Imagination: Powers and Perils

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When we think now about what makes up our inner lives we aren't inclined to think much about imagination. In general, we're disposed to think that imagination is something that artists have a lot of (sometimes too much) and that the rest of us don't really have to worry much about. When Freud—still the most influential of psychologists, though few want to admit as much—when Freud maps the inner life, there's an ego, a superego, and an id, but he makes no mention of an imaginative faculty per se. Freud doesn't really do much to distinguish between fantasy, which is something directed by the id, and some other faculty called imagination, which can, in Samuel Johnson's terms, "give us something that is new." In *The Happiness Hypothesis*, an engaging recent book of relatively sophisticated popular psychology that tries to do some soul mapping of its own, Jonathan Haidt simplifies Freud a little. Freud's id becomes a powerful but unpredictable elephant; his ego the rider, doing what he can to direct the pachyderm below, but also responsive to its peculiar wishes. There's no room for Freud's superego in this widely sold account, and not much discussion of imagination, either.

Yet I persist in thinking that a map of the inner life that doesn't pay serious attention to the imagination isn't much of a map. We stand to lose too much, and ignore possible pleasures and profits, by giving this force (if that is the best thing to call it) the silent treatment.

The romantic period was the time when people seemed to take the imagination most seriously. In Shakespeare there are moments when the imagination is celebrated: in one of the sonnets he makes the well-known claim that his poem will outlive all the grand stone monuments that seem so much more imposingly substantial. But in the plays, there are no poet heroes—no heroes of the imagination—and in Duke Theseus's famous speech Shakespeare happily lumps together "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet" and says that they are "of imagination all compact." It's really not until Blake that you begin to hear prolonged, rhapsodic hymns to the imagination. Wordsworth writes movingly about it in *The Prelude* and elsewhere; Coleridge treats it theoretically in the *Biographia Literaria* and mourns his own imagination's demise in one of his greatest poems, "Dejection, an Ode"; Shelley celebrates it in his *Defense of Poetry* and, for many, concentrates its powers with an unparalleled intensity in his lyric poetry.

I'll come back to the poets in time, but to start I want to take up a slightly less exalted point of view on the subject. I want to think about the role that imagination plays and doesn't play in the lives of everyday people.

The author Ian McEwan once made an observation about imagination that seems to me especially pregnant. McEwan is the author of nearly twenty novels, books that straddle the divide between serious literature (that is to say literature that can plausibly change one's life for the better) and entertainment. A questioner asked McEwan if, when he was growing up, he was exposed to literary influences. Were there a lot of books in his house? Was he surrounded by writer and artist types?

No. McEwan's family was lower middle class. There were a few books in the house, presumably a Bible, a prayer book, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, maybe. But that was about it. Then McEwan adds something. In fact, he says, my mother was creative in her own way. She had quite an imagination. And how was it manifest? McEwan's mother was a worrier. She spent some of her time—maybe more than some—spinning out scenarios about the bad things that could and perhaps would happen to herself and to the people she loved. "The writer in me is from my mother," he said. "She was a great worrier, which requires an imagination." One might guess that she imagined her children getting sick, her husband losing his job, her marriage hitting the rocks. People who specialize in worry often work matters out in rather intricate terms. Their dark fantasias are detailed and specific and often well shaped, too. In good Aristotelian fashion, they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. There is a protagonist and an antagonist—sometimes a person, sometimes simply fate. There is conflict and there is resolution, generally resolution of a dispiriting sort: the ship hits the crag; the lightning strikes the roof; the balloon falls from the sky or tears away from the spot where it was tethered on the ground; the child abducted from the grocery store by unknown persons is never seen by her parents again.

Schopenhauer says that life would improve a great deal if we could commit ourselves to two simple principles: Overlook it. Look ahead. By overlook it, he means resist dwelling on the numberless slights and outright insults that virtually all human beings must sustain. We're to rise above "the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely / the pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay, / the insolence of office, and the spurns / That patient merit of the unworthy takes," to use Hamlet's words. And we're also to look ahead, which means imagining possible futures, and that in turn means—for Schopenhauer is a great pessimist—future disasters. But Schopenhauer would counsel against excessive worry. For, he says, in truth, we live in only one time and that is the present moment. We ought to do the best we can to fend off disaster, and then get what modulated pleasures that we can (the best pleasures are always modulated pleasures for him). Chief among these are the pleasures that come from detachment: intellectual activity and aesthetic contemplation.

