Introduction

This world is a troublesome place. And the problem is, dear reader, that everything objective is either out of our reach, or does not conform to our expectations. But there is a simple, incredible, and effective solution. The world of the mundane reality is nothing beside the power of the imagination.

The creative imagination is the seat of every wondrous thing, it is more truly accordant with an authentic reality than anything the mundane world contains. Now Hume complained that the imagination was a very faint and secondary thing, and could in no way match up to the physical world. His was a foolish doctrine. Ironically I love reading Hume, because his vision of the world was so extreme and almost poetic in its mundanity. Many other philosophers and poets have realised that the imagination is in fact the authentic realm of being.

This is in some ways Romantic, but really it stretches far beyond the historical epoch of Romanticism. Plato and Plotinus, in the Ancient World, stated that the Intellectual Realm was superior in every respect to the material world. And Christian theologians have emphasised the power of the mind and soul in the contemplative life. Even the Tao Te Ching states: ‘without looking out of my window, I can know the ways of Heaven’.

The Western tradition is replete throughout its history with a kind of tug of war between a more materialist and a more spiritual outlook. Yet even the Epicureans posited their ideal as a life of contemplation. The cruder materialisms are mainly a legacy of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. I cannot stand a crude objective materialism. It traps us in a prison of our immediate circumstance, with all its drawbacks and limitations. Even were we incredibly wealthy or powerful, we would still experience physical limitation. Yet a focus on the imagination changes all of this radically.

I have often been incredibly disappointed with the physical world. Yet I learnt early on to shun its false attractions and focus instead on the power of the inner world, aided either by Art or spiritual practice. This has aided me considerably in my life journey. If I have ever
been puzzled by a person’s beauty, I reflect a while and admit that Art is so much the
greater. This frees me from any regrets about materiality. The imagination is a kind of
paradise available for any who would seek to explore its infinite vista. One need never be
weighed down by the problems and issues of the ‘real’ world.

Of course, we speak of ‘realism’, ‘reality’ and ‘real life’ as though these were the ultimate
arbiter of objective being, as though this impoverished physical reality were in fact our
kingdom and not the world ‘beyond’, however we choose to define it.

The human mind is indeed a great marvel, and it is precisely in the power of the human
mind to create its own reality. The truly impoverished, however materially rich (which is,
after all, no great thing) are those without due exercise of the imagination. It is a beautiful
thing that one can of course be totally absorbed in the world of the creative imagination. I
of course traverse this miserable physical reality when necessary, but as an introvert I am
naturally suited to the inner world.

Was I pushed into the inner world through disappointment? Maybe this is how everyone is
acquainted with that world, when they discover the limitations of mundane reality.
Through the power of literature, music, visual art and film one can really enter into
different realms of being, and that is without even mentioning spiritual practice, which is
an alternative path.

Goethe wrote ‘The Sorrows of Young Werther’ as an example of a man crushed by
disappointed love. Often I have put women on a pedestal and been very far removed from
an object of my approval – this even extends to the rich and famous who I have never
actually met. And perhaps one could argue that love (or eros) is ninety percent in the
imagination, and the physical reality of love is the portion to be attributed to an animal
nature, whilst the imaginary part is the angelic nature. Certainly from Hamlet to Troilus
and Romeo, thwarted love is the most poetic.

The creative imagination is the most beautiful thing in the universe, I cannot think of
anything greater or more noble. Whatever our circumstance in life, it is a free portal
available to us, leading us to a more sublime life. Not all the philosophers agreed of course,
yet even those Enlightenment philosophers who trumpet the power of material reality had
a unique vision which resided…in the imagination. It is simply inescapable. And then
there is the utter power of a fine poem or beautiful piece of music. It transports us
completely outside the limitations of time and space. If you have not felt this in its full
force, I encourage you to train your mind. Certainly, I live most of my life in the
imagination. And that is true whether reading Dante, or playing the piano.

Nothing can really disappoint us when we are in the imagination. It is truly the thwarted
man’s paradise. But it is more than this, it appeals to everyone who wishes for an
alternative to this earthly round, who wishes for a glimpse of Heaven. Creativity has always
been one of the most highly prized qualities in human culture. The creative, the poetic, the
sublime, the epiphanic, all of this should be aimed at as the highest human expression. And it also gives the most joy. Travel rarely does this for me, although I do not rule out travel. But it is secondary in so many ways.

