



## Interestingness and the Imagination

MARTIN E. MARTY

University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

First, let us locate an evangelical imagination. Three approaches, among other possible alternatives, come to mind. Latin phrases serve as codes or signals.

### *Imagination post mortem dei.*

A story will bring this into focus. A couple of summers ago my spouse and I were hosted at dinner by a couple at Aspen, Colorado. People of means and culture there welcome people of lesser means and aspirations to culture, who serve them by asking questions. The unimaginative questions to ask for openers are, “Where are you from?” and “What do you do?” I choose, and chose, “Tell me, please, three things about you that would not be in your *curriculum vitae*.”

That evening our host answered only one thing, and it took us through dinner and takes me through the years, in respect to one form of imagination. The man was from St. Louis. He was obviously well off. I knew he was a supporter of that city’s great cultural enterprises. He had the bearing, even in Aspen clothes, of a corporate executive. His answer to my question? “The most important thing about me is that I believe, with the poet Wallace Stevens, that ‘the imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos.’”<sup>1</sup>

Wallace Stevens, a Hartford, Connecticut, lawyer and insurance executive, is coming to be seen more and more as the prime American poet of the mid-twentieth century, one of our national “classics.” Few poets have reflected and written more profoundly on the imagination or better exemplified its use in constructing the normal and the opposite of chaos. In a famous lecture on “Imagination as Value,” Stevens argued that “poetry...is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet’s sense of

<sup>1</sup>I checked out his quotation, which is also cited in Lucy Beckett, *Wallace Stevens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1974) 32.

the world, that is to say, his attitude, as he intervenes and interposes the appearances of that sense.”<sup>2</sup>

For Stevens, however, “the particulars of reality” did not include the God of Christian faith, or God at all, except as imaginative construct. He borrowed Christian images to promote a humanistic redemption through the imagination *post mortem dei*, after the death of God. The only contemporary one would think of matching with Stevens, so far as quality of reflective poetry is concerned, T. S. Eliot, came at the issue from the opposite angle, for poetic imagination in his case relied on a transcendent analogue whose particulars of reality *were* grounded in God.

Eliot, in “Second Thoughts on Humanism,” argued that “man is man because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them. Either everything in man can be traced as a development from below, or something must come from above.”<sup>3</sup>

*Imagination versus Deum.*

For stimulus to imagination and pondering of it, no poet of our time excels Stevens; no wonder my Aspen humanist friend could so creatively disturb our dinner. I commend works by and about Stevens, and move on to the world Eliot has opened. We can call it the Catholic imagination, which because it is Christian is responsive, but it moves versus Deum, toward God, in the classic pattern of Western Christian mysticism.

Being a poet, Eliot would agree with Stevens that “we live in the concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them.”<sup>4</sup> Yet he was alert to creed, dogma, and substantive views of faith in general. On those terms, this form of imagination is open both to mystical aspiration or contemplation and to philosophical construction which, again, was contemplation. The imagination falters and blurs when the word “mysticism” appears, so messy are attempts to define or locate it, and I shall hurry past it to make other points. Yet notice it we must.

George Santayana, the great skeptical philosopher at Harvard while Eliot and Stevens studied there, and who influenced them both, said in a fugitive passage something to the effect that the Catholic imagination in mysticism seeks union with God on God’s level. The Protestant imagination seeks union with God on the human level; it is a mysticism based on divine condescension—something implied also by Catholic Eliot in his notion of “development from below.”

W. T. Stace, a great student of mysticism, once was said to have said that “there are no Protestant mystics,” though he cited some Protestant ones. His remark did inspire an anthology of Protestant mystics by two anthologists who were surprised, even in their defiance of his charge, to find that many Protestants agreed. There were no such mystics and there were not to be. Thus “Calvinists, *en masse*, thought that even if there were mystics, there shouldn’t be

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 39. For more exposition, see all of Chapter Two, “Imagination as Value.”

<sup>3</sup>T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, new ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1960) 433.

