

THE RENEWAL OF PERCEPTION IN RELIGIOUS FAITH AND BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

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Abstract. Religious faith may manifest itself, among other things, as a mode of seeing the ordinary world, which invests that world imaginatively (or inspiredly) with an unseen depth of divine intention and spiritual significance. While such seeing may well be truthful, it is also unavoidably constructive, involving the imagination in its philosophical sense of the capacity to organize underdetermined or ambiguous sense data into a whole or gestalt. One of the characteristic ways in which biblical narratives inspire and teach is by renewing their characters' and readers' imagination. The texts do so not inexorably but in a similar way as (other) works of art. This paper therefore investigates the ways in which works of art engage and develop the imagination, and thereby enable renewed perceptual and cognitive engagement with the world. The paper introduces predictive processing as a helpful psychological theory for analyzing this dynamic, and outlines questions for further research.

I. INTRODUCTION: AESTHETIC COGNITION AND IMAGINATIVE INVESTMENT

The overall theme of our collaboration is the question whether and how biblical texts can inform philosophical work not only through their propositional content (or their content re-cast in propositional form) but also through their distinctive *form*: story, poetry, vision. For a long time, philosophers of religion were inclined not so much to answer this question in the negative as not to admit it as a question. To be useful, the biblical texts must yield propositions, much as a wood must yield timber. But we now find ourselves at a point when *both* of the domains we are trying to engage — Bible and philosophy — are exerting pressure to ask that question. Philosophy, because it is increasingly interested in non-propositional modes of knowledge. And Bible, because after the heyday of historical criticism, those of us still interested in biblical studies are newly protective of the *integrity* of the texts. Those of us who read them as sacred texts are also intuitively convinced that the form as well as the propositional value must be significant. As David Jones writes, "It would appear...impossible that at the Redemption of the World anything should have been done which committed man to any activity not utterly inalienable from his nature. In such a context the extraneous is inconceivable." Had we been given a list of statements and rules, *dayeinu*. But in fact, we have been given our story.

If we follow this intuition and consent to ask the question how biblical texts can inform philosophical work not only through their propositional yield but also through their form, we can proceed in one of two ways. The first is to read specific Biblical texts (with the help of whatever theories might seem serviceable) to *show* what we might learn from a consideration of their form. The second is to consider the more general, theoretical question whether there are *forms of understanding* which are acquired either uniquely or especially through engagement with story, or poetry, or vision. A set of papers emerging from two workshops in Tantur, to be published in 2022, will pursue the first path. The present collection of essays attempts the second. In their ways, each of the essays in this special issue engage the more general question what forms of understanding are afforded by stories. Eleonore Stump writes about the senses in which narratives, even if factually loose, can be veridical with regard to their subject; Godehard Brüntrup considers narratives as key elements in the formation of an authentic self; Sam Lebens writes about conversion in the context of narrative identity; Mark Wynn writes about 'storied presence' and the

Christian Eucharist; and Darren Sarisky reflects on the role of hermeneutics in approaching transcendent realities.

My own essay takes a step back from the specific question of narrative and hermeneutics, and instead considers the biblical texts I mentioned (story, poetry, vision) as instances, more generally, of *artistic form*. In other words, I am making a generalizing claim that one of the salient features of some biblical texts is that they are artistic — that they are works of art. This generalization allows me to tap into a wider field of research about the question what forms of understanding may be engendered by encounters with art. This field is sometimes known as ‘aesthetic cognition’, and, while generally young, it offers remarkable opportunities for collaboration between philosophers, psychologists, and cognitive scientists, of which I am part.

Specifically (and not unlike Godehard Brüntrup and Darren Sarisky), I propose to approach the question what forms of understanding may be afforded by encounters with art from the perspective of the cognitive faculties or processes engaged in such encounters. I am not so much looking, in other words, at what stories may tell us about their subjects, which mere lists of personality traits could not. Rather, I am looking at cognitive faculties or processes that are especially or uniquely engaged in the reading, seeing or hearing of artistic forms, in the hope that this will take us one step closer towards considering how these processes contribute to our understanding of the world more generally.

