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Creativity, Imagination, and the Arts

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Sing to the Lord; bless His Name; show forth His Salvation from day to day. Declare His glory among the heathen, His wonders among all people. Psalm 96:2-3

God created man good and in His own image. Also, despite man's fall into sin, he still retains his humanness, although every one of his faculties—the various aspects of his unique man-ly creatureliness—is corrupted and distorted by sin.

The philosophers have long made exaggerated disjunctions in human consciousness and in man's knowing between reason and emotion, between the analytical and the imaginative, between the head and the

heart, even between scholarship and religious faith. Some distinctions must be made, certainly, but they should not be absolutized, nor should they fracture the organic wholeness, the integral bodily-spiritual unity of man, out of whose heart, the core of his existence, proceed the issues of life.

Let us begin our review of the imagination, then, with a portrayal of man as he presently is after the Fall. Agatha Lubbers sets the stage as follows:

Fallen man fashions the forms and seeks in the hope that he might feel after God and find Him (cf. Acts 17:27 ff.) All he

accomplishes, however, is the acknowledgement that he is a creature dependent upon God and existing because there is a God. In Ecclesiastes 3:11 we read that God has “. . . set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.” Even the pagan poets of Paul’s day said: “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 7:28). This is not the knowledge of love in Christ. It is not the certain knowledge and hearty confidence of faith. It is that formal knowledge which every natural man has so that he is inexcusable before God (cf. Romans 1:20).¹

Miss Lubbers goes on to point out that the Hebrew word *Bara* refers to creation by God, but that the word *Asah* can refer to the “creative,” that is, the imaginatively selecting and recombining, acts of man; for the latter term suggests the idea of cultivating, dressing, trimming, and culturing. Man, then, is commanded to be creative within his image-of-God capacity and limitations, maintaining and developing the earth as a faithful steward through all the arts and the sciences.

As an image-bearer of God who has been recreated in Christ Jesus (cf. II Cor. 5:17 ff.), redeemed man has the calling to work creatively and imaginatively in the cosmos of God. He does not sit down and wait until the New Jerusalem and all its culture appears, nor does he attempt to establish by his own efforts that New Jerusalem here and now. He works with the imaginative and creative powers God has given him as a recreated and reborn image-bearer in his present creation. He does this to the glory and praise of God’s sovereign grace.²

In *Art and the Bible*, Francis Schaeffer discusses the pleasure that the Sovereign God takes in beauty by describing the divinely appointed pattern for the temple (see I Chronicles 28:11-19), which required two free-standing columns capped with golden chains adorned with pomegranates, “art work upon art work”: “They supported no architectural weight and had no utilitarian engineering significance.”³ Leland Ryken gives a similarly detailed account of the artistic beauty of the tabernacle in his essay “A Christian Approach to Literature.”

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Schaeffer also makes clear that as our redemption is for the whole man, the Lordship of Christ “involves the total culture—including the area of creativity. Again, evangelical or Biblical Christianity has been weak at this point. About all that we have produced is a very romantic Sunday school art. We do not seem to understand that the arts too are under the Lordship of Christ.”⁴

The imaginative objectification of the ugly can also be aesthetically beautiful, for Christian realism demands honesty—that the truth be presented in love. Leland Ryken suggests this relationship of beauty and truth when he observes, “Scripture teaches that beauty is an attribute of God and that He is the Source of beauty, just as He is the Source of truth.”⁵ The Biblical doctrine of Creation undergirds this revela-

tion and also explains why man can produce artifacts, as well as why God is pleased by whatever reveals (or reflects) His own beauty and glory.

In *Hidden Art*, Edith Schaeffer refers to God's planting "a garden eastward in Eden. . . . And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food." Loveliness as well as deliciousness is the delight of our Heavenly Father. Mrs. Schaeffer challenges the child of God, reconciled through the blood of Christ, to creativity in every vocation and activity of life:

The marks of personality—love, communication, and moral sensitivity—which are meant to sharpen as we are returning to communication with God, should lead to an increased rather than a decreased creativity. The Christian should have more vividly expressed creativity in his daily life, and have more creative freedom, as well as the possibility of a continuing development in creative activities.⁶

