and more winsomely than Lynch, G. K. Chesterton also acknowledges the importance of the imagination for faith and for a full life. In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton gives an account of his discovery that Christianity (by which he means nothing more than the Apostle’s Creed) is the “best root of energy and sound ethics.”⁵ And intriguingly—even puckishly—he argues his case not so much on the basis of Christianity’s truth but on its ability to answer our need for “an active and imaginative life, picturesque and full of poetical curiosity.”⁶ Although his formal consideration is brief, Chesterton makes it abundantly clear that he regards the imagination as a power of paramount importance for faith and for sanity. Having struggled against a mental breakdown himself, he is only too keenly aware of what induces mental exhaustion and what prevents it:

Imagination does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason. Poets do not go mad; but chess-players do. Mathematicians go mad, and cashiers; but creative artists very seldom. I am not, as will be seen, in any sense attacking logic: I only say that this danger does lie in logic, not in imagination.⁷

Chesterton’s most striking observations on how imagination connects to belief appear in his fourth chapter, “The Ethics of Elfland,” where he outlines his “personal philosophy or natural religion” and reports his startling discovery that all of it was contained in Christianity:

My first and last philosophy, that which I believe in with unbroken certainty, I learnt in the nursery. . . . The things I believed most then, the things I believe most now, are the things called fairy tales. They seem to me to be the entirely reasonable things. They are not fantasies: compared with them other things are fantastic. Compared with them religion and rationalism are both abnormal, though religion is abnormally right and rationalism abnormally wrong. Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense.⁸

He goes on to illustrate that from “Cinderella” he imbibed the meaning of the Magnificat—“exaltavit humiles”; and from “Beauty and the Beast,” the great hermeneutical insight “that a thing must be loved before it is loveable”; and from “Sleeping Beauty,” the shattering realization that despite its many gifts the human creature is under the curse of death.⁹ From Robinson Crusoe, Chesterton discovered that existence is “a wild romance of prudence.”¹⁰ Imagine the imagination required to see in prudence, the inner essence of all other virtues and the one that directs us to reality, a romance and a wild one at that.

This belief in stories in general, and fairytales in particular, furnished Chesterton with five ethical assumptions, all of which provided the ground for his conversion: 1) the world does not explain itself; 2) “there was something personal in the world, as in a work of art”; 3) existence is “beautiful in its old design, in spite of its defects”; 4) the proper response to existence “is some form of humility and restraint”; and 5) “in some way all good was a remnant to be stored and held sacred out of some primordial ruin.”¹¹ He felt all this even though his age gave him no encouragement. And when he made his startling discovery that what he believed in most and most desired was plainly before him in Christianity he makes the critical admission that “having found the moral atmosphere of the Incarnation to be common sense, [he] then looked at the established intellectual arguments against the Incarnation and found them to be common nonsense.”¹² Chesterton’s journey from the fairy tale to ethical responsiveness and thence to Christianity is clearly one of the imagination.

Richard Wilbur, the third writer who particularly influenced our decision to take the imagination as our theme, describes his poetry as “a public quarrel with the aesthetics of Edgar Allan Poe,” thereby signaling his interest in the moral and spiritual implications of particular kinds of imagination.¹³ Many of Wilbur’s poems, in fact, examine what Lynch calls the univocal imagination, the kind that seeks “to reduce everything, every difference and particularity in images, to the unity of a sameness which destroys or eliminates the variety and detail of existence.”¹⁴ Wilbur gives us a chilling example of this type in “On the Eyes of the SS Officer.” The officer’s eyes “devise / Foul purities,” preferring their own veiling nightmare over the “opulent bric-a-brac earth” of creation.¹⁵ The univocal imagination is also apparent in “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World” where the speaker shrinks from the new day in his first waking moments. Preferring the solitude of his somnolent state in which his “astounded soul / Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple / As false dawn,” he yearns for an unattainable purity: “Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry, / Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam / And clear dances done in the sight of heaven.” But, in the end, as “The soul descends once more in bitter love / To accept the waking body,” he accepts the impurities, contradictions, variegations, and stresses of reality in which “the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating / Of dark habits, / keeping their difficult balance.”

Other of Wilbur’s poems—most notably “The Undead” and “The Mind Reader”—exemplify what Lynch calls the equivocal imagination, which is so amazed by diversity, by the singularity of existence and experience that it eschews all attempts to discover unity or order. It sees only random equivalence—“opts always for difference alone.”¹⁶

The speaker of “The Mind Reader,” for example, has heard of “a huge attention” in existence and he longs to know it, but he cannot bring himself to an act of judgment. He cannot sort through the myriad impressions that play upon his mind and come up with fundamental principles or conclusions. All he can do is sit in the cafe, survey (not even savor) the parade of life, and drink himself into a stupor (appropriately enough for an imagination that sees only dissolution).

