

Seeing Things Whole

by James M. Roseman

IN ITS MARCH 1990 PREMIER EDITION, the *First Things* editors laid out their “prejudices” for the new journal, noting by that term they mean “prior judgments,” which they further clarified as “the considered assumptions that frame what we’re going to do and how we’re going to do it.” The editors went on to describe their understanding of the relation between religion in public life under the rubric “first things.” Religion, they said, is prior to public life, in that even “while religion informs, enriches, and provides a moral foundation for public life, the chief purpose of religion is not to serve public life.” It is more fundamental than that. When religion becomes captive to public life it “is of little use to public life.”

Religion best serves public life by relativizing the importance of public life, especially of public life understood as politics. Authentic religion keeps the political enterprise humble by reminding it that it is not the first thing. By directing us to the ultimate, religion defines the limits of the penultimate. By illuminating our highest purpose all lesser purposes are brought under transcendent judgment.

What is notable in the statement of the purpose of *First Things* is its *prejudices*. That is, that the editors knew that they had them and they were stated, consciously reflected upon and well-considered. The end of the premier edition opening statement says, “At every historical moment, the contemporary is afflicted by the crippling conceit of its utter novelty.” To see this and build upon it is a rare kind of wisdom in our time. It is what makes *First Things*, and other such journals, so important today. To recognize that there are differences in things, and among those differences the cruciality of priority—and how vertical priority informs the horizontal—is monumental in today’s world. “Religion points us to the last things, framing the final direction that informs our decisions about life, both personal and public. The chief service of religion, then, is to teach us that the first things are the last things.”

Afflicted as we are today by the crippling conceit of our utter novelty, we have lost all sense of the notion that there are first things, second things, and last things. We no longer believe there is a grand story we all live within. As such we no longer believe there is a unity (a center) to things—no whole.

This essay is a kind of reminder of first things, not to *First Things* editors of course, but to us all. As such, for many readers it will be a statement of the obvious. For others, perhaps a renewal.

In his book *Love Alone is Credible*, Hans Urs von Balthasar describes how different the modern world is from the ancient and premodern world. In the old world everyone believed there was a unity to all things and therefore a center. They just had not yet found it. The Christian story provided it. In such a

world von Balthasar said Christianity stood “out against this background as the fulfillment of the fragmented meaning of the world (*logos spermatikos*), which in the Word Made Flesh (*Logos sarx*) achieves its unity and fullness and redeemed freedom. . . . Christianity represented not only a fulfillment, but also a conversion, insofar as all of the fragmentary *logoi* absolutized themselves and thus put up a sinful resistance to the true Logos. . . . This approach was possible because [the Church Fathers] took over the identity between philosophy and theology that had prevailed in the ancient cultures as a self-evident fact.” The Christian story was not only the Good News of redemption. It made sense of the world of everyday life. But in modernity’s closed world structure, as Charles Taylor calls it, the “secularist spin” restricts “our grasp of things” and the idea of unity and a center makes no sense anymore. In the same world of never-ending change that led the ancient philosophers to ask the metaphysical question and conclude there must be a center, a unity, we moderns no longer consider the question legitimate. We continue to pursue a unified theory of the cosmos in scientific terms, but not a unity to all things, including existence itself. We just assume there is no center, no whole, even while retaining social, political, and legal constructs that imply one: e.g., progress, human dignity, justice.

Though we moderns consider ourselves to have overcome the prejudices and superstitions of the pre-modern world, including that there is a center, a whole, our own conundrums belie our blindness.