A philosophical-literary tradition at least as old as Plato considers the artist—especially the poet or maker with words—to be an inspired madman, a visionary, prophet, godlike creator of both beauty and truth. This Platonic view, which flowered in romanticism, persists today as a religion of artistic sensibility and insight. John Livingston Lowes, in his massive study *The Road to Xanadu*, not only presents the genius of the romantic profession, but also articulates a view of the formal working of the imagination. As he discusses the poetry of Coleridge, Lowes observes that "In the intense luminousness of Coleridge's brain, scraps of remembered fact or lines on the printed page flashed, as he says, 'into vivid spectra,' and words sprang into pictures as he read or wrote."⁷

These images are brought into consciousness from the deep well of the imagination and thereby enable the artistic

process to give creative form to reality (the artist ultimately supplanting God Himself). Lowes summarizes the process as follows: "There enter into imaginative creation three factors which reciprocally interplay: the Well, and the Vision, and the Will. Without the Vision, the chaos of elements remains a chaos, and the Form sleeps forever in the vast chambers of unborn designs. Yet in that chaos only could creative Vision ever see this Form. Nor without the co-operant Will, obedient to the Vision, may the pattern perceived in the huddle attain objective reality."⁸

Jacques Maritain traces the relationship between Rousseau and romanticism and the more recent Art for Art's sake aestheticism. "The creative artist was rapidly transmogrified into the self-centered, posturing subjectivist or the querulous existentialist. Says Maritain, "By virtue of the principle that the artistic value alone matters, this value, along with poetic creativity and the poetic act, instead of remaining enclosed in the ivory tower of Art for Art's sake, was to claim sovereignty over all of human life. . . . Arnold was making his claims that poetry might save the world."⁹

In "The Personal Heresy," C. S. Lewis argues convincingly that poets—and all contemporary artists—must return to humility, submitting to the necessity of interesting and pleasing their readers, rather than boring, sickening, and insulting them. He calls for a return to diligence and craftsmanship, to a reassimilation of what T. S. Eliot felicitously yoked in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Lewis elaborates his criticism thus in "The World's Last Night":

Many modern novels, poems, and pictures, which we are brow-beaten into "appreciating," are not good work because they are not work at all. They are mere puddles of spilled sensibility or reflection. When an artist is in the strict sense working, he of course takes into account the

existing taste, interests, and capacity of his audience. These, no less than the language, the marble, or the paint, are part of his raw material, to be used, tamed, sublimated, not ignored or defied. Haughty indifference to them is not genius nor integrity; it is laziness and incompetence.¹⁰

Those who write on creativity and the imagination all maintain that coherent thought plays a critical role in the imaginative process. For example, George Kneller observes that creativity is characterized by "intelligence, awareness, fluency, flexibility,

achieved this level of artistic proficiency are Luci Shaw, John Leax, Eugene Warren, Marie Post, Thomas John Carlisle, and Chad Walsh, to mention several notable contemporaries. Vincent Thomas speaks of such mastery as follows: "When we congratulate an artist for being creative. . . , it is not because he was able to obey the rules that were known before he painted his picture or wrote his novel or poem, so that thereby he succeeded in doing what had been done before. We congratulate him because he embodied in colors or in language something the like of which did not exist before, and because he was the

"The Christ-believing artist, therefore, proclaims the glory and beauty of the Triune God by reflecting His handiwork in this wondrous—even though sin-cursed—creation and in the marvelous intricacies of human relationships and the awesome outworkings of His plan in history, especially as it focuses on Jesus Christ, the Creative and Incarnate Word in Whom all things cohere."

originality, elaboration, persistence, a combination of skepticism and credulity, intellectual play, a sense of humor, independence, and the union of inner confidence with a capacity of self-criticism."¹¹ Kneller contrasts creativity with standard definitions of intelligence as being more innovative and venturesome, more unconventional and audacious, but less cautious, methodical and conservative than "non-creative" thought.¹²

As for originality, an artist is not considered a master until he can transcend the rules of his particular genre—that is, he must learn to structure his art so integrally that the laws of his medium and the formal elements of his expression never obtrude. Christian poets who have most recently

originator of the rules he implicitly followed while he was painting or writing."¹³

Eliot's "Waste Land" imagery, Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles*, and Flannery O'Connor's grotesques of wickedness and wretchedness touched by God's grace in Christ all embody and illuminate the kind of superior creativity that George Kneller speaks of as "shattering the mold of custom and increasing the possibilities of thought and perception. Indeed, this is one reason why it is hard to admire works of art that imitate outdated styles. Creative novelty springs largely from the rearrangement of existing knowledge—a rearrangement that is itself an addition to knowledge."¹⁴

