

# Studying the Imagination

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This is my fourth or fifth visit to the University of Dallas, and I cannot think of a university I'd rather revisit. So I must warmly thank the Braniff Graduate Student Association for inviting me, especially to an occasion on a subject close to my heart.

Similarly, I cannot think of a more interesting constituent of our being than the imagination—initially engaging, terminally mystifying, and in between full of thought-inducing perplexities. It might even be that this is itself a primary puzzle: what it means to think about one capacity or faculty of the soul with another, or, more particularly, to try to apprehend what is, to be sure, not an a-rational element, but equally surely a partly non-rational one, with the resources of thinking, which is surely in essence rational.

Since most of you are students, you presumably study, and since you are graduate students you probably think of study as including a lot of so-called secondary literature—secondary meaning both derivative from, parasitic upon, primary texts and not so prime in itself.

I'm thinking of the choice of my lecture title, "Studying the Imagination," as giving myself a brief to dispense unasked-for advice. So here's the first bit: Don't do it. Don't approach this magnificent ability that preempts divinity by making worlds galore and outdoes the devil by snatching truth from teeth of deceit—don't first come to this inquiry by reading articles, or indeed by study at all.

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So it's: always one more primary text rather than yet another secondary article, always one more experience rather than yet another study. There are, I hasten to add, exceptions. Your own Professor Sepper has written a truly fundamental book on the imagination, aptly entitled *Understanding the Imagination* and subtitled *The Reason of Images*. Thus the work is concerned with the very problem of image study I mentioned, namely how we can capture the imagination in understanding, that is, by thinking, and it suggests one solution, that its images are actively imbued with reason. It has other excellences. The book actually asks you to stop reading and start imagining. It proposes a theory of imagining that involves playing with the appearances of one field of inquiry and projecting their possibilities upon another, a version of the imagination as a sort of dual vision that I embrace. In order not to leave this formal description imaginatively empty, let me give one, my, version of it from the *Song of Songs*; here is an abbreviated rendering of the man speaking:

Thou...art comely as Jerusalem (6:4).

It is the figure called a "simile," a likeness. I think actualizing the verbal claim means making an imaginative projection of the holy city's potent appearance upon, behind, around the beloved woman, a projection that expresses her specific grandeur. To get back to my point—such scholarly books are exceptions to my advice, which I will now put in an even more antinomian way: first write your thesis, then stick in oodles of references.

Begin instead with introspection. I've read the arguments that mean to skewer claims for looking within. They seem to me hard-hitting, but with a double-edged sword. By the same impossibility of our monitoring each other's internalities, it is also impossible to claim that we haven't got them—got that psychic duality that makes *self*-consciousness possible. After all, "self-conscious" has two meanings; one is apperception as Kant uses it, the introspective unifying awareness of all my cognitive functions; the other is the external sense of being oneself critically inspected. Neither of these events is really visible, unless you admit a hermeneutic of subtle signs, an interpretational art of reading small indices.

In fact, until the discovery of mirrors, human beings never caught even a glimpse of themselves, insofar as our face is most ourself; then our condition was exactly the one implied by introspection-deniers,

that others know us better than we know ourselves. I say “the discovery of mirrors” because, of course, they exist in nature. I will cite the most spectacular such self-discovery by means of a natural mirror. It comes from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Eve has just issued from her male birth. She wakes up and immediately discovers a liquid plane, a lake, that she looks into:

As I bent down to look, just opposite,  
A shape within the wat’ry gleam appeared  
Bending to look on me. I started back,  
It started back, but pleased I soon returned,  
Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks  
Of sympathy and love; there I had fixed  
Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire. (IV 460 ff.)

So her first act and affect is to fall in love with her so responsive self. And *thence* follows the whole sacred history of the human race, according to Milton, beginning with its ejection from the earthly paradise to its final reception into the heavenly home—Eve’s *felix culpa*, her happy fault.

I can’t pretend to have defeated all arguments against the legitimacy of introspection as the beginning of this particular—and perhaps of any philosophical—inquiry. Nonetheless, my advice is to use most secondary reading only post-positively—to corroborate and elaborate what you already know, not to give you ideas—particularly since it is by no means certain that it is either possible or good to “have” ideas or true charity to be “given” them. We have settled thought-moments, to be sure, but though no one knows how we get them, it is a matter of experience to know that we have them, usually, because we’ve made a persistent effort. Perhaps we sometimes have a thought-product, an idea, but if we do, we should probably put it away in mothballs.