In the Renaissance it was a battle between Nature and Imitation. Yet as the poet Philip Sidney stated in a treatise, Imitation appeals to the Divine Ideas themselves, and thus is more original and antecedent to nature. Plotinus even said to consider Nature herself as contemplation, and engaged in a kind of mystical bringing forth from a contemplative power, as we shall shortly consider. In any case, the imagination can be shown to be a primary faculty and a key insight on authentic reality.

What is the faculty of the imagination? Strictly speaking it is an imaging forth, the power of the inner mind to create a world of its own. And this world may have a bearing on spiritual truth too. But the faculty strictly speaking creates images in the mind’s eye, or more broadly speaking can have a greater degree of abstract and conceptual ideas. An old Neoplatonic idea was that of the Intellectual Realm, lying hierarchically above soul and below the One. This Intellectual Realm contained all the idea-principles that emanated from the mind of God, and went on to create soul, nature and the material world. Plotinus himself showed a great imaginative streak, for example asking us to consider the entire realm of nature as engaged in a kind of playful contemplation (Ennead 3,8). What should we make of this? Certainly the idea of Nature as a sentient and active force is deeply inscribed on ancient and medieval culture. The notion that she contemplates herself into being, that the flowers and trees themselves somehow partake of a universal plenum of being, is similar in both ancient paganism and medieval Christianity. See for example Spenser’s ‘Mutability Cantos’ regarding Nature. In any case, this extraordinary idea shows the key intersection between the imagination and reality; not reality in the eighteenth century philosophes’ sense, but in the sense of a deep vibrant level of universal being, that goes much further than mere material existence.

So how is the faculty of the imagination and the Neoplatonist’s Intellectual Realm, or realm of ideas, connected? It seems to me that the mental and conceptual has strong ties to the creative, and the imagination as a faculty can access this conceptual plane. I don’t necessarily mean the imagination in the Blakean sense of merely imagery (in his case, often confused) operating sometimes on an infrarational level. I mean more an intuitive faculty which can both engage with Art and the depths of spiritual practice, and in flashes of insight consider deep truths at the same time. Perhaps I am being unfair to Blake, who was after all a visionary painter and poet, but he lacked the suprarational clarity of a great philosopher or theologian. I am thinking of the imagination in a more classical sense, which extends well beyond Romanticism.

The Imagination and The Hierarchy of Needs
Strictly speaking, the imagination bypasses a lot of the hierarchy of needs. As we were shown in the social segment of our geography classes, as soon as one lower, more basic need is fulfilled then the mind immediately grasps for the next rung up. This is an endless and infinite process, i.e. in social theory, all our needs can never be met – they just scale off into increasing superfluity. But the world of the creative imagination entirely demolishes this needs structure, puts the mind on a more spiritual plane, and stops the cycle of dissatisfaction.

With the imagination, we create our own reality. Reality is on a spectrum anyway – the imagination augments it, deepens it, with an emotive leap of spiritual sublimity. With our deep consumer culture of today our minds are apt to be bent and misshapen outward, focused so much on acquisition, on the piling up of personal treasures, building castles in the sand pit in favour of the majesty of the sea shore and the infinite vista of the horizon. We are apt to forget ourselves, as there are so many distractions. It is understandable. But it can crimp our life and make it unbearable.

Anyone can partake of the kingdom, the empire of the mind. And it is entirely within their reach. In our consumption filled world, we are apt to think that the latest material possession will satisfy our enquiring mind. But this is pure illusion. For material possessions are straw and dross beside the pure gold of the life of the mind. And so once very basic needs are met, the hierarchy of needs disappears, because it has been superseded.

We do not need an abundance of material possessions to be happy. This should be an obvious point, but the essential truths of our being have been lost in the confusions of postmodernity. On one level it is a very old way of thinking that the ‘mammon of unrighteousness’ can supply our needs and wants, hence it is combated in the Gospel. However today’s tyrannical consumer culture grips the Western mind, and makes us forget more than ever. The real poverty is a poverty of the mind. Consider the difference between an expensive virtual reality device and a man’s free exercise of his developed and trained imagination. Clearly the latter is more powerful. The former comes about entirely through inner poverty. A crippled man needs a crutch. And the grasping materialist’s essential faculties have atrophied so he requires expensive technological intervention, which should be altogether unnecessary. Therefore a good imagination obviates complex material need.