With great irony, in an interview with Studs Terkel in 1961, famous American atheist intellectual Gore Vidal made an insightful statement about all cultures in each generation that can help us see why:

You’re born into a society and you are shaped by it, whether you know it or not or whether you like it or not. Each of us is born into a prison, of received opinion of superstition and of prejudices. . . . Alfred Whitehead said something fascinating about this. He said, you know you can always determine the nature of any society by the things it does not write about itself. It takes them so much for granted they feel no need to state it. So by the omissions you can begin to determine what a culture is like. . . . The prison is going to break you eventually, but you can at least get a look out; and it is the look out that is art—seeing something that is elsewhere, an alternative to the life that you’re leading. *So, to try to see the thing whole.*

Vidal’s observation is not new, as we observed in the editors of *First Things*. But it is something we often forget. We are all shaped by the particular cultural moment we live in. Much of the forces shaping us are subtle and unnoticed, like Richard Weaver calls attention to in his *Ideas Have Consequences*. Or what Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith addresses in his book *Moral Believing Animals*. He says

Human persons nearly universally live in social worlds that are thickly webbed with moral assumptions, beliefs, commitments, and obligations. The relational ties that hold human lives together, the conversations that occupy people’s mental lives, the routines and intentions that shape their actions, the institutions within which they live and work, the emotions they feel every day—all of these and more are drenched in,

patterned by, glued together with moral premises, convictions, and obligations. These morally constituted and permeated worlds exist outside of people, in structured social practices and relationships within which people's lives are embedded. They also exist 'inside' of people, in their assumptions, expectations, beliefs, aspirations, thoughts, judgments, and feelings. There is nowhere a human can go to escape moral order. There is no way to be human except through moral order."

The moral order we live within shapes us, becomes a part of us. We judge the world we live within according to the prevailing moral premises. Who we are and what we believe to be right and wrong emerge from this moral order. Everyone lives within a moral order, morally good or morally bad. No one stands outside in some neutral place. Different from all other "animals," we know (or can know) we see the world through a moral lens. It is unto this reality that St. Paul speaks in Romans 12:2 (NRSV): "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

But this observation applies broader than to being morally shaped by the culture we live. It extends to the whole way we interpret the world—our whole worldview, including the philosophical ideas that make up our worldview. This includes our metaphysical outlook, whether we ask the same big questions the ancients did anymore, or not. It extends to the whole of our "lived experience." It is in this broad sense that Vidal's comment that we are all "born into a prison of superstitions and prejudices" apply. Every person in every culture is born into the prison of its own moment and moral order. To see our imprisonment we must be tutored from the outside. Only from there can we see what we are otherwise blind to and be released to be formed in accord with a different order. Every culture in each generation faces the problem: we don't easily see how we see things. How does a culture detect its imprisonment?

Here Vidal quotes famed early 20th century English mathematician and process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, saying "you can always determine the nature of any society by the things it does not write about itself. It takes them so much for granted they feel no need to state it. So, by the omissions you can begin to determine what a culture is like." Whitehead is saying you can tell the nature of any society by the questions they don't ask. Because in what they don't ask is buried those perspectives they just take for granted as settled. This is very similar to what Plato says in his famous Allegory of the Cave.

The dominant questions of the pre-Socratic philosophers and Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were how to make sense of the constant change in the world and whether there was anything permanent (these were the metaphysical questions) and how to live in the world (these were the political and ethical questions). Regarding the metaphysical question, in Plato's view the day-to-day world of change and flux reflects our participation in a more real and unchanging world, his world of "forms" or ideas. He likens the changing world to people chained together in a cave with a big fire burning behind, the light from which casts shadows of their movements on the wall before them. The people in the cave interpret the shadowed movements as the sum total of reality. Only when a person escapes the chains and makes his way out of the cave can he see the truly real world. Like in the movie *The Truman Show*, escaping the cave allows him to see that the only reality he'd ever known is a mere shadow in comparison to an even more real world. The reality of the everyday world obtains its reality by "participating" in the truer world. The sensible things of this changing world, while real, point toward something even more real. But the "sensible" things in the world of those in the cave blinded them to the greater reality. But there

is an obstinacy in us all. We prefer what we think we know. Using his teacher Socrates as the interlocutor, Plato shows that even after the person who escaped saw the greater reality and returned to tell his compatriots about it, they wouldn't believe him. Socrates predicts the outcome: "*Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?*" Not because it wasn't so, but because they preferred their current way of thinking. The prisoners preferred their prison. This is a form of not asking questions about assumed settled matters residing in the background of our worldviews. Reality (and truth) "just is" what our contemporary lived-experience says it is (Rorty is an exaggeration of this), what Charles Taylor calls our prevailing "social imaginary." We don't ask questions about things that are unquestionable, things we think have been settled.

