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Imagination, theology, and literature

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On being asked how he came to write his children's stories, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C. S. Lewis replied that 'It all began with a picture'. They all began, he wrote, 'with seeing pictures in my head'; in the case of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, he wrote, it 'began with the picture of a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood.' Then another picture appeared: 'suddenly Aslan came bounding into it', and 'once he was there he pulled the whole story together.'[1] Lewis is describing a picture-making faculty in the human consciousness, which the reference to Aslan, the divine Lion, indicates is both poetic and religious. The word 'imagination' itself, in English, points to this 'image-making', and I am going to suggest that imagination is the faculty of making images which are not an exact imitation or mere repetition of the everyday world as it impresses itself on us through the senses, but which owe a great deal to the creativity of the mind.

1. Imagination brings order and novelty

Imagination creates a new world in two ways, *first* consoling us with the assurance of order in an everyday world that often appears random and

[1] C. S. Lewis, *Of This and Other Worlds*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Collins, 1982), 78–79.

chaotic, and *second* promising something new in a world that appears dulled by routine.[2] Here I am going to confine myself to the written art of literature, but I believe the same ideas could be worked out in music and the visual arts. There is a pattern of order *and* newness, and for the first aspect we may recall the place of the imagination in the human mind as conceived by Immanuel Kant.

For Kant, imagination works with the understanding to give *order* to our sense-impressions. At one level, he suggests, our image-making faculty (imagination) assists our understanding in its task of rightly perceiving the objects around us in the world.[3] The imagination brings the particular perceptions of the senses into contact with the understanding which in turn draws upon general categories (such as substance, cause and necessity). At another level, imagination enables us to know these objects with aesthetic judgement, finding purpose and beauty within them by making 'its own laws' and so placing them within a unified structure of nature.[4] It can even treat objects 'as if' they were the products of a unifying divine mind. In the areas of both 'pure reason' and 'judgement', the imagination thus, for Kant, assures us of order within the observed world.

Taking our hint from Kant, this ordering function of the imagination may be readily seen at play within the creative arts. The story in a novel or play creates a world that has shape in the midst of what may seem – without imagination – a formless and fragmented life. The events of a story are fixed and immutable in their own universe; however absurd or tragic the action has been, we can return to it again and again, revisiting it and being sure to find a complete world. As Frank Kermode points out, the story arouses the sense of an ending, where the chronicle of life seems to be an endless chain of mere successiveness.[5] Tragic dramas reflect the threats of death and loss that come to us daily, but with the difference that

[2] This analysis follows my scheme in Paul S. Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit: A Dialogue between Literature and Christian Doctrine* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 3–26.

[3] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), "Analytic of the Beautiful", §9 (58). Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), "Transcendental Analytic", A100–02 (132–33), A11–19 (141–43).

[4] Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, "Analytic of the Beautiful", §22 (86–89).

[5] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 45–50, 55–58.

here they bear the meaning of being part of a whole story where in life they may seem random and haphazard. Hamlet on the point of death can command his friend to go on living in 'this harsh world [...] to tell my story',[6] and Othello requests of the officers who witness his suicide that:

> When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
> Speak of them as they are; nothing extenuate,
> Nor set down aught in malice; then must you speak
> Of one that lov'd not wisely, but too well.[7]

Othello may be self-deceived in his summary of his story, but at least he has one. Form consoles, and so we ask also of a novel that the world within it should be consistent in its own terms, not that it should be the world we are familiar with. The worlds of roadside inns in Henry Fielding, minor country houses in Jane Austen, or the homes of middle-class intelligentsia in Iris Murdoch – all these are neater than in real life, but this is what comforts us. At the same time, however, the imagination acts in another way, as was stressed by another theorist, Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

For Coleridge the imagination is a means of creativity and openness to the *new*. What he calls the 'Primary Imagination' uses images to grasp the world around us, just as Kant proposes, but in a kind of repetition of God's own work of creation. In perceiving the world we share in the creativity that God has already exercised. Yet what he calls the 'Secondary Imagination' transcends even this. He claims that it 'dissolves [...] in order to recreate'. It is 'essentially vital' where objects around us are 'fixed and dead'.[8] Images can create a world that has not yet appeared, giving us a new experience of the wholeness of life beyond the isolation of separate things. Both modes of imagination are to be distinguished from mere 'fancy', or a copying and decorating of objects from the world around. Fancy is like a mirror held up to nature, and works largely through memory, joining reflections together. Imagination is like a lamp rather than a mirror; it *makes* light.

