

# Imagination and the Soul's Immensity\*

THOMAS E. CHENEY\*\*

Many people today are victims of the disease of modern living. The cry of "sick society" is not new in the world, but it now is epidemic and insidious. It appears in city riots and looting, in college student revolts, in hippie and yippy movements, in disrespect for law and order. It shows in advocacy of repeal of laws of living as old as Adam. "I did not ask to be born," says one, "therefore, the world owes me subsistence. I have no obligation to contribute anything to anybody."

For the present world to overcome the disease and become a utopia is not beyond the dreams of aspiring men. Yet any hope of attaining a utopia would of necessity require leadership of super wisdom. It would need to be schooled in the wisdom of the ages—it would have to encompass the whole of human experience. To move toward a new utopian world, we would have to draw the best from all the products of human creativity. We would have to recognize the immensity of the human soul and involve as many of its capacities as can be explored and understood.

First of all, to go beyond the corporeal, we must believe in an ideal; we must believe that ideals can be attained. Without vision of a better world, the world is doomed. We must accept the truth that young men may have visions of a better world.

Many great writers have inspired strivings for goodness and greatness. Many Renaissance writers—Sir Thomas More, Sir Francis Bacon, Shakespeare—had the vision. Romantic writers

---

\*Given as the Sixth Annual Faculty Lecture at Brigham Young University, March 26, 1969.

\*\*Mr. Cheney, professor of English at Brigham Young University, is the author of *Mormon Songs of the Rocky Mountains* (1968) and numerous articles.

explored the ideal almost to a fault, and Matthew Arnold was the advocate of dynamic search for culture and light.

Wordsworth spoke of man as an entity "whose exterior semblance doth belie Thy soul's immensity." True words—the exterior of man does indeed belie the soul's immensity. I am going to explore one phase of the soul's immensity—imagination. The exploring I will do into this vast area will be but negligible probings. I might hopefully get a few pictures as the astronauts did of the moon, but the millions of moons and worlds, of suns and systems in my field of exploration are beyond my ken. I want to examine the imagination of man as it deals with the supernatural, the occult, the unknown.

Man is imprisoned in the world but his imagination is free. Hence part of his reality is the world of the imagination. Man is what he thinks, and by means of thought he is capable of voyaging into a world of great expanse. Like Blake's sunflower, man has his roots in the earth, yet he counts the steps of the sun. The youth pining with desire and the pale virgin shrouded in snow, "Arise from their graves, and aspire/Where my sunflower wishes to go."

The poets and prophets and great ones of the world as well as humble folk at times feel earthbound, confined, limited. Distraught King Lear called man "a poor, bare, forked animal." Disillusioned Macbeth said life was "a tale told by an idiot." Melancholic Byron called life "an uneradicable taint of sin."

But Byron says also, "The race of man becomes a hopeless flight/To them who walk in darkness: . . ."<sup>1</sup> suggesting that *all* men do not walk in darkness. He also said:

All heaven and earth are still— . . .  
Then stirs the feeling infinite, so felt  
In solitude, where we are *least* alone;  
A truth, which through our being doth melt,  
And purifies from self: it is a tone,  
The soul and source of music, which makes known  
Eternal harmony, . . .<sup>2</sup>

Shakespeare, through Hamlet, spoke of man as "noble in reason, infinite in faculty, in action like an angel, in apprehension like a God."

---

<sup>1</sup>*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III. 666-667.

<sup>2</sup>*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III. 833, 842-847.



Not only Shakespeare and Byron recognized the immensity of the soul of man but innumerable others. Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth all yearned to transcend themselves and to in some way lose life to find in it something better. All mankind, the rich and the poor, the lofty and the lowly, yearn to arise above their own microcosm.

Reasons for this discontent and aspiration may be classified under four headings. First is *a need and desire for security*. Given a modicum of reason, man wants to know answers to unanswerable problems of life and death and all the overwhelming questions of how and why about the universe. He cannot feel secure unless he can put trust in some all-powerful source of justice; he must have a protector. If life is good, he must have a feeling of eternality.