From our modernist perch we tend to perceive Plato's allegory to be the tale of the great march out of darkness into the light we call The Enlightenment. Beginning in earnest in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the key intellectuals of the day challenged the prevailing order, suggesting that order wasn't asking questions about "settled matters." As the willingness to challenge the status quo continued and as the new scientific ways of knowing became pronounced, the dominant philosophical questions changed too. Whereas the first order questions asked by the classical philosophers and later by the medieval philosophical theologians, preeminently St. Thomas, were focused on the question of "being," and how God relates to his creation, which informed the answers to the second order questions (politics and ethics), during the Enlightenment the dominant questions shifted. The question, "How do we know and what can we know?" (epistemology) came to dominate, and led to a narrowing of the meaning of reason and the capacity to know. This shift coupled with the new science, the new cosmology would profoundly change the prevailing social and cosmic imaginary (as illustrated so well by C. S. Lewis's *The Discarded Image*). So much so that over time questions of being came to be viewed as unanswerable (and therefore meaningless), and therefore what is and what can be known came to be viewed as answerable only under the narrowed view of reason. This became the unquestioned sediment of the new "enlightened" cultural background, the new social imaginary. Modernity developed a new cave of shadows, captive in its own new prison unawares, with its own set of superstitions and prejudices. We leave our new prejudices largely ill-considered today because we believe them to be just "the way things are." There is no transcendent order not because there really isn't but because we just assume, under the new rationality, the matter is settled (hence MacIntyre's *Who's Justice, Which Rationality*). In short, we prefer our own world of shadows.

Vidal and Whitehead were right, with the irony that they themselves didn't readily see the walls of their own prison, nor their own superstitions and prejudices, just as many in modernity today do not.

Is there a way out of our cave? Vidal again is right (though by all accounts it doesn't appear he knew how right he was): we must *try to see the thing whole*. This, he suggests, can be achieved partly through art, by "seeing . . . an alternative to the life that you're leading." To restate in my terms, we can see our own imprisonment and find our way out by seeing something that is from another place or time and imagine or live from (or out of) that place or time. What then can we do to help us see things whole? We first must recognize that at the present time we don't (and, as von Balthasar suggests, we no longer believe there is a whole), then we must discover why not, and entertain anew how we can. The following three (for some well-known) topics will allow us to begin.

1. "Analysis" v. "Religion"

2. Reason and Imagination
3. Art as World Projection

“Analysis” v. “Religion”

In the slow and often subtle passage from the premodern to the modern world, through the gauntlet of the Enlightenment we further fragmented the world, beyond the fragmentation von Balthasar cites of the classical world. Think of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Yeats’s *The Second Coming*, or today’s endless array of dystopian novels and movies. By any measure the modern world is pieces, parts, and silos compared to the premodern world. Will and Ariel Durant and many other historians distinguish the two worlds by the monikers “Age of Faith” and “Age of Reason.” While we know these ascriptions are not accurate nor precise, they do take note of how dominant religion was in the premodern world and how dominant a particular quite narrow variety of reason is in the modern world. Two words that capture this distinction are “analysis” and “religion.” The etymological meanings alone of these terms are likely sufficient to see the point for our purposes: The word *religion* is derived from the Latin *religāre*, or “re-ligate,” literally, “to bind together,” “to re-ligament,” “to see the whole.” *Analysis* is derived from the Greek *análusis*, from *aná*, meaning “on, up,” plus *lúō*, “to unbind,” “to loosen.”