<sup>4</sup>Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1951) 154.

any....” Another scholar in the field, R. C. Zaehner, spoke of “the Protestant suspicion of mysticism” and its imagination.<sup>5</sup> In all cases, there was fear lest the imagination here be exercised against evangelical understandings of both revelation and grace, in which God takes the initiative.

As in mysticism, so in theology; the imagination *versus Deum* persists, not only in classic Catholic thought but also in some recent Protestant endeavor. Thus, to match Catholic David Tracy’s great representative work *The Analogical Imagination* there appeared in 1981 a work by Gordon Kaufman, a Protestant at Harvard, *Theological Imagination*.<sup>6</sup> This work Kaufman sees as an effort to help replace neoorthodoxy, with its accent on revelation. Indeed, one major reviewer noted that “the imagination is coming into ascendancy” and revelation “appears to be on the wane.” Kaufman glories in this; “theology is (and always has been) essentially a constructive

work of the human imagination.” Says his critic, Garrett Green, “By conceiving imagination only under the metaphor of construction, he misses the fact that imagination has a passive as well as an active movement, that it not only shapes reality but is also shaped by it.”<sup>7</sup>

### *Imagination coram Deo.*

Catholic contemplation, whether in the form of mysticism or theological construction, tends to fall into the orbit of a “theology of glory” against which Luther, as representative of the evangelical imagination, rebelled. That leads us, then, to a third type, imagination *coram deo*, exercised not in order to attain or “construct” deity but simply in the sight of God, responsive to God. Not that imagination wanes; indeed, when located in the act of faith it sometimes led Luther to high-risk formulations that, taken out of context and placed in new ones, came close to the Wallace Stevens style. Thus Luther would speak of faith as “the Creator of divinity in man” (*fides is creatrix divinitatis in nobis*)<sup>8</sup> and, almost colloquially, would say, “*Glaubst du, so hast du*” as you believe, so you have. On such a basis Ludwig Feuerbach could create a systematic theology-as-anthropology, theology turned on its head. The turn haunts later evangelical theology at the edges of its own radicalism.

Luther set out to control the imagination by locating it responsively in story, in history. The classic passage for this evangelical imagination may be said to have appeared early, in Luther’s theses for the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518. There he poses two styles:

19. The one who beholds what is invisible of God, through the perception of what is made (cf. Romans 1:20), is not rightly called a theologian.

20. But rather the one who perceives what is visible of God, God’s “backside” (Exodus 33:23), by beholding the sufferings and the cross.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup>For some discussions of Protestant Mysticism, see Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World’s Religions* (New York: Oxford University, 1976) 153ff.

<sup>6</sup>Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981).

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 11; see the review by Garrett Green, “Reconstructing Christian Theology,” *Religious Studies Review* 9:3 (July, 1983) 219-22.

<sup>8</sup>See the *Weimar Ausgabe* 40/1.360 for “*fides*.”

<sup>9</sup>Words from the Heidelberg Disputation are from *Martin Luther*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1961) 502f.

The evangelical imagination was to be busied, as an agent or *ancilla*, a handmaiden of faith, “perceiving what is visible of God.” This limited efforts to attain union with God on God’s level, to “construct” a poetic God or a theology which does not find its initiative in response to revelation. In simpler terms, this form of imagination leaves us “stuck with a story,” confined by a view of God’s “backside,” content with the traces of God in history—in short, the cross. That could mean that Christian preaching, teaching, conversing, liturgical observance, prayer, and action all become a boring monotony of repetitions. Same old story. What are the chances for exercising imagination and seeing the new issue, recalling that newness belongs to the nature of Gospel and God’s perceived actions themselves? I will devote the remainder of these remarks to this form of imagination, which must take on the character of “interestingness.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Interestingness and This Imagination*

“Interestingness” is an inelegant word, but it appears in the canon, The Oxford English Dictionary, without even any marks such as “obsolete” or “rare.” It means “the quality of being interesting.” And “interesting,” a few dictionary lines higher, means “having the qualities which rouse curiosity, engage attention, or appeal to the emotions; of interest.”