From this vantage, McEwan's mother is probably someone who went too far in imagining the worst. Yet, as McEwan says, there is something creative about that: worrying, with its plotting and character creation (or elaboration) is akin to fiction making. Still, if good fiction gives pleasure and instructs, one might say that excessive worrying gives pain. It also gives a failed form of instruction: it is productive of delusion. The worrier is constantly imagining disasters that are not going to happen. Worrying beyond a certain point is bad self-tutelage. Worrying is still a creative act: it's simply a creative act that will poison your days. Yet his mother's worrying, I suspect, helped McEwan learn to shape those worrisome, anxiety-inducing fictions that have brought him a successful career.

Worry isn't the only form of toxic imagination abroad in the world. Proust thought that jealousy was in many ways analogous to literary imagining and that in fact it could often be a goad to creation. But he also realized that jealousy pure and simple was living hell. Jealousy is a species of worry, I suppose, but it is worry of a specific and painful sort. The jealous lover is in constant fear of being betrayed by his beloved. He's perpetually on the watch for signs of infidelity, and when he cannot detect them, he sometimes creates them. He resorts to spying and to subterfuge. He reads mail not addressed to him, opens the diary, listens in on the other telephone. When things grow worse, he hires a private investigator to follow his beloved—if someone so regarded can be called "beloved." Constantly in the theater of his mind, he creates scenarios in which the one he loves is betraying him. The scenarios can be graphic, detailed. Much of what Aristotle says about concocting a good drama applies to concocting a jealous fantasy. There must be mystery; there must be an unfolding of information; there must, finally, be enlightenment as the fantasist learns that he's been played false, or hasn't.

Shakespeare's Iago is the all-time poet laureate of jealous fabrications, as he tempts Othello to ever greater heights of suspicious fiction making. Iago, who has been called "a motiveless malignancy," is an earth-walking demon in his own right, but he also, as it were, stands in for Othello's dark imagination, helping to make connections and conjectures that the hero himself could never quite manage. When Iago tempts Othello, it is sometimes as though we are overhearing an internal dialogue.

Jealousy is depraved or debased imagination; so is a certain kind of worry. Both can melt gradually into paranoia, one of the most horrible of human conditions. We might say that ambition, which Milton is willing to call "that last infirmity of noble mind," can also be a form of delusive imagination. One continually conceives the world in terms of the advances one hopes to make within it: those who aid and abet are allies; those who hinder are impediments. This is the furthest state possible from the one Kant commended when he asked us all to regard each human being as an end in himself. The ambitious man does not plan, he plots; he does not befriend, he networks; he does not extend charity but makes a deposit in what he thinks of as "the favor bank." Meanwhile, his imagination—if we can call it that—spins images of future triumph. "Poor man wanna be rich," as the poet of Asbury Park says, "rich man wanna be king. King ain't satisfied 'til he rules everything."

These abuses of imagination are sad for a few reasons. One is that they fill the mind constantly, creating anxiety, agitation, and a form of self-absorption that leaves no room for the individual to perceive what is going on around him. The jealous man cannot see the spring come in with its wonders—he's too busy thinking about all the erotic juice and joy that might be tempting his beloved. The ambitious woman sees only those who can help her on her way; the rest of the people around her are mere cutouts. (Experiencing one of these rather grasping moods, Emerson said to himself: Act as though the people around you are real. Who knows? Maybe they are.) The worrier frets the day away. "I cannot look thereon," Yeats says, thinking of all the wonders that surround him, "responsibility so weighs me down." In the case of the man with deranged imagination, his responsibility is to his obsession. He is wedded to it, like an artist to his vision.

