
I. FICTION WITHIN AND BEYOND LITERATURE AND ART

1. The Idea of Imagination and Technological Desire

*Donald Phillip Verene, dpverene@gmail.com (Professor Emeritus,
Department of Philosophy, Emory University)*

Abstract: In the technological society, both memory and imagination are lost. With this loss, traditional society is lost. Traditional society is based on custom and common sense. These aspects of traditional society provide the mind with the opportunity to engage in contemplation. Without contemplation, we are left with desire. Technique comes forward as the means to fulfill desire. All human activity becomes a panorama of means without any specific purpose except to engage in a continual sense of technical improvement. Memory and imagination provide the possibility of transcendence, of passing beyond the present within the present. The technological society conducts life in a continual present of the search for the one best means. The disappearance of contemplation entails the disappearance of virtue, and especially of prudence, as the guide to human activity. We are left with nothing more than desire and the attempt to fulfill desire through the attraction to hyperreality.

Keywords: Imagination, Technology, Memory, Intelligence, Hyperreality

The Idea of Imagination

Let us begin with the Muses, who can sing of “what is and what will be and what was before” and who announce that they “know how to sing many false things similar to genuine ones” but when they wish, they know “how to proclaim true things.” They were born of the union of “loud-thundering Zeus” the son of Cronus and “Mnemosyne (Memory), the protectress of the hills of Eleuther.” The Muses taught Hesiod beautiful song. “Such is the holy gift of the Muses to human beings. For it is from the Muses and far-shooting Apollo that men are poets upon the earth and lyre-

players.”¹ The Muses taught the ability to think in terms of metaphor, to perceive similarity in the dissimilar. Metaphors appear in the mind as if from nowhere. They are the medium of the imagination.

Vico, in his account of the “true Homer” in the *New Science*, says that “memory is the same as imagination [*la memoria è la stessa che la fantasia*].”² The Homeric poems are held in the memory of the Greek peoples and are brought forth through the imagination and recited. Vico has in mind the line in Aristotle’s little treatise *On Memory*: “If asked of which among the parts of the soul memory is a function, we reply: manifestly of that part to which imagination [*phantasia*] also appertains; all objects of which there is imagination are in themselves objects of memory, while those which do not exist without imagination are objects of memory incidentally.”³

Memory when it functions as simply reminiscence is not imagination. Imagination comes forth when memory functions as recollection. Aristotle says: “Whenever, therefore, we are recollecting, we are experiencing one of the antecedent moments until finally we experience the one after which customarily comes that we seek.”⁴ To recollect, Aristotle says, “one must get hold of a starting-point . . . It seems in general that the middle point among all things is a good starting-point.”⁵ We are in the middle point of the present, which can be connected to what was before, and connected by anticipation to what may come in the future. The Muses teach us how to recollect.

Vico says: “Memory has three different aspects: memory [*memoria*] when it remembers things, imagination [*fantasia*] when it alters or imitates them, and ingenuity [*ingegno*] when it gives them a new turn or puts them into proper arrangement and relationship. For these reasons the theological poets [the founders of humanity] called Memory [*Mnemosyne*] the mother of the Muses.”⁶ All poets look to the Muses for support because, like the Muses, they wish their words to sing in a har-

¹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, ed. and trans. Glenn W. Most (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1–53.

² *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), par. 819.

³ *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 Vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 450a.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 451b.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 452a.

⁶ *New Science*, par. 819.

monious voice. A poem must have coherence of its images and a harmony of its words. A poem with these characteristics immediately passes into memory, its natural home. A song is never sung only once. A poem is never read or recited only once.

The technological world has no place for poetry. The acme of technological desire is the appearance of artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence can produce poetry but it cannot produce what poetry is. The attachment to technology is the attachment to time, to a world of constant change. This change is not the time of the Muses. In the technological world the past is obsolete and the present is rapidly dissolving into the future. It is Hegel's "bad infinity." There is no beginning and no end. Artificial intelligence is unable to attain four things: greatness, self-knowledge, sublimity, and contemplation.

Artificial intelligence can reproduce *terza rima* but it cannot create the greatness of Dante. What we find in Dante's poem comes to us in the way that a metaphor suddenly appears in the mind. Artificial intelligence can imitate Hegel but it cannot create the greatness of Hegel. Hegel's dialectical Absolute comes to Hegel as an afflatus in the lecture-rooms of Jena. Dante is an artist of images. Hegel is an artist of reason. They are each a genius of imagination. Artificial intelligence is unable to supply the answer to the question which Socrates speaks to Phaedrus: Is Socrates, a multiform beast, like Typhon, or is he a "simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?"⁷ Self-knowledge is beyond the ability of anything artificial intelligence can accomplish. Artificial intelligence replaces Socratic self-knowledge with the pursuit of self-interest.

