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Imagination

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> *Imagynacion is a might thorow the whiche we portray alle ymages of absent and present thinges.*
>
> *The Cloud of Unknowing*
>
> *Two things cannot be rightly put together without a third; there must be some bond of union between them.*
>
> Plato, *Timaeus*

According to conventional wisdom, medieval understandings of the imagination lack imagination by comparison with Hamlet's "king of infinite space" and the Romantic sublime. It would take centuries, so the old story goes, for Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* to elevate the imagination to the status of "the living Power and prime agent of all human perception."[1] But this narrative has problems. The dependence of thought on perception and imagination was axiomatic for premodern writers: the mind retained sense impressions in the form of images that could be further abstracted into concepts and propositions.[2] Experiences and things did not enter the mind directly; "but the images of the perceived objects are available to the thought recalling them" (Augustine, *Confessions*, X.viii (13)). But while the insubstantiality of images was often lamented, it was by no means simply lamentable. It gave images their plasticity. The imagination had "thirdness"; it formed links between different kinds of mental phenomena.[3] Without this plasticity the mind could not learn, hope, decide, and plan; it could not anticipate a future time. Augustine thought it marvelous: "I [can] combine with past events images of various things, whether experienced directly or believed on the basis of what I have experienced; and on this basis I reason about future actions and events and hopes,

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and again think of all these things in the present" (X.viii (14)). Not only did the imagination play a significant role in the process of thought; it was a *sine qua non* of our ontology, especially the qualities and dimensions of our sentience. It had a crucial role to play in our salvation and God's providential order.

Nicolette Zeeman describes Langland's allegorical character Ymaginatyf as a "capacious inner sense," "a distinctive inclusiveness, with . . . inbuilt, etymological allusions to images, imaginative functions, and 'seeing,' as well as to hypothetical and speculative forms of cogitation" (84).[4] The generosity of this conception does not lag much behind Coleridge's "living Power and prime agent." True, Coleridge's further specification of the secondary imagination as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" would have sounded a bit heterodox to premodern ears; and *Piers Plowman* is chiefly about psychological travail and the threat posed to salvation by the *limitations* of human understanding – a concern regarded by some scholars as consistent with the distressed fourteenth century's interest in negative theology and accompanying critiques of knowledge (Utz 129–130). Capacious though Ymaginatyf may be, Langland's poem is full of false starts and frustration. The Romantic imagination suffers little from frustration; however tiny the human figure standing on the verge of the abyss, its mind contains the very thing (the "eternal act of creation") that seems to outstrip it. Arguably, the medieval imagination only translates "ineffable and therefore unknown forms of sentience" into truth tolerable by the human mind (S. Langer 39); it transmits divinity, rather than secreting it. But the notion of composition as re-creation of Creation was known to the Middle Ages; "high medieval authors . . . sometimes . . . stylize[d] themselves as *werltgot* (i.e., Lord of the fictional world created by them)" (Utz 131). Exceptionalist understandings of the imagination have a very long, if erratic, history. But even humbler notions of the imagination gave it reach; the medieval imagination mediated between different kinds of minds, powers, and worlds, between the past and the present, here and there. If not divine creativity, it was divine connectivity, responsible for extraordinary states of mind. How could we know God without solitary contemplation of the "ymages of . . . absent thinges"?

Humanist and new-critical histories of art commonly assign the values of preservation, craftsmanship, and communal experience to the Middle Ages, and creativity, inspiration and individual experience to the Renaissance or the nineteenth century. Ullrich Langer, for example, argues that medieval poets "celebrated the survival of human culture, not its original reinvention by an individual" (22; Utz 129). It is true that medieval poets often saw themselves as "makars" (makers), but no one doubted that prophetic dreams and visions were mediated by the imagination. And the cosmological deterritorializations of Bernardus Silvestris or Dante Alighieri, the *summa*-style expansiveness of the *Roman de la Rose*, the historical sweep of Laȝamon's *Brut*, are hardly modest efforts. *Translatio* did not simply preserve the past; it made it new again. But the point of this essay is not to reverse the charges on presentism's *timor mortis*. It is to explore the *interdependence* of individual and community, and the consequences thereof for our understanding of the richness and complexity of medieval understandings of the imagination.

There are, of course, different cultural and historical articulations of this interdependence, and we ought to attend to them. But we should also take care not to overstate the salience of these differences, or neglect common elements. Tradition grows, and creativity emerges, from networks *constituted by* intersecting histories. The "I," like its mutually constitutive webs of relationships, is a unique combination of genetic potentialities, traditions, and experiences, many of which are also parts of other such combinations. The psychoanalytic term "intersubjectivity" designates this paradoxical dependence of subjective experience on relationality. The theory of "mentalization" also builds on the idea that we come to understand our "own" minds only by interacting with the minds of others (Fonagy *et al.*). Subjectivity is a *process* that occurs when relationships beckon to, and thereby help to design, the minds of those linked thereby. The social bond, that is to say, depends on feelings of understanding and being understood. Relationality is not groupthink; it *enables* self-process. However much they may have longed to soar like skylarks and wander lonely as clouds, Romantic writers always had to grapple with the embeddedness of imaginative activity in relationships, with family, friends, lovers, books, "nature" (Carlson). Indeed, in *Frankenstein*, the temptations of aloneness lead to disaster. Contemporary neuroscience, moreover, confirms the importance of relationality to imaginative process. Nancy Andreasen, for example, argues that "genius" emerges within and from the very communities whose patient labors and inside-the-box innovations might seem incapable of predicting it.