The second reason for man's discontent is his *need for freedom of thought*. The goal of the mental process is spontaneity. Although men are not all alike, every man wants to feel free; he will resent any fettering of his right to think freely, following his own initiative. Every healthy mind of every man has a private compulsion to be free.

The third reason for man's discontent is *his conscious or unconscious need for food for the soul*. The motivating power which has impelled men to follow Christian faith is his inner sense of a need for rapport with the cosmic force. Wordsworth expressed that sense when he said:

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Man's soul is nourished through worship of the divine and through response to beauty, both what the eye sees and what the deeper sense perceives.

A fourth reason for man's discontent with his lot is a result of his divine origin. If we come to this life "trailing

---

<sup>3</sup>"Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," 93-102.

clouds of glory from God"; if we are begotten in spirit by God, then we could do nothing other than revolt against any seemingly immutable law which binds us to earth. If man were only of the earth earthy, he might be at home in the world. But he is not, for he is from God; he awaits the time when this corruption can put on incorruption.

Being aware as we are of man's discontent in the world and of his penchant for adventure into the unknown, we can see why man attempts to conquer space, orbit the earth, fly to the moon. We can also see why he is always striving to break the bands of the known world of the senses and follow mind-directed explorations into the macrocosmic immensity of dimensionless eternity.

The mind also is stirred and altered by body chemistry. This may explain why men attempt to get away from themselves with the use of alcohol, opium, marijuana, LSD and other drugs.

Flights into outer space give to man a portion of the soul-satisfying adventure he needs, but the drug voyage is a round trip ticket which returns him to his animal self or robs him entirely of identity.

Another way to satisfy our aspirations, to transcend the mundane, is through the imagination, to fly with Keats

Not charioted by Baccus and his pards,  
But on the viewless wings of Poesy.<sup>4</sup>

Without reserve I advocate flights on the wings of poesy. I lament with Coleridge the absence of "the shaping spirit of imagination." With Wordsworth I want the mind of man not only to perceive but to create. Need anyone shrink from seeking an intellectual or imaginative beauty spoken of by Shelley, which,

dost consecrate—  
With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon  
Of human thought or form, . . .<sup>5</sup>

Surely if we ever extend our reach beyond the flesh, we must soar into the world of the ideal. We must knock on the doors of eternity or they will never be opened for us.

---

<sup>4</sup>"Ode to a Nightingale," 32-33.

<sup>5</sup>"Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," 13-15.



In our materialistic and naturalistic world anyone who advocates any brand of idealism is in danger of being called an ineffectual angel flapping his luminous wings in vain. Emerson has been out of favor for a half-century. The reason—he was a transcendentalist. And any student of philosophy can tell you what is wrong with transcendentalism. As a philosophy it is inconsistent, illogical, and indefensible in any system of logic. Its language is abstract; its ethical system unscientific. But it has imagination and insight.

Another reason for Emerson's unpopularity is that he had no vision of evil. To count in philosophy nowadays, you must have a vision of evil. At Harvard Emerson studied and lectured; later a building was erected in his honor. Recently his statue in that building, even his statue, mind you, was smothered with hats and coats of rioters.

Years ago in the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold hinted that Emerson did not understand human weakness. Ours is the tranquilizer age; we understand human weakness. Arnold, however, allowed Emerson one virtue: Emerson, he said, was the aider of those who would live in the spirit. But our grossest failures, individually and politically, are failures of the spirit. There is no strength or salvation in unanimity of evil hearts. There is strength in the spirit. So again I repeat, we must allow the imagination freedom to explore the ideal.

Certain members of society have declared war on all phases of imagination. A child runs in to his unimaginative mother, exuberant, eyes flashing emotion, saying, "Forty cats are fighting in our garage!"

"Forty cats, child? Did you count? Were there forty cats?"

She talks him down to twenty, to ten, to five, and on, until he says in cold truth, his imagination and exuberance gone, "Well, there was ourn and another."

A mother says, "We want our children to be realists. We teach them that there is no Santa Claus."