Lying behind Wilbur’s poetry is a conviction that the proper response to existence is a third way. Lynch calls this the analogical imagination in that it seeks “some kind of interpenetration of unity and multiplicity, sameness and difference, a kind of interpenetration in terms of which the two contraries become one and the same thing.”¹⁷ Occupying a mediating ground the analogical imagination is epitomized in Christ:

It is no small wonder that it is in Christ we come to the fullest possible understanding of what analogy means in the fullest concrete, the facing relentlessly into the two poles of the same and the different and the interpenetrating reconciliation of the two contraries. He who is Lord of all things is the lord of the imagination. As a good artist, and not an aesthete, he therefore knew what he was talking about when he said: If I be lifted up upon the cross (in complete isolation and differentiated uniqueness, without anonymity, without friends), I shall draw all things to me (in sameness, in love, in a universal Church).¹⁸

Richard Wilbur’s “‘A World Without Objects is a Sensible Emptiness,’” a poem which has been called “a prayer for success in overcoming the temptation of a divided spirit,” is a celebration of, and call to, the analogical imagination—to the realization that “auras, lustres, / And all shinings need to be shaped and borne.” The speaker turns away from “the land of sheer horizon” and rejects the beasts of his soul “who long to learn to drink / Of pure mirage”

Back to the trees arrayed
In bursts of glare, to halo-dialing run
Of the country creeks, and the hills’ bracken tiaras made
Gold in the sunken sun.

But, lest he fall into the equivocal imagination instead, he counsels himself:

Wisely watch for the sight
Of the supernova burgeoning over the barn,
Lampshine blurred in the steam of beasts, the spirit’s right
Oasis, light incarnate.

The last character in this little drama I have been outlining entered the stage of our thinking in a confirming role. Peter J. Gomes, Preacher to Harvard University, recounts a conversation with a student about the imagination in his recently published, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*. At a House dinner, Gomes found himself seated next to a large football player and asked him what he was studying. The student answered, “sports theory.” Gomes immediately asked for an explanation. The student

answered that “the process of imaging, of getting the brain to play through all the right plays over and over and over again.”¹⁹ When asked, “does that mean imagining,” the student responded,

The imagination has everything to do with how you perform. If you imagine yourself going through all of this patterning in the brain, anticipating and responding, then when it comes time for you to actually have to do it you have done it, and you are much better off doing it because you’ve done it here before you have to do it out there on the field.²⁰

Another student chimed in that through imaging she can practice the piano even when she is in the library or at her desk. And Gomes, both astounded and intrigued, drew this lesson:

In other words, to see or to image perfection is to strive for it and, indeed, to accomplish much of it. The imagination has more to do with virtue than virtue itself. What an extraordinary thing. A football player doesn’t need a field or team with which to play football, and a piano player doesn’t need the music or even a piano to perform the great work. The only equipment we require to live out the image of goodness in the world is what we have, because God has given us by his very creation of us a capacity to image, to imagine what is good, what is true, and what is beautiful. Here the image is not the external result but just the reverse. An image is not fashion, it is the internal change that we call imagination, and if you cultivate a lively moral imagination, that is a considerable improvement over the maintenance of mere fashion and style.²¹

The Canadian critic Northrop Frye also contends that the imagination is crucial for moral discernment and spiritual renewal, and he offers this example: “Let us suppose that some intelligent man has been chasing status symbols all his life, until suddenly the bottom falls out of his world and he sees no reason for going on. He can’t make his solid gold cadillac represent his success or his reputation or his sexual potency.”²² According to Frye, what he needs is not a psychiatrist or a clergyman “because his state of mind is neither sick nor sinful.” What he needs is to have his imagination educated, for “it’s his imagination that’s been starved and fed on shadows, and it’s education in that that he specifically wants and needs.”²³

Such education of the imagination is often the point of Flannery O’Connor’s stories. In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” for example, the Grandmother achieves her moment of grace when she abandons her pretensions of southern gentility and superiority and reaches out to the murderer-Misfit in an act of imaginative identification: “You’re one of my babies.” Likewise, in “Revelation,” Ruby Turpin’s fatuous preoccupation with appearance, status, and wealth prevents her from seeing the imago Dei in others. Like Frye’s chaser of status symbols, her imagination has been subsisting on shadows. And these shadows are so dangerous, as her boxcar dream indicates, that she needs a blow to her head to knock her to her senses. In *The Violent Bear It Away*, arguably O’Connor’s most uncompromising yet richest tale, Rayber deliberately and systematically starves his imagination: “He did not look at anything too long, he denied his senses unnecessary satisfactions. He slept in a narrow iron bed, worked sitting in a straight-backed chair, ate

frugally, spoke little, and cultivated the dullest for friends.”²⁴ He cannot endure to accept the profound mystery of his idiot son’s existence, nor the love his son stirs in him; thus, Rayber literally tries to extirpate his imagination. His refusal of imaginative love puts him at war with himself, the world, and God.

