IMAGINING GOD

JUDITH WOLFE

Abstract

This article interrogates the role of the human imagination in ordinary perception and orientation, in encounters with art, and in practices of faith. Philosophers and psychologists have long argued that perception is irreducibly imaginative, in the sense that to perceive intelligibly is, in part, to integrate sensory data into forms or wholes that are not simply given. The ability to do this is what continental philosophy calls 'the imagination', and the imagination in this sense is central to how humans apprehend and orient themselves in the world. This centrality introduces an element of risk into all human apprehension of the world, other people, and the divine, which cannot be overcome by spiritual or epistemological safeguards. Rather, such risk is inalienable, not least to a life of faith. The article discusses ways to understand and engage this dynamic, especially through theological encounters with art.

Introduction: Finding and Making

The theme of this special issue is the question of how poetics and metaphysics relate to each other. In this context, poetics is closely related to aesthetics, the study of art, form, or beauty; poetics is, if you will, that part of aesthetics which focuses on art as something *made*. Poetics, in that sense, is the power and study of making: primarily in art, secondarily in life. And in this sense, poetics interacts in complex and dynamic ways with metaphysics, the study of what is given to be *found*, of the overall form of reality. Metaphysics and poetics must be thought together because we do not inhabit an inert universe of substances that can be measured and modelled with once-for-all accuracy. We live in a world that is poetic, both in the sense that it is God's work or craft, and in the sense that we not merely apprehend but also make it. You do not have to be an existentialist to acknowledge that we find ourselves by making ourselves: that we discover who we are by acting, by making decisions and executing them. The same is true of relationships: love is genuinely there to be found, but it cannot be found without being made.

This special issue starts from an intuition that the dynamics of 'making', which are such an important complement to the 'finding' of metaphysics, are paradigmatically instantiated in the processes of making and reading art. Art involves experiences and concepts within which finding and making are inseparable: above all, 'inspiration' and 'imagination'. The concept of inspiration, as a long tradition of art, music, and literature testifies, is a key hinge between finding what is there and making it, closely connected

Judith Wolfe
School of Divinity, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, KY16 9JU, Fife SCOTLAND
Email: judith.wolfe@st-andrews.ac.uk

(in theology) to the work of the Holy Spirit.[1] This essay, however, explores a more modest or ambivalent hinge between finding and making, and between human and divine action, namely imagination. In doing so, it seeks to attend to the risk involved in the fact that when we seem to find, we often in fact make. Such risk is endemic to the life of faith: How do we know that when we seem to find a beautiful metaphysical model, we haven't just made it up? How do we know that when we seem to hear the Holy Spirit, we aren't imagining it? More profoundly, how do we know that the perfections we attribute to God aren't merely projections—that Feuerbach isn't right? These questions demand responses that do not collapse into polemics of scepticism and anti-scepticism, but enable us to live with the irreducible risk of finding by making. The imagination plays a pivotal part in this dynamic.

Spiritual Perception and the Anxiety of Imagination

Whether the imagination is a faculty primarily for the discovery of truth or the creation of untruth—especially in relation to spiritual realities—is a question that haunted philosophy, theology, and art especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was one of the enduring tension points of S.T. Coleridge's poetry and poetic theory.[2] Into the twentieth century, Owen Barfield defended the view that imagination was the principal faculty of spiritual apprehension against C.S. Lewis, who thought it a faculty of meaning but not of truth.[3] The power but also constitutive unreliability of this faculty persistently troubled Lewis. Having arrived at a holy-sounding conclusion in one of his essays, he pauses with characteristic hesitation:

> Now that I see where I have arrived a doubt assails me. It all sounds suspiciously like things I have said before, starting from very different premises… . Have I mistaken for the 'vision' the same old 'transitory being' who, in some ways, is not nearly transitory enough? It may be so: or I may after all be right. I would rather be right if I could; but if not, if I have only been once more following my own footprints, it is the sort of tragi-comedy which, on my own principles, I must try to enjoy. I find a beautiful example proposed in the *Paradiso* (XXVIII) where poor Pope Gregory, arrived in Heaven, discovered that his theory of the hierarchies, on which presumably he had taken pains, was quite wrong. We are told how the redeemed soul behaved; '*di se medesmo rise*'. It was the funniest thing he'd ever heard.[4]

Imagination and inspiration are notoriously difficult to distinguish, and (like Luther and Coleridge before him) Lewis seeks refuge from the limitations of both reason and imagination in flinging himself on God's imaginatively unassimilable mercy.