Hume’s Objection

Now David Hume set out in his ‘Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding’ (1748) that the imagination was just a faint copy of sense experience. He seemed to deny the imagination its vibrancy, power and fecundity. We could simply say that Hume was a man of limited imaginative power for whom the practicalities of life assumed a greater
importance. However I would argue that it was instead symptomatic of an entire way of thinking, which was very common in the eighteenth century. The philosophes believed in science, progress and the power of the empirical world – the imagination was deliberately given short shrift, and no doubt the imaginative power in these individuals waned when it was not exercised and energy was instead exerted on the outer world.

Of course we had the monumental reaction to this in the Romantic movement, which was essentially a recapitulation of the power of the imagination, in a more secular vein. For all that, the Art of the neoclassical period is still beautiful in its own way – it is bright, decorous, harmonious and inspiring in its ordered beauty. The poetry of Alexander Pope or a piano sonata by Haydn, both are classically elegant. Ironically the Enlightenment was not without the power of the imagination – it is a fascinating epoch, and in fact the very vision of a Laplace, startling in its raw emotive power of untrammelled intellectual and political progress, offers a lot for the imagination to consider. Romanticism of course swerved back to the subject, and introduced keen ideas of the sublime in nature and the inner world. Nevertheless, I do not wish you to consider my championing of the imagination as an entirely Romantic endeavour. Far from it; the true power of the creative intellect subsumes all categories of the mental life of man. When I talk of the imagination, it is often in contradistinction to the pattern of ordinary everyday life, which must needs suck the soul out of all our endeavours, and produce a drab and lifeless world. Brother Lawrence could wash the dishes and think of God, and this was his supreme excellence – many a contemplative found power in the everyday. But the everyday I oppose is the lifeless unthinking everyday, the semiconscious milling about ‘distracted from distraction by distraction’. This is the true enemy of the Spirit.

Hume himself set out a bold philosophical edifice apt to fire the imagination with its vision. But his treatment of the imagination as a faculty residing within the mind was rather laughable – at the other extreme of course we have poor William Blake whose philosophy of ‘minute particulars’ rested on his own eccentric and uncontrolled imaginative faculty – indeed he fled from the ‘ghost of a flea’. Perhaps the greatest example of the imagination is in a religious context such as Dante’s vision of hell, purgatory and heaven, as well as our use of the creative imagination in religious meditation. But this is merely one subset of the totality and infinity of the imagination’s potential – it is really an entire overarching structure for living one’s life. This Hume could not grasp; perhaps he was too much of an extrovert to grasp the significance of the inner world. His philosophical treatment of the ‘imagination’ as dull and lifeless was of course systematic of the agenda of the philosophes, and perhaps hardwired into their way of thinking and entire ontological worldview – that of the priority of the ontic, of the empirical over the metaphysical, of the material universe over spiritual or mental being.

So it is no wonder that we find Hume objecting to the idea that the imagination has any original creative function, rather than being a dull amalgamation echoing past sensory
data. Hume’s matter-of-fact way of thinking has become so commonplace in the modern world, but for me the original vision of this boxing in of mental and spiritual faculties suggests, paradoxically, an imaginative experiment, even if the practical living out of this philosophy would be anathema to any creative introvert. Hume’s vision is powerful – it is clearly articulated and boldly expounded. For all that, it is severely limiting on the powers of the mind and soul. Compare Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’, one of his greatest Romantic poems, to see the reaction to Hume and the Enlightenment project’s boxing in of the soul in this way. And consider many stunning mystical and visionary experiences in the Christian tradition, or even on a more ordinary plane in the practice of ‘meditation’, which became extraordinary precisely because it largely died out (having already been secularised by Descartes), to see the possibilities of the mind. Consider how powerfully we react to music, which led Schopenhauer to declare it to be the closest to the underlying reality itself (the world as embodied music). Or the power and glory of God for the Medievals, expressed in Gothic cathedrals, or the adulation of the ancients by the Renaissance humanist scholars. All these are worlds of the imagination. They are, even today, within our grasp – we can enter into the experience of these things. This is the legacy of culture.

St Bonaventure, in his ‘Journey of the Mind to God’, or the intellectual striving of Plotinus’ ‘Enneads’, entirely refute Pope’s ignorant line of poetry about ‘the indolence of the sage’ - yet can we blame Pope, and is this not a vision in itself, a vision brought about by the turning wheel of history? The shift in our ideas has been shocking. We are pragmatic, sceptical, even cynical – we have lost the capacity for wonder. Prayer is a commonplace, where before it was a great battle, a deep insight. The power of poetry to paint a world, a worldview, an entire existential framework, has been neglected. We live in strange and disconnected times.