My opening claim is that one central faculty or process involved in encountering art is what some philosophers, especially in the continental tradition, call the imagination. The imagination is often taken as the creative power of the artist. But I mean the term in a sense related to the reader or beholder rather than the poet or artist. In so doing, I am following a long tradition of European philosophers who define imagination not so much as the familiar ‘power or capacity to form internal images or ideas of objects and situations not actually present to the senses’ (OED), but rather as ‘the power or capacity by which the mind integrates sensory data in the process of perception’ (also OED). In other words, I am talking about imagination as the power of gestalt formation: of perceiving or envisioning a field of isolated, unstructured, or even disparate phenomena *as* a form, shape, pattern or whole.

Before I get into details, I want to give a conspectus of my argument, including its theological horizons. I believe that the imagination in this sense of gestalt formation plays a central role in aesthetic cognition, that is, in the way we understand art. To elicit the beholder’s imaginative power is not a by-product of artistic creation, but one of its core aims, which artists achieve by deliberately withholding realistic information or juxtaposing disparate material. This is most immediately evident in visual and poetic art: to see a representational painting is to construct a three-dimensional whole out of two-dimensional lines, and a significant subject out of an often mundane scene; to read a poem is, analogically, to project a ‘three-dimensional’ gestalt out of metaphorical juxtaposition, and so to gain an imaginative ‘double’ or ‘depth’ vision of both material and psychological reality.¹

The relevance of this analysis for philosophy of religion (and I am thinking here of more than the reading of biblical texts) is that imaginative projection of this type — whether *stimulated* by artistic engagement or merely *analogous* to it — is also important both for the way we know other humans and for what we understand religious faith to be.

With regard to other humans, philosophers such as Stanley Cavell (following Wittgenstein), Roger Scruton, and Hans Belting regard the perception of other humans as in some respects analogous to the perception of images.² Human faces, they argue, can be described more than merely metaphorically as the ‘image of the soul’. Their perception, just as that of a figurative image, irreducibly involves the imaginative apprehension of ‘depth’. This is confirmed experimentally in studies documenting the near

1 My use of this term is borrowed from Tzachi Zamir, *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2006).

2 Stanley Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging”, in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, ed. Stanley Cavell (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), 238–66; and Roger Scruton, *The Face of God: The Gifford Lectures* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).

inability of subjects to see and describe human faces without reference to psychological depth: tiredness, cheerfulness, anger, and so forth. As in representational paintings, this organizing depth is ‘posterior’ to the facial lines in the sense of being inferred from them; but ‘anterior’ to them in the sense of always already organizing their perception. As in the case of art, this imaginative moment ensures that the perception of faces can never fully eschew the risk of mis- or overinterpretation — that such risk is integral to what it means to see faces at all.

With regard to religious faith, thinkers such as John Hick, Roger Scruton and Rowan Williams (not, admittedly, names often said in a single breath) regard religious cognition as in some respects analogous to both aesthetic cognition and the perception of other humans just outlined.³ Religious faith, they argue, manifests itself among other things as a mode of seeing the ordinary world that involves the imaginative projection of an immaterial ‘depth’. To have faith is to see the world, as Hebrews 11 puts it, *as* ‘created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible’. On such an account of religious faith, a skilled imagination forms an ineradicable part of the cognitive apparatus by which humans understand the world as witnessing to God. If this last analogical step is apt, then we stand to learn something about the potential, risks and failure modes of the imaginative element of faith from close attention to the way the imagination functions in aesthetic cognition. This essay takes first steps towards that immediate aim.

II. IMAGINATION AS GESTALT FORMATION

There is a long (though not currently fashionable) philosophical tradition placing a human faculty it calls ‘the imagination’ (lat. *imaginatio*; ger. *Einbildungskraft*) at the centre of its account of cognition. Thomas Aquinas, after Aristotle, defines the imagination as an interior sense that receives and stores phantasms from things perceived, and enables the active intellect to abstract species from these phantasms to gain understanding.⁴ Immanuel Kant extends this account, famously describing the imagination as ‘a hidden art in the depths of the human soul’,⁵ ‘a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious.’⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein expresses this insight as the claim that all seeing is ‘seeing-as’: to see at all is to see a phenomenon *as* a particular thing.⁷

This language is eyed with suspicion by those who regard it as a denial of realism. I do not take this as a necessary implication (it certainly is not for Aquinas), though the tradition certainly makes the claim that there is no *unmediated* perception and knowledge of the world: that the structure of our cognitive apparatus, both innate and acquired, shapes the way we organize our perceptual field.