Creative novelty, however, demands extensive and profound experiential back-

ground: it is not the product of superficiality. In his valuable work *Imagination*, Harold Rugg gives the account of the mathematician Poincaré who suddenly perceived the solution to a complex problem as he was walking along a bluff while on a vacation. The insight came to him with brevity, clarity, suddenness, and complete certainty. However, as Rugg reminds us, "The flash will not occur unless the mind, conscious and unconscious, has been stored with a rich body of percepts, images, motor adjustments and concepts that are pertinent to the new concept struggling to be born."¹⁵

Further, Rugg affirms that creative expression is generated by intense feeling, an extended period of observation, reflection, and preparation, and a deep, comprehensive, unconventional understanding—the imaginative conception—which is finally objectified by the artist. Rugg epitomizes the three stages of creative work thus:

There is first a long, conscious preparatory period of baffled struggle; second, an interlude in which the scientist or artist apparently gives up, pushes the problem back or down or 'out of mind,' leaving it for the nonconscious to work upon. Then, third, comes the blinding and unexpected 'flash of insight,' and it comes with such certitude that a logical statement of it can be immediately prepared. These stages are present whether in art, science, technology, or philosophy.¹⁶

In *Writing Creatively*, J. N. Hook suggests that sensitivity is just as important to artistic creation as thought. He does not mean sentimentality or affectation, but a deep feeling that seeks the fulfilment of an equally profound understanding, a complementary comprehension. "The creative person," continues Hook, "seeks the perfect medium to express to others the emotions he has felt, the relationships he has discovered. . . . [Yet] nobody finds the

perfection that his mind envisions. But in the search, many brighten their lives and the lives of those who sympathize with the attempt."¹⁷

Creativity is on a continuum, but the artist must be exceptionally imaginative or his works will appear trite and derivative. However, no Christian, regardless of his particular calling, should scorn or ignore this dimension of his created humanness. Pertinent here is what Ernest Tuveson observes about the role of the imagination: "The light of the imagination is not a means of grace but an instrument for the criticism of life."¹⁸ H. R. Rookmaaker also emphasizes this office of art when he concludes *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (InterVarsity) with the insight that the norms for art are basically the same as the norms for life, and that Paul sums them up in Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

For the Christian artist, then, the imagination is an instrument of his craft, a talent that he must worshipfully exercise in the service of his crucified Savior and resurrected King. And it demands the kind of mental concentration, spiritual discipline, and bodily sweat that Flannery O'Connor alludes to in her essay on "Writing Short Stories":

Maritan speaks of "the habit of art." It is a fact that fiction writing is something in which the whole personality takes part—the conscious as well as the unconscious mind. Art is the habit of the artist; and habits have to be rooted deep in the whole personality. They have to be cultivated like any other habit, over a long period of time, by experience; and teaching any kind of writing is largely a matter of helping the student develop the habit of art. I think it is a way of looking at

the created world and of using the senses so as to make them find as much meaning as possible in things.¹⁹

The Christ-believing artist, therefore, proclaims the glory and beauty of the Triune God by reflecting His handiwork in this wondrous—even though sin-cursed—creation and in the marvelous intricacies of human relationships and the awesome out-workings of His plan in history, especially as it focuses on Jesus Christ, the Creative and Incarnate Word in Whom all things cohere (see Col. 1). Moreover, as he is a new creature in Christ, regenerated by God's Holy Spirit, "The creativity of the Christian is sanctified. This means that the Christian writer is a sanctified writer. He writes words 'seasoned with salt' (cf. Colossians 4:6). In Ephesians 4:29 Paul says, 'Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace to the hearers.' This is not only a directive for the new man in his conversation, but it also refers to what flows from his pen, or is struck from his typewriter. In all forms of literature and in all the forms of the other kinds of creative arts, it must be for edification; that is, to build up in the knowledge of God."²⁰