William Dunbar's "Lament for the Makars" is both an ambitious poetic genealogy *and* a melancholy catalog of memory-images of dead or dying predecessors, to which "facultie" he is linked by fear: "*timor mortis conturbat me*," "the fear of death confounds me." Death has taken all his "brethren"; and since he is himself a maker, "On forse I man [Death's] nyxt pray be" (l. 95). Does Dunbar present himself as the *therapon*, the companion/survivor who addresses us when we are in the state "in which there is no other to respond" but him? In the end, only the *therapon*'s loyalty matters; since he will not run away from us, or put us away, or leave us for dead, only his interlocution can restore our "freedom of speech" (Davoine and Gaudillière 209–210). But perhaps Dunbar is not the *therapon* but the subject maddened by fear, who has no others left to respond to him. Or perhaps we can't distinguish the one from the other. This is intersubjectivity in the form of identification: "He has tane Roull of Aberdene,/ And gentill Roull of Corstorphin/ Two bettir fallowis did no man se" (ll. 77–79). Dunbar already knew what Freud would later argue, that we learn of our own death only through the death of the other, that such knowledge as we have of the solitary experience of dying is ironically relational. If Dunbar's catalog is a humble medieval registration of creaturely vulnerability, it is also, gravely, singularizing: the commonness of death does not make it any less traumatic; it is when we feel the hand that has touched so many other shoulders touch our own that we are at once singled out, and subject(ed) to the law of nature.

The imagination's role in processing the transformations necessary to life and death is repeatedly foregrounded in medieval narrative, certainly as important a "source" for medieval conceptions of the imagination as are treatises on the soul or on dreams (Kolve). The dream-vision genre in particular – a long-attested form, but explosively popular in the fourteenth century – has attracted much attention from critics interested in medieval ideas about the imagination (Lynch). In Chaucer's dream-vision poem *The Book of the Duchess*, the apparently obtuse narrator – a *therapon* of the order of Sancho Panza – questions the melancholic Man in Black about the latter's lamentably lost "queen," White. The two sift through the images of White stored in the Man in Black's memory, but the narrator doesn't understand how she was lost until the Man in Black finally exclaims, "She ys ded!" (l. 1309). But who is this mysterious Man in Black anyway? Is he John of Gaunt, whose duchess, Blanche, died in the course of the 1368 plague? Then again, the Man in Black says "y am sorwe, and sorwe ys y" (l. 597). Does he stand for an emotion? Is he an allegorical figure? Or is he (also) a reprise of the brooding noblemen in Chaucer's French sources? Perhaps he is part of the narrator's own melancholic mind – a figment of *his* "sorwful ymagynacioun" (l. 14)? But how does that help, since the narrator is, by his own account, a "mased thyng" (l. 12), uncertain of his circumstances and the nature of his being. Ontological indeterminacy once again accompanies the work of the imagination.

Melancholy wounds our sentience, our (feeling of) aliveness. We know that our lives have happened to us, but we cannot *claim* them or even feel that we have *experienced* them. We can't tell whether we are alive or dead. If we shelter the images of lost objects inside our minds, we also take on their deadness. As courtly love knew, when existence is a doubtful matter, the smallest, most delicate of responses – a look, a shift in tone, a ring carelessly left behind – can call us back to a conviction of aliveness. The *therapon* is therefore a signifying fool (cf. the garrulity of both the narrator and Pandarus in *Troilus and Criseyde*). He embodies the responsiveness that calls us back to aliveness, and the promise, the oath of loyalty, implicit therein. How can "I" be dead if I can hear the friendly commentary of a "third" who is neither the lost object that walks now with her back to me, nor the ruined "I" that follows her? Sometimes epiphany is a flash of intersubjectivity, when what needs to be said can finally be said.

In *BD*, of course, epiphany is equivocal. Arguably, the poem's ending illustrates the problem of "other minds" (Austen) as much as it illustrates the dependence of understanding on the social link. But the narrator and the Man in Black have *accompanied* each other in a process of imagining, remembering, and wondering, while hovering ontologically over the borderline between life and death, as doubles, friends, ghosts, indeed as images. "She ys ded!" is the moment when the power of mutual attention stands out in sharp relief. Intersubjective imagining has given the Man in Black, as it would give Don Quixote, the liberty to be mad, to be undead, for as much time as he needs, without interference from uncomprehending others; and the attempt creates the sought-for link, the "third" (in *BD*, poetry itself) that links the one to the other, however perplexing the experience and uncertain the outcome.

The pair buy time, and use it to affect (in all senses) each other. The ontological uncertainties of melancholia can enable as well as impede exchange; through conversation, even with "oneself," the fixations associated with melancholia can be loosened up, plasticized, and brought into a new relationality in "present" time.

