Roger Lundin on the Revenge of the Imagination (and its Cure)

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Hey All,

Last summer, a pastor-friend lent me a book that I'd been dying to read, but hadn't gotten around to ordering just yet: *Believing Again: Doubt and Faith in a Secular Age* by Wheaton English prof. Roger Lundin. The book is an extended historical survey of the cultural currents stirred up in the 19th century that make unbelief seem so natural today (and conversely, make belief so difficult today), and what resources we have to respond -- to fight the current, so to speak. I've finally gotten around to picking up the book (I'm a horrendously slow reader, so the books I should read, that sit on my shelves staring at me accusingly, are legion). I'm only through the first chapter, but it's a winner. I loved Lundin's *Culture of Interpretation,* and the analysis in his latest is no less elegant and spot on. The man knows the 19th century like the back of his hand. And he's a good writer.

However, one assertion from chapter one immediately jumped out at me as (apparently) patently false: that the imagination is an invention of 18th and 19th century poets (particularly Coleridge and Wordsworth) in response to the progressive and aggressive desacralizing of the world by rationalist philosophy and science. In other words, as the historical faith that the universe was a God-inhabited, God-ordered realm began to evaporate, frustrated romantics (including Christian romantics) responded by creating this thing we now call the imagination. How can he say that? I wondered. After all, doesn't the imagination as a concept go all the way back to the ancient Greeks (*phantasia*)? Didn't they talk about the Muse? What was Plato condemning as misleading reason if not the imagination?

But as I read further, it became clear that what Lundin meant by the imagination was not exactly what Plato (or Aristotle, or Augustine, or Aquinas, etc.) was talking about. Of course there has always been a recognition of a creative, image-creating faculty used in the arts. What was genuinely new was the conception of an inner realm, opened by Descartes' *cogito,* and verociously expanded by Coleridge and company into an inexhaustible, renewing power that is directly in contact with God (or alternatively, as a virtual stand-in *for* God). And it is *that* into which the poets and Emerson poured their confidence in the face of a world denuded of a sacred Author and a sacred order. The demystification of the outer world was met with a mystical expansion of the inner world. And it is from this cultural stream that the current talk about the arts as "sacramental" flows.

But, in Admiral Ackbar's words, "IT'S A TRAP!" By constructing and investing so heavily in this supposedly sacred realm of the imagination, many Christian artists (popular and otherwise) unwittingly contribute to sapping the world of an order that does not depend upon us. In trying to counter the reduction of world to a mechanism and impersonal laws (Darwin's, Newton's, Einstein's, etc.) by expanding the claims of the imagination, many Christian artists aid and abet and view of reality where *we* make it up. What the romantics started, some Christians seem set on finishing with their talk of sacramental art and the quasi-divine power of the imagination.

And believe me, it makes a difference. Last night I was teaching on Saussure's structuralist linguistics in class. If you know Saussurean linguistics (and there's no reason why you would, particularly), you'll know that according to him, language signifies not through connecting us to the world (or "reality"), but through dividing up symbols into a system through which we understand the world. In other words, language mediates reality to us by how the system parses our linguistic categories. Many students therefore simply assume that "reality" is a cultural construction and nothing more. One student chafed at my use of the phrase "mediates reality," finding it ridiculous to consider any reality outside of our language systems. Just try talking about human reality that transcends culture to university students, and you'll find out what I mean. Postmodern relativism is simply romanticism (and its emphasis on the imagination) gone to seed. Lost is any faith that there is any blessed order in the world that is there to be discovered. Gone is any sense that we can bear

witness to something we ourselves did not create. Gone is truth that did not spring, Minerva-like, from *our* forehead. Gone is any sense of wonder at something (or Someone) greater and more magnificent than ourselves. And this is fatal (or at least a major obstacle) to Christian belief. And so, from an attempt to re-enchant the world through a belief in a most free, most autonomous imagination, romanticism and "sacramental art" end up disenchanting the world further, causing the sacred to retreat farther into the recesses of our own minds.

But there is a price to be paid for this inner retreat, and that is a growing awareness of the disjunction between the rich palace of the inner imagination and the poor shanty-town of the outside world where nothing is sacred, nothing inherently meaningful. (If you doubt this, just watch just about any nature program, whether David Attenborough or the Discovery Channel: it's a constant and colorful parade of mindless devouring, production, reproduction, and destruction of the players in the drama). Perhaps this disconnect is why meaninlessness and nihilism are so much in vogue nowadays. Blow up the imagination big enough, and all of a sudden, the patterns of meaning within the world won't do and must be ignored and disavowed. Ironically, in its nostalgic reach for enchantment, the modern romantic imagination has found itself in a wasteland.

Lundin's analysis is relevant to me because I am intensely interested in the imagination. And it is very wise, because I can see that it is so. In my passion to be a booster of the Christian arts and the imagination, the danger is that I fall into imaginatolatry, and help create the very monster that could eat my soul (or at least my culture). What's to be done?

Lundin points to alternative models of the imagination that refuse to lionize subjectivity and the inner creative power of the imagination (that is, the romantic view). In its place, he turns to people like the American poet Richard Wilbur. He sees poetry's main job not as creation, but as witness.

> In the strict sense, of course,
> We invent nothing, merely bearing witness
> To what each morning brings to light:
> Gold crosses, cornices, astonishment
> Of panes, the turbine-vent which natural law
> Spins on the grille-end of the diner's roof,
> Then grass and gracles or, at the end of town
> In sheen-swept pastureland, the horse's neck
> Clothed with its usual thunder, and the stones
> Beinning now to tug their shadows in
> And track the air with glitter. All these things
> Are there before us; there before we look
> Or fail to look.

(Wilbur, *New and Collected Poems*, p. 9, quoted in Lundin p. 52-53).

That is to say, it is in our essential connectedness to our created context wherein lies the imagination's proper role, not in the imagination's godlike ability to create from nothing.

Lundin expands on this point using Danish poet Isak Dinesen's (Karen Blixen) metaphor for reality as "the play of the Lord" which *as a whole* confers sacredness. It is not thos or that specific element that is sacred, but the whole arragement as the drama moves along that points beyond itself to its Author. Or as philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre notes, we find meaning and direction only as we understand what story we are a part of.

Lundin also refers to Gadamer's dethroning of the autonomous subject (and so, also, the romantic cult of the isolated genius) in his analysis of *play*. In play of all types, it's not the subjectivity of the player that counts, but the subject as he is drawn into the total pattern of activity as a participant. The binary opposition between subject and object falls away in the activity of play. And *that,* he says, is more characteristic of human existence than the isolated, subjective imagination.

A final image he offers comes from English poet W. H. Auden and Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz. For Auden, the desacralized universe poses an ethical challenge: So what if the universe doesn't love me, doesn't speak to me? Well then, let *me* be the loving presence here. And from Milosz, a reimagining of the role of the poet as a "secretary of the invisible," taking lines of dictation from creation and history, an order that the poet doesn't fully understand, fragments to be wrestled with, but also to be faithfully recorded.

Lundin concludes that Christian thinking would do well to heed these voices and learn "a poetics that is modest in its assumptions, communal in its concerns, and creative in its understanding of the role of the arts." I would call this chastening response to the problem of the inflated imagination a "poetics of connectedness," a reminder that we live in community; with God, with nature, and with each other. And the arts are called to be a witness to that, not a creator of it. Only then can imagination fulfil its role and promise of offering coherence and beauty by responding to the coherence and beauty and order of the Creator.