Imagination and Truth: Reflections after Coleridge

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COLERIDGE'S REMARKS, IN *BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA* CH. XIII, concerning imagination and fancy, result in part from his study of Kant.[2] Coleridge is not widely recognised today as a major philosopher, but he exemplified the faculty that he attempted to describe, making imaginative connections that, so far as I am aware, no philosopher had made before him, and which are essential to understanding the place of imagination in the life of the mind. Kant had pointed the way, in his remarks about imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) in the first and third *Critiques*. But Coleridge's suggestive coda, distinguishing imagination from fancy, provides a starting point, I believe, for a deeper account of what is at stake, both in life and in art, in our use and abuse of the unreal.

Kant followed contemporary philosophical orthodoxy in identifying a faculty of imagination, actively involved in all perception – both the perception of the external world, and the production of images in remembering and imagining. Perhaps dreaming too is an exercise of this faculty, whose principal characteristic is to unite in a single representation the sensory components of some object of awareness. Mary Warnock, in her book on the topic, has shown the remarkable consensus among empiricists and rationalists of the Enlightenment, in postulating this single faculty involved in the representation of how things seem to creatures like us.[3] But the consensus is not reflected in common usage, which distinguishes – rightly in my view – perceiving from imagining, and which regards imagination as a very special attribute unequally shared among rational beings and perhaps not present in the other animals at all. We all perceive things and, failing some disability, we perceive equally well. But we don't all imagine things, and those with the imagination of a Shakespeare or a Wagner – or a Coleridge, for that matter – are exceedingly rare.

Kant acknowledged this in his way, by distinguishing the use of imagination in the 'synthesis' of 'the manifold' from what he described as the 'free play' of imagination in aesthetic experience. And Coleridge follows him in distinguishing 'primary' from 'secondary' imagination, the first being the simple ability to form images, whether through the natural use of the perceptual organs or through remembering and dreaming, the second being the active, voluntary and creative assembling of images, as in poetry and painting, from the inner resources of the mind. Primary imagination is given to all of us, secondary imagination only to some and only in varying degrees.

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[2] See Robert D. Hume, 'Kant and Coleridge on Imagination', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* vol. 28, no. 4, Summer 1970, pp. 485-496.

[3] Mary Warnock, *Imagination*, University of California Press, 1976.

Forgetting terminology for the moment, it is surely obvious that we can follow Kant and Coleridge in distinguishing the ability to create new images and new narratives from the ability to receive images and perceptions already made. And Coleridge is right to emphasize the voluntary nature of secondary imagination, as he calls it. I have tried to spell this out at length in *Art and Imagination* (1974), pointing to the fact that you can command someone to imagine that *p,* but not to believe that *p*; likewise you can command someone to imagine *x*, but not to perceive *x*, even if you can command him to do something *else*, which has the perception of *x* as a consequence. These differences, I argue, are by no means trivial, since they bring the active imagination into the province of practical reason. Moreover, because what is imagined is imagined as existing independently, there is an exercise of emotional sympathy that grows from imagination, and which forms an integral part of our moral development. It is the primary reason why folk tales, folk religion and folk poetry survive.

There are other, equally important, features of creative imagination that should be borne in mind. First, there is the element of 'unasserted thought'–[4] that is, propositions entertained without necessarily believing them, as in a hypothesis, a fictional narrative, a reflection on imaginary worlds or, to take the most basic and defining case, the antecedent of a conditional. Second, there is the element of immediate experience. Creative imagination involves imagining 'what it is like' to be in a certain situation; it involves anticipating how it might strike you, how it would feel and what it would look like. It is concerned with appearances in the broadest sense of the term. The world of imagination is a world of seeming, a world in which, to borrow Wallace Stevens's words, 'be is the finale of seem.' In imagination we are creating worlds – not possible worlds, necessarily, but imaginary worlds – and we are doing so with a view to knowing how they seem, what it would be like to live in them, how they compare with the world that we know.

That this is entirely unlike what goes on in ordinary perception, or in drawing factual conclusions about reality, is surely evident. Thinkers who use the same word to describe the two processes tend to believe that each involves the 'unifying' of sensory elements. But I am not sure that this is coherent. When Kant tries to describe the act of 'synthesis' that brings concept and intuition together in a perceptual judgment he finds himself driven towards the conclusion that the synthesis is 'transcendental' – in other words, one of those occurrences that does not actually *occur* since it is always assumed to have occurred in any account of its origins. The sensory manifold is presented to consciousness *as unified*; and there is no way in which we can be conscious of its elements before putting them together in a whole.