Here’s a second unasked-for piece of advice, crucial, I think, to any preoccupation with the imagination; this time not a “don’t” but a “do.” Do engage with works of the imagination, be they expressions of passion as is much lyric poetry, or narrations of mythical events (“mythical” in the sense of stories ante-dating their telling) as are epics, or narrations of new-made tales as are novels. And, of course, look at visual works like paintings and listen to works that affect the soul directly by physically embodied numbers, namely music. The reason for

this injunction is obvious: How can you study analytically experiences that you haven't experienced?

Let me be particular by connecting the two bits of advice: "Don't begin by reading up but by self-observation" and "Do begin with taking in works of the imagination," and not scholarly articles, and I'll add, don't do it as a dull duty but as a labor of love. The first thing you'll discover—not be told but experience—might be, as does Eve in that supreme work of the theological imagination, *Paradise Lost*, that there are external images as well as internal ones. What's an example of an internal image? Well, the vision of herself as an aboriginal, non-Pagan, female Narcissus—that image itself occurs to Eve in a dream; thus it is an internal image; moreover the dream takes place, so to speak, in an English epic. "Epic" is a term from the Greek adjective *epikos*, pertaining to *epos*, "word." Epic is the poetry of many words, and the dream image of Eve seeing herself as a Greek myth in a fictive pond occurs in a long English poem of words, a Homer-rival. So here's a first experience of images: they can be somatic or psychic, external or internal—and their expression can be very complex.

And, immediately, a second discovery: Images are, as we might say, intermodal. Visual works turn into words, words into sights. The *Iliad* offers the first, unsurpassable example: Hephaestus' replacement for Achilles' armor that Hector has stripped from dead Patroclus, whom Achilles had sent into battle as his surrogate. Recall that Patroclus, the mildest, least self-assertive man before Troy, being encased in Achilles' armor, morphs, in a sort of ecstasy, into an Achilles-replica that displays a fatal Achillean aggression.

Achilles' new shield, a work of what scholars call "iconic poetry," is a magical artifact. It is round and around its rim flows Ocean, the river that bounds the world. Within it is depicted—this picture is a movie—the world that is carrying on while the Achaeans are locked in a stand-off before Troy. It is the ultimate visually specific artifact, with this small additional feature: it is a work of words. So words can image sights—and visions can be put into words.

The shield of Achilles takes Homer 910 words to depict, as I figure it (Book XVIII, lines 478–608 at seven words a line). But then think of the number of people who've read the *Iliad* and envisioned the shield. I have no idea what the number is, but say a million through the last 2700 years, and there'll be that many mental images from this less-than-

a-thousand words: One picture is worth a thousand words, to be sure, but a thousand words generate a million pictures.

As an aside: Sometimes Homer—as many true artists after him—says nothing and so speaks volumes: Achilles, searching for a point of vulnerability in the all-covering armor of Hector, finally sticks his deadly spear into him. Visualize, form a mental image; Homer is silent, but we see: It's his own armor; he's taking his own life, killing Patroclus incidentally, a hair-raising sight. Thus the "Plan" of Zeus is fulfilled. Visualization is the key to reading Homer.

It's also one element in *the* outstanding question concerning what is called "mental imagery," to my mind the crux of all thinking about imagining. A first aspect of this question is: How is this eyeless seeing properly described in all its elusiveness? What would be a truly satisfying phenomenology of mental imagery? A second aspect is: What is the difference between such images which are reproduced from memory and those produced originally by the imagination? Third: How can words morph into visions and visions be conveyed into verbal descriptions? Or, more generally: What are other intermodal and intramodal images and imitations, such as for touch the deceptive cuddliness of comfort robots, or for taste the convincing sweetness of sugar-substitutes, or for hearing the duck-fooling quacks of duck call devices such as made the Duck Dynasty fortune, or for smell, the scent that is applied from a bottle but seems to be exuded by a body?

And a fourth aspect, for the moment: Is memory deceptively transformative? Is the original imagination an organ for lying fictions, for deception, or a conduit for revelatory illumination? And so, more generally, how do we explain those images that are apparently not imitations, don't have an origin in verifiable originals, be they stored in human memory or laid up with the Muses in Olympus? Or, perhaps, the stunning notion: Do all images have, *ipso facto*, by their very fact, originals? For example, when Homer paints word pictures of gods, should we infer that there *are* gods in some mode of being?

To these four questions not a soul knows the answer—which to seriously philosophical spirits is not an inhibiting but an inciting fact.

