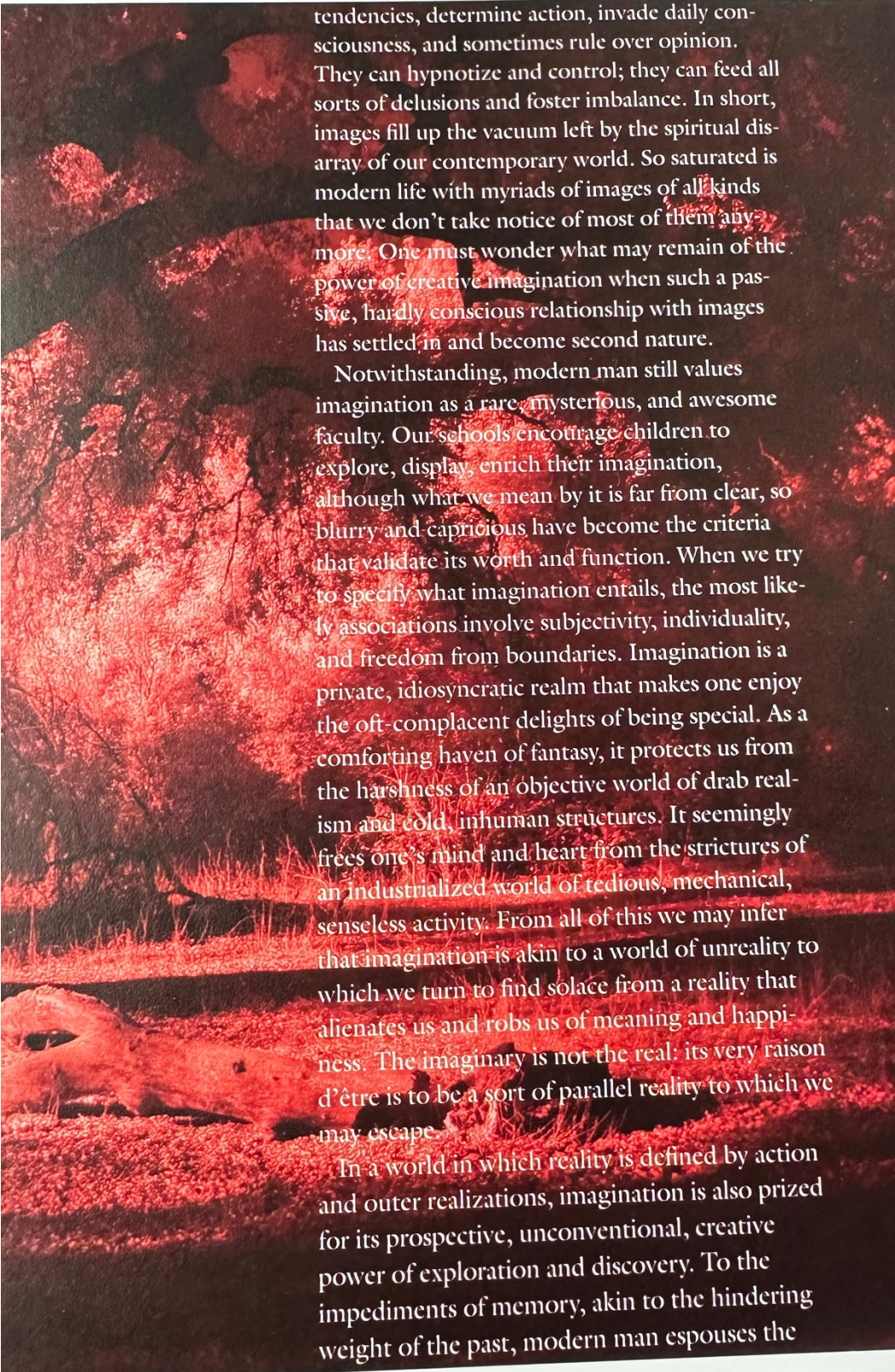


IMAGINATION AND THE VOID

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

Patrick Laude





THE AMBIGUOUS POWER OF IMAGES has never been as pervasive as it is today through the world of media and virtual reality. Images shape ideas and tendencies, determine action, invade daily consciousness, and sometimes rule over opinion. They can hypnotize and control; they can feed all sorts of delusions and foster imbalance. In short, images fill up the vacuum left by the spiritual disarray of our contemporary world. So saturated is modern life with myriads of images of all kinds that we don't take notice of most of them anymore. One must wonder what may remain of the power of creative imagination when such a passive, hardly conscious relationship with images has settled in and become second nature.