The other danger of dwelling with an obsessed imagination is that one can precipitate the disaster one most fears. The jealous man alerts his wife to temptations she hadn't noticed and now begins to contemplate. The worrier makes public his worry. "I hope that bully never picks on me," the worrywart schoolboy says, and lo, the bully, who has never had a particular interest in the little worrier, gets a new idea. As to ambition, Proust has it about right: it seems to him that when we see what another person's narcissism requires to sustain or augment itself, we're prone to do all we can to prevent him from getting it. Why this is it's hard to say, but it is, in my experience, true enough.

Lacan asked his patients regularly to pose themselves a simple question: "Where do you stand in regard to your desires?" The implications are manifold, as are the possible answers. In a similar spirit, one might ask people to ask themselves, "Where do you stand in regard to your imagination?" The worriers, the jealous ones, the strivers—and don't we all play these roles at least from time to time? —clearly are afflicted by their imaginations. But what about those people who answer, with a mock self-deprecating shrug, "Really, I don't have a problem here. From the time I was small I was told that I never had much imagination—and I guess that's true. And maybe that's not the worst thing in the world. An imagination can get you into trouble." True, an imagination can be troublesome. But surely lack of imagination—or, maybe more accurately, the suppression of one's imagination—can create problems of its own.

All children are in their ways creatures of fancy—they love to conceive lovely futures for themselves. They love to daydream. And in those dreams, they make themselves out to be heroes and lovers and poets and wizards and warriors and adventurers and all the rest. Yet some children are sundered from that world of innocent dreaming, sundered completely. They become the sort of adults who know the reality principle and nothing else. They always know what time it is, and they are always on time. They live under the reign of the old god Chronos—of Kairos, the blessed and sublime moment, they know nothing. These are relatives of the Unknown Citizen for whose tomb Auden wrote his inscription. "Our researchers into Public Opinion are content / That he held the proper opinion for the time of year; / When there was peace, he was for peace; when there was war, he went." Such people are all judgment without fancy; all mind without heart; in their extreme form they are what one aspiring visionary (C. Wright Mills) called them, "crackpot realists." Nothing is so for them but what they can weigh and measure, multiply and divide. They hate poets, and poets hate them back, as Eliot's murderous portrait of that "young man carbuncular" in *The Waste Land* attests.

Northrop Frye, one of the last century's most valuable thinkers and someone who was particularly absorbed by the issue of the imagination, once observed that we human beings inhabit two worlds. These are the world that we actually live in and the world that we want to live in. The world that we want to live in is rather different, Frye implies, from the world that we fantasize about living in. The world that we want to live in is something that is actually humanly attainable. We're not talking about fantasy or fancy, but about some other, more plausible version of experience. We enter that plausibly desirable world from a few directions. One of them is negatively, through the back door, as it were. We enter it through satires like Swift's "Modest Proposal," where the author prescribes the raising and eating of its native children as the way to shed Ireland's material woes. Lying inside Swift's essay, like a rose in a poisonous bramble, is a vision of the way Ireland might be redeemed. (Don't talk to me, he says, "of being a little cautious not to sell our country and consciences for nothing; Of teaching landlords to have at least one degree of mercy toward their tenants." But of course such things are very much what Swift wants to be talked to about and to discuss in turn.) You don't get that redemption until the end of the piece, but it inheres in the essay from nearly the start. Other visions of the world that we might live in if we dared and could imagine more intensely and more generously are to be found in the work of the poets who seek renovation outright, poets like Blake and Shelley and, in his way, Wordsworth. But there is a sense of a better world, too, in the narrative voices of novels like *Middlemarch* and *Bleak House*. There the narrator's irony signifies the gap between the way life is conducted and the way it might be. The vision of renovation is often indirect in great fiction, in a way that it's not in, say, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound,* but it is there to be perceived nonetheless. Henry James's injunction to writers, to become people "on whom nothing is lost," applies to readers as well: we need to read consequential novels for the possibilities of change they evoke, the hope that is latent within them.