Playing a most significant part in the process of creativity, as we have said, is that form or function of human consciousness called the imagination. In a discussion of the nature of her art, Marianne Moore speaks of poetry as "a thing of heightened consciousness,"²¹ which is a metaphor for the imagination; and May Swenson reflects that although poetry is not a science, it is nonetheless animated by "the insatiable curiosity of science. The universe, inside and out, is properly its laboratory."²² The imagination then generalizes by focusing on particulars, after which it relates them by synthesizing human experience into patterns of meaning. Richard Wilbur phrases it as follows: "What poetry does with ideas is to redeem them from abstraction and submerge them in sensibility; it

embodies them in persons and things and surrounds them with a weather of feeling."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge attempted to differentiate between fancy—which merely isolates, lists, and associates—and imagination—which imposes form on perceptions and reshapes the raw materials of experience into new patterns of meaning. Coleridge was not being typically romantic when he referred to "the human mind as made 'in the Image of the Creator' " or when he described "the imagination as 'a dim analogue of creation' ";²⁴ for Coleridge here acknowledges the pre-eminence of the Sovereign Creator and views man as made in God's likeness. The imagination, then, as distinguished from the fancy, organizes and fuses what is usually and habitually perceived as disparate. Ezra Pound's definition of a poem aptly suggests this synthetic power of the imaginations as "an emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time."

Inscape is the word that Gerard Manley Hopkins coined to suggest the uniqueness, the individuating essence, of a person, animal, bird, scene, or relationship. The heavens, indeed, declare God's glory, and the firmament displays His artistry in Hopkins' poetry. Perhaps the most scientific of English poets (he had essays published in *Nature*), Hopkins relates poetic knowing to the richly diversified substantiality of the real world, God's wonderfully variegated creation. William Walsh writes thus of Hopkins' vision, theory, and poetic practice:

It is the nature of the poetic intelligence, as we see with great clarity, in the poetry of Hopkins, to give us the wholeness of the act of knowing. It is this which makes it so salutary a corrective in education, where we fall continually into the error of identifying understanding—and especially trains of understanding or reasoning—with one component of understanding, the generalizing, systemizing element, and

neglect what it should be grounded in, a sense of the particular, as well as what it should return to, a still more heightened sense of the particular.²⁵

In *A Christian Critique of Literature*, Calvin Seerveld characterizes imaginative knowing as "distinct from the act of scientific creation" (or theoretic analysis), as well as from "the perceptive action of naive experience."²⁶ When an art work

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results from the structuring expression of such imaginative knowing, Seerveld terms its mode of existence "one of symbolical objectification of imaginatively grasped meaning"—subject, as a minimum requisite, to the aesthetic law of coherence.

Seerveld further defines imagination as *Hineinlebenshaltung*, which through "sensuous confrontation and reflective discrimination" constitute a living into a particular object or aspect of reality. *Hineinlebenshaltung*, then, "is a peculiar structuration of human consciousness that permits a man's aesthetic, that is, symbolizing ability singularly to dominate his action toward reality."²⁷

As educators we are sometimes so influenced by positivistic assumptions and empirical philosophy that we slight the organic wholeness that imaginative synthesis can confer upon our knowing.

Harold Rugg emphasizes the value of educating the imagination thus:

Imagination is the universal and indispensable instrument of all levels of living in the human world. Our daily lives are dependent on it. All day long we imagine our way around the house or the community, visualizing alternative courses and alternative consequences of action. In fact, the principal function of the imagination is to enable the human being constantly to build thought models of the real world.²⁸

The tremendous culture-forming power of the imagination, through works of art in various media, is explored by Donald Drew in his *Images of Man: A Critique of Contemporary Cinema*. Drew affirms that men try to understand and communicate the meaning of life through art, in order to get at "the intrinsic nature of reality" and also that "The arts reveal the human condition and define and redefine man in his multifarious activities and relationships."²⁹

Further, he demonstrates that imaginative expression evokes an imaginative response so potent as to produce altered behavior and sometimes radically modified lifestyles. Commenting on movies specifically, Drew observes that "Films are made not only to affect the senses but to grip the imagination, which then sets up an attitude of mind and in turn produces certain emotions leading to certain conduct. As we have seen, film forces its way into the citadel of beliefs and feelings. Moreover as in advertising, each image tends to ignite the physical conditions and conduct corresponding to it."³⁰ Recent studies on the effects of TV violence strongly support Dr. Drew's conclusions.