Notwithstanding, modern man still values imagination as a rare, mysterious, and awesome faculty. Our schools encourage children to explore, display, enrich their imagination, although what we mean by it is far from clear, so blurry and capricious have become the criteria that validate its worth and function. When we try to specify what imagination entails, the most likely associations involve subjectivity, individuality, and freedom from boundaries. Imagination is a private, idiosyncratic realm that makes one enjoy the oft-complacent delights of being special. As a comforting haven of fantasy, it protects us from the harshness of an objective world of drab realism and cold, inhuman structures. It seemingly frees one's mind and heart from the strictures of an industrialized world of tedious, mechanical, senseless activity. From all of this we may infer that imagination is akin to a world of unreality to which we turn to find solace from a reality that alienates us and robs us of meaning and happiness. The imaginary is not the real: its very *raison d'être* is to be a sort of parallel reality to which we may escape.

In a world in which reality is defined by action and outer realizations, imagination is also prized for its prospective, unconventional, creative power of exploration and discovery. To the impediments of memory, akin to the hindering weight of the past, modern man espouses the

seemingly unlimited power of projection of an imagination that defies the constraints of reality as it is known. Modern science and technology thrive on this sense of unhampered liberty to question, inquire, and fathom. This is, in a sense, the very pride that modern mankind boasts as its uncontested superiority over ages of allegedly conformist compliance with unexamined beliefs and unscrutinized customs. There is no modernity without unconstrained imagination, imagination to think, to do, and to be.

CRITICS OF MODERNITY HAVE SUGGESTED that such highly subjective, individualized, and metaphysically unrestricted understanding of imagination may ultimately confine us to alienation and Prometheism. The artificiality of many of its productions reinforces mankind's chronic separation from its environment, short of integration with a qualitative universe of meaning. It erects walls of isolation among humans by means of the mesmerizing power of technological creations and projections. Television and the internet are poor substitutes for bonds of friendship and communication. Furthermore, the unbound, directionless, and idiosyncratic imagination of our times is suspected of opening a chasm between humanity and the divine: it is likely that the myriads of imaginary dreams of virtual reality produce a world in which God has become implausible and seemingly unneeded. Imagination, pushed to the limits of its demiurgic élan, ends up evoking a ghostly, and ghostly, counter-reality: it is indeed the imagination of the sorcerer's apprentice. At the end of the road this counter-reality overruns and cancels out what it counters. The virtual becomes more real than the actual; it dispels ontological bound-

aries and realizes the old prophecies of a world totally enmeshed in the alluring net of Maya, or swept in the whirlwind of exponential "surreality."

To attend to this crisis of modern imagination, a few questions are in order. Should imagination be confined to the realms of the subjective, the individual, and the phantasmatic, and has it always been akin to them? Is imagination free from any laws, and independent from any objective grounding? Is the contemporary disconnection between imagination and "things as they are" and "things as we know them" the fundamental rule, or rather the circumstantial exception?

TRADITIONAL WORLDS have been unanimous in their metaphysical and spiritual embrace of imagination. The world of images has been universally conceived as an inspiring and pacifying treasury of wisdom: not only a horizon of dream but a space of knowledge. Pre-modern mankind was quite aware that visual representations provide a more direct access to reality than concepts and discourses. It highly prized the power of imagination as a privilege to relate to the beyond. This is why words referring to seeing and "imaging" often denoted, or connoted, a sense of knowledge. Thus, a "theory" amounts to none other, etymologically, than a "vision" of reality. Rites and symbols bear witness to this benefit of directness and integrality with which the discursive process of reason can never catch up. Myths, parables, icons, visionary dreams, sacred ideograms, all bear witness to the instantaneity of the manifestation of the sacred in and through images. Even the most iconoclastic of traditions, namely Judaism and Islam, have not been able to dispense with the human need for visual imagery,



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if only through their inspiring cultivation of the illumination and calligraphy of the word of God.