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[1] See John Betz's essay in this journal issue, as well as David Fergusson, *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[2] See especially Gregory Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[3] See especially Norbert Feinendegen and Arend Smilde (eds), *The 'Great War' of Owen Barfield and C.S. Lewis: Philosophical Writings, 1927 – 1930, Inklings Studies Supplements* 1 (2016).

[4] C.S. Lewis, 'Christianity and Literature', *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 181-97, at 196.

Thoughts are but coins. Let me not trust, instead
Of Thee, their thin-worn image of Thy head.
From all my thoughts, even from my thoughts of Thee,
O thou fair Silence, fall, and set me free.
Lord of the narrow gate and the needle's eye,
Take from me all my trumpery lest I die.[5]

This contrast between imaginative reach and passive receptivity relates to wider modern anxieties surrounding the human capacity to apprehend the divine reliably and without self-deception. In recent decades, Reformed epistemology has striven to guarantee such apprehension by positing a *sensus divinitatis*. Unlike John Calvin, who coined the term in the sixteenth century not in order to argue that humans could apprehend God correctly through such a sense, but only that they were never guiltless for denying him, modern Reformed thought has used the *sensus divinitatis* in the context of an apologetic argument for Christian belief.[6] In Alvin Plantinga's system, 'a belief has warrant … if it is produced by cognitive processes or faculties that are functioning properly, in a cognitive environment that is propitious for that exercise of cognitive powers, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at the production of true belief'.[7] His aim, therefore, is to argue that humans have a *sensus divinitatis*: a belief-forming mechanism that can deliver properly basic belief in God that requires no further argument to be rational. This intriguing argumentative strategy sets itself against the 'masters of suspicion' who attribute belief not to the right functioning of a reliable sense but to the misfunctioning of senses that are properly directed at inner-worldly objects. Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Wagner, Freud, Marx, Heidegger, and many others, all regard belief in God as the mistaken, imaginative projection of human concerns onto a giant screen, reflecting a need to set limit conditions for human concerns, or to anchor them in supposed absolutes. According to these thinkers, such projection is never stable; it succeeds imaginatively only at the cost of rational incoherence.

It is clear that faith is in part a matter both of reason and of will. Plantinga's argument acutely raises the question not only whether faith is *also* in part a matter of a quasi-perceptual apprehension of God, but, further, whether such apprehension is mediated by a distinct sense (whether a *sensus divinitatis* or a Maximian *nous*) or by humans' ordinary senses and faculties. In particular, is the immediate experience of faith the exercise of a distinct 'organ', or is it an inflection of our ordinary faculties, including those of imagination and desire? By focusing not on God as the object of apprehension but on the *sensus divinitatis* as its quasi-sensory medium, Plantinga opens his claims to psychological-neurological interrogation. Recent years have seen an upsurge of such interrogation, partly enabled by better diagnostic techniques (including portable neurological equipment) and new theories (including predictive processing).[8] Such research, especially by anthropologists like Tanya Luhrmann and psychologists like Uffe

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[5] C.S. Lewis, 'Apologist's Evening Prayer', in *Poems*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1964), 129.

[6] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F.L. Battles, ed. J.T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), I.3; Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[7] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, xi.

[8] For a summary of evidence against a *sensus divinitatis* in Plantinga's sense, see Hans van Eyghen, 'There is No *Sensus Divinitatis*', *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 15, no. 45 (2016): 24-40.

Schjødt, converges on the claim that if faith is partly a matter of apprehension (rather than merely of reason or will), then such apprehension is learned rather than innate, and utilizes pathways and processes also active in other domains of life, rather than distinct ones. That it is learned means that a sense of the divine is closer to the ability to perceive nuances of nose and palate in a wine, or fugal variations in a baroque composition, or the intricacy of a position on a chess board, than it is to the more innate ability to see colours or hear human voices—or, we might add, to the pathological but equally 'immediate' compulsion to see hallucinations or hear disembodied voices. That it uses common pathways means, above all, that apprehending the divine is in an important sense a matter of what, in common parlance, is called imagination: as Luhrmann puts it, 'Faith is about … the ontological attitude people take toward what must be imagined—not because gods and spirits are necessarily imaginary, but because they cannot be known with the senses, and people of faith must allow those invisible others to feel alive to them'.[9]