That the imagination is not an easily isolatable faculty, but a holistic form of human coming-to-know, has been acknowledged by educators, but the implications have not been adequately explored. Certainly, the imaginative aspect of human

nature is integral to man's essential humanness, to the core of his being, what the Scriptures call his heart. Jane Dillenberger calls our attention to the religious fullness of our human response to the imaginative portrayal and interpretation of life in a painting:

Whereas subject matter and form are perceived by us through an activity primarily of the mind in the one case and of the senses in the other, the content of a painting is communicated to us more generally, and in one sense, more passively. We receive the content or meaning of a work of art; the meaning is bestowed upon us, rather than being attained through a specific activity on our part. What is required of us for the communication of content is a kind of consent or openness on our part. When we confront a painting, it is not a matter of a few moments of visual contact—in those few moments of temporal time, our entire lifetime of visual, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experience is being drawn upon and stimulated.³¹

Just as creativity differs from person to person, so the precise working of the imagination allows for interesting and unique variation. Stephen Spender refers to the work of the poet as the expression of the logic of images by one "who never forgets certain sense-impressions which he has experienced."³² Spender considers memory to be fundamental to the operation of the imagination, as the poet recalls former experience and applies it to a different situation. On the subject of imaginative diversity, Spender says that "Some poets write immediately works which, when they are written, scarcely need revision. Others write their poems by stages, feeling their way from rough draft to rough draft, until finally, after many revisions, they have produced a result which may seem to

have very little connection with their early sketches."³³

This may sound as though the artist does not work in a self-conscious manner or that his "daemon" is in control, but that bit of neo-Platonic romanticism would deny the truth that the artist does, in fact, finally shape his material, determine his expression, choose structure, tone, and theme, and that he remains responsible, before both God and man, for the objectified view of life and interpretation of reality that he artistically presents. Clive Bell, himself a pantheist outspokenly dedicated to the "religion of art,"³⁴ argues that good art—"significant form"—transcends and precludes moral judgment. Nevertheless, Bell recognizes that "All artists are religious. All uncompromising belief is religious. A man who so cares for truth that he will go to prison, or death, rather than acknowledge a God in whose existence he does not believe, is as religious, and as much of a martyr in the cause of religion, as Socrates or Jesus."³⁵

In the arts (as elsewhere), as they are bodied forth through the disciplined exercise of the creative imagination, one must discern the spirits to see whether they be of God (I John 4:1). Calvin Seerveld says in his *Christian Critique of Literature* that if we do not judge the works, they will judge us, and Francis Schaeffer reminds us that "the world view that is shown through a body of art must be seen ultimately in terms of the Scripture. The artist's world view is not to be free from the judgment of the Word of God." And further, "The greater the artistic expression, the more important it is to bring it and its world view under the judgment of Christ and the Bible."³⁶

In this essay I merely touch on creativity and the imagination as they relate to the arts, education, life itself, and I attempt to sketch the outline of a Biblical perspective. I realize, however, that I have hardly begun to explore what the Scriptures can teach us, in an illustrative and exemplary way (in the Psalms alone, for

example) about the nature and proper use of the imagination.

Creativity, imagination, and the arts should not be neglected, depreciated, feared, scorned, adulated, or deified, for as Leland Ryken says, "If the arts are a gift of God, the only kind of genuine gratitude is joyful use of the gift. This applies, too, to the development of the imagination, which should be the gateway to a life of joyous response to the beauty of God as revealed in the whole of creation. This enjoyment of that which is beautiful is inclusively rather than exclusively Christian, just as eating, drinking, and sleeping are activities equally of the Christian and non-Christian, but it is no less important for that."³⁷

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4. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
5. Leland Ryken, "A Christian Approach to Literature" (Wheaton College: Wheaton Illinois), 1970, p. 8.
6. Edith Schaeffer, *Hidden Art* (Tyndale House: Wheaton, Illinois), 1971, p. 29.
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12. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
13. Vincent Thomas, ed., *Creativity in the Arts* (Prentice-Hall, Inc.: Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey), 1964, p. 98.
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22. *Ibid.*, p. 159 (from "The Experience of Poetry in a Scientific Age" by May Swenson, pp. 147-159).
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26. Calvin Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Literature* (Guardian Publishing Co. Ltd.: Hamilton, Ontario, Canada), 1964, p. 20.
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28. Rugg, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
29. Donald J. Drew, *Images of Man: A Critique of the Contemporary Cinema* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois), 1974, pp. 13-14.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
31. Jane Dillenberger, *Style and Content in Christian Art* (Abingdon Press: New York), 1965, p. 28.
32. Vincent Thomas, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
34. Clive Bell, *Art* (Capricorn Books: New York), 1958, p. 190.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
36. Francis Schaeffer, *op. cit.*, pp. 43; 45.
37. Ryken, *op. cit.*, p. 14.