The focus of this essay, however, is primarily on a type of cognition that involves the imagination not ‘blindly’ but consciously, namely aesthetic cognition. It is my claim that works of art deliberately elicit imaginative gestalt-formation; indeed, that such imaginative investment by the recipient is at the heart of what it means to ‘see’ a painting or read a poem. If imaginative gestalt formation is also active in ordinary perception, though in more automatized and less consciously creative or constructive ways, then this claim suggests that engagements with art have a role to play in shaping our ordinary interaction with the world by ‘training’ the imagination. But that second claim can be bracketed for now.

We can find our way into the subject of imagination as gestalt formation by the somewhat arcane route of Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit. Wittgenstein saw the following puzzle in a paper: ‘Which two animals most resemble each other? A duck and a rabbit.’ It piqued his interest, and he devoted a section of his *Philosophical Investigations* (Part II, xi) to the fact that we seem always to see *either* the duck *or* the

3 See John Hick, “Religious Faith as Experiencing-As”, in *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures: Talk of God*, ed. G. N. A. Vesey (Macmillan, 1968), 20–35; Rowan Williams, “Poetic and Religious Imagination”, *Theology* 80, no. 675 (1977): 179–80; see also Judith Wolf, *Inspiration and Imagination: Modern Theology* (forthcoming 2022). See also Scruton, *The Face of God*.

4 *Summa Theologiae* 1.78.4; 1.86.2 ad 2; 1.84.7.

5 *Critique of Pure Reason* A141 = B181.

6 A78 = B103; see also A120.

7 *Philosophical Investigations* pt. II, §xi.

rabbit, but never merely a set of (ambiguous) lines. There is, he observed, no anterior perception of a set of lines that we then overlay with interpretation (such that we could perceive the set of lines without such interpretation). Rather, the interpretation is instantaneous: we always see the lines *as* something, even if that something is not stable, but liable to giving way to something else. All seeing, Wittgenstein concluded, is 'seeing-as': seeing these lines *as* a rabbit, or seeing them *as* a duck.

Eight years later, in his ground-breaking work on the psychology of art, *Art and Illusion*, Ernst Gombrich went so far as to claim: 'Ambiguity — rabbit or duck — is...the key to the whole problem of image reading.'⁸ Why? Because 'seeing' an image at all is made possible by imaginatively perceiving the parts as organized within a whole that is in turn organized by a spatial framework. Yet that organizing framework is not directly perceptible but projected by the parts that appear organized by it. The two-dimensional image is seen in accordance with a three-dimensional framework which is not *present* in the image but *makes sense of it*.

We can see this clearly in puzzles or illusions designed to demonstrate the active work of seeing. Beside the duck-rabbit, the most famous may be the Necker cube, whose position in space is ambiguous, the frontal plane being either on the lower left or the upper right. Even more startling, because created in three dimension, is the Ames Room, devised by Adelbert Ames on principles formulated by Hermann Helmholtz. Here, looking through a peephole, one seems to see an ordinarily-shaped room whose inhabitants grow and shrink. In fact, of course, the room extends backward on one side, and what look like regular floor patterns and equally sized doors are in fact irregular shapes. The illusion consists in the conviction that there is only one way of interpreting the visual pattern in front of us. We are, as Gombrich puts it, "blind to the other possible configurations because we literally 'cannot imagine' these unlikely objects. They have no name and no habitation in the universe of our experience"⁹.

But this is not only the domain of optical illusions. The organization of shapes in space is only the most easily isolated variant of a general tendency to interpret the elements of an image in accordance with a whole which is not present in the image but makes sense of it: a whole that is perceptually secondary to the image's elements in the sense that it is not apprehended directly, but inferred from them; yet at the same time perceptually primary in the sense that it always already governs their perception and meaning.

Ernst Gombrich goes on to claim that after the mechanics of illusion were increasingly perfected in early modern Europe, the exploration of this dynamic — what Gombrich calls 'the beholder's share' in the joint work of artist and beholder — became a key and increasingly conscious concern of artists.