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[6] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.2.348.

[7] William Shakespeare, *Othello*, 5.2.342–45.

[8] S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), I, 202.

Above all the Secondary Imagination has the power to create something new; like the moon, it sways the tides of the world. In this new world, for example, as portrayed in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", the shooting of an albatross is the primal sin of Adam, and the experience of guilt is falling into the power of the nightmare 'life in death', who 'thicks men's blood with cold', sailing by on a skeleton ship. The experience of God's grace is the dancing of shining water snakes upon the surface of the sea. These are not allegories, but new creations of language with the power of symbol. In his more theological works, Coleridge writes of an intuitive *knowing* of the divine realm which bears a strong resemblance to what he says elsewhere about the imagination.[9]

If we follow Coleridge's idea of the imagination, the story with its 'Once upon a time' offers us the hope of ever-open beginnings in a world where often nothing seems new under the sun. It invites us to immerse ourselves into lives other than our own, to extend our range of consciousness; we feel as does a rather ordinary lady in one of Virginia Woolf's novels, taking part in a village pageant and exclaiming, 'You've made me feel I could have played [...] Cleopatra!'[10] So W. H. Auden observes in a poem about being a novelist that he must, 'Among the just be just/ Among the filthy, filthy too'.[11] By imagination we enter new territories of experience that are not our own.

Metaphors and symbols have their place in the narration of a novel, but are the very essence of poetry with its compression of meaning. The poetic image often offers us both the ordering function of imagination that Kant highlights, and the promise of a new creation that Coleridge stresses. By comparing one thing with another, the metaphor exposes an underlying unity between things in the world (an ordering), and at the same time puts them together in new ways. The poet asks, in effect, 'Have you noticed that this is like that?', and so brings something new out of a verbal sign at the same time as unifying it with others. This is supported by rhythm which uses time to give a sense of form and structure, and by correspondences in sound as well as in meaning.

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[9] E.g., S. T. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer (London: Routledge, 1993), 216–20.

[10] Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), 107.

[11] W. H. Auden, "The Novelist", in *Collected Shorter Poems 1927–1957* (London: Faber, 1966), 124–25.

The emphasis upon either form or novelty in a metaphor can certainly vary. Sometimes the use of metaphor lays more stress upon the giving of form or order to the world than an awakening to new insight; this is the case, for example, in many of the similes in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The scribe notices correspondences between things in order to detect regularities and so predict successful action in the future. These nuggets of experience can be caught in proverbs that have metaphor at their heart: 'The beginning of strife is like the letting out of water' (Prov 17:14), 'A wife's quarrelling is like a continual dripping of rain' (Prov 27:15), 'The dread wrath of a king is like the growling of a lion' (Prov 20:2).

On other occasions, however, the use of metaphor can lay stress upon a new and unusual insight. In the lyrical poetry of the Song of Songs, the wooer describes the hair of his beloved as being like a flock of goats moving down the slopes of a mountain, and her beauty as 'terrible as an army with banners' (6:5, 4). Unexpected imagery like this seems to dissolve the world as we know it, to disintegrate the familiar in preparation for a new order. The Metaphysical Poets of the seventeenth century often use such radical imagery, choosing a vehicle for the metaphor which seems to have no obvious emotive associations with the object to which it is linked; Donne, for instance, uses scientific and geometrical imagery for human experiences, comparing lovers to twin legs of a compass, love to experiments in alchemy and the body to a map.[12] But all use of image will contain, to some degree, both ingredients of a different world from the everyday – the dislocating and the unifying, the novel and the formal. So imagination, as Coleridge perceived, is a vitality which 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create'.[13]

2. Images in theology

Turning to theology, God as the ultimate and uncreated Reality is unique, and cannot be classified with anything we observe in the world. This means that it is impossible to speak literally about God, as we would an object in the world; we can only speak about God in images and analogy.