Artificial intelligence is a fictional person, a *personne*, no more real than Descartes's *cogito*, incapable of *ethos* (character). Character depends on the imagination to take thought from the apprehension of what *is* to what *might be*. Then from what might be it is possible to form a judgment of what *ought to be*. Because artificial intelligence is incapable of imagination it is also incapable of eloquence. Eloquence is the achievement of human speech in which words bring forth the True as the whole.

Artificial intelligence is incapable of sublimity as Longinus describes it: "a well-timed flash of sublimity shatters everything like a bolt of lightning and reveals the full power of the speaker at a single

⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 230a.

stroke.”⁸ Sublimity takes consciousness out of itself. Artificial intelligence is also the antithesis of contemplation. Contemplation (*theōria*, *theōrein*) is the power of the mind to think beyond any sequence of solving problems. Aristotle says: “Happiness [*eudaimonia*] is coextensive with contemplation.”⁹ Contemplation is a state of the intellect that is closest to that of the gods. Through contemplation we acquire a good daimon. There is no possibility of happiness within the world of artificial intelligence.

Each of these four attainments takes the mind to a “transcendent state of thought,” which the procedures of artificial intelligence cannot reach. Artificial intelligence can reject and reformulate what has been said concerning what is transcendent but it cannot think from the standpoint of the transcendent. The transcendent sense of things is accessible only through the imagination. The lockbox of artificial intelligence keeps the mind and humanity within the boundaries of time, within what is always ongoing. The reality of artificial intelligence is always without access to the “really real” (*to ontos on*), which requires the sense of transcendence, the sense of the human and the divine.

Real intelligence always has within it what it is not. Real intelligence has within it dialectic. Such intelligence is inherently philosophical. Real intelligence or “intellection” (*noēsis*) is what is reached by the ascent of the Platonic Divided Line that begins with the formation of images (*eikones*) as products of *eikasia*, meaning “to make an image.” Within the metaphor present in the image is the sense of comparison, a conjecture. The mind is taken to a new standpoint, which when pursued culminates in a noetic sense of what is. The noetic is sublime. The epiphany that occurs in the flash of insight of the sublime effects the mind’s grasp of what is before it. The mind’s eye sees into the form, the *eidos* of whatever is presented. If the mind is held within the bonds of time, as it is in the activity of artificial intelligence, there is no access to the eternity of the *eidē*.

In this manner the mind’s eye sees into the “great time,” the time of origin that can be reached only through the dialectic of oppositions. The insight into the great time offers the individual the assurance of a

⁸ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. W. H. Fyfe, rev. Donald Russell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1.4.

⁹ *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), 1178b.

providential order that transcends the ongoing movement of ordering experience that is dominated by the mentality of problem-solving. The individual moves from Dante's "dark wood" (*selva oscura*) of error to the perception of the wheel "which moves the sun and the other stars" (*che move il sole e l'altre stele*). The individual also moves from Hegel's "certainty of sensation" (*die sinnliche Gewissheit*) to the transformation of *Geist* into a state of "absolute knowing" (*das absolute Wissen*), of knowing the True as the whole.

Artificial intelligence is unable to take dialectic any further than scepticism. Sceptical thought treats opposition as no more than an *aporia*. It is a dialectic of back and forth, without the possibility of moving thought toward a grasp of the whole, which contains all opposition. This insight arrives in the mind from outside time because from within time only the opposition itself is possible. Artificial intelligence, being bound within time, has no ability to see beyond itself. It is the ability of the human to see beyond the human that makes the human, human.

Technological Desire

Let us turn from the imagination to the technological itself. In the fourth chapter of the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Hegel describes a form consciousness takes when it acts toward its object in terms of desire (*Be-gierde*). Desire enters consciousness when consciousness turns from its pursuit of the truth of certainty as residing in the object (understood as something separate and independent from itself) to taking its object to be something integral to itself. Consciousness affirms its object to be part of the truth of certainty of itself.

Hegel says: "Thus self-consciousness cannot sublate the object by its negative relation to it; because of that it instead generates the object again, and the desire as well. It is in fact something other than self-consciousness that is the essence of desire and through this experience this truth has dawned on self-consciousness itself. But at the same time self-consciousness is no less absolutely for itself, and it is only by sublating the object, and it must get its satisfaction, for it is the truth."¹⁰ Self-consciousness desires to have nothing as a standard to be beyond its

¹⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Meiner, 1952), 139; *Hegel: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), par. 175.

reach, nothing that can exist as a certainty beyond itself. Certainty is the sole possession of the self as a self.