My own view is that it would be wiser to use the word 'imagination' to denote only the mental activity that Kant describes as the 'free play' of imagination, and which Coleridge dubs 'secondary imagination', and to find

[4] Scruton, *Art and Imagination*, chs 7 & 8, Methuen, 1974.

some other word to describe what goes on in ordinary perception and judgment. In any case, what is important is that we rational beings, in addition to perceiving and understanding the real world, have the ability to create worlds that are unreal, maybe even impossible, as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but which we bring into imaginary being from our own inner resources. Moreover, these worlds do not deceive us. I am not under an illusion that the images and stories that I entertain when I imagine things are features of the real world. I am conscious of their unreality, and that is part of their purpose. This is so even when the imaginary enters my consciousness through the real, as when I see a face in a picture or hear musical movement in a sequence of sounds. These 'seeing in' and 'hearing in' phenomena also exhibit the distinctive marks of secondary imagination: they are (up to a point) subject to the will; they involve entertaining unasserted thoughts, and they seek out the sensory embodiment that fills the mind with a narrative of other worlds.

There is much detail to be filled in here, and it has preoccupied me in *Art and Imagination*, and in the two succeeding volumes, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* and *The Aesthetics of Music*. Those books describe imagination as involving a different order of intentionality from the forms of cognition that we share with the other animals. We are able, as other animals are not, to make the absent, the non-existent and the purely hypothetical present to consciousness, in order to understand and appreciate the object imagined not for its use or its effect, but for what it *is in itself*. By putting consciousness in charge of its own object, so to speak, the imagination amplifies our ability to understand and appreciate the world for what it is, without reference to our fleeting interests. It shows the intrinsic meaning of things precisely by abstracting from all that is merely real, present, useful, or 'to-hand', as Heidegger puts it. Spelling this out in detail shows the way in which imagination and the aesthetic point of view are intrinsically connected.

One of the most important uses of imagination is in the building of figures of speech. To understand a figure of speech is to understand how a falsehood can reveal a truth. It is to bring the unreal to bear on the real, so as to experience the one in terms of the other. This may seem to be a very different capacity from the ability to make fictions, or the ability to summon images of absent and invented things. On closer examination, however, we see that there are striking similarities between the two capacities. In a figure of speech, whether metaphor or simile, we aim at the transformation of experience that comes about, when objects that do not belong together in reality are brought together in consciousness. This 'bringing together' is something we do; it is subject to the will, involves unasserted thoughts and conjures other worlds of experience than the present and the actual.

Figures of speech are truth-directed. The more adventurous they are, the more this constraint on them is felt, since language is a truth-tracking tool, and compels us always to look for 'the truth in what is said', even when, especially when, that truth is hidden. Consider this flight of fancy from Verlaine ('Il Bacio'):

Baiser! rose trémière au jardin des caresses!
Vif accompagnement sur le clavier des dents
Des doux refrains qu'Amour chante en les coeurs ardents,
Avec sa voix d'archange aux langeurs charmeresses!

Kiss! Hollyhock in the garden of caresses!
Lively accompaniment on the keyboard of the teeth
To the soft refrains that Love sings in passionate hearts with
Its archangel's voice to enchanting languidness![5]

Outside the poetic context who would think of a kiss as a hollyhock in a garden? But it is true that hollyhocks grow in gardens. It is true too that caresses weave and cling like undergrowth, and that the kiss rises to another plane, as hollyhocks, the tallest of garden flowers, stand out above the undergrowth. It is nonsense to describe the kiss as an accompaniment played on the keyboard of the teeth, but then the teeth are like a keyboard, are made of the same material, and are pressed down by the kiss that accompanies the murmurs of love in something like the way that the keys of a piano are pressed down in accompanying a song. As we are carried along by the poem we find no difficulty in absorbing the picture of kissing that it offers us, and the elaboration of this picture depends at every point upon the truth-tracking nature of language. The striking image of 'le clavier des dents' depends for its force on our knowledge of the mouth, the smile, the gateway to the other that the teeth can open and close, as well as our knowledge of the keyboard and its uses.