How confining the evangelical imagination seems to be. Martin Thornton has said somewhere that all you need, physically, to sustain Christian response, is a loaf of bread, a bottle of wine, and a river. Orally and aurally, you also need the words of and about the Word, which are testified to in another physical object, a book. Admittedly, it is an expansive book, a miniature library of sixty-six books. Still, it fits comfortably in a corner of the hotel desk drawer; not much to go on. The imagination *post mortem dei* seems limitless. It can take the form of “a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality,” of *all* reality, not just that of one story. The imagination *versus Deum* is also unconfined; the mystic or theologian reaching for “what is invisible of God,” seems less bound by finitude and limit. But *coram Deo* the imagination works with what seems to be a limited repertoire. Can we stretch it?

Yes. We need a vivid image, one that imparts—shall we say?—*interestingness* about possibility. I quote George Steiner reviewing *The Oxford Chess Companion*:

*The Oxford Companion* lists 701 chess openings or main variants on these openings.... There are 400 different possible positions after each player has made one move; 71,852 after the second; once three moves have been made by white and by black, the possible legal configurations exceed nine million. The number of distinct, non-repeating 40-move chess games which can be played is much greater than the estimated number of electrons in our universe.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>I first developed the notion of “interestingness” at a midwinter convocation at Luther Northwestern Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, in January, 1982; little of that first address survives here.

<sup>11</sup>From a review clipped from *The Times Literary Supplement* sometime in the summer of 1984, read on a boat amid the Greek islands; the rest of the issue was jettisoned and the date is and should be lost. Let imagination take over.

So much for the possibilities of 40-move games on one little board. The human brain has billions, trillions of interactive cells; there are a billion Christian brains; “the particulars of reality” to which they connect and relate and with which their imagination works is so near *literal* infinity that one can fairly say “literally infinite.”

Still, somehow, a preacher gets up and says, “The text for our morning meditation is written in the eleventh chapter of...” and the congregation nods, knows it will nod, knows that nodding is expected of it, knows that the preacher knows that nodding is part of the transaction. Why? Because the interestingness is structured out of the experience. There is no imagination.

Not that all imagination is to be exercised in a first line, up to which it is difficult to live. Told that readers might buy and read a novel whose first line had the necessary ingredients of religion, sex, royalty, and profanity, one writer came up with an opener: “Get your damn hand off my knee, said the duchess to the bishop.” The imagination, exhausted, ended with that line. Many a sermon has lain inert after a too “ert” first line. If interestingness is not all thus to be

packaged, where do we locate it, and what inheres in assumptions about it? I shall make several proposals.

### *Imaginative Growth*

First, given the structure of the imagining human brain, the marvel of the human body, the wonder of the human creation, and the miracle of the human story centering in Creation, Incarnation, Atonement, Resurrection, Advent, one must work very hard to suppress interestingness. That proposition is not based upon a naive “high” and unfallen view of human nature and is not an expression of optimism. All one need do to counter such notions that it is, is to reflect on the scope and intensity of the imagination of evil. Instead, this positive view is simply based on the mathematics of mind and world and story. It reflects the fact that, as Suzanne Langer put it, “We live in a mind-made world.”<sup>12</sup> Conversely, we respond to texts that indicate, as Paul Ricoeur would have it, a “surplus of meaning.” This does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid; Ricoeur himself reminds that while “it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal. The text presents a limited field of possible constructions.”<sup>13</sup> It is in that sense that texts are traces of “what is visible of God,” the “backside.” Yet we have already shown that these are limits that hardly limit—except for the sake of building community, clarifying, and redeeming through story believed.

The corollary of this notion of a mind-made world and a surplus of meaning is that one must work at it to be uninteresting. At times the endeavor of the Christian community seems to be an exercise in convention, routinization, and inhibition designed to render the inherently interesting infinitely uninteresting. Sometimes this results from a lack of decisiveness about the story to which one responds; perhaps it results from the character of personalities who do the

<sup>12</sup>Langer is quoted in Susan B. Weston, *Wallace Stevens: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University, 1977) 1.