Luhrmann is perhaps the foremost anthropologist in this area. Raised unitarian, with an open sympathy for people of faith, she has developed her theories over several decades of immersive research in faith communities of various religions, seeking to identify strategies and habits common to these diverse communities. Luhrmann argues that contrary to the common psychologists' assumption that religious people experience 'God' as an immediate presence, in similar ways as schizophrenics experience voices or drug addicts hallucinations, they in fact have to work to make God present. Although the commitment to such work sometimes has roots in a radical, unbidden and unexpected experience of divine presence—a mystical experience, a near-death experience, a conversion experience—the day-to-day experience of divine presence is a matter of practice, required in part by the basic fact that the term 'presence', in the case of spiritual realities, necessarily functions differently than in that of objects-in-the-world.

It is in this context that Luhrmann argues for imagination as an indispensable medium of divine presence. On her theory, the psychological ability to make God real for ourselves is related to our ability mentally to address an imaginary friend or mentally to inhabit Middle Earth. The difference is not a different organ of apprehension but communal frameworks within which we develop mental and practical habits to register the believed reality of this imagined other. Within these frameworks, we learn to detect and attend to interoceptive and other stimuli, to interpret certain experiences spiritually, and to place ourselves within a world shaped by the assumption of God's presence and agency. On this view, our awareness of God is not a matter of a discrete mechanism (such as a *sensus divinitatis*) but utilizes our faculties of imagination and desire. This claim is not intended to disparage or disprove faith, but only to analyse its vehicle. We imagine God's voice in the strict sense that we employ processes of imagination, even if these processes have a different valence in this particular context. And we desire in all the ways in which we ordinarily desire, even if that desire has a different significance when recognized as ultimately directed, perhaps even responding, to God. In other words, on a religious view that accepts this reduction, ordinary human faculties, including imagination, are open to God without being able to guarantee their object.

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[9] T.M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 79.

Imagination and Transposition

This inability to guarantee an object that is ontologically incommensurate with ordinary objects, yet apprehended through ordinary human pathways and processes, is a matter both of risk and of opportunity. What is more, according to a theory suggested but only rudimentarily developed by C.S. Lewis, it is not merely a matter of faith but also of human experience more generally. In a sermon on St Paul's discourse on speaking in tongues, Lewis enquires into the fact that although glossolalia may sometimes be nothing but a hysterical phenomenon, it cannot categorically be dismissed as hysteria by Christians who take St Paul seriously. Lewis analogizes this to the frequent association of mystical experiences with erotic feelings and language, which may sometimes be forms of sublimation, but cannot be reduced to them without remainder. To find a surer ground for arbitration, Lewis analogizes these further to less spiritual, more everyday experiences that exhibit similar patterns. Thus, he writes:

> I find that if, during a moment of intense aesthetic rapture, one tries to turn round and catch by introspection what one is actually feeling, one can never lay one's hand on anything but a physical sensation. In my case it is a kind of kick or flutter in the diaphragm. But the important point is this: I find that this kick or flutter is exactly the same sensation which, in me, accompanies great and sudden anguish. Introspection can discover no difference at all between my neural response to very bad news and my neural response to the overture of *The Magic Flute* … . And I likewise love this internal flutter in one context and call it a pleasure and hate it in another and call it misery. It is not a mere sign of joy and anguish: it becomes what it signifies. When the joy thus flows over into the nerves that overflow is its consummation: when the anguish thus flows over that physical symptom is the crowning horror. The very same thing which makes the sweetest drop of all in the sweet cup also makes the bitterest drop in the bitter.[10]

He concludes:

> I take our emotional life to be 'higher' than the life of our sensations—not, of course, morally higher, but richer, more varied, more subtle. And this is a higher level which nearly all of us know. And I believe that if anyone watches carefully the relation between his emotions and his sensations he will discover the following facts; (1) that the nerves do respond, and in a sense most adequately and exquisitely, to the emotions; (2) that their resources are far more limited, the possible variations of sense far fewer, than those of emotion; (3) and that the senses compensate for this by using the *same* sensation to express more than one emotion—even, as we have seen, to express opposite emotions.[11]