It is easier to recognize the presence or absence of the imagination than to say what it is. And one problem that occurs when the word “imagination” enters a discussion is that too often it is equated with the imaginary (unicorns and such) rather than the imaginative—the seeing into the reality of a situation or person. A robust imaginative apprehension lies behind Mother Teresa’s labors among the poorest of the poor. She sees in their lives not “the miserable” as does the sentimentally-pitying consumerist mentality, but gifts of God’s creative love. For all their suffering, they are beloved. In them, she sees the *imago Dei*.

To explain such acts of imaginative engagement, the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins coined the term “*inscape*.” This is the inward structure or essence of a thing, the quiddity of a person or object created by the instress of God’s love; to apprehend it requires the stillness and discipline of genuine contemplation. And this requires risk, an abandonment of one’s presuppositions, a willingness to accept the other and to embrace the strange and freckled. Doing so, as O’Connor’s characters illustrate, is often unsettling and painful and even death-dealing.

One of the most arresting acts of imagination occurs at the end of Bernanos’s *The Diary of a Country Priest*. With his dying breath, the young curé who is the protagonist of the novel says, “*Tout est grâce*”—Everything is grace. It is an astonishing statement, filled with hope and thanksgiving, and yet so much in the curé’s life militated against that affirmation. How he comes to make it is one of the novel’s most poignant mysteries. He is utterly alone, without family or close friends. He is not particularly respected by the clerical authorities. His parishioners are hostile to him, and even his success in delivering Madame le Comte from her hell of hatred is misinterpreted. And at the end, hemorrhaging from stomach cancer, his only company is a defrocked priest and his mistress. Yet he possesses the wherewithal to make his imaginative affirmation—that everything, including his loneliness, pain, and suffering, is grace.

The articles in this issue will help you, we hope, to understand how important the imagination is, how it works, and what challenges and threats it faces in contemporary society.

Three Theoretical Examinations

The first three pieces treat the imagination more or less generally or theoretically. Joseph Schwartz’s wide-ranging piece demonstrates how rich the subject is, how it is best approached asymptotically through many examples, and how it is rooted in the Incarnation. It also helps us to distinguish between a mere *jeu d’esprit* and those works, literary or musical, that capture the radiance of reality. Invoking the same Christological foundation, Aidan Nichols broadens the ambit of the discussion by considering the

demand that images make, the “ancient theology of the image” that Paul invokes “to speak of the person and work of Jesus,” and the effect of contemplating images. In the final article of this group, Nathan Scott, Jr., turns our attention to a specific theoretician, William Lynch, S.J., “whom,” he says, “we ought to try to recover from the obscurity into which his career has been allowed to descend.” After delineating Lynch’s astute morphology of the imagination, Scott considers Lynch’s analysis of the role of imagination in combating hopelessness and in healing mental illness.

Imagination in O’Connor and Newman

The next two articles investigate the working of the imagination in two prominent Catholic writers. Drawing upon materials recently made available to her—namely, “two ordinary school notebooks, mottled black and white”—Sally Fitzgerald analyzes Flannery O’Connor’s efforts to formulate a reliable understanding of herself and her desire to be a great artist for the glory of God. Fitzgerald also considers the influence of the Iowa Writer’s Workshop on O’Connor’s development as well as such well known theoreticians as Coleridge, Eliot, Teilhard de Chardin, and Tresmontant. Ian Ker directs our attention to the importance of imagination for faith, his particular concern being the role of the imagination in the conversion of John Henry Newman. He points out that the famous *via media* was a failure for Newman because it never really informed his imagination in the way the Roman Catholic Church came to do. In the course of his discussion, Ker suggests that the failure to read the Bible in Catholic countries impoverishes imagination and the faith and that the dechristianization of the West is attributable to just such an imaginative impoverishment.

Image and Icon

We turn to a different art form in the next two articles. The first is a reprint of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s “Image-Filled and Imageless Contemplation,” a brief but trenchant meditation on the paradox of gaining knowledge of the imageless God through the eternal Image who entered the multiplicity of existence in the Incarnation. Next, Nicholas Conostas provides a concrete analysis of a particular form of the image—the icon, the proper contemplation of which, he argues, “presupposes a sacred imagination.” His article presents a kind of grammar of the icon. He explains how the full frontality of the face, the large eyes, enlarged ears, closed mouth, and general elongation of the iconic figure imaginatively restores the human body to its true function of relating to God. In the end, the effect of icons is to “liberate the world from the totalizing specificity of time and space.”