That brings me to my third and last preachment. My first two said: Primarily, attend to internal and external experience. Now the complement, which says: Be uncompromisingly ontological; first and last, before even going into mental imagery, attend to an account of the

*being* of images, their features insofar as they justify approaching the imagination with the intellect. Thus the ontological inquiry will direct you not only to the essence of images, but to that ultimate problem of thinking about imagining I mentioned at the beginning.

Back to the shield: Just as Achilles, the Warrior Incarnate, goes into battle carrying before him the living world, *his* world, which he enlivens and endangers, and which, in turn, both protects him and is vulnerable to the piercings of hostile weapons, so the writers who have, to my mind, written most primally and originally about the imagination, are fully in possession of and behind the world of experience. Think of Plato's Socrates in the *Republic*, of Augustine in the *Confessions* and *On the Trinity*, think of Kant in the "Schematism" of the First Critique, and of Hegel's worldly pageantry in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. I'm not name-dropping here, because, talking to graduate students, I know you can supply the particular matter.

For the ontology of images there is, I think, an indisputable prime text: Plato's *Sophist*, which my translating colleagues and I took a wicked pleasure in subtitling "The Professor of Wisdom." Its problem is not the definition of a sophist—only lexicographers get satisfaction from definitions—but the delineation of the essence of sophistry as embodied in a practitioner. On the face of it the dialogue seems to be an exercise in the only method of which Socrates can be said to be guilty: the so-called "method of division and collection." This method, imaginatively applied, does itself in: Socrates develops seven specifications of the Sophist-type, so it must eventually come home to the participating reader of the dialogue that, at the least, this method vehemently over-determines the sophist or, at the worst, befuddles his being. In any case, it is clearly not a method at all, if by a method is meant a learnable jiggled procedure. For it turns out that to do significant dividing, you have to know beforehand the whole universe of discourse, including the features of the being you are seeking to delimit. Else how will you know what you must posit, and why you may reject its negation? So Socrates gives up on division in general and attends to the particular division which introduces the insight that a sophist is an image-maker, a circumventer of genuine originals in his profession of wisdom. At that juncture it becomes necessary to understand what an image is in its very being. And that is the high point of the dialogue. The final collection of the specifications of sophistic image-making is only a bit of clean-up; it is

packed into an eminently forgettable last paragraph (268 C–D). But who can forget the analysis of image-essence?

It requires a drastic deed, which is the imaginative paradigm for our dialectical West, where “dialectical” means absorptive overcoming, preservational undoing. It requires a parricide, in which the parent to be undone is Father Parmenides. It had been revealed to Parmenides by Aletheia, the Truth-divinity—which is to say that he had received the gift of really hearing what human beings say—that we can utter things which we cannot think. We can mouth “is not,” but we cannot objectively think what it is that is not. We can say “no-thing” but we cannot directly think it. I might say here that much later Aristotle gives, incidentally, one explanation of this fact when he says in *On the Soul* that even for theory, for contemplative intellection, we need a mental image, a *phantasma* (III 8). And of course such an internal appearance is more a something than a nothing; hence there is no thoughtful concern with nothing.

The Parmenidean progeny, the stranger from Parmenides’ city, Elea, who carries out this parricide for Socrates’ most thoughtful youngster, Theatetus, does it in an exemplary dialectical fashion. He accepts from Parmenides that “true,” “real,” “genuine” nothing, not-being (*ouk on*), is not and, if spoken, conveys no thought. But he claims—a tremendous novelty—that there is a second kind of negated being, a non-being (*me on*). It is a roving sort of negativity that does not claim to annihilate, to produce an unthinkable, only spuriously sayable, no-thing, which “is not” (*ouk esti*). Rather, as it runs through the world and through speech, it produces difference and diversity. Motion is not rest, but that does not make it a not-thing, a nothing. It makes it other than rest, different from rest, a non-rest-being. Thus real-world opposition is not negating annihilation; it is *diversity*, a potent Platonic form.

Its name in the *Sophist* is “Otherness.” I’ll just add here that besides introducing the principle of diversity among the Socratic forms, a principle that all but dominates our current political discourse, this mighty dialogue says more than any other of the forms or ideas themselves and the community (*koinonia*) in which they are engaged.

But all I’ve said so far of the dialogue was prelude to the point: The sophist-type has been identified as a master of spuriousness, who substitutes images for original beings. (Incidentally, Socrates speaks appreciatively of and respectfully with well-known human sophists; it’s

the type that he derides.) The reinterpretation of not-being, a conceptual thicket in which the Sophist threatens to hide, was undertaken by the Elean stranger for the sake of an ontological analysis of an image. As Otherness, Nonbeing does not subject world and speech to the white-out of Parmenidean truth. That demanded a world of absolutely undifferentiated, completely compact unity, and speech that cannot deny anything, neither by deliberate nor by unintentional falsification. So non-being is now available to explain the being of an image.