The truth-tracking nature of figures of speech is connected with another feature, which is that of condensation. Figures bring things together in such a way that the one casts light on the other with an immediacy that cannot be easily paraphrased. They do not describe the connections between things, but *make* those connections in the mind of the reader. Such connections can also be made by allusion, by irony, or by mere proximity, as in the following description of Octavia from *Antony and Cleopatra*:

Her tongue will not obey her heart, nor can
Her heart inform her tongue – the swan's down feather,
That stands upon the swell at full of tide,
And neither way inclines…

Shakespeare simply puts two subjects side by side, and at the same time evokes, through the rhythm of the verse, the experience first of the one and then of the other, so that the two *come together.* But they come together in the feelings of the audience – it is as though two experiences bleed into each

[5] Paul Verlaine, trans. Karl Kirchwey, *Poems Under Saturn*, Princeton University Press, [1866] 2011.

other to become one. A similar point was made by Coleridge himself, taking a couplet by Burns as his example:

> To snow that falls upon a river
> A moment white—then gone forever![6]

Here snow melting into a river is taken by the imagination as a simile of the short-lived nature of pleasure, and the poet has made the two experiences one.

The active nature of the imagination is shown clearly in Shakespeare's simile. We are being asked to bring one thing to bear on another, in ways that we ourselves partly control. I can emphasize the effect of 'swell', which refers to the moment when the tide is fully in and about to turn, when the momentary motionlessness is the sign of the greatest pent-up force. And I think of the swelling of the breast as someone, longing to say something, is held back by some scruple. And then, recalling the 'swan's down feather', three words suggesting purity, delicacy, innocence, I am granted an insight into Octavia's heart, and into the kind of person she is. The power of concentration in Shakespeare's image is such that it would take far more than this single paragraph to spell it out. And in spelling it out we would in any case lose what the image principally contains, which is an immediate experience of a woman's heart.

This brings me to Coleridge's distinction between imagination and fancy. His suggestion is that fancy reassembles what is already known, picking up images from the memory and setting them down side by side. The example he gives is from *Venus and Adonis*, which he quotes in *Biographia Literaria* Ch. XV:

> Full gently now she takes him by the hand,
> A lily prisoned in a goal of snow
> Or ivory in an alabaster band
> So white a friend engirds so white a foe…

No image changes the meaning of its predecessor: all stand mutely side by side, repeating the soft effect, marking time, as it were, until some revelation might be granted. This contrasts with the work of the imagination, which is to bring disparate things together, so that each casts light on, shows something previously unknown in, the other. His example is again from *Venus and Adonis*:

> Look! How a bright star shooteth in the sky:
> So glides he in the night from Venus' eye…

By bringing the two images together the poet reveals something that separately

[6] Coleridge misquotes. This is Burns' actual couplet from 'Tam O'Shanter', preceded by another simile of short-lived pleasure: 'But pleasures are like poppies spread,/ You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;/ Or like the snow falls in the river,/ A moment white—then melts for ever'.

the images do not tell. Venus's wonder at the boy's beauty, its contrast with the surrounding world, its sudden, shocking and yet infinitely distant quality – all are brought home to us through the act of synthesis. In short the one image casts light on the other – a truth is conveyed, and conveyed through an experience that we attribute to the Venus of the poem, knowing in that moment *what it was like* for her to watch the boy depart, who had refused her love.

Coleridge's preoccupation in attending to these lines of verse, and in the chapter generally, is with the poetic use of imagery, and he does not extend his thoughts to the contrast between imaginative and fanciful *narrative*. But it is clear that we can generalise the distinction he has in mind. Both imagination and fancy involve invention. But some inventions continue and deepen a theme or story, while others are merely added to it without casting any light on the matters that precede them. Fairy stories on the whole belong to the second class of narrative; the stories of Chekhov are paradigms of the first. In a Chekhov story each episode, each image, each word adds something to what has come before, changing in retrospect the experience of earlier paragraphs, so that the reader comes away from the text with the sense of having been acquainted with a whole and integrated experience.

The point could be expressed in another way. Of each image or episode in such a story we can ask the question 'why?' And the answer will be found in some other image or episode in the same story. This question 'why?' belongs to practical reason. It is asking, of both author and reader, 'why imagine *this, here*?' It expressly acknowledges both the voluntary nature of imaginative construction, and its answerability to human purpose. The question is, what purpose? It is here that the question of truth most acutely arises. It is, I suggest, precisely because imagination creates a sphere of unrealities that it challenges us to distinguish a true from a false reading of them. The imagination arranges images and scenes before our mind detached from present and immediate interests, so that we are free to consider them as they are in themselves, objects of sympathy and critical reflection. But, once we are launched on this path, questions arise concerning the truthfulness of the narrative. A successful figure of speech is one that in some way illuminates the thing to which it is applied – by causing us to experience it in a way that casts light on its inner reality, as the image of the swan's down feather casts light on Octavia's heart. Hence we distinguish irrelevant, whimsical or merely associative figures of speech from those that hit home. And they can hit or miss, regardless of the fact that they are always, literally speaking, false. Figurative language involves the truth-directed use of falsehood.