One might say, using an eighteenth-century formulation, that authentic imagination blends vision and judgment in due measure. Imagination can work facile magic to be sure—it can be the medium for fantasy, ambition, jealousy, worrying, and, of course, self-aggrandizement. But it can also be a way of making contact with real possibilities of an individual and a collective sort. Great literature and consequential literary criticism have told us this for centuries, and we need to recall from time to time that it is so.

But of what use is this knowledge to the man or woman who is a victim of his own imagination? What does the higher imagination that is literature do for the jealous obsessive and the shivering worrier?

Psychoanalysis has an answer to this problem. In psychoanalysis (assuming it is still practiced in something approaching its classic form somewhere or other) the patient spends years writing a bad novel. The novel probably never reaches paper, at least beyond the analyst's notes, and it will never have much public currency. The novel stars the patient as the protagonist and features the analyst in a great variety of supporting roles. Due to the phenomenon that Freud calls the transference, the patient is inclined to inscribe the therapist in his set dramas of love and loss. There are many permutations of the transference, as the relevant literature describes it, but most commonly the therapist ends up playing a parental role of some sort. The patient begins to ask for—sometimes he demands—the same satisfactions from his analyst that he did from his mother and his father in the past. These satisfactions are often the ones that he demands from those he loves in the present. And of course they are not forthcoming. No wife or child will ever love you as your mother did—or as you dream that your mother might have done. "The mother's face, the purpose of the poem, fills the room," says Wallace Stevens. The line is lovely, but it's actually part of a meditation on the inadequacy of familial memories to sustain the poet against late-life fears. One might say that the return of the mother's face is too frequently the purpose of the faulty poem that is the psychoanalytic transference.

What does the analyst do to the flawed imaginative creation that arises from the transference? Something like a literary critic—but only *something* like one—he debunks the story. He points out the fact that the patient is asking him for a quality of love he cannot provide. He poses the question—which almost answers itself—as to whether the patient might be prone to demand that quality of love all too often from others in his current life, others who cannot provide it. The transference is not a simple event, and I cannot claim to be encompassing its complexities here, but it is enough to say that psychoanalysis was in many ways designed to contend with the problem with which this essay began, the problem of the sick imagination.

So what is wrong with transference analysis as a mode of demystifying and stabilizing a toxic imagination? The objection is that transference analysis can sometimes do its job too well. It is not that psychoanalysis does not work, as so many of its critics are prone to say, but that, given a long enough period of time, it often does accomplish what it sets out to do. It kills the destructively fantasizing power, yes, but all too often it leaves nothing behind. Patients emerge more cautious, tighter, grayer in presence. They take up less psychic space in a room. Their auras have gone from rainbow to taupe. They've been—clichés have their wisdom—shrunk. Rilke refused analysis by saying, "If my devils are to leave me, I am afraid that my angels will take flight as well."

After years of having his imaginative excesses pinned specimen-like to the wall, analyzed, and debunked (by himself and by the analyst), it is no surprise that something inside the patient may elect not to do much more imagining at all. He is delivered from worry and jealousy, but the danger is that his mind becomes rather desertlike.

But that doesn't really matter, you might say. As a culture we're not committed to psychoanalysis anyway. We've found that other things work better. Maybe.

It seems to me that we still have ways of scorching the imagination, so as to protect—well, so as to protect whom? The imaginer, one might say, but also perhaps we're out to protect society at large—or at least its status quo arrangements. When a young man or young woman has a strong imaginative component, that person often goes off to a university to study the arts. He might major in art history, or literature, or philosophy, which can—witness Nietzsche and Emerson and Schopenhauer—be a form of art. What does the young person learn? The techniques of criticism. These techniques are often demystifying; they are almost always distancing in the extreme.

Not all professors of literature and art go around telling their students that the major works of the Western imagination should chiefly be understood as ways of oppressing women, the poor, and people of color. But almost all professors do greatly prefer analysis to immersion—and the more sophisticated, complex, official sounding the analysis is, the better. There's a great sentence in Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* that captures this situation: "The only humane virtue we can hope to teach through a more advanced study of literature than we have now is the social virtue of detachment from one's own imagination, recognizing always that such detachment made absolute destroys any individual imagination." The irony here is palpable. For Bloom the destruction of a human imagination could never qualify as a social virtue, or even as a personal one. Such destruction could only be a disaster.