Such pervasiveness of the imagination of forms in the world of religions may surprise: is not the end of the spiritual journey most often envisaged as a transcendence of all imaginary and discursive forms? Certainly so, but this transcending motion cannot bypass images themselves since it takes as its starting point the world of forms in which we live and “imagine,” and since images ultimately point to that “unimaginable” that is both their root and their end. Sacred imagination proceeds from the divine source of tradition that it prolongs and unfolds, thereby providing us with its iconic power of allusion to and intimation of the unseen. It offers us a way to gaze upon

the Divine Mystery that we cannot grasp and that our reason can only infer without ascertaining it with full existential certainty. God escapes our imagination in His essence, but He mercifully manifests the beauty of His manifold qualities in the world of sacred imagination.

AS A SCHOLARLY “PROPHET” OF IMAGINATION.

Henry Corbin emphasized, in the wake of Swedenborg and Shi’ite and Sufi theosophy, that the world of imagination is an objective and universal domain, not a purely private bubble of fiction. The necessary distinction between the latter and the former demanded that he coin a new word, i.e., the “imaginal,” to prevent his readers from confusing spiritual imagination for the individual inventions that we fancy. Imagination is indeed a

“world,” the *mundus imaginalis*, a world more real than our daily dream. In it and through it the higher realm of spiritual realities becomes proportionate to our terrestrial faculties of perception: the imaginal unfolds a bridge between the celestial and the terrestrial. In other words, the “imaginal world” is the intermediary realm that joins the spiritual spheres with physical realities. As for the “imaginary” domain that

ontological province, but it also possesses its own laws. In his **ANTHROPOLOGICAL STRUCTURES OF IMAGINATION**, Gilbert Durand drew an extensive repertory of the ways in which imagination has manifested and functioned through myths and symbols, through religions and arts, through ages and lands. He has shown that mankind has been remarkably one in its understanding and use of imagination as a faculty that

IMAGINATION LIES AT THE JUNCTURE OF DEATH AND LIFE, ABSENCE AND PRESENCE.