Any image, be it internal or external, made or natural, revealing or deceiving—every image is, particularity apart, a communion of opposite forms. Or, if the Platonic framework bothers you, say, a conjunction of antithetical concepts. An image is always *not* what it is; it *is* a being in the mode of a non-being. Try this: Next time a friend shows you a picture of his baby and says: “That’s my child,” say: “No, it isn’t.” If the friend is a graduate student in philosophy, he will look at you aghast for a moment, then get it and laugh. “You’re so right,” he’ll say, “but it’s something—better than nothing.” So what is it?

The baby picture is what most images are: an imitative image. It may have been intentionally diddled with so as to be in some aspect false (even babies might benefit from beautification), or it may be as candid as an artless snapshot, but although the features may be altered, the subject imaged is recognizable to those who know or can surmise the look of the original. This imitative essence of imagery distinguishes images from symbols, which do not, or no longer, signify by similarity. For example, there’s the sign for a ladies’ restroom, a skirted figure. It used to be an image, but since most women no longer wear skirts, it’s now a symbol.

Let me say here that I’ll be talking from now on about sights mostly, sights and their magical relation to words. The reason is that, although there are lots of intra-modal, that is, intra-sensory imitations, visual images, imagery, and imagination seems to prevail over other kinds in complexity of detail, profusion of sorts, and effort of production. Thus the problems of visuality seem to me more gripping, particularly as it relates not to morphing into another sensory mode, but to translation into speech, that is, a transmutation from spatiality (for visuality seems to be indefeasibly part of the extended world) into ideality (the post-sensory meta-physical realm reached by speech). Moreover, there is a deep theory of the most poignant kind of audibility (except perhaps weeping), namely music. Schopenhauer claims that it is imageless in its

very being, since it is a direct, non-representational expression—not a representation—of the human will in its vital immediacy (*World as Will and Representation* II, Supplement, Ch. 39). My point is that this withdrawal from the imaginative realm of music, the most moving of artifacts, and therewith of audibility leaves the field to visuality and its imagery.

So what is an image, a being that is not what it is? I could flatten the inquiry by asking: What is an image such that it's not what it is of? That would make the question into a pseudo-question—one that dictates the answer. "Of" is a preposition of derivation; it signifies dependent belonging. Thus "the United States of America" are contained by, united by the continent, America, that underlies them and on which they depend; as Lincoln says: "upon this continent" (First Draft, *Gettysburg Address*). So the question would encapsulate the derivative, dependent feature of an image, whereas the point of an image ontology might well be to give the being of an image an essence of its own. It would be the more desirable if it turned out, after all, that some images have no originals. That, after all, is what we mean when we babble so incessantly and admiringly of a human ability (!)—here I've put an exclamation point—called "creativity," a power once attributed to God alone, particularly that of making something out of nothing.

Here is the ontology of the *Sophist* in brief. In Plato's dialogue it goes both for images and for the human type that has turned itself into an image, a being that is a poor but plausible imitation of its genuine original, the philosopher. Incidentally, here is yet another image perplexity: Why is the plausibility of an imitative image, its very rhetorical persuasiveness, absolutely no guarantee of its accuracy—and yet possibly a mark of its truthfulness? I'm thinking, for instance, of portraits that deform every proportion and distort every coloration and thereby produce a true likeness.

Our common experience is that things may be genuine or they may be fake and words can be true or they can be deceitful. Forgeries are perfectly real as things and that's what makes them hard to discern as forgeries, as counterfeits. False rhetoric is often perfectly good, even especially persuasive as language, and that is what makes it seductive. Thing-imitations are not nothing simply; word falsifications are not nonsense simply: on the contrary, they are potently not what they pretend to be. The Elean stranger, Parmenides' true progeny, in following the way

of thought, can be understood as setting before himself this double “*im-passe*,” this *a-poria*: how to hold fast to the real human purveyor of imitations by saving his mere and sometimes false images as *somehow* real beings. Put ontologically: How to understand images as not being mere nothings? And how to preserve the false character of the sophist-type as an indictable reality.

Again, put ontologically: How to understand a deceiver (be he personally innocent by reason of ignorance or deliberately bad because of corruptness) as doing something potent and even crucial to the very being of a world?