Transfigurations: Law and the Public Life

The role of the imagination in law and public life is the focus of the next three articles. The elipsis in James Gordley’s title hints at the scepticism that some may feel in finding the terms “law” and “imagination” joined together. Law, it would seem, is a matter of

rules, precedents, and hard-headed logic, but Gordley debunks this notion, arguing that to discover the rules and higher principles informing a ruling requires imagination, “the sort of imagination that scholars in other disciplines employ when, looking at data, they see an hypothesis that can explain it.” This sort of imagination engages reality. Following Gordley are two thoughtful reactions to Martha Nussbaum’s *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (1995). Nussbaum argues that the literary imagination is “an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own.”²⁵ She teaches novels to her law students because she sees in literature a powerful corrective to the vitriol of much contemporary discourse and a means to build a more humane and just society. While agreeing with her main thesis Don Briel points out a severe limitation in her conception of the imagination. Lacking a religious grounding, her sense of the imagination is profoundly private and can lead only to autonomous self-interpretations. Briel draws upon a range of classic thinkers to demonstrate that the imagination is etiolated unless it opens one to transcendent mystery. Similarly, Michael Jordan argues in an essay that moves from the Transfiguration to Olivier Messiaen’s orchestral rendition in *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus Christ* that there are signs of the resurgence of the imagination in our culture. After setting forth the Transfiguration as a keynote in our understanding of the imagination—as a test of it really—he considers the current hostility to the imagination from three particular points of view: theology (Hans Urs von Balthasar), philosophy (Eva Brann) and postmodern theory (Richard Kearney).

Reclaiming the Imagination

Finally, the last section of this issue considers the threat the imagination has been, and continues to be, under in the last half of the twentieth century. It opens with a reprinting of Elizabeth Sewell’s classic essay, “The Death of the Imagination,” that appeared in *Thought* in 1953. According to Sewell, the imagination is an ordering power on which freedom depends; it is what sends us rushing out to embrace reality; it is an invitation to the universe and a means of discovering new significances. But in order for the imagination to thrive we must maintain the unity of mind and body. The danger of separating mind from body has been analyzed and decried in some detail by the American novelist Walker Percy.²⁶ The threat of angelism (orbiting forever in a false transcendence) is as great as bestialism (being sunk in immanence). Both are inhuman conditions subject to great evil. In response to Sewell, Janine Langan issues an urgent, tough-minded call for the re-education of the imagination. She also laments that “instead of coming to the imagination’s rescue, the Church has panicked at its antics” and that as a result the imagination has become dechristianized. In Langan’s view so much of what is crass, vulgar, meretricious, banal, bathetic, blasphemous, ersatz, and supercilious in modern society is a consequence of the impoverishment of the imagination. Unless there is a re-education of the imagination to “the splendor of truth,” then the “thanatos syndrome” that Walker Percy saw as the chief symptom of our age will work its way to its natural outcome.

We hope that this issue with its many rich perspectives will help to create the unity that Sewell believes is essential for the imagination and to begin the re-education that Langan calls for.

—Michael Allen Mikolajczak,
Editor

Notes

- 1 William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.4.
- 2 William Lynch, S.J., *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), 157.
- 3 William Lynch, S.J., "Theology and the Imagination," *Thought* 29 (1954), 61.
- 4 Lynch, *Christ and Apollo*, vii.
- 5 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1936), 13.
- 6 Chesterton, 10.
- 7 Chesterton, 17.
- 8 Chesterton, 49.
- 9 Chesterton, 50.
- 10 Chesterton, 64.
- 11 Chesterton, 65.
- 12 Chesterton, 142.
- 13 Richard Wilbur, *Responses: Prose Pieces, 1953-1976* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), 125.
- 14 Lynch, *Christ and Apollo*, 113.
- 15 All quotations from Wilbur's poetry are from Richard Wilbur, *New and Collected Poems* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1988).
- 16 Lynch, *Christ and Apollo*, 114.
- 17 Lynch, *Christ and Apollo*, 141.
- 18 Lynch, *Christ and Apollo*, 157-58.
- 19 Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: William Morrow, 1996), 200.
- 20 Gomes, 200.
- 21 Gomes, 201.
- 22 Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 150.
- 23 Frye, 150.
- 24 *The Violent Bear It Away in Three* By Flannery O'Connor, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Signet, 1983), 193.
- 25 Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), xvi.
- 26 See Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).