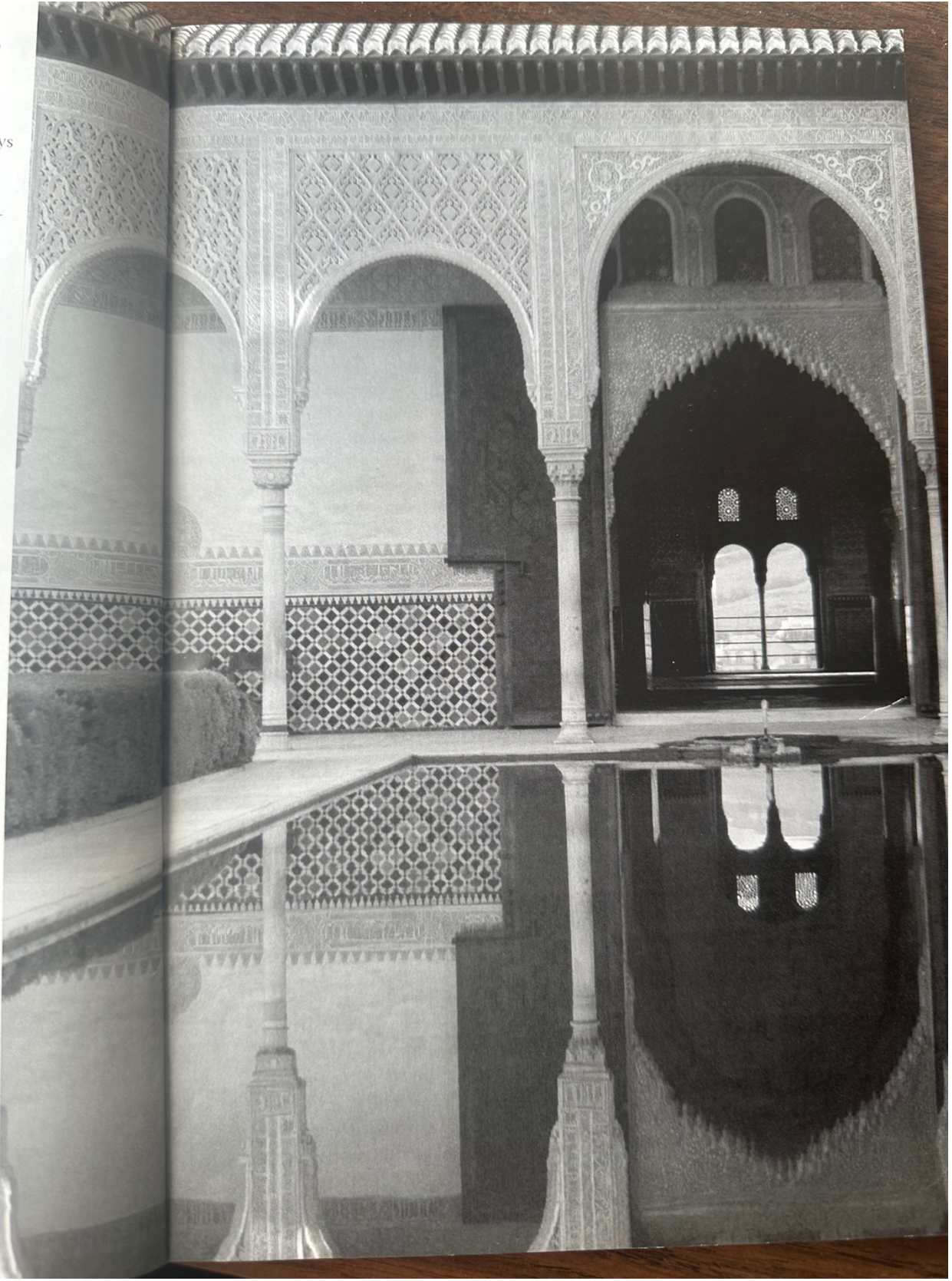
we vaunt and value, it is nothing more, at best, than the residual manifestation of this imaginal realm. Thus, contemporary forms of arts, such as moving pictures, can become the vehicles of the imaginal archetypes of the myths of old, and many “imaginative” works of literature are half unconscious channels of truly imaginal realities, half phantasmatic fabrications of an artist engrossed with his own genial figments. Literary and cinematic works may flaunt imaginal realities in contexts that often trivialize their modes of manifestation, but they cannot but be the vehicle, albeit in a passive and unconscious way, of their ultimate meaning.

Imagination has not only its

makes us feel at home in the world of forms in which we live. Genuine and sound imagination is neither severed from the cosmos, nor from the gods, nor from the One. It obeys, for example, the fundamental laws of cosmic alternation epitomized by the sequence of days and nights. There is, therefore, a diurnal and a nocturnal regime of imagination: the first provides images of separation, differentiation and opposition, as the day that projects diversity and contrast, *yang*, whereas the second proposes

“THE COURT OF THE MYRTLES”
GARDEN OF CLASSICAL ISLAM
THE ALHAMBRA PALACE, GRANADA, SPAIN
FOURTEENTH CENTURY, NASRID PERIOD
(1230–1492)

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visions of reconciliation, fusion and union, like the night that envelops and disposes to sleep, *yin*.

Imagination lies at the juncture of death and life, absence and presence. It has been hailed as a victory over death and putrefaction. Is not the image a surrogate for the living reality that has elapsed or vanished? Paintings, photographs, are images proposed to memory: we willingly evoke the presence of those we love by means of the magic of representation, or we restore, through it, a symbolic life to those who have passed away. In Rome, the *imago* was a mortuary mask of the dead that patrician families carried in a funerary procession. It was then placed on the altar of ancestors, like a permanent reminder of death in life and life in death. The image is a presence in absence, but it is also an absence in presence. It is never a full adequation, nor an utter distance. Imagination lies in this ambivalent realm that is neither real nor unreal. As the symbol—which etymologically refers to a token only one half or one side of which is presented as a sign of recognition—it always presents us with a reality the true face of which is to be found beyond.

From etymology to entomology, our exploration of the connotations of the *imago* teaches us that this term may also refer to the final stage in the development of an insect. This not only alludes to the idea that the true “image” may be taken to be the goal or the end result of a creative process, it also points to a sense of perfection, as well as to an intuition of a being’s essence. The image is more than a representation, it is the ultimate form of a being, and imagination captures nature at a stage, or on a level, that is more real than what we flatly call reality.