Here is the answer: The not-being proscribed by Father Parmenides was rescued from utter nothingness by being understood as that aforesaid principle which relates all beings to each other *as* other, the form of Otherness, the principle of ontological relativity (255 C ff.). It is scattered through the whole realm of thought, and as *the* principle of relation holds its world together in a communion. Yet as a principle of opposition—and that’s the practical application—it is the source, the *arche*, of diversity: any “this” is not a “that,” but not, for all that, a nothing. Rather, once more, it is an *other*. Every negation is an assertion of something that is otherwise.

Thus Parmenides’ utter Not-being has turned into qualified Non-being, responsible for all worldly, the political variety up to that diversity which is indeed America’s current preoccupation, racial, ethnic, gender diversity (whose euphemistic inverse is “identity politics”).

And, almost incidentally, an image is now explained as well. It is not nothing but an original’s other, related to this original by that intensely peculiar relation called “likeness” or “similarity.” Similarity, then, has this ensuing analysis: One being is similar to another when its perceptual looks, its appearance, is near-identical, while its thought-look, its form (*eidos*) is other. That Otherness, however, is *also* Non-being, so that the difference between original and image is also a *drop-off* in being: An image is a lesser being than its original. And so any proud father will agree: the baby’s picture is not *the* baby, it’s *of* the baby but is much *less* a baby than the infant itself. Here, incidentally, is another fascinating problem about these lesser beings: For all their affliction with secondariness, be it as quick electronic snapshots or time-consuming artful portraits or silhouettes outlining a natural shadow—for all these mechanisms of derivativeness, such material images tend to be longer-

lived than their flesh-and-blood originals. For example, I own a cut-out of a full-size portrait of my grandmother; once I looked liked it, now she looks like me; she's been dead four-score and three years or so. Or, I own a version of Plato's *Sophist* which has had countless reiterations since its words originally issued from Plato's mouth, and a servant first entered them into a scroll. (Isn't it remarkable that twenty-four hundred centuries on we're back to scrolling!)

Let me now top off these observations of image-study with another great text, not on the ontology of images but on the phenomenology of the imagination, Augustine's *Confessions*, Book X. I think I'm justified in calling it a phenomenology, an account of appearances, because it precedes and prepares, by way of a vivid description of the inner experiences of remembering and recollecting, what is, to my mind, Augustine's unsurpassed contribution to time-studies, and, indeed, the basis of Husserl's canonical *Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*. Thus both Augustine and Husserl derive their understanding of time from a description of memory.

But this Augustinean image of memory is also an image of the imagination, which he locates within memory, as its workshop, so to speak.

Contemporary memory studies speak drily of memory as a storage space. That is a very shrunken terminology. Augustine speaks of the "huge court," the "immense capaciousness" of "its fields and vast palaces." To me, memory, as he observes it in himself, has three potencies: Much that is within it is time-affected, but some items are atemporal, for example, the "learnables" (*mathematika*). Memory itself is the source of temporality, briefly, in this way: perception is always now; past and future are made possible by remembrance and expectation, by image-recall and image-projection, both time-marked by the thickness and sequence of the intervening images. Much that is within memory is, in the lingo of memory studies, "reproduced," that is, memory renders sensory intake as a matterless reproduction, an imitation by abstraction from stuff. Some of what is within, however, for example, what goes to make possible expectation, the hope or fear of things yet to be, and above all what is responsible for imaginative fictions, is produced—no one knows exactly how—in the memory depicted in Augustine's expansive view. This memory is thus not merely a place for laying up memories, a storage space speaking drily or a treasury speaking enthusiastically, but

also, as I said, a laboratory, a workshop for imaginative novelties. And finally, not to omit what matters most to the monk, the memory has in its recesses, way back, a path out and up, toward God.

To sum up the effect of what I've tried to express: Not a soul knows how imagination is possible or, putting it in contemporary terms, how the brain's functions become consciousness's activities. For example, not a soul really knows whence come poems, whether, as in Homer's experience, they are of the Muses who dwell on Olympus or, as in Wallace Stevens' doctrines, they are

...of the [scriptless] mind in the act of finding  
What will suffice. ("Of Modern Poetry")

This general un-knowing is not at all caused by a lack of effort but is, in fact, the laboriously achieved result, not so much of diligent study as of musing introspection. It is also, once more, a telling test of a student's worthiness to be called a "lover of wisdom," a *philosopher* rather than a doctoral candidate. If you're that much the more eager to engage in the inquiry because it's bound to be inconclusive, you're the one — if not, the *other*.