In just that way novels, representational paintings and theatrical dramas are subject to a regime of truth-telling. Sometimes fancy, in Coleridge's sense, takes over, as in the digressive fairy tales of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. But most writers and painters aim to show the world as it is, and to employ fiction, metaphor, magic and legend for this end. Their narratives confront the question of 'truth to life', and 'truth to experience'. By presenting

character, situation and emotion for their own sakes, fictions prompt the question whether reality is like *this*, and if so what does it mean. The answer to those questions is not to be found in a paraphrase or a literal statement. It is to be found in the experience of the reader or the viewer – in the work of the imagination as it occurs in the one who appreciates what the fiction is really about.

In this way, it seems to me, we should construct an idea of imagination, roughly corresponding to Coleridge's secondary imagination, as a truth-directed activity, which approaches the real by the avenue of the unreal. As such it is prone to certain disorders, one of which, but perhaps by no means the worst, is the disorder that Coleridge called fancy – in which the imagination marks time, as it were, summoning new images, new scenes, new symbols and metaphors, without thereby exploring the primary subject.

There are other disorders, however, related to the one defined by Coleridge, though more closely connected to the kinds of corruption that we witness in art, literature and music today. Two in particular have interested me in my work, since they have been brought so powerfully to the fore by modern literary and artistic criticism: sentimentality, and fantasy. Sentimentality is a vast topic that I here leave to one side, remarking, however, that it must be counted as a greater offence to the truth-directed mission of the imagination than fancy, since it involves the systematic faking of emotion. My concern in the rest of this paper is rather with the distinction between imagination and fantasy, towards the definition of which I believe Coleridge made a large and original step.[7]

Imagination as I have been describing it involves the active participation in forming images, scenes and narratives, with a view to understanding the world in which we live and our own states of mind and aspirations. Like figurative language it is a route through the unreal back to the real and this feature recalls Freud's description of the artist, as finding a route from fantasy back to reality. What Freud meant by fantasy is not quite what I mean. Nevertheless there is a widespread phenomenon that warrants the use of this potent word and which, while superficially resembling the imagination, is deeply opposed to it, in both art and life.

The phenomenon I have in mind can best be approached through a few examples. In the Greek tragic theatre it was a convention that death did not occur on stage, but was reported, either by the chorus or by one of the characters. It might be a particularly horrible death, like that of Pentheus in *The Bacchae*. But it was left to the spectator's imagination to fill in the details, and to filter out those details that might impede the flow and the sense of the drama. In a Tarantino film such as *Kill Bill*, by contrast, we are shown death on the screen, in a manner as life-like and horrifying as possible, so that nothing is 'left to the imagination'. Both narratives address our ability to entertain unasserted thoughts: neither the audience of the tragedy nor the

[7] For more on this theme see my 'Fantasy, Imagination and the Screen,' in *The Aesthetic Understanding*, London 1983.

spectators of the movie believes that they are in the presence of a real death, or that the scene before them is part of the actual, rather than an imaginary, world. In the first case, however, the audience takes an active part in summoning the appropriate image, and stands at sufficient distance from the event to assess its meaning, its relevance, and the validity or otherwise of a sympathetic response to it. In the second case the spectators are typically gripped by the image, cannot get it out of their mind, are unable to assess its meaning or relevance, and feel only an abstract and depersonalised sympathy, which is the counterpart of horror. You might say that, in the first case, the will of the audience is freely engaged in creating the image; in the second it is in the grip of a force that invades it from outside, and which compels an interest that is strictly irrelevant to the drama. Horror scenes in movies are for this reason addictive: they are unreal at the same time as *realising* something that grips us and stirs us in the deep, uncritical tumult of our animal life.

The habit-forming character of such images has been noted by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly and others, in their studies of TV addiction, emphasizing also the effect of the five-second cut, which glues the viewer's eyes to the screen.[8] Similar processes are at work in the inevitable car chase in a B movie, and indeed in all the devices that put effect, shock, and the greed for detail in the place of sympathy and understanding. Such devices invite the audience to *surrender* to the imaginary world on the screen, to put the active imagination on hold while the eye feasts, vulture-like, on the carnage.

It goes without saying that similar mechanisms are activated by pornography, the addictive nature of which is now well documented.[9] However, modern pornography has stepped out of the unreal into the real: what the viewer is witnessing is a real event, not an event that is realistically simulated. This very fact illustrates the way in which our ordinary perceptual mechanisms can trap us into the kind of visual greed that leaves nothing to the imagination, even when the event portrayed is faked.