Galen, in the first century CE, fully somatized classical psychology, and medicine followed suit well into the seventeenth century. "Black bile" was thought to be the bodily "humor" responsible for melancholy. But even when somatic explanations of psychological distress dominated understandings of the mind, the imagination was thought to mediate the interactions between mind and body, and images were often used in healing. Premodern medicine was well aware both of the power of the placebo effect and its dependence on the quality of the relationship between healer and sufferer. In *BD*, the narrator refinds his mind by engaging with the Man in Black in the kind of friendly probing and conversation that had long been enjoined on physicians, even before the time of Hippocrates (Jackson). Imaginary doubling is the chief mode of affect transmission in *TC* also. The narrator is the servant of the servants of Love; Pandarus is a failed lover whose perplexities register on the comic rather than the tragic scale. Sustaining this double sensitivity, to the horror of desolation as well as its humbling prevalence, is essential to the finding of the addressee. Unlike the narrator of *BD*, however, Pandarus is a failed *therapon*. In Book V, he tries to take all the tragedy out of Troilus by urging upon him all the conventional remedies for melancholy (including socializing, and entertainment (Olson)), but in an attempt to evade rather than fully engage Troilus's madness.

Mysticism: The *Therapon* as Inhuman Partner

We are constantly changed by the minds of others; feelings are notoriously "contagious." But the fact of our vulnerability to influence does not necessarily make its effects any less perplexing. We do not always feel close to other minds, let alone to the mind of the "Other" – whether that Other be God, or the Fates, or the ancestor. Sometimes we feel the Other knows us better than we do ourselves; sometimes we feel we can channel messages from the Real, sometimes we fear we will be shattered by them. *The Cloud of Unknowing* begins with a prayer to "God, unto Whom alle hertes ben open, and unto Whom alle wille spekith, and unto Whom no privé thing is hid" (Gallacher, ll. 2–3). This is intimacy indeed. But if our hearts are open books, who, or what, is reading them? The *Cloud* author warns us of the pitfalls of the contemplative life, especially for "newlings":

> For yif it so be that thei . . . here redde or spoken hou that men schuld lift up here hertes unto God, as fast thei stare in the sterres as thei wolde be aboven the mone . . . Thees men willen sumtyme with the coriousté of here ymaginacion peerce the planetes, and make an hole in the firmament to loke in therate. (Gallacher, ll. 1978–1982)

One thinks of Nicholas, the clerk in Chaucer's Miller's Tale, who "evere caped upward into the eir" (I 3473) while pretending to receive his "showing" of God's latest plan to destroy the world. But the *Cloud* author's sarcasm is a measure of his seriousness: newlings are in danger of mistaking images for spiritual realities, and thus forgetting the differences between their minds and God's.

> For before the tyme be that the ymaginacion be in grete partye refreynid by the light of grace in the reson . . . thei mowe in no wise put awey the wonderful and the diverse thoughtes, fantasies and ymages, the whiche ben mynystred and preentid in theire mynde by the light and the corioustee of ymaginacyon . . . alle this inobedyence is the pyne of the original synne. (ll. 2223–2230)

The attempt to imagine the unimaginable can readily threaten the onset of trauma, exclusion, madness, the irreparable loss of the ear of the Other.

And yet we know that medieval mystics regularly risked this separation from God, and used images to assist contemplation. When Julian of Norwich is near death, her curate arrives with "the image of thy maker and Saviour. Louke thereupon and comfort thee therewith." Though she is looking "up rightward into Hevyn," she agrees instead "to sett [her] eyen in the face of the Crucifix . . . wherein [she] beheld a comon light, and . . . wiste not how" (Crampton, ll. 89–98). Julian speaks of fear and doubt, of "seing and knowing in sight with a soft drede" (l. 429), of the challenge of properly evaluating the images she sees: "[o]ne tyme mine understondyng was led downe into the see ground, and there I saw hill and dalis grene, semand, as it were, mosse begrowne." Her spirits were "in grete travel" when beholding this image, doubting it was a showing; but then God "gave me more sight whereby I understode treuly that it . . . was a figure and likenes of our foule dede hame, that our faire, bright, blissid Lord bare for our sins." For Julian, contemplation has its ups and downs. She means to reassure us (and herself) that these vicissitudes are survivable. It is safe to know God, she insists; she sees no wrath in Him, only love. In fact there is a rhythmic movement in the *Shewings* whereby ambiguous images and static give way to God's gifts of knowledge; mystical experience is, finally, more "hamely" than it is ravishing or transporting. Though God's "werkyng . . . overpassyt al our imagyning and all that we can wenyn and thynken," nonetheless "[h]e will not we dredyn to know the thyngs that He shewith." He wants us to know him, for "He will be sene and He wil be sowte, He wil be abedyn and He wil be trosted." (Crampton, ll. 361–375).

Rhetoric: Can You Hear Me Now?