Some people imprisoned in the little world of getting and spending interpret all experience in terms of the marketplace. A priesthood class heard the biblical message of the power of the Divine over devils, as presented in the story of the possessed man living in the tombs, who cowered before Christ and said his name was Legion. Then he became sane after the legion of devils came out of him and entered a herd of

swine which ran into the sea and were drowned. A class member hearing the story asked the question, "I would like to know, who is going to foot the bill for them hogs?" This man never got out of the marketplace.

I knew a child about two years old who stood by a glass door, looking at the full moon that was big and bright with fluffy clouds floating by, who said quite casually, "Moon, don't pick your nose. There's some kleenex right by you." A matter-of-fact person who refuses to believe in the man in the moon could kill that delightful metaphor rising from the spontaneous imagination of that child.

People who do not cultivate some of the transcendent elements of the human soul, yet who accept Christian philosophy as an answer to problems of the world of the unknown, may interpret the spiritual with a matter-of-factness that strips all the wings off everything heavenly. By this metaphor I mean that heavenly things become earthbound. God becomes too much of a man. In their unimaginative interpretation God gives his revelation much as a man would dictate a letter to a secretary. In his earthbound mind man too often brings God down to his own yard instead of ascending to any vantage point of heavenly dimensions.

To be completely born into the world of the imagination does not mean that one needs to lose sight of the everyday world in which he *must* give attention to his own physical needs. Even the supersensitive poet may see cesspools as well as hear angels sing; yet to deny to anyone the right to hear angels sing is vile murder. Without possession of the intellectual beauty of imagination man will remain an animal. A person reading Eliot's "The Hollow Men" without imagination will not see in it man's aspirations to see beyond, through the author's references to "eyes" and "stars" and "death's other kingdom"; nor will he visualize the upward struggle expressed in his haltingly voiced, "for Thine is the Kingdom." He will only see the scarecrow with its head filled with straw—the immutable hollowness. I say again that to kill in man what Coleridge calls "the shaping spirit of imagination" is murder. May heaven free us from "mind-forged manacles" which would deny freedom of the spirit.

Flights into imagination can be indulged in to excess—this we must recognize. And that it can lead to falsehood,



error, and sin is so evident in all ages of human existence that it has become suspect in all areas. Ancient folklore or superstition submerged history until the only historical truth of that time to be relied upon is the truth of man's thought. The world of the folk and particularly that of the pre-Hellenistic world was peopled with supernatural beings, most of them malevolent: vile witches, wizards, demons, dragons, giants, monsters, sorcerers, elf knights and fairies, both good and bad, and innumerable animal-man combinations: mermaids, vampires, goat men, werewolves, cat women, lamias, silkies and sphinx. Various kinds of spirits made the invisible world more populous than the visible.

In attempts to explain the unknown, men customarily have turned to the supernatural. An example is the ballad "Willie's Lady."<sup>6</sup> Willie's wife is pregnant and cannot be delivered of her baby. The reason provided is that she is under the spell of the mother-in-law witch.

But his mother wrought her mickle care  
And mickle dolour gard her dree  
For lighter can she never be.  
But in her bower she sits with pain,  
And Willie mourns o'er her in vain.  
And to his mother he has gone,  
That vile, rank witch of vilest kind.

His pleas are answered with

But she shall die and turn to clay  
And you shall wed another May.

The wife and child are saved through the intercession of Billie Blin, a kind of household, grown-up brownie, who suggests a trick which the couple use to force the witch to reveal the charms she has imposed on the mother to prevent delivery. Now they remove the charms.

And now he's gotten a bonny young son,  
And meikle grace be him upon.

The creatures of terror, who peopled the unknown, were often appeased by human sacrifice. One example, Moloch, about the eighth century B.C., was appeased best with the frying flesh of the firstborn child.

---

<sup>6</sup>Child Ballad (6).

Out of this cesspool of superstition grew the great world of classical mythology. This Greek mythology is significant, for it was a forward step in human thought. Looking at it today, it reveals that men were close to the earth, to nature; the myths are related to trees, seas, flowers, hills and human beings. The imagination was vividly alive, but it was tuned to see beauties, not horrors. It rose triumphant above the savagery and fierceness of other cultures. This Greek culture is important to us, for the winds of time have abrasively worn down their monuments and carried their culture to us. We are their descendants politically, intellectually, and artistically.