[12] See John Donne's poems "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning", "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day", and "Hymne to God, My God, in My Sicknesse".

[13] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, I, 202.

So we are bound to use the faculty of imagination, and as in the creative arts, this might be of two kinds: let us take our two aspects of order and newness again, but this time in reverse.

First, imagination opens up what is totally new. Holy Scripture (as we have seen in the examples quoted so far) is itself a piece of literature containing narrative, poetry and drama with all the openness to multiple meaning that these have. The character of Scripture should, indeed, lead us to realize that the primary forms of talk about God are metaphor and story. We find that the prophets can use image in a surprising and even shocking way, opening up new insights. For example, Hosea presents God as comparing himself to a moth and dry rot in the house of Judah (Hos 5:12), and Jeremiah accuses God of being like a brook that has dried up (Jer 15:18).

The Jesus of the Gospels uses similes and parables like this, stepping into a rich heritage of the use of sign in wisdom, prophecy, and apocalyptic. His comparisons use surprising images, which often run counter to the prevailing culture. The kingdom of heaven is like a shepherd who abandons the rest of the flock for the sake of one wandering sheep (which seems careless); or it is like a woman who uses a day's labour in searching for a coin of very little worth (which seems wasteful); or the kingdom is like leaven rising in bread (which seems immoral because leaven was usually taken by the religious to be a symbol of evil). Famously, a rich man getting to heaven is like a camel passing through the eye of a needle (which seems absurd).[14] Jesus brings contraries together in a way that dissolves the familiar; we are startled, perhaps offended, and our empathy is required to close the gap, enabling us to see through the world to the purpose of God. As Paul Ricoeur puts it, proverbs and parables about the kingdom in the Synoptic Gospels 'reorient us by disorienting us.'[15] After all, only a kind of speech which resists being trapped in a single, fixed meaning can begin to express the mystery of the kingdom of God which we are invited to enter rather than analyze. The Jesus of Mark's Gospel refers to his parables as a deliberate piece of mystification, like a poet hiding his meaning in density of image: 'for those outside everything is in parables so that they may indeed see but not

[14] Luke 15:4–7; Luke 15:8–10; Matt 13:33; Matt 19:24.

[15] Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*: *Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 59.

perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand ...' (Mark 4:11–12).

At the heart of Christian theology, the language of God as Trinity shows this disturbing novelty, refusing to objectify God as either one being (strict monotheism) or three beings (polytheism). The image of a divine 'Person' (*prosopon*) is not a literal description, as if God were three subjects or even three centres of consciousness; rather, as early theologians made clear, a divine 'Person' was defined entirely *by* relationships within the being of God, and – at least in Augustine's view – *was* a relationship.[16] As I have proposed elsewhere,[17] using the word 'person' about God has meaning only in the active process of our participation in God, not as any kind of mental observation of a metaphysical object. The uniqueness of God requires this odd use of language, using images, imaginatively, to open up something totally new with which early Christians felt themselves to be confronted in the phenomenon of Christ and his relationship with God.

Second, theology also has an ordering function. It tends to use images to create concepts which in turn fence the plurality of images around, in order to limit expansion of meaning. The doctrine of the Trinity, for instance, contains *concepts* which relate one divine person to another in certain stipulated ways: the Father begets the Son, but the Son does not generate the Father. Or, the Father is uncreated and therefore the Son, while begotten, is also not made. Theology works in this ordering way because it assumes there is a revelation which in some way sets up a normativity of expression. In literature, stories and images are used playfully and experimentally to hint at a kind of reality which the reason cannot properly comprehend. But a faith based on events of *revelation* asserts that the Final uncreated reality has actually disclosed Itself to us, and human images and stories take their place in witnessing (however imperfectly) to this encounter with a self-revealing God. As Karl Barth expresses it, 'revelation grasps the language'.[18]

The belief that God *comes* continually to the world and has finally come without reserve into time and history ('incarnation'), does mean that religious belief will not be exactly like the 'suspension of disbelief' given

[16] Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.6.

[17] Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 34–54.