What we want is to educate the imagination, to borrow a phrase from Frye. We don't want to indulge it (in worry and grandiosity and the rest), but we don't want to exterminate it, either. I'm asking, of course, what hope literature might have for transforming the imagination from a toxic to a life-giving power—or what power great writing might have to wake up an imagination that's gone dormant, or that has never been terribly active to begin with.

But why would one want to do this—rekindle an imagination—when we've seen what dangers imagination can bring? Imagination is perilous, fair enough. But a person without imagination has no real capacity to envision a more humane and rich future and then try to create it. He'll be unequipped to understand how his life could be turned into something better than it is. He's unlikely to be able to see the world from anyone's point of view but his own. He's unlikely to live anywhere, actually, than in the immediacy of his own wants. He'll be self-centered, grasping, and pragmatic—a creature who inhabits the state that Blake calls Selfhood. I'm interested, then, in what one might call a redeemed imagination as a possible cure for a damaged or fallen one.

Robert Frost liked to say that though he himself was no literary critic (heavens forfend), his poems had literary criticism *in them.*

What he meant by that, I suspect, is that his poetry contained an awareness of its own powers and limitations. His irony signified his sense of what his imagination could illuminate and what it could not, how it applied to life and how it might not. "Mending Wall," the poem that ends in the speaker's neighbor saying once again the line he learned from his father—"Good fences make good neighbors"—is a case in point.

The poem is set on a day in spring when the poem's speaker and his neighbor have agreed to meet and restore the rock wall that divides their respective properties. The speaker of the poem—who is not Frost, not quite—is playful, arch, and worldly. He makes sophisticated fun of his neighbor who hasn't got the capacity to brood on the question of boundaries and walls. "I wonder / If I could put a notion in his head," the speaker says. But he can't. His neighbor hugs obdurately to the wisdom of his father: "Good fences make good neighbors."

Most of the reader's sympathy is with the poem's speaker. He's rather like us, a cultivated person capable of having a little fun at the expense of an unlettered acquaintance. ("He is all pine and I am apple orchard," the speaker says. "My apple trees will never get across and eat the cones under his pines.") But there comes a point in the poem where one feels that the speaker's wit is a bit too nimble, his attitude about walls too blithe, almost capricious. "Something there is," he says, "that doesn't love a wall, / That wants it down." Yes, fine. But then the speaker goes too far in his condescension. "I could say 'Elves' to him, / But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather / He said it for himself." The speaker wants his neighbor to join him in his easy disregard for boundaries—he wants his neighbor's thoughts to mirror his own: "I'd rather / He said it for himself."

When the imaginative narrator pushes too hard, we begin to doubt him a little. The old time-worn wisdom of his inarticulate neighbor begins to be something we want to reconsider. Maybe there is some measure of truth in his affirmation of boundaries, even if he can't deliver that truth in cogent terms himself. His skepticism acts as an ironic brake on the nimble play of wit the narrator engages in.

Maybe his kind of looseness about fences (and defenses) can at times bring on disaster. The fact that the poem proceeds in supple but consistent iambic pentameter suggests at least a partial endorsement on the poet's part of structures and limitations. In a famous pronouncement, Frost said that writing a poem without meter is like playing tennis without a net. What would it be to live life without walls?

There's imaginative bravura at work in "Mending Wall"—but there's questioning judgment as well. The poet delights in his powers to play with boundaries, but he's suspicious about the play, too. "Mending Wall" is an excellent poem in itself, but also a model of how an educated mind might work—unfolding with brio, but also interrogating itself all the way. "The mind is the terriblest force in the world, father," writes Stevens, "Because, in chief, it, only, can defend / Against itself. At its mercy, we depend / Upon it."