On this theory, physical states become a repertoire or language mediating experiences that exceed physicality, yet cannot be experienced independently of it. This may be observable in psychosomatic illnesses, in which bodies express what souls suffer, often in body parts that the community associates with relevant aspects of the

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[10] C.S. Lewis, 'Transposition', in *They Asked for a Paper* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), 166-82, at 170.
[11] Lewis, 'Transposition', 170.

inner life: heartache, head strain, an upset stomach. It is also observable in states of emotional excitement, in which one may experience goosebumps, burn as with fever, or feel butterflies in one's stomach. These physical states express or mediate psychological states that are in some sense coextensive with them, but also exceed and lend them significance. Bodily sensations, even basic emotions, for Lewis are simple instruments mediating a wide range of realities. In this, they resemble language, which (for Lewis as for later theorists such as George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and their many followers) similarly describes experiences that exceed physicality primarily through the figurative use of words whose original referent is physical.[12] 'It was heavy' is used to refer not only to a suitcase, but also to a dense lecture or to a bitter funeral (where 'dense' and 'bitter', too, have their origins in physical realities). This multivalent use of a single term is not a form of logical categorization (like the generalizing use of a single term 'pet' to refer to both cats and dogs): suitcases and funerals do not fall within the same experiential or logical category independently of a term like 'heavy'. At the same time, such multivalent use of language cannot be reduced to a purer, univocal use that identifies non-physical phenomena by purely abstract words; as Lakoff, Johnson, Mary Gerhart, Allan Russell, and many others have shown, there are no such words.[13]

One of the challenges highlighted by these accounts is that it is not possible to identify a phenomenon of the soul or spirit simply by pointing at a discrete entity and saying, 'look! there!' Lewis illustrates the challenge vividly by the thought experiment of convincing a two-dimensional being that a certain triangular shape in a picture is that of a road receding in the distance. No difference identifiable within a two-dimensional reference frame distinguishes the road from a flat triangular shape, and no appeal to a putative third dimension in which this distinction makes sense could be comprehensible to a two-dimensional creature.[14] For Lewis, this resembles a common predicament. One cannot simply point a doctor or scientist to a pang in the heart and say 'this is grief'. In his instruments, it will show up the same way as a cardiac pain. Rather, to suggest that there is a three-dimensional road rather than a two-dimensional triangle, or an ailment of the soul rather than merely a malfunction of the body, one must point out things that are odd or remain unexplained within the merely material context. Why does the flutter of the stomach arise in this situation? Why does this fever appear as pleasurable? Why is this urgent desire not satisfied by any ordinary joy, despite the fact that the person experiencing it is not someone known to be permanently dissatisfied?

Imagination as the Creative Power of Perception

The challenge that Lewis describes is not merely one of apologetics but also one of discernment: not merely of convincing sceptics of the validity of claims of spiritual

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[12] See especially C.S. Lewis, 'Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare', in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 251-65; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[13] See Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*; Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell, *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1984).

[14] See Lewis, 'Transposition', 174-79; Lewis, 'Bluspels and Flalansferes'; Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), IV.2.

apprehension when scientific measurement only records bodily processes, but also one of discerning whether one may indeed be registering spiritual depth. This challenge is compounded if, as Luhrmann and others argue, that depth is apprehended or projected by imagination; if, as she puts it, 'the heart of the religious impulse [is] the capacity to imagine a world beyond the one we have before us'.[15] Lewis's analogy of the apprehension of depth in a two-dimensional picture opens a fruitful approach to this challenge which neither denies the creative agency of the imagination nor concludes from it to a spiritual fictionalism.

I claimed in the introduction that the dynamics of making, which are an indispensable complement to the 'finding' of metaphysics in a world such as ours, are instantiated particularly saliently in the processes of making and consuming art. Although the term 'imagination' is often used in senses associated with the creative work of artists, the definition most relevant to the present context is one associated equally with artists and with viewers. In a philosophical tradition spanning Aquinas, Kant, Hegel, Merleau-Ponty, and others, 'imagination' refers primarily to 'the power or capacity by which the mind integrates sensory data in the process of perception'.[16] In other words, imagination may be described as the creative power of gestalt formation: of perceiving or envisioning a field of isolated, unstructured, or even disparate phenomena *as* a form, shape, pattern or whole. In this sense, Kant describes the imagination as 'a hidden art in the depths of the human soul',[17] 'a blind but indispensable function of the soul'.[18] For Kant, this 'art' is operative in ordinary perception, since there is for him no unmediated apprehension of the world: the structure of our cognitive apparatus, both innate and acquired, shapes the way we organize our perceptual field. However, the imagination is operative particularly saliently—not 'blindly' but consciously—in some extraordinary contexts, above all in our engagement with art.