We enjoy nothing more than the demand made on us to exercise our own 'imitative faculty', our imagination, and thus to share in the creative adventure of the artist. But if this pleasure is to be felt, the transformation must not be so easy as to be automatic. The further illusionist skill advanced, the more frequently we therefore hear of the difference between a work of art and the mere trick of deception. In 1823 the great neoclassical critic, Quatremère de Quincy, devoted a whole book to this important distinction. Our pleasure in illusion, he insisted, rests precisely in the mind's effort in bridging the difference between art and reality. This very pleasure is destroyed when the illusion is too complete. 'When the painter packs a vast expanse into a narrow space, when he leads me across the depths of the infinite on a flat surface, and makes the air circulate ... I love to abandon myself to his illusions, but I want the frame to be there, I want to know that what I see is actually nothing but a canvas or a simple plane.'¹⁰

We can see this at work in the history of modern painting. The paintings of the impressionists capture the visual impression of a scene in all its dynamism and ephemerality. But by avoiding familiar schemata, they remind us that if we did not already *know* that these were horses, and these people, we would not *see* them as such. The remarkable vitality of impressionist paintings comes from the collaboration between the artist's minute observation and the beholder's imagination: it comes from the dynamism of our imaginative impression of a gestalt on a riot of colours.

8 Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Phaidon Press, 1961), 188.

9 Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 200.

10 *Ibid.*, 224.

The expressionists pushed this dynamic farther. Where impressionism still aimed for a collaboration between unstructured sense impression on the one hand and gestalt or schema on the other, expressionism set the two at odds with each other. The elements of an expressionist painting resist being integrated straightforwardly into a form or whole such as we might encounter in the real world. They gesture in that direction, but do not allow the beholder to complete the gesture. Where in space is Kokoschka's *Still Life with Mutton and Hyacinth* (1910) arranged? How do the elements of Picasso's *Still Life* (1918) relate to themselves, each other and space? These paintings call into consciousness the perpetual (and usually unconscious) endeavour to read or see elements according to a whole, by frustrating that endeavour. Sometimes, as in Picasso's *Weeping Woman* (1937), incoherence on the sensory level can be resolved into sense on a semantic or figurative level: This woman appears broken because she is broken on the inside; her pictorial disjointedness is not accidental but expressive. Similarly, Salvador Dalí's phantasmagorical shapes are expressive of the sometimes threatening uncanniness of the world encountered by the senses.

But these are only a few of the endless variations in which modern artists play with the ability of art to bring immediate sensory data and imaginatively projected gestalt into conflict. Some, such as Jackson Pollock, create art that is entirely non-figurative — and yet even in abstract works such as No. 5, many viewers see figurative meaning, such as the oft-reported dense bird's nest. The painting works in part by stimulating our attempt to see form or meaning in it, and by frustrating that meaning on the purely pictorial level. What effect this frustration has is partly left to us: excitement at an endlessness of possibilities; frustration of an aim-directed faculty; boredom because there is no sense to be found; introspection into the processes it triggers in me; relaxation because no goal-directedness is here necessary, or one of any number of other responses.

III. AESTHETIC COGNITION AND PREDICTIVE PROCESSING

A recent and very successful scientific theory of cognition is especially promising in accounting for these patterns, and moreover suggests that what is true on the micro-level of object recognition may also be true on the macro-level of 'making sense' of things more generally. This theory was not developed with art in mind, and in fact how it interacts with art is only now starting to be examined systematically. But it gives new texture and depth to the dynamics we have been investigating, and suggests their connection to religious faith (without yet having advanced far enough to explain it).

The theory is known as predictive processing or predictive coding. Its core claim is that one of the brain's primary functions is to generate predictions about what it will perceive or do. Perception is not a one-way stream of impressions informing the mind, but rather always a two-way stream: a bottom-up stream of sensory data, and a top-down stream of predictions. The bottom-up stream starts with all the sense impressions we need to process. The top-down stream starts with all our accumulated predictions about the world: our basic concepts and convictions; everything we know from previous experience; our familiarity with a specific context; etc. These priors predict what it is that we are seeing, and perception takes the form of 'checking' to what extent the sensory input conforms to those predictions.