The force of Hume’s relegation of the imagination can be everywhere felt in the modern mentality. We are obsessively focused on the outward aspects of life, and the inner life, the inner world of man, has largely shrank and disappeared. The relentless outward focus, prompted by events like the Industrial Revolution where everything was focused on productivity, efficiency, labour and capital, to today’s commercialised extreme where the main focus is GDP growth, at the expense even of the health and sustainability of the natural world. This is the legacy of empiricist philosophy, although the change was perhaps inevitable with various historical factors or the ‘world Spirit’ as Hegel might say.

The Romantic Vision vs The Spiritual Vision

The Romantic vision of a life focused on the subject and the power of the imagination was explicitly a reaction to the excesses of a materialist and scientistic mentality. But of course the pendulum had swung back, and traditionally the creativity of the imagination has been
associated with the spiritual life, at least in part. We have two competing ideas of how best to use and develop the imagination: it can be achieved in a spiritual or secular way. Now a poet like Shelley has what I would term an ‘atheistic spirituality’ because his thoughts, themes and ideas, indeed his very values, seem to be suffused with a spiritual sentiment and mode of being, and yet there is no mention of God and certainly no traditional religion. In fact, Shelley was hostile to traditional religion. Similarly, Blake had not stepped into a church in the last thirty years of his life. His spiritual outlook was famously non-traditional, to the extent of lampooning God the Father. Clearly Romanticism offered something different to earlier forms of the imagination. Even in a Romantic work within the mould of traditional religion, such as Verdi’s sublime Requiem, it was more suited to the concert hall than any actual ecclesial setting.

When we compare something like Verdi’s Requiem to a Renaissance piece like a Palestrina Mass setting, the difference is immediately obvious, even startling. Verdi’s is essentially a drama infused with spirituality, it is operatic and extremely emotive. Even the Baroque such as Bach’s ‘St Matthew Passion’ has elements of this, to a lesser extent. On the other hand, in the Renaissance piece we have a purer form of spirituality, more peaceful, more sonorous, putting religious beauty above drama. Going further back, Leonin or Gregorian chant of the Middle Ages was even simpler and had a more authentic spiritual dimension.

There is something immediately wonderful and arresting about the Romantic, brought completely to life in, for example, the full whimsical beauty of a Chopin Nocturne. It genuinely leads to a new way of thinking and experiencing. But my favourite culture has always been that of both the Middle Ages and Renaissance, above both modernity and the ancient world. This fires my imagination the most readily. And it is undoubtedly a more spiritual vision, even in ostensibly secular works such as Chaucer’s ‘Hous of Fame’.

The key difference between earlier and later imaginative forms, therefore, lies in the use of religious ideas and themes, at least on the timescale of the Christian era. But this conceptual bifurcation of the imaginative vision makes it easy for anyone to partake of its splendour, whether religious or non-religious in beliefs and temperament. The forms the imagination has taken down the centuries has altered with the Zeitgeist, but we have been left with an extraordinary legacy of Art and culture which can aid later generations in turn. It is a kind of deposit of wisdom which is handed down, and in an age like ours, with all its downsides, setbacks, and disadvantages, at least we have easy access to a good amount of that historic culture. It is important to make the most of this gift, and whether in the Romantic vision, or the spiritual vision of the imagination, to utilise our cultural resources as well as we are able.

Ode to the Imagination
O power of the imagination, how great you are! How sublime your inspirations! From the earliest age I learnt some of your secrets, through the power of reading. And now, like Wordsworth and his field of daffodils, I have it always with me. The imagination is such that actual outward life can be a distasteful labour – although monks especially are known to combine prayer and manual work, suggesting some activity is helpful. But in general terms, nothing can surpass the faculty of the creative imagination for interest and engagement. I could live out my whole life within thy environs! Rather than travel the globe, I would simply, through cultural artefacts or through my spiritual faculties, go on a great mental journey.

The imagination is its own reward, and contains everything necessary for a fulfilling and worthwhile life. For I do not believe that we must act out a great part on this world’s stage, that we must seek for the things coveted by the majority of mankind. O noble imagination, you show forth that the petty ambitions of man are worth less than nothing. Your power is immediate, your horizon infinite, your time eternal. You are the fulfilment of man’s dreams through the dream itself; the journey is the crucial element, the destination a mere stage prop.

Imagination, you are a gateway that leads to infinite possibilities; you are a window upon Heaven, a faint echo of the ideal world and the ideal life that can come suddenly into focus and strike us with an astounding moment of insight. You rescue us from the merely animal, the prosaic, and transport us into a wonderful universe of enchantment and splendour. In short, imagination, you are one of the key faculties of the mind, and a portal upon eternity.