[18] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–77), I/1, 430.

to literary texts. It makes a difference that the basic movement is *from* being confronted by the reality of God *to* verbal expression, that in short (as Eberhard Jüngel puts it) 'God comes into language.'[19] Belief in this movement will prompt a desire to find and state some 'truths' about the mystery at the heart of life. As Newman observed, what begins as 'an impression on the imagination' becomes 'a system or creed in the reason.'[20] So there is always a momentum within belief, to infer concepts from images, to impose limits upon the boundless energy of symbol, and to attempt a summing up of the accidents and loose ends of stories in one unified Story. Early theologians affirmed that everything in the bewildering expanse of earth and heaven is 'held together' in the one Christ, the Wisdom of God, and in the double event of his death on a cross (Col 1:15–20) and resurrection from the dead (Col 2:12).

Here, everything is given order not by a dogma but by a particular story. In practical terms, then, a belief in divine revelation will elicit attempts to *state* the mystery, to tell *the* Story, and so to clarify the language of faith. The theologian continues this process of creating a coherent and consistent system of thought, putting into concepts (doctrine) the wholeness of reality that imagination and faith are feeling after. Theology, in the wider sense of God-talk, will thus show a tension within itself between two kinds of speech which are both response to revelation – symbol and story on the one hand, and the concepts that interpret them on the other. Of course, doctrinal statements are themselves bound to go on using symbol and metaphor, since no talk about God as the incomparable One can do without them; but they use metaphor in an effort to fix meaning, to define and limit a range of possible understandings. On the other hand, theology must always allow the imagination to break open the systems it so carefully constructs.

3. Mystery and the arts

While theology works with the belief that mystery *comes into* language,

[19] Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, trans. D. L. Guder (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 295. Jüngel stresses that the coming of God makes human stories correspond to God: 300–04.

[20] John Henry Newman, *On the Development of Christian Doctrine*, ed. C. F. Harrold (New York: Longmans, Green, 1949), 49.

the creative arts *reach out* towards mystery.[21] The power of making pictures in the human mind ('imagination'), transcends itself towards something Other than a world which lies open to scientific discovery. We are alerted to this by the way that poems and novels are themselves self-conscious about their search.

Stories often show their awareness of the quest by taking as their theme the *telling* of a story. The narrator may show his characters discovering that a particular story has the power, in some mysterious way, to give shape to their own lives, and so the reader perceives that this is what the novel itself is doing. In Iris Murdoch's *The Green Man*, for example, her character Peter Mir receives a deadly blow from a person, Lucas Graffe, who is trying to kill his brother. Mir seems to have been killed, but mysteriously turns up alive for a brief period to deliver a more symbolic blow, a mere nick in the skin, to Lucas who agrees to face Mir's onslaught in exchange for his own blow. The similarity of this sequence of events to the medieval poem of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* strikes several friends who are involved, and one of them – Bellamy – finds that he is living both in *this* story and in the Gospel account of the crucifixion of Jesus. These give him a pattern by which he can find himself in what is becoming an increasingly meaningless journey of life.

If novel and drama transcend themselves towards mystery through story, poetry does so through its multiplicity and density of images. It hides meaning in order to find it again with increase, so that – as Iris Murdoch puts it – 'Philosophy is clarification, but literature is mystification'.[22] By bringing two verbal signs together in a metaphor, new levels of meaning are given to both; between the two objects being compared there is room for a vibration of undertones and overtones. In their juxtaposition or 'interaction',[23] many relationships are evoked that need not be, or cannot be, expressed. As Paul Ricoeur expresses it, a metaphor both affirms and denies, saying 'this is and is not'.[24] So poets deliberately 'hide' their

[21] I am following the distinction I make in Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit*, 22–24.

[22] In interview with Brian Magee, in *Men of Ideas*, BBC TV, April 1978; slightly revised in Brian Magee, *Men of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 230.

[23] 'Interaction theory' of metaphor was developed by Max Black; see *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), 35–47, 236–37.