If sensory input and prediction do not accord, we register a prediction error, which needs to be resolved. And this can be resolved in two ways: either by adjusting what sense impressions are channelled upwards, or by adjusting our predictions. For example, if we look at Figure 1, we start with the general prediction that we will see a *picture* of something. But the sensory input generates a prediction error: we cannot see a picture here, only 'noise'. This is not a pleasant experience: according to the theory of predictive processing, it is a central aim of the brain to eliminate prediction error. We will therefore adopt one of two strategies: either shrug off our prediction that Figure 1 is indeed a picture, and register it as meaningless blobs; or seek to adjust our sense impressions until they yield a picture. We are able to do so upon being told that Figure 1 shows a dalmatian. And once we have seen it, it is virtually impossible to *unsee* it.



Figure 1

An important part of this theory is that sense impressions and predictions both come with what is called ‘confidence intervals’: in each case, we not only receive a sense impression or make a prediction, but assign a certain level of confidence to that impression or prediction, which regulates how strongly we will defend it against the other stream in the case of conflict. In the case of Figure 1, you are likely to come with a high level of confidence that what you are shown is meaningful — i.e. is indeed a picture rather than ‘noise’ — because you are, after all, being shown it as a figure. In the case of a prediction error, where your prediction says ‘there is meaning in this’ and your sense impressions say ‘nothing to see here’, your top-down stream of prediction is likely to prevail.

Now, in our example, the prediction error was relatively easy to resolve: there was indeed something to see. But in Google’s Artificial Intelligence project Google Deep Dream, deeply held predictions can sometimes override sense data more violently. In the Deep Dream project, related to its face recognition project, Google taught its AI to recognize animal shapes by feeding the AI a very large dataset of animal pictures, and then setting it to detect animal shapes in a diverse dataset. Figure 2 shows how Google Dream interpreted a familiar painting.



Figure 2: Georges Seurat, A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte as interpreted by Google Dream

This kind of ‘overwriting’ of sensory data according to prediction is not something only Artificial Intelligence is liable to. It is extremely difficult to ‘see’ things that counter our accumulated priors about the world, as psychological experiments such as Daniel Simons’ and Christopher Chabris’ selective attention test ‘The Invisible Gorilla’ (1999) so effectively shows.¹¹ In the case of that attention test, the ‘confidence interval’ of our predictions is very tight: we are deliberately primed to expect or predict passes of a ball, and our sense perceptions fall in line with that strong prediction, ignoring stimuli that are incongruent with it. But in other cases, when sense perception is strong and clear, and we have fewer particular predictions, the conflict may be resolved the other way: If I go on an ambling walk without particular expectations, and I see distinctly a small winged shape I have not seen before, it may be my predictions I adjust rather than my sensory impression: and it may be that having done this often enough, I come to believe in fairies.

The serious point here is that predictions are not made on a single level, but in a hierarchically arranged cascade: the low-level or specific prediction that the small shape I see is likely to be a butterfly rather than a fairy is informed by higher-level or more general predictions about the population of Scottish forests, and more general predictions still about the constitution of the world. Conflicts between sense data and predictions that cannot be resolved at a low level (e.g. by adjusting the way one sees, or adjusting one’s expectation slightly) ‘travel up’ to be resolved at a higher level — and sometimes, they may be strong enough to require us to adjust high-level predictions about the world, as happens in a powerful conversion experience.

IV. IMAGINATION, ART AND FAITH

Predictive processing developed as a general theory of perception and cognition, and how it functions in aesthetic cognition is only just beginning to be explored. The dominant theory of current research is that art plays with our basic desire to resolve prediction errors.¹² This is certainly the case. In this essay, however, we have come farther. We have established that art brings to consciousness and attenuates something that is, more ‘blindly’, a feature of all perception: what Kant calls ‘imagination’, Wittgenstein calls ‘seeing-as’, and psychologists used to call ‘gestalt perception’. We see the world around us according to gestalts or schemata without which it would make no sense to us.

Art both exploits that dynamic and loosens its grip on us by alerting us in myriad ways to the dynamic and complex relationship between finding and making: to the fact that meaning or form is not merely passively received. I would argue that this is a distinguishing feature of what might be called good art, as opposed to entertainment or propaganda. At least certain forms of entertainment and propaganda exploit techniques of aligning stimulus and gestalt to immerse us in a seemingly meaningful experience in which everything is congruent and all incongruity is excised: beautiful people accompanied by romantic music, or powerful people triumphing over negative non-entities. The seeming completeness of this experience is a function of its ruthless exclusion of things for which it has no space.