A fantasy interest is typically directed towards aspects of the actual world that are either forbidden or shocking and which we strive to avoid. No mere narrative, and certainly not a metrical chorus in the sinuous style of Euripides, will address this kind of interest, for fantasy involves a hunger for the actual, the realistic, the thing itself. We can satisfy such an interest, however, through the *simulation* or *enactment* of the forbidden or shocking thing. While the object of imagination may be stylised and abstract, the object of fantasy is simulated and usually ultra-realistic. It is the unreal that out-realises the real.

Just why certain images and scenes are shocking or forbidden is a deep question of moral psychology. There is a philosophical tradition originating in Kant's moral philosophy, and reaching down through Fichte's theory of the subject and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to Sartre's *Being and*

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[8] The research is summarized in Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, 'TV Addiction is no Metaphor', *Scientific American*, February 2002.

[9] See Jean Bethke Elshtain, James R. Stoner and Donna M. Hughes, eds., *The Social Costs of Pornography*, Princeton, Witherspoon Institute 2010.

Nothingness, which emphasizes the contrast between seeing another as a free subject and seeing him as an object immersed in the flow of nature. This contrast is also a conflict: we strive to maintain the vision of the subject, the free and accountable being, in all our encounters with others. And when we see the subject extinguished by the bodily processes that he cannot control we are often deeply disturbed, since it is forbidden to the free being to see another person as a thing. Sartre ([1943] 1969, 519 ff) is surely right to suggest that this perception is the foundation of our concept of obscenity. And it is at the root of the traditional avoidance in art of sadistic, scatological and pornographic detail. To awaken our interest in those things is to step out of the realm of creative imagination into another order of perception. We avoid this because certain perceptions drag us down into the bodily underworld, the world from which we emerged during our infancy, but which still flows like a sewer beneath the ground of human freedom. When these perceptions are aroused, as by Tarantino, they exert their fixating and obsessing influence over the spectator, and interrupt the flow of imaginative sympathy. From the artistic point of view this is a fault every bit as damning as sentimentality and kitsch.

It seems to me that people are instinctively aware of the distinction between imagination and fantasy, and of the danger that fantasy presents to our peace of mind. This partly explains the use of masks in the theatre, and especially in the Attic theatre of ancient Greece and in the Noh theatre of Japan. The mask removes the actor from the stage, and replaces him with a purely imagined person – the *persona*. The expression on the face of this person is not directly produced by the actor. It is *seen in* the mask by the spectator. The entire action is, by this device, removed from the realm of the simulacrum and transferred to that of the imagination. The spectator is the active creator of the scene that he witnesses, as much as when watching a ballet, in which human actions are not reproduced but represented.

Fantasy as I have described it is a matter of degree: fantasies intrude even when they do not dominate, and there are ways of controlling and using them which do not detract from the imaginative involvement that is the true aim of representational art. Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, with which Coleridge illustrated the distinction between imagination and fancy, also contains controlled sexual fantasy, notably the charming metaphor that the goddess deploys in order to entice the bashful boy to cunnilingus:

> I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;
> Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale:
> Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,
> Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

Invoked through this pastoral metaphor the act is cleaned of its obsessive power, and we hold the image at a distance that does not trouble us. The reader responds sympathetically to Venus in her predicament, not vicariously to his own fantasy of the sexual act.

Putting the point more generally, there are two quite different uses that we

make of the unreal. In one use the unreal interests us as a way of expressing and enjoying desires that we have excluded from the real – desires that are forbidden, shocking, or disturbing, and which we provide therefore with simulated objects and substitute goals. In the other use the unreal interests us as a way of exploring the real, providing imaginary worlds in which we wander freely, our sympathies engaged, so as to understand things as we cannot normally understand them, for what they are in themselves, rather than how they answer to our interests. This use of the unreal draws on our creative capacity to entertain thoughts without believing them, to imagine what it is like to see, hear, feel, live in fictional situations, to make critical judgments concerning the unrealities before our mind, and in general to exercise our sympathies freely and without personal risk. There is, surely, the greatest difference between these two uses of the unreal, and although they do not correspond exactly to what Coleridge had in mind in distinguishing imagination and fancy, they help us to see the truth behind his observations. Coleridge saw that some uses of the unreal guide us to the real, while other uses stay immersed in the unreal, marking time in an emotional holiday. In the society in which we live, besieged on every side by art that arouses us without instructing us, it is surely right to recognize that the unreal can be both used and abused. Coleridge deserves credit for perceiving this, and for recognising that we can be as easily trapped and enslaved by our ability to conjure absent things as we are, in the greatest art, instructed and idealised by it.