The self does not desire to overcome the seeming independence of the object by the destruction of the object. Consciousness desires simply to have the object before it as its own. Hegel says: “Its doing is only in one moment a doing of *desire*; it does not aim at the destruction of the objective essence in its entirety, but only at the form of its otherness or its independence, which is a semblance devoid of essence, for *in itself* it counts this otherness as the same essence as itself, or its selfhood.”¹¹ To accomplish this sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the object, the self resorts to work (*Arbeit*). Through work the self can make its object its own.

Hegel says: “The actuality against which desire and work are directed is no longer for this consciousness a *nullity in itself*, something merely to be sublated and consumed by it, but something like that consciousness itself, an *actuality broken in two*, which is only on one side null in itself, but on the other side is also a sanctified world; it is a shape of the unchangeable for this has received in itself singularity, and because as the changeable, it is a universal, its singularity has in general the significance of all actuality.”¹² In this action desire validates the actuality of itself by demonstrating its ability to possess the object.

“Fictional reality” understood as an epistemology is a version of the copy theory of knowledge. It is based on the assumption that there is an independent presence of an object before the mind. Proper knowledge of this object is for the mind to bring before itself a conceptual copy of this object, making the object into a subject for thought through the representational power of language. Cassirer, in the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, has shown the error in this copy theory of knowledge. Cassirer says: “In every linguistic ‘sign,’ in every mythical or artistic ‘image,’ a spiritual content, which intrinsically points beyond the whole sensory sphere, is translated into the form of the sensuous, into something visible, audible or tangible. . . . Thus in every sphere, it is through the freedom of spiritual action that the chaos of sensory impressions be-

¹¹ Ibid., 263; par. 362.

¹² Ibid., 165; par. 219.

gins to clear and take on fixed form for us.”¹³

No object stands simply before consciousness. What is before consciousness always embodies a spiritual content. Cassirer says: “Myth and art, language and science, are in this sense configurations *towards* being: they are not simple copies of an existing reality but represent the main directions of the spiritual movement, of the ideal process by which reality is constituted for us as one and many—as a diversity of forms which are ultimately held together by a unity of meaning.”¹⁴ An object never has meaning or being *in itself*. What the object is, is what it is *for us*. What the object is for us is always how it is taken up as part of culture, as part of one of the forms of consciousness that are writ large in the symbolic forms of myth, religion, art, history, science, and so forth.

There is no “reality” that is then “fictionalized.” Once the object is apprehended as a phenomenon within one of the symbolic forms of culture, it can be distorted into something hyperreal, such as described by Umberto Eco, discussed below. But what is formed as a hyperreal object for consciousness cannot be referred back to something standing completely independent of some form of consciousness. All objects are objects only in terms of being instances of any form of the human spirit, of *Geist*. The object becomes something hyperreal for consciousness when there is an impetus to make the object that is already formed into something more.

This “something more” is achieved by making the object appear more fascinating. The object becomes more fascinating than it is in its original formation by consciousness. The impetus to make the object hyperreal takes the object as already formed as an object of consciousness and forms it again as something more than it was. Hyperreality takes the object from one form it has within consciousness and makes it into another. Hyperreality does not take the object as something existing wholly independent of consciousness of the object and give it a new reality within consciousness. Hyperreality is a movement wholly within consciousness.

In contemporary society, possession of the object is accomplished

¹³ Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Die Sprache. Gesammelte Werke Hamburger Ausgabe*, Vol. 11 (Hamburg: Meiner, 2001), 40. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Language*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 106–7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41; 107.

by technique. Technique allows the self to make of the object all that the self desires. The object becomes whatever the self wishes it to be. Technique becomes the single instrument for the fulfillment of self-interest. Jacques Ellul, in *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*, with the translated title, *The Technological Society*, makes a distinction between the “technical operation” (*l'opération technique*) and the “technical phenomenon” (*le phénomène technique*).¹⁵ Technical operation is what is commonly understood simply as tool use, the means to accomplish a task. Technical operation exists in traditional society alongside other activities—intellectual, aesthetic, religious, practical, and so forth. For example, in terms of Cassirer’s philosophy of culture, *Technik* is one symbolic form among others, making technical activity only one aspect of social life. The technical phenomenon occurs in the technological society in which the activities present in traditional society are all transformed by the application of technique.

This transformation occurs when the use of technique becomes a topic for “rational judgment,” when a desire for having the “one best means” is introduced as a standard for judging activity in every area of human concern. It is immediately asked, of any way of doing things: “Is this the one best means? Can it be improved? Can it be applied elsewhere?” What was a matter of tradition, individual genius, or social evolution is now rationally evaluated as to whether it is the one best means. Everything in the technological society is constantly improved and constantly replaced, in pursuit of the new.