Unlike ordinary objects and scenes, works of art deliberately elicit imaginative gestalt-formation from their viewers, hearers, or readers; indeed, it is one of my central claims that such imaginative investment is at the heart of what it means to 'see' a painting or read a poem. This specific definition of 'imagination' may not exhaust the more open-ended way in which Luhrmann uses the term, but it is a central aspect of the faith-dynamic she identifies. In other words, I am arguing that in experiencing the presence of God, people of faith often experience the world similarly as they would experience a work of art: as disclosive of an unseen depth. The faculty enabling them to do so is the imagination.

This claim is more multifaceted than it may appear because the role of the viewer's, hearer's or reader's imagination in the interpretation of a work of art is endlessly complex. The active and unpredictable engagement of his or her imagination responds to the deliberate incompleteness or incoherence of the perceptual material presented. In the case of visual art (to which the following analysis restricts itself), this incompleteness and incoherence relate above all to the spatiality and materiality of the perceptual field that the artwork presents to the viewer.

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[15] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, 76.

[16] 'Imagination, n.1a', OED Online. December 2021. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/11125 (accessed 4 January 2022).

[17] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) A141 = B181.

[18] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A78 = B103; see also A120.

The spatiality of images is a rich subject of psychological and philosophical research.[19] The core claim of one of its seminal theorists, Ernst Gombrich, is that 'seeing' an image at all depends on imaginatively apprehending its visible, two-dimensional parts as organized within a deep, three-dimensional which is not present in the image, but makes sense of it. This is especially striking, but by no means unique, in optical illusions such as Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit and Necker's cube. In each of these, the image's two-dimensional visual elements are compatible with two separate three-dimensional organizations—and in the case of the duck-rabbit, constitute different objects within these different spaces. In the absence of pictorial context, there are no criteria for arbitrating between these constitutions, because the organising space is available only by means of the lines implicitly organised by it. Three-dimensional depth is perceptually 'secondary' to the image's elements in the sense that it cannot be apprehended directly, but only inferred from them; at the same time, it is 'primary' in the sense that it always already governs the viewer's perception and interpretation of those elements. There is (as Wittgenstein observes) no antecedent, raw perception of lines not organized in space, on which the viewer imposes 'duck' or 'rabbit' in a secondary interpretation which he or she could easily withhold.[20]

Philosopher Michael Polanyi argues that the success of the viewer's imaginative projection (or recognition) of three-dimensional depth in an image depends on retaining a peripheral awareness of the image's underlying materiality. Polanyi calls the two elements of image perception a 'focal awareness' of what is represented and a 'subsidiary awareness' of the medium of representation, e.g. canvas and paint.[21] For a successful perceptual act, both focal and subsidiary awareness are required: subsidiary awareness of a flat canvas cues viewers to imaginatively project depth, even (and especially) if the illusion of depth is imperfect. The obverse can be observed in works that labour to conceal their 'flat' materiality, such as *trompe l'oeil* ceilings, which disguise flat paint as architectural depth. The aim of such works (as of virtual reality) is not to engage their viewers' conscious imaginative participation, but to deceive their perceptual faculties: not to invite them to suspend disbelief but to compel belief. When tightly controlled, this results in a uniquely immersive experience; however, even a slight loosening of perceptual control results in its disintegration. Unlike Michelangelo's ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, which inspires an imaginative apprehension of depth (physical, psychological, and metaphysical) wherever the viewer may stand, Pozzo's ingenious *trompe l'oeil* vault and dome in the Church of St. Ignatius of Loyola compel depth perception when viewed from directly below, while appearing distorted even to the point of illegibility when viewed from an angle.

'There is something peculiar', Polanyi concludes,

> in the way Gestalt formation takes place when forming a painting. This union is not a fusion of *complementary parts* into a whole, but a fusion of *contradictory features*. The flatness of the canvas is combined with a perspectival depth, which is the very opposite of flatness.

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[19] The seminal work remains Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon Press, 1961).