Douglas Bush says, "The folk who made the myths in Greece disliked the irrational and had a love for facts, no matter how ridiculous some of their stories appear."<sup>7</sup> The Greeks made their Gods in their own image, like superior men—no dragons, no animal-gods. They knew what they looked like, made statues of them, made them companionable and capable of human error. One could both argue and laugh with them. The Greek myths were basically an about face from demon lovers, vile witches, and wicked stepmothers. Though often associated in common thought with the romantic and trivial, Greek mythology is shot through with strange lights of imagination and feeling. It shows a struggle to emerge from the depths of primitive vagueness to a summit of artistic significance. Its sheer beauty shows the artist's dreams of symbols beyond themselves.

The Christian has a problem in determining the religious value of Hellenism. Gilbert Murray in *Five Stages of Greek Religion* says, "Religion like poetry cannot be defined. But one may give some description of it . . . it deals with the uncharted origin of human experience . . . and the region is apparently infinite" (p. 4). He goes on to say that to draw distinction between religion and superstition is difficult. All religion might be false if analyzed into intellectual beliefs—some wrong if not wickedly wrong.

But the religion of Greece debarbarized people and worked toward concord and fellow feeling and individual worth. The human being began to count.

---

<sup>7</sup>Douglas Bush, *Pagan Myth and the Christian Tradition in English Poetry* (Philadelphia, 1967), p. 7.



A distinguishing feature of Greek religion is that poets were prophets. The poets were inspired by the gods. This calls for a story: The God of Gods, Zeus, and Mnemosyne (Memory) begat nine daughters, the muses. Like the trinity in Christian philosophy the muses were one in purpose. In objectives, their hearts were set upon song, and their purpose was to free man from care. He was happy whom the muses loved. At the service of the muses was Pegasus, the winged steed unwearying of flight. And though his flight schedule covered the universe, yet mythology brought his home to his stable in Corinth every night. Wonders attended him. Flying too near the earth his hoof struck the hill side, and like a stroke from Moses' staff, a spring gushed forth, the spring of Hippocrene, sacred to the muses and poets. Poets drinking from the spring could speak what Gods would have them speak. No wonder Keats wished for a draught from the pool of Hippocrene.

Next in order to the Gods came a few mortals so excellent they almost equaled the Gods. The greatest was Orpheus, son of a goddess (the muse Calliope) and Thracian prince. His mother gave him the gift of music. Presented a lyre by Apollo, with his music he enchanted men and charmed wild beasts until their savage growls were hushed and their snapping jaws relaxed. The very trees and rocks strained to break loose from their moorings and follow him. With his harp he even turned the courses of rivers. After the loss of his new bride, Eurydice, he went to the world of death to retrieve her. In the underworld he struck his lyre and charmed all Hades to stillness. Tantalus forgot his thirst, the eyes of the dread goddesses the Furies were wet with tears. No one could refuse him anything—such was the power given to man by the muses.

Pagan myths have flourished through many Christian centuries. Christianity in its inception assimilated elements of Pagan religion and thought, and after the first clashes between the new and the old faiths the Christian community recognized that in secular, aesthetic, and moral life it had much to learn from the ancients. During the Renaissance widespread reverence of the Greeks as a superior race gained support. The Christians saw that to the Greeks, Homer's works were a sort of Bible, even though his gods and goddesses were not always circumspect. St. Paul, using a concept which is also Greek, said, ". . . the invisible things of him from the creation of the

world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (Acts 17:18).

Plato reminds us in his *Republic* that allegorical interpretations of the myths had already come to the rescue of religion and morality. The allegorical interpretations have also come into the Christian era. In the sixth century Fulgentius turned the Aeneid by allegory into a kind of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

On the same basis one could turn the Orpheus story into allegory: Orpheus was Christ, for he like Christ was son of God and man, a reversal from virgin birth, for Orpheus was son of a goddess and a man. Orpheus' music like Christ's words touched the hearts of men so that they would follow him with unreserved devotion. Like Christ he had power over nature. As Orpheus could turn rivers, Christ could still the waves. Orpheus' beloved Eurydice is fallen man and Orpheus leading her from Hades is symbolical of Christ leading man to salvation. Man like Eurydice is prone to cast a longing look behind and thus fail to gain salvation with his Savior.