IMAGINATION FILLS A GAP, but it does so in two very different ways. As Corbin reminds us, it can be, positively, like a bridge, or a pathway, between the world of visible, physical forms, and the realm of suprasensory, archetypal, spiritual realities that cannot, as such, be perceived by our senses, nor enter the world of forms. This is the intermediary world of similitude in difference and difference in similitude. Similitude is the key to interpretation, the science of deciphering messages from the beyond; but such a translation is not one-sided and quasi-automatic like that of a sign-post or an allegory, meaning this is that and that’s it. Difference introduces a wealth of levels and correspondences that makes the symbol ever more than what it appears to be. Imagination is the faculty that gives access to this full domain of meaning. On the side of creation, it crystallizes, as it were, spiritual intuitions and realities into formal, symbolic realities. On the side of interpretation it “frees” meanings from their formal shell and connects them to the living sources of Reality. It does not create symbols out of nothing, it simply perceives, or unveils, their objective reality as merciful and fruitful intermediaries between the spiritual and the physical. This imaginal domain is not vain, phantasmatic imagination at all: it is an objective domain to which visionaries, shamans, and mystics have had access, a symbolic book which we can read in order to reach intimations of the Beyond as “through a glass,” not “darkly,” but rather through the many “colors” of divine theophanies.

By contrast with the substantive and sustentive nature of spiritual and symbolic imagination, the trivial market of our “imaginary” life amounts to no more than a “filler” in the most pejorative

sense of the word. This is imagination as “filler of the void,” to use Simone Weil’s phrase: “It is continually at work filling up the fissures through which grace may pass.” There are the fissures that result from our relativity, from the fact that we are neither self-sufficient nor self-fulfilled. The “void” that is to be filled is the incompleteness of our terrestrial being, of our individual experience. It is from or through the “void” resulting from our relativity that the “fullness” of the Real can be unveiled. In need of Reality, our incomplete, fragmentary being should open itself to the completeness, the absoluteness of the Divine, which is the only fully satisfactory response to it. But such an opening implies a “dark night” that our soul does not want to bear with patience, or in waiting, to use again one of Weil’s powerful spiritual metaphors: hence the compensations of illusory imagination. Wandering imagination, sterile imagination, serves our delusions of metaphysical “immunity,” in the hope of forgetting the void that is growing within us, and threatens to make walking dead of ourselves.

EVEN THOUGH the contemporary concepts of the “imaginary” and imagination fall short of the full reality of the imaginal domain and the plenary spiritual function of images, they cannot but testify to the latter as their distant or inverted reflections. Reality is one, and there is no absolute “error” in being. First, the subjective bias of our current concept of imagination does not only stem from an ignorance of the ontological objectivity of the imaginal, it also remains, positively, as a faint mirror image of divine Self-knowledge. This is suggestively taught by a *hadith*: “I was a hidden treasure and

I desired to be known, so I created the world in order to be known.”

Imagination is an objectification of the divine Subject through which God knows Himself in the mode of multiplicity and contrast. Imagination is the exteriorized “content” of the Divine Subject in the way of a wealth of creative meanings “passed into” imaginal forms. The world springs forth out of God’s imagination, and human imagination can, and must, unfold in an analogous creative process. Human art mimics divine art. In parallel, the individualistic bent that characterizes modern imagination, despite its flowing from an inordinate cultivation of arbitrary idiosyncrasies, can also be understood as an obscured and indirect sense that imagination does indeed relate each and every soul to the whole of being, and to the Principle of the whole. Ibn Arabi’s concept of the “God of belief” as a personal imaginal reality, that William Chittick also defined as “self-disclosure of the Real (that) ties a knot in the fabric of existence,” is of necessity limited and colored by the size and the hues of the individual recipient. There is no way for the limited to be connected with the Unlimited but through representations or limitations that are as many imaginal apprehensions of the Real. These limitations are not exclusive of liberty, and our modern equation of imagination with freedom is not unfounded, although not fully understood in its foundations.

Imagination is liberating because it reflects God’s utter freedom to create. It is the projecting and creating power of His infinity. Reflecting this divine freedom on the human level, only the sage and the saint have enough imagination to become other than themselves, and one with all selves. |