[24] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. R. Czerny et al. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 221–24, 255–57.

meaning through the use of image, but at the same time they know that they cannot control the expansion of meaning that takes place when they do so. They cannot plan or catch all the echoes. The wisdom writers of Ancient Israel, as we have seen, use metaphors for the analysis of experience, but they also freely admit that the implications of some comparisons elude them. Mystery remains. For instance, they note that the following four kinds of movement have a similarity, so that each is a metaphor of the other, but in the end they escape being categorized:

> Three things are too wonderful for me;
> four I do not understand:
> the way of an eagle in the sky,
> the way of a serpent on the rock,
> the way of a ship on the high seas,
> and the way of a man with a maiden. (Prov 30:18–19)

In poetry, drama and novel, the imagination thus reaches out towards mystery, towards a reality that is our final concern but which eludes empirical investigation and bursts rational concepts.

4. Interpreting the imaginative movement to mystery

The way that imagination moves towards a reality that is Other than our observable life is a phenomenon that can, of course, be interpreted in rather different ways.

For instance, imagination can be understood as a journey into the depth of human feeling. In his *Critique of Judgement*, the philosopher Kant identifies the sense of the 'sublime'. Here the imagination is not working in playful harmony with the understanding, or working with the aesthetic judgement to promote our taste of the beautiful; rather it struggles and fails to make a whole out of things. Imagination strives after comprehending infinity and has some apprehension or intuition of what this might be. It might be grappling with an infinite series of things in human cognition (what Kant calls the 'mathematical sublime'); or it might be impressed by fascinating yet terrible objects in nature which seem to have no limits – vast seas, massive mountains, skies full of stars, deep ravines, mighty waterfalls (what Kant calls the 'dynamical' sublime). Faced by the sheer boundlessness of things, the imagination feels terror, and yet it also feels

a kind of 'negative pleasure' in the experience.[25]

We are launched from an object in the world into an experience that we can only hint at with the use of images. Because we feel a loss of all limits, we lose touch with the object altogether and Kant concludes that we are immediately aware only of our own feelings.[26] For Kant, then, the intuition of a reality which seems other than us can really be said to be *only* a depth in our own feelings. Here we may judge that Kant is too reductive in his thinking. To say that the mystery to which the imagination reaches out, in its sensation of the sublime, is a dimension of our own feelings does not mean that this is *all* that it is. To say – rightly as he does – that God cannot be known as an object in the world does not mean that God cannot be known at all.

Others then will want to speak of a depth of Being, giving the mystery a greater objectivity of its own, over against human experience. They will argue that there are other modes of knowing than observation and deduction which rely on the evidence of the senses alone. In his early work Martin Heidegger spoke of a 'primordial thinking' which links us to Being Itself, a Depth in existence which transcends our own merely finite being.[27] In its primordial experience the self can resist the urge to organize experience, and instead it can become 'attuned' to the Being that is just there, 'present to hand', presenting itself to the one who waits and listens.[28]

Another way of looking at the movement of imagination towards mystery is through realizing that every written text, every work of art, is open in meaning. We might call this a depth of textuality. Late-modern thinkers often named post-structuralists find that the complex network of verbal signs within any written text does not imitate the everyday world, but must be read as an inter-related system in its own right. The meaning of words and phrases comes from their difference from each other. Unlike earlier structuralists, these thinkers conclude that this relation of difference can be infinitely expanded as *all* signs differ from *all* others. So we can

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[25] Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, First Part, §§23, 29 (91, 120). Finally, imagination will enjoy the sense of the superiority of reason which makes such demands upon it: Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, First Part, §25 (97); cf. §29 (119).

[26] Kant, "Analytic of the Sublime", §23 (90–93); cf. Introduction VII (32–33).

[27] Terminology adopted by John Macquarrie in his *Principles of Christian Theology*, Revised Edition (London: SCM, 1977), 94–95.

[28] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 172, 176–77, 321–22, 384.

never reach any final point in interpretation of a text. It is endlessly open in meaning. Because signifiers become the signified to which new signifiers point, meaning is dispersed down an infinite chain of signs.[29] When we read a sentence, final meaning is suspended or postponed: it is still to come. As Roland Barthes puts it, 'The text practises the infinite deferral of the signified'.[30]

This theory is put in artistic form by Umberto Eco, who is himself a specialist in the science of verbal signs (or semiotics). Eco's *The Name of the Rose* takes the form of a detective story, relating a series of murders committed in a Benedictine monastery in the fourteenth century, and the central point is that the monk-detective finds the villain by accident. The detective certainly attempts to trace him through following up the signs left by the crimes, but they turn out in fact not to have been pointing to the murderer at all. There is no straightforward imitation between sign and external event, between (for example) the '*name* of a rose' and the 'rose' itself. The narrator who has shared as a novice monk in these events concludes, 'I leave this manuscript, I do not know for whom; I no longer know what it is about.'[31]