The allegorical uses of myth can enlarge the soul. How feelingly they touch the heart! Shelley's drama *Prometheus Unbound* is a striking example. Prometheus was capable of divining the future, as his name, which means *forethought*, suggests. Some traditions account for the creation of man by having the gods delegate to Prometheus the right to create him. Accordingly Prometheus made man noble, shaped him, not like animals, but upright like the gods. Then he lighted a torch on the sun and brought men fire, a protection better than fur or feathers, or strength or swiftness. For this Jupiter was furious. To punish man he had Vulcan, lord of the forge, create woman. Thus Pandora was forged, an exquisite creature, given a grace or a beauty by each of the gods. Jupiter gave her as a gift to Prometheus. Suspecting Jupiter's motives, Prometheus refused to accept her, but his brother, Epimetheus, did accept her as a wife. As a dowery she brought a huge jar which she had been asked not to open. Curiosity, however, overcame her and she opened it, thus releasing from it all the plagues and evils which since have followed mankind. Prometheus, however, for his blasphemous acts was bound to a cliff in the Causasus Mountains, where he was to remain eternally and an eagle, or vulture, would peck at his liver each night, only for it to grow back to be eaten again. After generations of



suffering Hercules, flitting by, released him from his torment—how and why mythology does not say.

Using the myth, Shelley has Prometheus bound to the cliff—his body bound, but his spirit free. Before he is unbound he attains courage and a state of patient opposition to tyranny. The hate for his persecutor, the envy, the desire for revenge, all are replaced with love. Supported then by Earth, his mother, and by Asia, the spirit of love and of Nature, and by the primal power of Earth, Jupiter, the very symbol of tyranny, is driven from his throne, and Prometheus is freed. Yes, by this means Shelley says that love will triumph over hate. Later, in *Hellas*, he identifies Prometheus with Christ. He says,

A Promethian conquerer came; he trod . . .  
The thorns of death and shame. . . .  
The Power of earth and air  
Fled from the folding star of Bethlehem,  
Apollo, Pan, Love  
And even the Olympian Jove  
Grew weak, for killing truth had glared on them.<sup>8</sup>

Truth being our objective, killing truth must glare on all falsehood. In all of our exploratory flights into the unknown and immense world of the soul, truth must stand guard to subdue evil. Herein lies our human dilemma—recognition of truth in the area of the imagination where dire perplexities and powerful ambiguities appear.

Christian poets have blended pagan elements into Christian writings. The noble Milton and deeply religious Spencer were most ambivalent in this respect.

But the Christians, too, have myths which cry out for allegorical or symbolic interpretation. Some years ago a married couple came to my home obviously to get some help in settling a dispute. The husband maintained that a man has one less rib than a woman. Genesis proved it, for one of Adam's ribs was taken to make Eve. Thus woman was made whole, but man left one rib short. That night I gained in favor with the wife. Since that time I have learned that all Christian folk can be divided into two classes—those who believe in skeletal equality of men and women and those who believe that man is one rib short.

---

<sup>8</sup>"Worlds on Worlds are Rolling Ever," 16-18, 34-38.

Within Christian faith, folk imagination has often led people astray. Henry Adams thought that Christian gullibility for the supernatural had been exploited to build great churches which could rightly be called monuments to superstition and ignorance. Within Christian faiths are many problems related to spiritual experience. William Blake's life is one such problem. As a child he had visions of God and angels, and as a man he received visits from the spirits of great men. When his brother died, Blake saw his spirit pass from his body and ascend upward clapping his hands with joy. He said he wrote what angels directed, and he spoke of his visions as "majestic shadows, gray but luminous." He believed and implicitly trusted the visions. All nature to him was a vast and spiritual symbolism. Yet he was a radical with ideas contrary to those current in his day. His great prophetic work, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," challenged established virtues. He was thought insane. Yet Henry Crabb Robinson said, "There is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott."

Blake's forte was the Bible, his prophetic books reminiscent of the Book of Revelation; his great message was, "Be free and love all things."