Blake spoke of the imaginative process in terms of the Prolific and the Devourer, the Prolific being something like the unbridled imagination, the Devourer in part the force of limits. Great art is always a mixture. There is imaginative force, manifest in metaphor and images and inspired flights; but there is also judgment, made manifest in many ways, but chiefly in irony, irony in this case being nothing other than the signified gap between what we posit to be true or possible and what may actually be the case—the tough and resistant case.

So should those with distempered imaginations (most of us, at least at times, I imagine) spend their time in the reading of great literature? Is that the way to tune the instrument? Of course, there is reading and there is reading. There is the kind of reading that challenges us. It makes manifest a criticism, if not of life, in Arnold's phrase, then a criticism of our interpretation of experience, our view of life. Such reading allows us to adjust our instruments, or perhaps even to conceive forging them anew. Anyone who has inhabited a consciousness like Tolstoy's or Proust's makes contact with the sense that there is more to life than we had ever imagined possible. In R. P. Blackmur's phrase, the reader's "stock of available reality" increases.

But we do not read this way in general. Usually we read as tourists and not as travelers, as gourmets not as athletes in training, as journalists and not as thinkers. We do this, I think, because we have yet to open ourselves to the massive powers of transforming tutelage that great writing can provide. We are told, implicitly and explicitly, by the purported experts that the best way to read is with as much detachment as possible. We are to become creatures of judgment exclusively. We are to become academic inhibitors. It is as though the priests of this or that shimmering faith decided en masse that the holy books were a matter exclusively for historical analysis and not for revelation in the here and now. Imagine this: whenever a young man or woman begins to edge toward being inspired by the person of Jesus Christ or Muhammad or Moses, the minister, imam, or rabbi rises up to block the way. We'll have none of that around here! So the Bible is fit for deconstruction, the Koran for forays of the New Criticism, the books of Moses for intellectual carbon dating and nothing much more.

These critical methods are superb in a sense. They are superb at solving the crisis of the imagination. They do so by killing the imagination. Every year some of the most imaginative young men and women in the nation declare that they will study literature. They proclaim that they will immerse themselves in Yeats and Stevens, become adepts of Woolf, read Milton as no one has before or since. And then their professors come along and do to their students what was slowly, attractively done to them: they help the students to exchange hopes of imaginative power and discretion for lordly mastery over the works that matter. If psychoanalysis can be the murder of imagination so as to save the individual as a functioning social integer—and also to deliver him or her from a great deal of pain—then psychoanalysis is not dead. Indeed almost all that now passes as literary criticism and art criticism (and much of popular cultural criticism, too) is a form of psychoanalysis, a psychoanalysis of the work and the reader. And this analysis does about the same thing to the student as the therapist's analysis can do to the patient.

In the most immediate sense, society profits from this. People with highly active imaginations can be a danger to themselves and to those around them. But in the long run, we would be better off, collectively, if we educated imagination rather than trying, tacitly, to eradicate it. Samuel Johnson greatly feared the excesses of imagination, his own in particular. He was a man who spent a good deal of his life trying to find some form of expression to channel his hyperactive mind. Writing a dictionary, glorious as it was in certain regards, simply wasn't enough. He eventually defined a dictionary writer as "a harmless drudge." There was too much pulling the sledge and not enough running free through the hills. ("An old white horse galloped away in the meadow": one of Eliot's most beautiful lines.) There was too much Devourer, almost no Prolific at all. But later in life, Johnson did find a form through which to express both imagination and intellect, and that form was life itself. He turned himself into a character—and did so quite knowingly, I think—in a brilliant true-life novel by his young friend, Boswell. He pronounced and he prophesied and he recounted his glorious, sad past; he rolled down hills with children and drank tea all night; he discoursed in apothegms and "tossed and gored many." His superior intellect was still on display, but something about Bozzy's presence helped him to deploy it with a playfulness and even a joy that he never had shown before. Sometimes he grew tired of the role. He said once to Boswell, "Sir, you appear to have only two subjects, yourself and me, and I am sick of both." But by and large he gloried in his new condition. For a while he achieved a state where imagination and intellect were as deeply interfused as mother and child, husband and wife, lover and beloved. Samuel Johnson during his Boswell years seems to have been truly happy.