Hildegard of Bingen pictured her own visions as spiritual flames passing from the heavens through the mind of the mystic to her writing tablet. But media – modes of intersubjective transmission – are not always so reliable. The fits and starts of *PP* are formal analogs of much wider interruptions in service; during the plagues of the fourteenth century, most of England was a dead letter office. Sermons, proclamations, counsel, for the most part fell on deaf, or dead, ears. I know of no rhetorical treatise that explicitly anticipates the catastrophic wiping out of audition, but arguably, that is rhetoric's primal scene. The rhetorician's desire is to spectacularize attention, to put intersubjectivity on stage, in law courts, political assemblies, and evangelical gatherings. Even *ethos*, the "character" of the orator, is a relational concept: virtue helps the orator *persuade others*. And however upright he may be, he still needs to shape his words according to their social rank and *habitus*. This is not easy; Aristotle finally recommends that orators focus on "notions possessed by everybody," because very few people can learn new things on the spot (*Rhetoric*, I.1). The stakes of the ethical relationship between orator and auditor multiply in Book IV of St. Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*, a "translation" of classical rhetoric into what would become the Christian *ars praedicandi* (arts of preaching). It focuses presciently on the rhetorical temptations to which evangelism is vulnerable: far better to convey Christian truth humbly and clearly than to trick it out with bombast and ornament. Medieval and classical rhetorics were largely agreed that the imagination was responsible for inventing the phantasms which, despite their insubstantiality, could be so (dangerously) powerful in swaying the minds of listeners. Augustine felt, and passed on to monastics, the Neo-Platonic dislike of the imagination's ability to confuse us on the score of reality, but, as noted, he was well aware of the mind's reliance on it: "Every one of them enters into memory, each by its own gate . . . the objects themselves do not enter, but the images of the perceived objects are available to the thought recalling them" (*Confessions*, X.viii (13)). Those images are nonetheless the very traces of lived experience – of color, shape, smell, taste, touch – and the means by which minds are linked to their environs, to books, to themselves.

Rhetorical "invention" depends on the plasticity of images. Geoffrey de Vinsauf's comparison of invention to the creation of mental blueprints is used by Chaucer in *TC* to describe the workings of Pandarus's mind. In Book I, Pandarus and Troilus pledge to each other their "trouthe"; "[m]y lif, my deth, hol in thyn hond I leye;/ Help now" (I.1053–1054), says Troilus to Pandarus. Speak *for me*, he pleads, "[t]o hire that to the deth me may comande" (I.1057) After this moment of intensified intersubjectivity, of troth-plighting and covenant, Pandarus goes on

> his wey, thenkyng on this matere . . .
> For everi wight that hath an hous to founde . . .
> wol bide a stounde,
> And sende his hertes line out fro withinne
> Aldirfirst his purpos for to wynne (I.1062–1069)

It is as if the acquisition of an other self not only required but set in train specially crafty thought. His newly sworn best friend forever, Troilus, having fallen into his fateful love, now falls into a fellowship whose warranty is the death that both threatens and defines it. Palamon too, in the Knight's Tale, re-minds Arcite that he is his "cosyn and thy brother/ Ysworn ful depe . . . / That nevere, for to dyen in the peyne,/ . . . / Neither of us . . . to hyndre oother" (I.1131–1135). The language repeats, to the rhythm of the death drive, the doubling "invented" by the oath, and the resulting simulacrum, the supporter of identity who at the same time unravels it. Troilus and Pandarus are likewise beginning their journey towards the Real of death; and when, in Book V (a book full of memorial images and hallucinations) the world becomes a "foule dede hame" for Troilus, it does so for Pandarus and the narrator too: "al nys but a faire/ This world that passeth soone as floures faire" (V.1840–1841). As with Julian of Norwich, an extraordinarily loyal counterpart is needed, one who "nil falsen no wight, dar I seye,/ That wol his herte al hoolly on him leye." The narrator flinches at the Real – which cannot be bargained with, with which there is no exchange – and turns to Julian's "hamely" God, who *will be trusted*, urging all "yonge fresshe folks" to "up-casteth the visage" of the "herte" "[t]o thilke God that after his ymage/ Yow made" (V.1839–1840). The imagination may trick us into mistaking a humble "fare-cart" for our lost love, but the narrator hopes that, by the same means, it will also help us recuperate such desublimations, intensifying resemblance by turning the heart's face to the divine Image whose imprint it bears in turn. Did Chaucer think this substitution of images was really a salutary way of working through the pain of betrayal? I doubt it. But I do think he meant to draw us into a series of identifications – of intersubjective transformations (narrator-Troilus-Pandarus-"folkes") – that makes us *feel* the ontological and intersubjective confusion attendant on trauma.

Faculty Psychology: Falling to Pieces

Intersubjectivity goes on within as well as between minds; "selfhood" is a process, not a consistent or homogeneous entity. Both Plato and Aristotle acknowledged its heterogeneity, believing that one part of the soul could be "moved" by something, and another, not. For Plato, the three main components of the human soul are reason, the affects, and appetite. The imagination is a problem for the soul, rarely an asset, because the perceptions it processes into such convincing images derive from the ever-changing sensible world – and that world is itself merely an illusion, that "passeth soone as floures faire." The ideal forms of things are, by contrast, so real as to be superreal, and thus undetectable by our senses. Phantasms enchant us because, as traces of sensory experience, they appear to be so substantial; like the *Cloud*-author's newlings, piercing the heavens with their upward gaze, we may come to believe we really have hold of something when we are actually missing everything that matters most. Premodern treatises nearly always acknowledge that imaginative creations are appealing (and powerful) because they are semblances of living process. But of what value is living process in the first place, let alone phantasms thereof, if creaturely life, that seems so real, is really naught?