[20] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations / Philosophische Untersuchungen*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), II.xi.

[21] Michael Polanyi, 'What Is a Painting?', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 10, no. 3 (1970): 225–36.

Such integration of incompatibles is not unknown to psychology. Binocular vision is based on the fusion of incompatibles. … A deep three-dimensional appearance is produced here by fusing two conflicting flatnesses.

This fusion produces a radical extension of our eyesight, but the integration of canvas with perspectival design goes much further in its radical innovation. Binocular integration adds wonderfully to our powers of perceiving what is there, but the integration of incompatibles in a painting reveals to us something beyond all that exists in nature or human affairs: for what we see is a flat surface having a deep perspective in three dimensions. This quality of flat-depth, which is the hallmark of a normal painting, may be said to be transnatural.[22]

Images, in other words, work not merely by approximating reality but by simultaneously flaunting their own unreality: they show forth depth only by being noticeably flat. 'The arts', as Polanyi puts it, 'do not exhibit things that *could be* really there and yet *are not* there; they exhibit things of a kind that cannot exist either in nature or in human affairs'.[23]

Within this flaunted unreality, the 'depth' that images possess is invested in them by the imagination of artists and viewers, mobilized into encounter by and with the image. 'The factual information content of art', to quote Polanyi a final time, 'is slight, its main purpose being to evoke our participation in its utterance.'[24] This participatory dynamic is central to the history of modern painting. After the perfection of perspectival illusion in early modern Europe, artists engaged the creative potential of their viewers' imagination in increasingly complex ways.[25] Impressionist paintings used this to capture the visual impression of a scene in all its dynamism and ephemerality. The success of this attempt depends on viewers' participation: if we did not already know that they were water lilies, we would not recognize the shapes in some of Monet's later studies. The captivating vivacity of impressionist paintings arises from the collaboration between the artist's precise observation of not fully integrated sense impression and the viewer's experience and imagination: from the dynamism of the viewer's imaginative impression of a gestalt on a variegated field of colours. Expressionism exacerbated this dynamic. Where impressionism still aimed at a collaboration between loosely structured sense impression on the one hand and gestalt or schema on the other, expressionism deliberately brought the two into conflict. 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 towards such integration, but do not allow the viewer to complete the gesture. 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

[22] Ibid., 230.

[23] Ibid., 234.

[24] Polanyi, 'What Is a Painting?', 232; compare Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second revised edition, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), sec. I.1.3 and I.2.1.

[25] See Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, chaps 6-8; Eric Kandel, *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present* (New York: Random House, 2012).

appears broken because she is broken on the inside; her pictorial disjointedness is not accidental but expressive. Similarly, the phantasmagorical shapes of Salvador Dalí's *Temptation of St Anthony* (1946) are expressive of the sometimes threatening uncanniness of the world encountered by the senses.[26]

In all these forms, images succeed as images by keeping in viewers' peripheral consciousness their own unreality. To overstep such self-constraint would be to function no longer as images but as simulacra, as exemplified by *trompe l'oeil* paintings or virtual reality. In philosophical and theological language, this distinction is sometimes described as that between icons and idols: idols arrest the gaze while icons are porous to a reality beyond themselves to which they direct the gaze.[27] However, icon/idol discourse tends to obscure the fact that images are never merely transparent to spiritual realities: they work by eliciting imaginative engagement, which always involves both freedom and risk. Images can neither guarantee their authenticity nor secure their interpretation; because they are completed in part by the imagination of their viewers, they are always open to over- or misinterpretation. At the same time, they do not demand singularity of interpretation, but acquiesce in the creativity and desire of their viewers, which rush ahead to realities uncontained by any image. These dynamics of risk and freedom, desire and creativity also define a theological engagement with art and imagination.

Incompleteness, Incoherence, and Transnatural Depth

The preceding sections converge on a theological proposal in three steps. First, there is an analogy between the way we experience a work of art and the way those of us who are people of faith experience ourselves, others, and the world, namely as having an unseen 'depth' that makes sense of them. In both cases, the realities we encounter sometimes present themselves to us as incomplete within their own dimensions, and therefore as bodying forth more than meets the eye. Secondly, if this is the case, then one way of suggesting that we, others, and the world have such unseen depth is by pointing out things that remain incomplete or incoherent within a merely material, or even a merely psychological or sociological, context. This is a basic impetus of both art and religion. Thus, the artist Wassily Kandinsky describes painting as 'a power which must be directed to the … refinement of the human soul' and its ability to see spiritual depth; 'when the soul tends to be choked by material disbelief, art becomes purposeless'.[28] Like many theologians, he notes an incompleteness to our merely physical experience of the world, which both art and faith register and respond to faithfully and creatively.