The Link Between the Imagination and the Real

We suffer a modern prejudice that the imagination is just a make-believe or daydream world. In fact this is the legacy once again of philosophers like Hume. In truth, the realm of the imagination may be closer to the Real than our everyday basic existence. Consider the routine of life, and its many chores, and pointless activities. Is this the highest level of authentic being? Clearly not. And yet when we are engaged with a great work of literature, or a stirring symphony, or when we are engaged in a spiritual meditation, or even reflection upon some profound truths, then are we not at a higher level of being? Is this not a happier state?

For we have a certain prejudice regarding what constitutes the Real, namely the rigours of ordinary life. And I put to you that this is pure illusion, and far from the truth. I often feel most alienated from my deeper being when I am in a busy social situation. Outward activity can be useful and rewarding, but if the balance between action and contemplation is not right, if we do not give adequate time and mental energy to both aspects of our
existence, then we are in danger of a certain incompleteness. If we were wholly contemplative, we may find ourselves isolated, but if we were all frenzied action, we would give no energy to the exercise of the imagination.

Now the imagination is not simply some Romantic reverie – it is the very faculty of the mind that deals with pictorial images of higher concepts. And I am not saying the imagination is the highest faculty – indeed this I would reserve for the intellect. But using pictorial images in the mind we can create entire environments, achieve inner peace, realise great ideas, and create our own realm of being, modify our very plane of existence. Meditation, as an exercise, often involves forming images in the mind, for example of the life of Christ (note: I am talking of Western meditative practice here). We might focus on the scene of the Crown of Thorns for example, and imagine the profound truth of the suffering God-man as he stands before us. We can delve further in our meditative practice, and maybe access the intellect, as the images fade and we are left with the pure grasping of an intuitive truth, that strikes us with a profundity of insight. But the world of the imagination is often terribly under-utilised, and this may be partly to do with the decline of spiritual practices like meditation.

But is not this view of Christ more Real an experience than doing our weekly shopping at the mall? Does it not strike us as more profound, more life-affirming, and more genuine? This is some of the power of the imagination. Another scenario: Bruckner’s Sixth symphony. As we hear the dramatic sonorous notes we imagine an entire landscape of which we are a part. We are one with the emotive field of the music that is almost a psycho-spiritual place. Or the Adagio to Rachmaninoff’s Second piano concerto, where we remember all our past loves and romantic affections, poured forth in an eternal language that the imagination grasps easily and glides along with gracefully! We see ‘Hunters in the Snow’ by Peter Bruegel the Elder, and suddenly as we contemplate the painting we imagine ourselves as part of the scene, in that frozen village and the cluster of houses, and the elegant landscape...imagining ourselves in a perfect Winter pastoral scene, the idealisation of the old Early Modern peasant life. There are so many possibilities with the use of the imagination, and it is more authentically Real than the humdrum moments of ordinary activity.

Conclusion

Never doubt the power of the imagination. It is utterly extraordinary, and surely empiricist philosophers got the balance woefully wrong to focus on the exterior world of ordinary activity. This is like a prison of the prosaic, a mental cage of the banal and bathetic, the world of transport and the workplace, of the domestic environment and distracting social engagements, all of which we accept uncritically as our ‘lot’ in life, without giving ourselves time for the aspect of the contemplative life. We must get the balance right, for a
happy and fulfilling life, and that means effectively utilising the imagination, among other things.

It is foolish to consider the faculty of the imagination as ‘escapism’. This is a value judgement that makes contemplative time weak and artificial, and deifies our humdrum trip to the shopping mall as somehow the mark of authentic and real living. It is a product of our extremely outward looking society, which seems to have lost the capacity for the inner life. This is of course tragic, and only leads to unhappiness. But we can reclaim that inner space, it is possible with determination and discipline to turn to the imagination and utilise it effectively. Art is of course a great help but the imagination is not bounded by Art. Neither is it purely a religious matter, or purely a secular matter. The imagination encompasses so much of the life of the mind, that it would be very difficult to exaggerate its importance.

Everyone can make fulfilling use of the imagination – perhaps through the power of reading or music, perhaps through some creative outlet such as writing or drawing, perhaps in religious practice, or otherwise in the moments of pure inspiration that we feel in our lives. It is such a powerful tool that it is important not to neglect this aspect of our existence – but instead to fully celebrate our state as human beings and make use of this extraordinary power of the mind.