In the psychologies deriving from Aristotle and Galen, the mind is divided into three "faculties" – imagination, reason (or judgment), and memory. Ideally, the faculties work harmoniously together, but in reality their interrelationships are often fraught with misunderstanding, even strife. The imagination presents phantasms to the passions as well as to reason. If passion overrules reason, the mind will mistakenly judge the phantasm to be "good" – that is to say, a (beneficent) reality – and pursue it, like a will o' the wisp. When Troilus first sees Criseyde, "of hire look in him ther gan to quyken/ So gret desir and such affeccioun/ That in his herte botme gan to stiken/ Of hir his fixe and depe impressioun" (*TC*, I.295–298). For both Platonic and Aristotelian traditions, reason, not impression caused by "affeccioun," is the jewel in the mind's crown. The *Cloud* author puts it this way: "reson" and "wille" are "principal mighte[s]" because "thei worchen in pure spirit withouten any maner of bodelines; ymaginacion and sensualité [be] secondary [to reason and will], for thei worchen in the body with bodely instrumentes, the whiche ben oure five wittes" (Gallacher, ll. 2190–2193). We share these latter "mights" with "beasts"; medieval natural philosophers often note that animals can form and evaluate mental images (to strategize about action in the near future). Once corrupted by original sin, our minds become bestial all too readily. But reason is still the faculty that sets the human soul apart from other forms of sentience.

So how reliable are these piebald minds of ours? What can we (safely) use them for? Contemplation, we have seen, has its dangers; what about philosophy, theology? Is there, for example, a difference between simply imagining a God and imagining a God that actually exists? And how would we know? (This question is the crux of Anselm's magisterial, but not entirely convincing, ontological proof of the existence of God.) Both Plato's *Timaeus* and Aristotle's *De anima* bequeathed to the European Middle Ages a mind that did not always know itself, let alone agree with itself, whose most cherished convictions were almost impossible to substantiate. It is worth noting that scorn for the everyday, error-prone workings of the human mind is often a theme in the scientific psychologies of our own day, but happily there are signs that this is changing. "Confabulation" and "delusion" are being reevaluated as important supporters of, rather than obstacles to, (inter)subjectivity. Many such stories (e.g., "my left arm really is there, you just can't see it") draw on every resource available, on behalf of relationality – one tries to be a good patient, to answer the question appropriately; one hopes to find an other who can respond. Self-and-other experience *needs* plasticity in order to adapt to changing circumstances.

Awareness of the differences between external and internal reality, and the usefulness of the latter's pliability, manifests itself in the *Morall Fabillis* of Robert Henryson. Probably a schoolmaster as well as a notary, Henryson would likely have taught with with the aid of Aesopian fables, exemplary and unquestionably fictional stories (the animals can talk) that crisscross different kinds of sentience in order to enhance the capacity for judgment. The *moralitates* appended to the ends of Henryson's *Morall Fabillis* do not appear to celebrate plasticity; in fact they lay down the law with a heavy hand: "Ay rinnis the foxe, als lang as hai fute hais" (l. 827). In the *Fabillis* intersubjectivity is usually deceptive, seductive, destructive: "Brother, gif you be wyse, I reid the fle/ To matche the with ane thrawart fenyeit marrow" (ll. 2924–2925). But the narrator of the *Morall Fabillis* also defends the importance of the imagination to ethical instruction: the reason "feinyeit fabils of ald poetré" first began was, "to repreif [man] of [his] misleving,/ . . . be figure of ane uther thing" (ll. 1–7). Imagination helps ethics – which is all about "others" – by supporting a kind of mentalization (I learn to "see" myself in other things). "Put in exempill and similitude," Aesop shows us "How mony men in operatioun/ Ar like to beistis in conditioun" (ll. 47–49). Intersentient imagination is a means to bring home the creatureliness of the human, our vulnerability and fear. Seeing ourselves in other things hones our capacity to attend to, and learn about, this vulnerability. This is, at least, the hope of many a schoolmaster.

Return to Mysticism

Sense perceptions are abstracted by the imagination in preparation for their comparison to past experience and evaluation by reason: "the actions of the imaginative faculty" include "retaining things perceived by the senses, combining these things, and imitating them" (Maimonides 2.56, 370). The "intellect" is a higher power, because it distinguishes the universal from the individual, and thereby enables logic and critical thinking. To whatever degree the imagination abstracts images from the senses, those images remained tied to sensory experience; when we imagine a horse that we have never seen, it will still look like a particular horse, of a certain color and size. Far worse than this allegiance to the senses and to particulars, "every deficiency of reason" can be traced to the imagination, because (as the *Cloud* author also complained) it can lead us to attribute corporeality – e.g., feet – to God and the angels, or to think of God as performing actions (speaking, sitting, dwelling) in the ways that human beings do (II.12, 280).