Interestingly, this is borne out by the effects we can observe when the tight control that the work is exercising is disrupted: by how glib a film may suddenly seem, or how, when you change perspective, a trompe l’oeil ceiling such as Pozzo’s magnificent vault at St Ignatius Church in Rome loses its effect, while normal paintings (which exercise much less tight control on our perception) do not. What effect such immersive or engineered experiences ultimately have is a matter of the way we use them: specifically, of how we make our way back from those experiences to ordinary life. But the works themselves provide

¹¹ See www.theinvisiblegorilla.com and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo>.

¹² Sander van de Cruys and Johan Wagemans, “Putting reward in art: A tentative prediction error account of visual art”, *i-Perception* 2, no. 9 (2011): 1035–62; Ruben T. Azevedo and Manos Tsakiris, “Art reception as an interoceptive embodied predictive experience”, *The Behavioral and brain sciences* 40 (2017); Stefan Koelsch, Peter Vuust, and Karl Friston, “Predictive Processes and the Peculiar Case of Music”, *Trends in cognitive sciences* 23, no. 1 (2019): 63–77; and Sander van de Cruys et al., “Visual affects: Linking curiosity, Aha-Erlebnis, and memory through information gain”, *Cognition* 212 (2021): 1046–98.

no way back. We are on our own. Good art, by contrast, implicitly helps us to live with the fact that, as Rainer Maria Rilke puts it, ‘we are not really at home in our interpreted world’¹³.

What can we learn from our life with art both about religious faith in general and about reading the Bible in particular? I want to draw out two things, one relating to religious faith, the other to biblical reading.

The first is the claim I began with: that religious faith may manifest itself, among other things, as a mode of seeing the ordinary world, which invests that world imaginatively (or inspiredly) with an unseen depth of divine intention and spiritual significance. To have faith is to see the world, in some sense, as a work of art: as having a shape or wholeness that makes sense of its parts, has beauty, and displays intention. This claim immediately comes with a caveat, however: While such seeing may well be truthful, it is also unavoidably constructive — it involves imaginative projection or top-down prediction. Members of certain religious groups may recognize this risk from the experience (and sometimes subsequent falsification) of an easy tendency to see divine action or spiritual inspiration in ordinary events and emotions, or of things falling into place in a whole pregnant with meaning. The theory of predictive processing can give at least partial accounts of the processes at work in such religious experiences of the world, and valuable research is being conducted in this area.¹⁴

At the same time, art is not merely a matter of imposing a gestalt on the world, of seeing patterns where there are none. It also serves to loosen the grip of unquestioned or unnoticed forms and meanings on our perception of the world, to make us aware of the hermeneutical dynamics of our life in the world. As importantly, it offers an opportunity to see potential significance and promise yet to be realized. As Rowan Williams observes regarding the poet: ‘The reality before him is obscurely incomplete: it proposes to the poet the task of making it significant — which does not mean imposing upon it an alien structure of explanation.’¹⁵ Similarly, Jacques Maritain describes poetry as the ‘recomposition’ of ‘a world more real than the reality offered to the senses.’¹⁶ Faith, too, is such a recomposition. Faith takes hold of a metaphysical gestalt of the world: It affirms that the very heart of reality, Being itself, is personal; that creation is a gift expressing the love of its creator; that the human pursuit of truth is therefore not merely a matter of human *eros*, but first and foremost of divine *agape*. But faith also recognizes the dissonances between this gestalt and the world as we perceive it with our senses, and does not attempt to resolve them simply by imposition. Rather, it expresses itself as *hope*.

This brings me to my second point. Our life with art is instrumental in nourishing such hope. Images such as Lippi’s *Annunciation* or Botticelli’s *Mystic Nativity* overlay ordinary reality with visions of the world as pregnant with Christ, or saturated with angelic joy. These images are not making strict truth claims, but teach us to imagine the world as a theatre of divine agency, or as porous to heaven, and so to become receptive to the possibility of a spiritual ‘depth’ to the ordinary.