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[26] A more detailed discussion of the themes of this section, and their psychological significance as interpreted within the framework of predictive processing, can be found in Judith Wolfe, 'The Renewal of Perception in Religious Faith and Biblical Narrative', *European Journal of the Philosophy of Religion* 13, no. 4 (2021): 111-28.

[27] See especially the writings of Jean-Luc Marion, but also a range of recent work including Javier Carraño, 'Husserlian Approaches to the Icon and the Idol', in *Transcendence and Phenomenology*, edited by Conor Cunningham and Peter Candler (SCM Press, 2008), 111–33; Maximos Constas, *The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography* (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2014); Natalie Carnes, *Image and Presence: A Christological Reflection on Iconoclasm and Iconophilia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

[28] Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, ed. Hilla Rebay (New York: Guggenheim Foundation, 1946), 93.

The third step is more cautionary: the recognition of unseen depth is mediated by our imagination, which is fallible. This is as true of the interpretation of art (which is perpetually fraught with the anxiety of overinterpretation) as it is of the experience of the divine. Regarding the latter, the burden of interpretative responsibility and its endemic risk of error cannot be circumvented by relying, as Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis* attempts, on a special mechanism which is insulated against the vagaries of the ordinary senses. Neither can it be cut short by the experience of 'saturated phenomena'—phenomena which, as in Jean-Luc Marion's vision, overwhelm us from outside our own intentional movements. Such experiences of overwhelm certainly occur, but they must nevertheless be assimilated into everyday life through conscious self-orientation and interpretation. And because the experience of God in our own selves and the world relies on imaginative investment, it is impossible categorically to avoid its over- or misinterpretation. Signs of God are always vulnerable to over-narration (the convalescent, in disregard of those who have died of the same illness, declaring that 'God healing me proved his love for me'), to disconfirmation (the disillusioned charismatic bitterly reporting that 'what I thought was plenitude was really manipulation'), and to repeated re-narration (as anyone who has experienced failed relationships feels compelled to do).

In this context, it is vital that art is never a matter of imposing a gestalt on the world, of seeing patterns where there are none. Rather, it serves (among other things) to loosen the grip of stale forms and patterns, and make us aware of the hermeneutical dynamics of existence—of the fact, as R.M. Rilke puts it, 'that we are not fully at home in our interpreted world'.[29] So does faith. Faith certainly takes imaginative hold of a metaphysical gestalt of the world. It affirms that the very heart of reality is alive and personal; that creation is a gift expressing the love that *is* the divine life, given so that creatures may participate in that life; that the human pursuit of truth is therefore not merely a matter of human *eros*, but first and foremost of divine *agape*: and that this descent or overflowing of love is materialized in the Incarnation of the Word. But faith also recognizes the dissonances between this gestalt and the world as perceived with the senses, and does not attempt to resolve them by *fiat*. Rather, it expresses itself as desire and hope. Art can be instrumental in nourishing such hope. Many religious images overlay ordinary scenes with visions of their divine depth or meaning. These images are not making strict truth claims, but teach us to imagine the world differently, and to act to realize this vision. Like the Ignatian Exercises, they can thereby become a school of faith.

This account does not deny more immediate experiences of divine presence within ordinary life. However, it emphasises an apophatic or eschatological dimension of our imaginative response to the world that is closely related to Polanyi's description of the 'transnatural flat-depth' of art. This eschatological dimension relies radically on what is incoherent or incomplete within that world, and acknowledges, analogously to Polanyi on art, that faith sometimes 'do[es] not exhibit things that *could be* really there and yet *are not* there; [it exhibits] things of a kind that cannot exist either in nature or in human affairs'. Engaging this dimension requires a self-abnegating imagination, that is, an imagination that knows itself to be at once necessary and constitutively inadequate. Such imagination is trained on intentional attention to the

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[29] R.M. Rilke, 'The First Elegy', in *Duino Elegies and Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1982), 4 (translation emended).

things that are odd: to the gaps in human experience that do not and will not make sense.