Jacques Derrida, a key figure in late modernism, does not in fact think that any particular text has no meaning at all outside itself, despite what his critics have said. He does not think that a text is sealed off from all other parts of the world. He does maintain that there is no simple *imitation* of the world beyond a text, and that the whole world is a textual system, full of signs that relate to other signs. His most famous phrase, 'there is nothing outside the text', means that there is nothing outside *textuality*: there is a never-ending inter-textuality, an interaction between texts.[32] This is why all patterns of words are provisional. Derrida expresses this by saying that our reading of a text is always open to 'what comes in', or 'what arrives'. The endless meaning of the text points to an event of

[29] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 7.

[30] Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text", in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 76.

[31] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. W. Weaver (London: Pan Books, 1984), 502.

[32] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 136, 148.

'coming' (*venir*) which he calls an 'event of the other', a 'breaking out' into the open where something new comes that shatters the horizon of sameness and challenges us, especially with the need for justice. He finds a witness to this 'coming' in the Book of Revelation with its often-repeated appeal to Christ and the Spirit to 'come', never satisfied. This coming cannot be objectified, possessed or finalized, and is always 'yet to come'.[33] It is the coming of the 'altogether other' (*tout autre*),[34] so that – as he puts it – 'in the language of the same, the other can come'.[35]

As we shall see, the reaching of imagination towards mystery in the depth of feeling, the depth of being and the depth of textuality is not contradictory to imagination and mystery *in theology*. Each area of depth shows the capacity of the imagination to make pictures which are not simply imitation or mimesis of the world, and this ability is fundamental to our living in the world. Paul Ricoeur insists that stories and metaphors 'redescribe reality',[36] and it is this redescription that gives human beings a project which will re-make the world 'in front of the text' and open up hope for the future. This is a hope that Ricoeur himself, as a Christian philosopher, sees symbolized in the resurrection of Jesus with its ever-open promise.[37]

5. Mystery and theology

While a movement *towards* mystery is characteristic of novels, poetry and drama, quite the opposite might seem at first sight to be true of Christian belief. In the arts, the imagination uses stories and metaphors playfully to hint at a kind of reality which the reason cannot properly comprehend. But a faith based on events of revelation asserts that the Final Mystery has actually disclosed Itself to us. The initial movement is not from the world to mystery, but from mystery to the world. The movement *towards* mystery is experimental and questing, and lays a stress upon the autonomy of the imagination to create something new. Conversely, theologians are

[33] See also Jacques Derrida, *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 66.

[34] Jacques Derrida, *Psyché: inventions de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 55.

[35] Derrida, *Psyché*, 35, 160–61.

[36] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 255.

[37] Paul Ricoeur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope", trans. R. Sweeney, in Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 405–06, 409–10.

always bound to be responsible to what they believe has been revealed in a movement *from* mystery Itself. Creativity here, it seems, will be secondary. It might appear that a theologian can never be truly original, but I want to argue that this is not so.

For when Karl Barth affirms that 'revelation seizes the language',[38] he adds that it does so in a way that 'veils' as well as 'reveals'. The Word of God is mystery, veiled in objects in the world. This is another way of putting what Coleridge and Newman had already affirmed: the religious imagination is like the poetic imagination. When God discloses God's self, our response to what is revealed is like our response to imaginative forms in the arts. Creativity, even originality, is quite appropriate, indeed necessary.