The variety of reason that dominates in the modern world is scientific reasoning. This notion dominates the way almost everything is approached in modern life. It is the default view we maintain in the background of our social and cosmic imaginary. We simply assume this kind of reasoning is the proper, if not the only method for determining what is real or not. But what we don’t often realize is how narrowly focused this kind of reasoning is. It is designed to ask and answer very small questions but very precisely. Analysis pulls things apart and breaks things down. That’s what it does, it is its purpose.

Religion on the other hand, when thought of as an intellectual model and way of knowing (and it is certainly much more than this), asks and answers enormously big and sweeping questions—questions of the whole not pieces and parts. Observe Michael Ward on this in his ““Science and Religion in the Writings of C. S. Lewis.”

The smallness of scientific statements is often obscured by their successfulness. Scientific statements succeed in defining and predicting certain pockets of the natural world, definition and predictions which can then be put to use, in curing small-pox, or building the internal combustion engine, or devising the microchip. The magnificence of such scientific achievements is so huge that it can mislead us into thinking that they have said a great deal, when actually they have said relatively little, but said it very well. A true scientific statement has to be relatively small, because it is only relatively small things that can be said with sufficient univocality to be empirically verifiable or falsifiable. You might think it preposterous to describe the mapping of the human genome as a “small statement,” but genetics is only one department of biology and biology is only one department of science and science is only one department of human knowledge. Seen in context of all that there could possibly be said about a human being—socially, psychologically, spiritually, economically, historically, geographically, emotionally, visually, audibly, tangibly, olfactorally, racially, anthropologically, dermatologically, psephologically (you get the picture!), any genetic statement, however marvelously correct, is still a minuscule fraction of the total. When you start trying to make larger statements you move into the language of the humanities and then into the arts and then into religion. Religious statements, by saying things which attempt to explain life in the round, use language which is very hard to quantify, to measure, to test. But that is because they are trying to say a very great deal; they are trying to find the unity, the oneness, the heart of all reality. Here the stake is not a mere thirty shillings, but every penny you have, your life, your soul.

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In the modern world we tend not to see things whole in large part because we are so analytical. We ask small questions, get lots of accurate fact-based answers (data), but cannot see things whole. Modernity has severely impoverished and limited assimilation capabilities. Our view of reason is narrow. We must admit how inadequate our small questions and narrow reason are to see a whole.

Reason and Imagination

Imagination is the ligature of the pieces and parts to see the thing whole, connecting the head with the heart to find the meaning. It is the faculty that can weave the pieces and parts into a whole—not an imaginary whole, but a *real* whole. In his "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," C. S. Lewis says, "reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning." Further, he says, "meaning is the antecedent condition of both truth and falsehood, whose antithesis is not error but nonsense." In *Chance or the Dance*, Thomas Howard says, "Imagination is, in a word, the faculty by which we organize our experience into form, and thus apprehend it as significant. To put it another way, it is what makes us refuse to accept experience as mere random clutter, and makes us try without ceasing to shape that experience so we can manage it. We cannot live with the idea of mere randomness." Quantum mechanics and chaos theory even demonstrate that what appears chaotic and random is not *merely* so. Howard says, "All of us, besides merely *passing through* an experience (thirst, love, exhaustion), want to be able to *say something about* that experience. For if we can just get something said about it, we get a kind of detachment from it, and can savor it (in a pleasant experience like love) or battle it (pain, say, or thirst)." With the faculty of imagination we continue to practice the art of seeing through things to something more – there is an "aboutness" to our everyday experience. Further Howard says, "imagination is the "synthetic faculty; that is, it brings things together (synthesizes) rather than breaks things apart (analyzes). . . . It is an image-making faculty; that is, its tendency is from the abstract to the concrete, and not vice versa."

In order to have a chance to see things whole, we must recouple a robust reason with imagination.