<sup>13</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976) 79.

responding. They seem to echo an eighteenth-century character colorfully, interestingly, named Boscoe Pertwee: “I used to be indecisive but now I’m not so sure.” More likely than a personality issue is one of faith itself: there is a forgetting or refusal to acknowledge the Source of the gift of interestingness and an unbelief in the possibility of imaginative followup.

Somehow the inner and the outer have to match; there has to be a lifelong growth in the connections between mind-made interestingness and the surplus of meanings to which one responds. This demands a growth through responsiveness. This permits, indeed almost demands, an alertness to the natural order. Precedent comes from Luther himself. Erasmus, who refused to marry and hence to participate, understand, or delight in procreative process “looks at the creatures as a cow stares at a new gate.” Ordinarity and familiarity afflict too many. Meanwhile, the “upright” have a passion for wonder and inquiry. “For whenever they behold a work of God, they imagine how conditions would be without it. Death ennobles life, darkness praises the sun, hunger kisses the precious bread, sickness teaches the meaning of health, etc.” Therefore they “search, explore, and ponder the works of the Lord, esteem them, and imagine

what the world would be like if these works had not been created.”<sup>14</sup> Imagine that.

Human creativity equally inspires imagination. That of Franz Kafka, who spoke of the literary process: for the writer, the night is never night enough, the silence is never silent enough. That of Wayne Gretzky, whose brain and eye seem to permit him to slow down the perceived motion of a hockey puck and permit him to act. That of Vincent Van Gogh, who admitted that when he attacked the canvas, he did not know what would ensue, but still he must work with the torment of matter. That of Mozart, who seemed to be a channel by which the music of the universe reached the universe of ears. That of preachers of parables, who have “limited” understandings and texts that reach into almost limitless, more-than-chessboard-extended, horizons.

Alongside the natural world and human creativity there are human relations. Interestingness derives from the imagination that has gone the depths, into suffering, and pondered “what is visible of God” in them. The face of the aged callee in a senior citizens’ home is then, to the caller, not a boring visage but a map of ranging experience, a record of many acts of love and responses to assault or ignorings. One sees saintliness on the face of the sinner. And there is imaginative responsiveness to the call and act of God in what we call vocation. It induces a scripted life, but there are almost limitless possibilities within each singular life script lived in the bounds of Christian communalism.

Enemies of the evangelical imagination are inattentiveness to the story, listlessness in response in general, loss of wonder about the world of the text. “The past is a foreign country. They do things different there”; that line comes from someone otherwise unknown to me, one L. P. Hartley. That text does not let me evade. W. C. Fields: “I have spent a lot of time searching the Bible for

---

<sup>14</sup>See these and similar Luther citations in Martin E. Marty, “Simul: A Lutheran Reclamation Project in the Humanities,” *Cresset* 45:2 (December, 1981) 7-14.

loopholes.”<sup>15</sup> That is a classic statement of the evasive imagination, which is exercised more energetically than the obedient one but, needless to say, to less effect.

Finally, one wonders whether interestingness is lost through absence of commitment to craft. One critic of Winston Churchill tried to put the statesman and orator down with “Winston has devoted the best years of his life to preparing impromptu speeches.” That could also be a compliment. He took so seriously the audience and the context that he had to overprepare even the apparently spontaneous—and still leave room for the spontaneous. Dare the preacher, teacher, Christian conversationalist, or enactor, be less devoted to her or his craft? Interestingness, the product of the imagination, does not simply occur spontaneously, though spontaneity is often a gift beyond “surplus of meaning” from the Giver of Surplus. The evangelical imagination is a busy one, seeking perfection, careful about detail, always seeking more options to exercise. And, in the act of receiving bread and wine, responding to baptism, hearing the word, and acting, forgiven, in vocation, it also knows the virtues of Sabbath, of idling motors of imagination, and restless rest. Those who live near or off such imaginations will profit from them.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Nigel Rees, “*Quote...Unquote*” (New York: St. Martin’s, 1979) 77.