As Julian of Norwich's writing has already shown, however, not all contemplatives are as ambivalent about the imagination as the *Cloud* author. In his sermons on *The Song of Songs*, the great mystic St. Bernard of Clairvaux opines that revelation is the work of the angels, who communicate to us the images and ideas through which we can comprehend God. Without this mediation, our minds could not bear the "radiance of the truth":

> when the spirit is ravished out of itself and granted a vision of God that suddenly shines into the mind with the swiftness of a lightning-flash, immediately . . . images of earthly things fill the imagination, either as an aid to understanding or to temper the intensity of the divine light . . . [I]n their shadow the . . . radiance of the truth is rendered more bearable to the mind and more capable of being communicated to others. My opinion is that they are formed in our imaginations by the inspirations of the holy angels. (41.3)

For Maimonides too the imagination, despite its dangers, is the switching station between the divine and the human. Its ability to translate superreal messages into intelligible visions depends on the very plasticity for which it is so often excoriated. Phantasms are traces of sense impressions, but they are also *traces*, free of attachment to worldly realities and thereby more open to otherworldly communications. States of dreaming or trance are the times when the "greatest and noblest action [of the imagination] takes place." Then it is "that a certain overflow [can overflow from God] . . . to this faculty," and it is the cause of "veridical dreams and prophecy" (2.56, 370).

Even hallucination is actually a "perfection" of imaginative activity, because it "sees the thing as if it were outside" (2.56, 370). The imagination produces illusory reality-effects, but it also permits sensational reality-effects that signify superreal origin – angels with many faces, chariots of fire. It is indeed possible, in the Middle Ages, to think of the imagination as the means (and the only means) by which creatures experience the Sublime, in the form of divinity:

> the true reality . . . of prophecy consists in its being an overflow . . . from God . . . through the intermediation of the Active Intellect, toward the rational faculty . . . and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty. This is the highest degree of man. (2.36, 369)

The imagination does not simply process information from the senses on behalf of the intellect; the intellect also serves the imagination, as a conduit for the divine "overflow" that perfects the human mind. Though the perfect imaginer lives in solitude far away from corruption, he is filled and fulfilled by an Other, and will further share the divine "overflow" with all others of his kind, to their general benefit, including their well-being, longevity, and (political) amity:

> Whenever [a perfect man's] imaginative faculty . . . receives from the intellect an overflow corresponding to [its] speculative perfection, this individual will . . . see only God and His angels, and will . . . achieve knowledge of true opinions . . . for the well-being of men in their relations with each other. (2.56, 372)

The perfecting power of the imagination is part and parcel of its intersubjective action and inspiration.

The Historical Imagination

The semantic range of "perfection" includes topics of forming, making, and completing. Particularly in its medieval uses, it evokes craftsmanship and creativity. In Exodus 25, the work of consecrating, creating holiness, making sacrifice acceptable, hence bridging the human and the divine, takes the form of a finely crafted enclosure, the ark: "thou schalt make on euer eithir side of Goddis answeryng place twei cherubyns of gold, and betun out with hamer" (Wycliffite Bible). The empty space thus defined, where Yahweh will dwell when he is among the Israelites, is a place of transmission, empty of idols, but not of "answerynge." Yahweh's specifications initiate a series of mediations, from the image of speech itself, to the process of making an imaginary object material. As we have seen, the power of the imagination to give form to what is unimaginable or absent is crucial to its affective significance:

Yahweh anticipates the building of the ark in the context of covenant, of newly pledged loyalties. The ability of the mind to form images of spectral objects has also been associated in psychoanalysis and contemporary developmental psychology with affect "regulation." Affect regulation means, among other things, the ability to endure and work through affect-storms – like choking rage, or unmanageable anxiety – in part by summoning images of a different future. If, for instance, the one who gives to me, and sustains, my life, puts me in a crib and then leaves the room, can I summon up an image of her in my mind to comfort and accompany me while she is absent from the room? Might such an image sustain our connection, our "covenant"? Or does she just flat out disappear – which would break the link, and terrify me?

These contemporary insights have a genealogy: the long tradition, medico-philosophical in nature, of giving the imagination a central role in the process of mourning, which we have already seen at work in *BD*. The connection between image-making and affect-management is an ancient one; it is used, for instance, to explain how idolatry begins, with a king's mourning for the loss of his son. The king makes a memorial statue of his son and orders the community to gather round it for the rituals of lamentation that answer isolation and silence. Eventually this origin is forgotten and the statue, no longer a memorial to life, is now endowed with it. The "Matter of Troy" – historical, epic and romantic (re)visions of the legend of Troy – is, like the Book of Exodus, keenly aware of the power of images to transmit feeling across time: hence the importance of the Palladium that protects Troy, and its theft and translation to Rome. In both the Judaic myth of exile and the classical legend of Troy, the phenomenology of the *making-real* of allegiance intersects with the phenomenology of concealing and revealing, of insubstantiality and magnificent materialization.