Art as World Projection

What does it mean to get a "look out" to see our own imprisonment and find our way out through art by seeing something that is from another place or time and imagine or live from (or out of) that place or time? It means to step out of our own moment in time, which means to have a sense of history; and it means to step into other worlds, to see that our own "imprisonment" is not the only way there is and not simply "the way things are." Art can reflect or confirm our moment, capture and preserve our collective memory (history) and our lamentations (longings), and thus it carries a sense of time. But it can also challenge us to see things differently (prophetic) and can cast, model, and convey our dreams and aspirations, for good or ill. It can project alternative worlds and invite us in to see *the more*.

In his book *Art in Action*, Christian Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff says, "World projection is perhaps the most pervasive and important of the actions that artists perform by means of their artifacts." This means, he says, that art presents "to us a world for our consideration," tapping the human ability "to imagine a world distinct from the actual world." This is an ability unique to human beings. It includes the ability to create imaginary worlds, or worlds that are not real, such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, and through them speak of a more real world. This aspect of human art can help us step out of our moment and envisage not only an entertaining respite from the burdens of our moment,

but help us imagine a different and even a new way of being. This imaginative act can be transformative, by creating new and better horizons to which to aspire and experience a glimpse of a fuller even more real world.

Let's take two examples: Tolkien's *On Fairy Stories* and the Corporate Communal Worship of the church.

Fairy Stories

Some imaginative stories create a world into which we can step that is much like the actual world though fictional. In his essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien calls the creation of imaginative worlds our ability to have Secondary Belief. The artist "makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter," and what the artist "relates is 'true' [because] it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside." This is the normal kind of fictional or dramatized story (whether narratives, poems, or other forms such as drama, ballet, paintings, and even music, especially in oratorios or opera). But Tolkien says of fairy stories, they are different in that we don't find them plausible in comparison to the real world we live in but this implausibility is not problematic for our enjoyment; indeed "sometimes the opposite":

[Tolkien says,] Fantasy, the making or glimpsing Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faerie. I desired dragons with a profound desire. Of course, I in my timid body did not wish to have them in the neighborhood, intruding into my relatively safe world. . . . But the world that contained even the imagination of Fafnir [dwarf son of a dwarf king in Norse mythology] was richer and more beautiful, at whatever cost of peril. The dweller in the quiet and fertile plains may hear of the tormented hills and the unharvested sea and long for them in his heart. For the heart is hard though the body soft."

To create such fictional, even implausible worlds through art does not mean something true about reality is not or cannot be communicated through the alternative world. Some aspects of reality may be better shown through such fictional worlds. One in particular is consolation. And this, Tolkien says, is best shown through fairy stories.

He says that fairy stories always have a form of consolation in them, but not mere "Happy Endings." He calls it *Eucatastrophe*, a good that unexpectedly emerges from a catastrophe. This "sudden joyous 'turn' . . . ; this joy, which is one of the things which fairy stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist', nor 'fugitive'. . . . [I]t is sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur." He says this is not a denial of the terribleness of the bad and sorrowful aspects of the catastrophe (what he calls *dycatastrophe*), "the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance." But in the end, beyond all expectation, there is good news (what he calls *evangelium*, which is the Greek word for "gospel"). Here Tolkien says:

The peculiar quality of the "joy" in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as sudden glimpse of underlying reality or truth. It is not only a "consolation" for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question "Is it true?" The answer to this question that I gave at first was (quite rightly): "If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world." But in the "*eucatastrophe*" we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater—it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world. . . .

The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: “mythical” in their perfect, self-contained significance and at the same time powerfully symbolic and allegorical; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete *eucatastrophe*. But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation. The Birth of Christ is the *eucatastrophe* of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the *eucatastrophe* of the story of the Incarnation. The story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the “inner-consistency of reality.” There is no tale ever told that men would rather find as true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation. To reject it leads to sadness or wrath.

The art of fairy stories, therefore, can enable us to step out of time and place, which in turn can help us see our own imprisonment. But more than that alone, it can show us a picture of a truer, richer world toward which we should lean and align our lives in the midst of the confines of our moment and place.