I have said that the biblical texts are, apart from everything else, artistic. By saying this, I do not mean to downplay their truth claims. Rather, I am arguing that there are at least some biblical texts which function in ways importantly akin to art. In particular, one of the characteristic ways in which biblical narratives inspire and teach is by engendering gestalt shifts — shifts from perceiving one ‘gestalt’ (‘whole’ or ‘form’) in one’s world to perceiving another. This is the case both for characters within these stories and for their readers. Many biblical stories turn on their characters’ sudden ability to see their world or lives no longer as one thing but as another—to perceive them as forming a gestalt they did not previously see.

13 Rainer M. Rilke, “The First Elegy”, in *The Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus: A Dual Language Edition*, ed. Rainer M. Rilke (Vintage International, 2009), 3.

14 Michiel van Elk and André Aleman, “Brain mechanisms in religion and spirituality: An integrative predictive processing framework”, *Neuroscience and biobehavioral reviews* 73 (2017): 359–78; Uffe Schjødt and Marc Andersen, “How does religious experience work in predictive minds?”, *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 7, no. 4 (2017): 320–23; Uffe Schjødt, “Predictive coding in the study of religion”, *Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 2019, no. 13: 364–79.

15 Williams, “Poetic and Religious Imagination”, 179–80.

16 Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays* (Sheed & Ward, 1946), 75.

This is especially striking in the prophetic and wisdom literature. In the Book of Jonah, God raises up a gourd tree so that his prophet may learn to see the Ninevites anew, as people ‘who cannot tell their right hand from their left’, eliciting God’s concern as the gourd tree elicits Jonah’s. More expansively, in the Book of Job, Job ultimately does not find explanations but experiences a gestalt shift: in God’s self-manifestation, his perception of the shape of the world and his own place in it change. In Deuteronomy, Moses addresses this need for a perceptual shift, and God’s ability to effect it, explicitly:

You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand, *or eyes to see*, or ears to hear.¹⁷

In the Gospels and Acts, Jesus encourages Martha to see the world afresh when he urges that Mary has chosen the better part. After his resurrection, he enables Mary Magdalen, Thomas Didymus, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and his persecutor Saul to see him—and with him the entire story of which they are part—afresh. These conversions comprise not so much deliberate decisions as sudden shifts of perspective. His disciples come to *see* Jesus as ‘my Lord and my God’ (John 20.28). To see him thus transforms their vision not only of him, but with him also of the world, themselves, and how they are to speak, act, and live.

Biblical stories not only recount experiences of gestalt shifts, but as importantly aim to inspire such shifts in their readers. John’s Gospel immediately commends Thomas’s realization to his readers; Deuteronomy addresses its testimony not only to the Israelites in Moab but also to the people assembled to hear it thereafter. Many of the Scriptures’ parables likewise aim to inspire new ways of seeing ordinary circumstances: thus, 1 Corinthians 12 trains its readers to see the people of Christ as a body conjoined, and Matthew 25, likewise, to see the stranger and the prisoner as in some sense Christ. The mental transformations engendered here are aptly described by the Greek *metanoia*, ‘conversion’ or ‘renewal of the mind’. The language of gestalt shift inflects this traditional language with an emphasis on perception: the understanding gained in a spiritual conversion (whether total or in relation to some aspect of reality) takes the form of renewal of perception.

In particular, it is not incidental that eschatology is handled in the Bible most often in imagery.¹⁸ I am convinced that the eschatological images in the Bible are intended to excite our imagination, and so to loosen the grip of the current form of the world. This is life-giving. At the same time, it is unavoidably fraught with risk. Like other images, eschatological images cannot guarantee their own interpretation, but always remain vulnerable to over- or misinterpretation. It is a mark of apocalyptic sects and political theologies to repudiate this vulnerability, and use these images to control interpretations of current events, associating true faith with the authority correctly to interpret the signs of the times by reference to their Scriptural types. One consequence of a phenomenology of eschatological expectation is to loosen this illusory grip, and enable a coming to terms with the ambiguity of images as irreducibly part of the human condition ‘between the times’.

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¹⁷ Deuteronomy 29.1–4 (NRSV, emphasis added).

¹⁸ Judith Wolfe, “The End of Images: Towards a Phenomenology of Eschatological Expectation”, in *Image as Theology: Arts and the Sacred* 5, ed. Mark McInroy, Casey Strine and Alexis Torrance (Brepols, forthcoming 2022).

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