For the Middle Ages, one of the most influential examples of the historical and geographical reach of the image is Aeneas's uncanny encounter, in Book I of the *Aeneid*, with the frieze picturing Troy's fall, and his description thereof once back at the coast with his shipmates: "O fortunate those whose walls already rise!" (I.437). Aeneas finds the frieze in the Temple of Juno, located in the sacred grove in the city's center, "where the wave and storm-tossed Phoenicians," not unlike the wave and storm-tossed Trojans, "first uncovered the head of a fierce horse, that regal Juno showed them" – a Carthaginian Palladium of sorts (I.441ff.). Inside Juno's temple, "while [Aeneas] marvels at the city's wealth,/ the skill of [its craftsmen] . . . and the products of their labours,/ he sees the battles at Troy in their correct order,/ the War, known through its fame to the whole world" (I.454ff.) – a story already monumentalized before he can complete his own role therein. The Latin is "[s]ic ait, atque animum pictura pascit inani/ multa gemens, largoque umectat flumine voltum" (I.464–465). *Pasco*, "pasture," is a primal word whose meanings run the gamut of life and death: feeding, nourishing, cultivating, and supporting, but also feasting, devouring, consuming and destroying. *Inani* chiefly reinforces this negative range of meanings: empty, stripped, deserted, lifeless, vain, useless, unfounded, unprofitable. In the emptiness of the "insubstantial frieze"

(I.464) he sees the death of Troilus ("unhappy boy"), the beauty of Penthesilea, Priam's pleading, "unwarlike" hands, and himself, fighting in the fray. Undead images record what fallen peoples and places leave behind. But Aeneas is reoriented thereby. Uppermost at this moment is the power of imaginative plasticity, of *translatio*, to cut us loose. Like Augustine, Aeneas "meets" himself, and "recalls" himself, in memorial images; his report to his shipmates further multiplies his vision and position. He sees himself in an "uther thing," and thinks perhaps Troy is not forgotten after all; "[s]ee, Priam! Here . . . are tears for events, and mortal things touch the heart" (I.461ff.). There is time to cry his own tears, to say to his *therapon* the words that need to be said, to hear the compassion of the world: "What place is there, Achates, what region of earth not full of our hardships?" (I.459ff.). Fame may be capricious, but its power to awaken feeling is unchallengeable, and in this case, in the course of circling back to its celebrities, it awakens empathy, intersubjectivity and the promise of *care*: "Lose your fears: this fame will bring you benefit" (I.463). It seems that, in the grove, "*something new* appeared that calmed his fears/ . . . here for the first time Aeneas dared to hope/ for safety" (I.450ff.)

Lydgate's *Troy Book* joins together the image of a "rising" city with the image of the grieving, monument-building father, Priam. Even Priam's Troy is a monument of sorts; after he hears the story of the fall of Old Troy (and that of his father), when the "sorwe is aswaged and the syghes olde/ by longe processe" (II.478–479), he sends for all the crafts "that wer excellyng in practik/ Of any art callyd mekanyk/ Or hadde a name flouryng or famus" not just to construct but to adorn the new city in every possible way (II.521–528): "werkemen" "corious,/ Of wyt inventyf," "sotyle in her fantasye" – among them, "ymagours" "[t]hat coude . . . with colour peynt/ With hewes fresche" and "[m]ake an ymage that wil nevere fade (II.506–511)." Freshness is also an important goal for the master-builders:

> And of the toun the stretis large and wyde
> Wer by crafte so prudently provided . . .
> That holsom eyr amyddis myght enspire . . .
> And Zephirus . . .
> Most plesantly in the eyr gan smyte, . . .
> And with his brethe [the citizens] . . .
> to "recomfort" and "delyte" (II.667–678)

Further purgation and renewal is accomplished by

> many gargoyl and many hidous hed
> With spoutis thorugh and pipes . . .
> Voyding filthes low into the grounde
> Thorugh gratis percid of yren percid rounde

– thanks to "every crafte that may rekned be" (II.695–699). The grotesquerie "points to" or frames the abjection flowing through it; it substantiates the power of the imagination either to pool or to channel whatever threatens to choke or engulf us.