Another case study in this area is Joan of Arc and her mystic experience. The skeptic, Mark Twain, studied her life and wrote a book, *Personal Reflections of Joan of Arc*. He had an iconoclast's itch to shatter the world of sham and superstition, yet he viewed Joan of Arc's visions with sympathy and acceptance.

Mormon faith, born as it was through the supernatural powers of heavenly visitations and communion of God with man, and accepting biblical dictum as it does that mystical signs shall follow them that believe, is a powerful affirmation of faith in the great world of the spirit.

But the spiritual eyes of Church folk are not always clear, and some have been too quick to see miracles, too prone to see the diabolical devil himself operating a Ouija board, too ready to interpret a peregrination of the mind as a possession of the devil, or too eager to call a stranger who does a kindness an ancient Nephite of supernatural power, too much inclined to hear the voice of the dead or to die and experience a few hours



of celestial living, or even to embark into wild fantasy in the name of religion which is little short of schizophrenia.

In keeping our minds open to imagination we must take care not to sponsor ignorance and superstition. In no area of human endeavor does man need to exercise his powers of selectivity with such care as in the area of mind probings into the unknown. Great myths of the past and present, used correctly are teachers of beauty and truth. Hopefully we rise above superstition. If we are in tune with nature and can see the reflection of God in the sea, the stretches of eternity in our lengthened insights; if we are not out of tune with our universe, we will have no need to say, "Great God I'd rather be/A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn,"<sup>9</sup> as Wordsworth affirms, for we would have passed to the higher level.

In the history of Porter Rockwell we have a story reflecting something of the tradition of Achilles and something of Sampson. The Prophet Joseph Smith told Rockwell that if he would not cut his hair he would be invulnerable to enemy bullets. With but one exception, he met the requirements, and the daring and fearless deputy marshal and gunman died a natural death in his bed.

We have no need to place this story under the harsh judgment of rationalization. The truth is that it was a fact in Rockwell's private faith.

Many Christian people believe implicitly in prayer. We would not have it otherwise. Many people privately promise their Heavenly Father devotion and service in payment for a received or anticipated blessing. Many people have premonitions interpreted as divine guidance, many sick are healed through faith, many feel the presence of God, many are expurgated from hate because divine love comes into their hearts—these are rewards of imagination under controls of faith.

Tradition in song and story preserves for us a legacy of faith, faith in the guiding and protecting power of God. In answer to prayer sea gulls came to devour crickets that would have destroyed crops. We have no need to destroy what has become legend.

Projecting ourselves into the world of the spirit is a very real necessity, for only through this projection can we believe

---

<sup>9</sup>"The World is Too Much With Us," 9-10.

even basic Christian concepts. There were no human eyewitnesses to the greatest event in Christian faith. No one saw the resurrection of Jesus. No canonical gospel presumes to describe Jesus emerging from the tomb. Our faith in Jesus' resurrection is based on testimonies of those who saw the risen Lord. All the historian can do is assemble evidence upon which faith can be based.

In our fear of giving credence to falsehood in the world of the supernatural, we must be aware that we cannot with impunity shut ourselves out of the great eternal and beautiful world of the soul's aspirations. Through imagination our world of eye and ear is beautified. Feelings are touched with music that gives dimension to life. Out of the minds of men comes art that elevates; structures of transcendent beauty arise—architectural monuments to imagination. Word pictures come to us through literary devices to move us into new worlds. Myth, tradition, legend contribute to this richness.

One of my fellow English teachers said, "Literature class is teaching Thoreau in a windowless classroom." To anyone who cannot project his mind beyond the stretch of eyesight, all life is a windowless classroom. If on a clear day I stand on the highest mountain and view the great stretches open to my vision, the experience is ecstatic. But the greatness of that experience is the feeling of eternal immensity that it inspires. Were I to sit at Waldon Pond with Thoreau, I would still be in the windowless classroom if I did not have something of the visionary insight of the soul's potential.

To reach the hoped-for Utopia, to make our world a present pleasure, we should abolish hate from our hearts, transcend the trivial and crude, and achieve the great adventure, the exploration of the soul's immensity by full use of our imaginative and creative powers.