Such imagination is closely related to desire. As (for St Thomas) the will turns the intellect towards truth, so it may be said that desire turns the imagination towards fullness. To put it differently, desire may be defined as 'the pain of the presence of the absent', and the faculty that makes the absent present as absent is imagination. Imagination in its wider sense therefore does not simply strive to make God present, but (partly in defiance of itself) makes him present as absent. This echoes Polanyi's claim that images do not simply extend our vision in the way that the complementary impressions of our left and right eye do; rather, they offer vision in a kind of impossibility: a depth in flatness. Often, God's presence in our lives is not simply an extension of their natural scope; rather, it indwells them as depth indwells a flat canvas, defying its own dimensions. Although our imagination is summoned to perceive that depth, it is required to do so from within a human perspective. And unlike in our life with two-dimensional images, that perspective does not provide independent access to the 'depth' we are called to perceive. Rather, it is, to some extent, the perspective of a two-dimensional creature dimly apprehending a third dimension through the things that do not make sense within its own dimensionality.

This dynamic is at work in any apprehension of eternity within human finitude that resists both a premature arrogation of participation in plenitude and a denial that such participation can be coherently desired. This is apparent in Edith Stein's theological response to Martin Heidegger's claim not only that to be fully human is to live in the face of death, but also (and more controversially) that an existential experience of death may only be gained by anticipating one's own death, never by witnessing another's. As Stein counters, it is not one's own death but the death of others—especially that of loved ones—which brings us most radically face to face with finitude.[30] Only within one's love for another can death appear as the horrendous negation it is. This is because to love, as Heidegger himself realized in reflecting on his love for Hannah Arendt, is to say '*volo ut sis*'—'I want you to be'.[31]

This desire, so basic to love, that life should be infinite need not be an immodest rejection of life's finitude. Rather, it may be a humble acknowledgment of the at once undeniability and impossibility of an ideal. The bafflement of this contradiction—the incompleteness and incoherence of life within its own dimensions—may open into an encounter with God. A disciple of Edith Stein's captures this viscerally after separation from a loved one:

> Such impossible desire for another person leads one to that place beyond the possible where union would be but cannot be. In that place, one experiences that utter poverty in which alone one is aware of the desirability of the world without being enthralled to it, and aware of its insufficiency without being disdainful of it. In short, one experiences the condition of standing as a creature before God who is at once creator, judge and saviour. I stand in this poverty, extending my arms in puzzlement, unable to speak, merely nonsensically repeating, 'I miss her, I miss her'. This desire can be neither replaced nor fulfilled: I have nothing but my love and the

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[30] See Edith Stein, 'Martin Heideggers Existenzphilosophie', in *Endliches und Ewiges Sein: Versuch eines Aufstiegs zum Sinn des Seins*, ed. Andreas Uwe Müller (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), 475-76.

[31] Letters to Hannah Arendt, 13 May 1925 and 7 December 1927; in *Hannah Arendt / Martin Heidegger: Briefe 1925–1975*, second edition, edited by Ursula Ludz (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1999), 31 and 59.

admission that it cannot be lived. To stand in this impossibility—to stand without ground to stand on—is to stand before God.[32]

I will conclude with a painting by Paul Cézanne called 'Old Woman with a Rosary' (1895-96), painted shortly after his conversion to the Catholic faith, while he was living in isolation due to illness. The woman's eyes are dark, and her neck bends under the yoke of death. Her belly is black emptiness. But in the midst of all this, her determined hands clutch her rosary beads almost to breaking as she recites the Lord's Passion. In his sorrowful mysteries, the woman finds her own nearing death told to her as a bearing of God. And so, this picture is of another Annunciation. Here too is a handmaid of the Lord. Her forehead is touched with light; her neck bends in greeting; her dark eyes acknowledge an unseen presence. In the hollow of her belly, the sorrowful mysteries are rounded out with the glorious. Here is an invisible depth, seen through a sacred imagination, that makes new sense both (for her) of her experience and (for us) of this painting. Neither act of imagination, hers or ours, contains guarantees of its own truthfulness. But God in his grace may meet and fill it— and our acts of imagination, as of reason, desire, and love, always depend on such free grace.

[32] Elizabeth Cohen, undated, correspondence in private collection (my translation).