Mourning and melancholy try desperately to maintain some kind of intersubjectivity with the dead. The mummified Hector embodies the undead sentience characteristic of the melancholic object. He no longer has a mind to be held in the minds of the living, and (Lydgate observes), unless "crafte be above nature," his body must undergo "corrupcioun." But Priam in fact hopes that "crafty operacioun" can preserve Hector's body "hool" "[f]rom odour and abomynacioun," so that "in sight it be not founde horrible,/ But that it be lifly and visible/ To the eye, as be apparence,/ Like as it were quyk in existence" (III.5593–5598). Inside the temple "consecrate/ To Appollo of olde fundacioun" the master craftsmen construct by "gret devis" a series of enclosures and images whose import is now familiar to us: "a litel oratorie/ Perpetuelly to be in memorie,/ Where was set a riche receptacle/ Made in maner of a tabernacle," in which a large golden "ymage" is raised up (III.5614–5620). The image represents Hector as a warrior, and seeks to stun accordingly. But it is followed by a kind of meat-statue: "amyddes al the grete richesse" the craftsmen set "[t]he dede cors of this worthi knyght," standing as upright as if "by sotil craft" he were still living, "of colour sothly, and of hewe/ . . . as freshe as any rose newe," just "[a]s he lyvede in his apparaille" (III.5653–5662). Crafty men have inserted small golden pipes into the crown of his head, which extend throughout his body and circulate the "licour" ("bawme natural") that could "kepe hym hool fro corrupcioun/ Withouten any transmutacioun" (III.5663–5674). Priam's grief compels him to double the magnificent but lifeless image of Hector rampant with a memorial mummy straining for the sentience of a vegetable soul. Even the air is sweetened by a "viol" full of balmy vapors, "Causynge the eyr environ be delys/ To resemble a verray paradys" (III.5696–5701). Priam's balm-piping system recalls the city's water system that "craftily, thorugh castyng sovereyne," diverts the Xanthus, so that

> in the cité was no filthe sene; . . .
> Wherby the toun was outterly assured . . .
> From wikked eyr and from infeccioun,
> That causyn ofte by her violence
> Mortalité and gret pestilence. (II.745–763)

Respiration and olfaction provide images for the extreme vulnerability of sentient beings to one another – the foul air that "carries" disease, the communal air that we all breathe. Perhaps in post-plague England evocations of "wikked eyr" and "filthe" began to rival descriptions of horrible war-wounds as pointers to the shattering power of the Real. Compare the Knight's famous description of Arcite's wound, "shent with . . . corrupcioun" before he is even dead:

> the vertu expulsif . . .
> Ne may the venym voyden ne expelle.
> The pipes of his longes gonne to swelle
> And every lacerte in his brest adoun
> Is shent with venym and corrupcioun (*Canterbury Tales*, I 2749–2754)

The two greatest devastations of the later Middle Ages – the Hundred Years' War and the plague – crisscross at the point of "filth." The extreme Lancastrian fondness for legislating "works" of an infrastructural nature also defend against decay, creating civic "life" and building around, so as to screen, the mortality that the living can only imagine.

Lydgate's rendering of Priam's epic grief acknowledges the imagination's allegiance to sentience, as well as the power of the trace or remake or sequel to expand and diversify sentience by means of metaphor, image, intonation, gesture, conversation, *translatio* – in short, expressivity and receptivity. For Elaine Scarry, the plasticity of the imagination is the source of its ethical power; it gives form even to overwhelming pain, making it shareable, thinkable, by linking it to *symbols* of sharpness and intensity, or burning and throbbing. The imagination affects, and is affected by, every kind of feeling. Unfortunately, it can be bent to cruel ends. But fundamentally, "making" makes material the activity of *care*. When Maimonides tries to explain the ups and downs of propheteering, he explains that visions are granted to men who practice perfection partly because the properties of the vessel affect the properties of what the vessel contains. But even men who seek perfection are mortal. "You know that every bodily faculty sometimes grows tired, is weakened, and is troubled. Now the imaginative faculty is indubitably a bodily faculty. Accordingly you will find that the prophecy of the prophets ceases when they are sad or angry" (2.56, 372). Painful feelings limit our ability to extend ourselves toward and properly shelter the divine; but the will can be moved by "some image of the true joy" (Augustine, *Confessions*, X.xxii (32)). Augustine praises the imagination's plasticity ("I [can] combine with past events images of various things, whether experienced directly or believed on the basis of what I have experienced") without which we could not model "future actions" and "events," or feel hope. Without imagination, we could not believe "that the worldis weren maad bi Goddis word" – beautiful worlds, full of diverse kinds of sentience – or that "visible thingis weren maad of vnuysible thingis" (Hebrews 11.1–3). Contemplation is impossible without images ("[I can] again think of all these things in the present"); so is the exercise of the will ("'I shall do this and that,' I say to myself within that vast recess of my mind which is full of many, rich images, and this act or that follows"); so is desire ("O that this or that were so") and prayer ("May God avert this or that") (X.viii (14)). For the medieval world, the imagination – despite its ambiguities – was the faculty that enabled us to feel the Creator's profound allegiance to sentience *and* the Word's companionship beyond all things.

See AESTHETICS; DESIRE; ECOLOGY; MATERIAL CULTURE; MEMORY; PUBLIC INTERIORITIES.

Notes

1 For the "old story," see Carruthers 1.

2 Augustine notes that his mind can also store images of phenomena never experienced directly by his senses; these images come from literature and learning, and secret caverns of the mind. But even these images are experienced in the mind as if they originated from sense experience; *Confessions*, X.x (17).

3 On thirdness in psychoanalysis, see Green. This "third" is a field, an Øther, created by the intersubjective exchanges between analyst and analysand. The third in Plato's sense is different – if anything, it is meant to preserve the boundaries between things by imagining a thing that would join them. But the importance of mediation in his thinking is unquestionable.

4 Karnes focuses on Ymaginatif's *cognitive* work in her recent study.

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