That humans have the capacity to project other worlds is not to suggest that we should embrace some Feuerbachian, Freudian, Marxist therapeutic view of God-as-a-projection. No! Rather it is to suggest that embedded within this human capacity is an actual grand story, reflected through and within our capacity: God’s own projection of the actual world within which we all live. This is what Tolkien meant when he suggested to C. S. Lewis that night after dinner in 1931, that the human mythopoetic ability is a reflection of God’s grand myth. Is it possible that our mythmaking nature is the echo of a Grand Myth, one written not *by* us but *in* us, *in* creation by the creator? Fairy stories enable us to enter worlds we ourselves have created and to see our own world from a different place. This is a reflection of a different place, one much more real than our created ones and even more real than the one we call the real world, which itself, while being quite real, is a reflection of that greater reality and window into it.

Corporate Communal Worship of the Church

Every time we enter into corporate worship, Morning Prayers, Evening Prayers, the Mass, we enter into a different world even while we are in-this-world. The liturgy is both a picture of a transcendent yet immanent reality, and in this sense is a work of art telling the narrative of the story of God and projecting and displaying the world to come, and yet it is an actual reality of both this world, past and present, and the world to come, in which we participate now. In corporate communal worship we participate, in concentrated form, in the actuality of God’s drama and we are characters in the drama. Just as the whole of creation is God’s work of art, that work of art is, as a whole, on display in corporate worship, even while we are participants in it: God’s Grand Drama: creation, fall, redemption, consummation. This is the rhythmic gathering and scattering of the church, reflecting and participating in God’s Grand Myth, his work of world projection.

So, art can be a way of stepping out of our own momentary cultural imprisonment. But when considered more deeply than merely a technique to find our way of escape from present superstitions and prejudices (as good as that is), art can help us see back beyond our present moment (into our history and tradition) and lead us into the truer, richer world of the future as found in God’s Grand Story. The more we live into and out of that Story the more we (and our culture) are conformed to our

true form. This way of conceiving art as a way out of our imprisonment does so by enabling us into the grand vistas of God's tomorrow even now, in this moment.

As we step out of our present culture and moment in time, facilitated through art and worship, we can begin to be weaned of our incessant tendency to analysis and reconnect reason and imagination, enabling us to see things whole.

But there remains the biggest inhibitor to seeing things whole: The secularist spin put on the view of reality that dominates the modernist outlook, and the resulting closed world structure that forecloses true transcendence. Only as we openly talk about the age-old big questions that lie in the background of our modern social imaginaries, can we come to see that even our dominating closed-world structure outlook results from our penchant for analysis and narrowed reasoning, not from being freed from a cave of shadows. We'll see the same logical necessity of true transcendence to make sense of the world that the ancient philosophers saw. That we don't is due more to hubris and a diminishment of intellectual virtue rather than warrant. We prefer our prison. We think we are answering big questions when we are really answering really small ones. As W. Jay Wood points out in his *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous*, we think that to know what there is to know that we must be like Mr. Spock in *Star Trek* or Professor Gradgrind in Dicken's *Hard Times*: just the facts ma'am, believing cold disinterested logic make facts speak for themselves. But as Sissie Jupe shows in response to Professor Gradgrind, we simply *know* there's more to a horse than how many teeth it has and whether it sheds its coat in the summertime. The prevailing story we live in can enable insight and knowledge or can inflict us with blindness. How we live sets the concerns we have and what we deem significant; and what is significant to us shape who we are. Who we are can affect what we discern to be true about the world. We must step out of our moment to see. As we do, we begin to see that there is more to see than we realize. We can begin to see things whole.

The more we see things whole the more we can influence the current moral order toward God's moral order, avoid being conformed to this world and its moment, and better be conformed to His world.

Jim Roseman is an elder at Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas, a lay theologian and philosopher, and a fellow of the Lewis Tolkien Society in Dallas. He formally studied religion, philosophy, and theology in college and graduate school, but his career has been in business. For over 30 years he worked in management and IT consulting with and for global companies, and is now an independent management consultant.

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