Here Newman makes a significant contribution. For Newman, all things, including the divine presence, leave an impression on the imagination.[39] So the religious quest begins, like poetic imagination, with the decision to suspend disbelief.[40] The imagination then uses what Newman calls the 'illative sense': that is, we judge degrees of truth in an imaginative way through inference, the accumulation of probabilities, and the use of analogies.[41] In the making of doctrines the mind assents to ideas through the use of reasoning-practices, like the syllogism; Newman calls this 'notional assent'. By contrast, imagination assists the leap into the certainty of religion, into the 'real assent' of accepting things in themselves as true, not just concepts about them, and this includes divine things.[42]

We seem to be on the same ground as Coleridge's 'Secondary Imagination', and Newman acknowledges generally his debt to Coleridge.[43] However, Newman fails to give the religious imagination the originality it should have. The divine 'things' to which real or imaginative assent is given turn out for Newman to correspond remarkably to what he calls the 'truths of revelation' or 'truths of religion' already held by the church.[44] So what is grasped imaginatively is inevitably limited by the creeds and

[38] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 430.

[39] John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Burns & Oates, 1874), 92, 109, 116–17, 429.

[40] Newman, 194–96.

[41] Newman, 315–16, cf. 424–27.

[42] Newman, 184–86, 214–15.

[43] Newman, 304–05.

[44] Newman, 154–55, cf. 146, 335–36.

propositions to which the mind gives 'notional assent'. This pre-existing acquiescence by the reason to abstract truths is bound to limit the creativity of the religious imagination.

The gap begins to be narrowed between poetic and religious imagination when we consider what it means to claim a revelation from God. Newman supposes this to be the communication of truths or propositions, but this would limit revelation to a particular culture, place and time. It would also reduce God to human categories and make God into an object of human thinking. We must instead think of divine revelation in a more dynamic way, as God's unveiling of God's own being. In a phrase of Karl Barth's, 'Revelation is the Person of God speaking',[45] not the sending of a message. Revelation can be nothing less than an *encounter* with the speaking God, where 'speech' is understood as self-expression, an opening and an offer of the divine Self. Response to this encounter will have plenty of room for imagination.

Moreover, if revelation is divine *self*-revelation, then it makes sense to regard it as a universal experience. The movement of imagination towards mystery in the creative arts would then be prompted by the self-opening of the Mystery to us. As Paul Tillich expresses it, we have ultimate concerns because what is ultimate – God as Being itself – is already participating in our existence. He suggests that we are already seized and held by a 'spiritual presence', so God is in our asking of questions about meaning as much as in the answers.[46] Similarly, Karl Rahner observes that the openness of the human spirit to the mystery of the infinite can never be separated from God's own openness to us in gracious self-communication. The movements of grace and nature are always bound up together, so that God's offer of God's self to us is prior to all human freedom and self-understanding.[47] To be a person, as he puts it, is actually to take part in 'the event of a supernatural self-communication of God'. If the whole of culture opens us to revelation like this, then there can be a valuable dialogue between theology and the arts.[48] In a conversation with

[45] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, 304, cf. pp. 137–39.

[46] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Combined Volume (London: James Nisbet, 1968), 88–93, 181–84, 203–04, 235–37.

[47] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978), 127.

[48] See Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit*, 27–46; Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 5–8.

literature, for instance, poetry, novels and plays can be drawn upon not just to *illustrate* but actually *to make* a theology which is shaped by imagination.

6. Conclusion: Response to revelation

Both concepts and images, whether in theology or the creative arts, are responses to revelation. Theology, unlike the arts, works with the *awareness* that God as the final mystery has disclosed God's self to us; so in making its concepts it takes into account all the various categories and propositions that people have formulated in their responses to God in the past, whether these are transmitted through written texts or through the tradition of the community which has been shaped by the reading of these texts.[49] We began this discussion by finding both ordering and creative aspects in the imagination. Both operate because the imagination makes images which do not simply imitate the everyday world. Theology will tend to emphasize the making of order as it develops concepts which fence images around to control their meaning, but it will become static and life-denying if it does not allow its structures to be constantly broken up by the new creations of the imagination.

At the centre of God's self-revelation, Christians find the revelation of God in the life of Christ and the historical events surrounding it. This story calls theology to be responsible in the concepts it develops to talk about God, but also to live in the story in imaginative and open-ended ways. It invites us, like the children in Lewis' tales, standing in the midst of the dark wood of our existence, to meet the Lion who can turn mere winter into Christmas.[50]

[49] Rahner, *Foundations*, 155, calls this 'categorical revelation', though I would prefer 'categorical responses to revelation'.

[50] C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (London: Bles, 1974), 100–01.