The technologically possessed self turns away from the wisdom of Ecclesiastes: “What has been will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, ‘See, this is new’? It has already been, in the ages before us” (1:9–10). It is this wisdom on which traditional society is based. It is the wisdom of memory. The pursuit of the technical is devoid of memory. Only the present dominates. In the technological society, “consciousness” is added to the engagement with the rational judgment. The technological self has no need of memory. Technological consciousness always looks forward from the present to a new present. There is nothing to be learned from the past beyond the immediate past, which is al-

¹⁵ Jacques Ellul, *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1954), ch. 1; *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Random House, 1964), ch. 1.

ways no more than a preface to the new, to what can now be done. The voice of the Muses cannot be heard in the technological society.

In the technological society, “consciousness” is added to the application of “rational judgment.” Not only is any means judged in terms of its possibilities for improvement, but a general consciousness of technique is built up, so that techniques in one field of endeavor are considered for extension into other fields. To the question of the “one best means” is added a second question: “Where else might technique be applied?” Everyone becomes involved and concerned with the possibilities of technique. Everyone is fascinated with performance, whether it be of household appliances, electronic programs, types of communication, or spacecraft.

The technical citizen is constantly required to engage in evaluation. The individual is asked not only to act in terms of technical means but also to evaluate the means. Technical consciousness accounts for the rapid and far-flung expansion of technique in all areas of life. No human activity escapes the “technological imperative” of improvement. The self is a locus of technological desire. Life without the technical phenomenon becomes unthinkable. Privacy is no longer possible, or even desired. The wisdom that can be gained from memory is left behind.

Traditional society is based on common sense and custom, as well as on memory. Common sense and custom provide consciousness with the means to confront and adjust to things as they are. They allow human nature to develop itself so as to accept that there is a real order to things. The technological society replaces common sense and custom with technique, allowing desire to dominate all forms of human activity. A sense of the transcendent in human experience disappears. The sense of reality that is present in ancient Greek philosophy is no longer a concern, once technique is seen as making all that is desired possible. In the technological society, whatever is conceived as possible is then in fact done. All thought and effort is dedicated to the formation of what is desired. But whatever is achieved is never enough. There is always the need for more.

In his essay, “Travels in Hyperreality,” Umberto Eco shows that the technological society is governed by the quest for more. Hyperreality is obsessed with “fullness,” of *horror vacui*.¹⁶ Eco details the demand of contemporary society for the “real thing.” To attain the “real thing,” technique must be employed to “fabricate the absolute fake, where the boundaries be-

¹⁶ Umberto Eco, “Travels in Hyperreality,” in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986, 3–58), 8.

tween game and illusion are blurred, the art museum is contaminated by the freak show, and falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of ‘fullness,’ of *horror vacui*.¹⁷ In order: “to speak of things that one wants to connote as real, these things must seem real. The ‘completely real’ becomes identified with the ‘completely fake.’ Absolute unreality is offered as real presence.”¹⁸ In the ‘completely fake,’ Eco says, we are given the reproduction so we “will no longer feel any need for the original. But for the reproduction to be desired, the original has to be idolized.”¹⁹ Works of the humanistic imagination take us to a contact with realities that are transcendent, with the forms of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. The desire for these ultimates becomes unnecessary when we are given directly the fascinating reproduction. The reproduction, however, must be continually repeated because there is in fact nothing in it.

In the technologically dominated life the individual has a continual yearning for more. Although technique makes all possible, it is never enough, because what is possible is the basis of further possibility. We can no more rid ourselves of the computer screen than we can steal a line of Shakespeare in traditional society. The difference is that what is on the screen is Hegel’s “bad infinity,” a series in which there is always “more.” The line of Shakespeare is a “true infinity,” which takes us ever back into ourselves, into our pursuit of the Delphic precept to “Know thyself,” the most ancient instruction given to human beings, likely given by the Seven Sages, and likely by Thales, the philosopher among them.

We find ourselves in what Giambattista Vico, in the *Scienza nuova*, designates as the “barbarism of reflection” (*la barbarie della riflessione*), in what James Joyce, in *Finnegans Wake*, calls “Our wholemole millwheeling vicociclotometer,” in which we “Forget!”²⁰ In this age, we experience: “the misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits that have turned humans into beasts made more inhuman by the barbarism of reflection than the first men had been made by the barbarism of sense [*la barbarie del senso*].”²¹ The barbarism of reflection produces a “deep solitude of spirit and will.” Those who embrace it lose the ability to think in a speculative manner. In the world of technological society

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹⁹ Ibid., 19.

²⁰ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 614.26–27.

²¹ Vico, *New Science*, par. 1106.

there is no irony, no dialectic of thought, no sense of ignorance. There is only continual engagement in technique, moving forward into its electronic filing cabinet.

The idea of the privacy of individual life is lost. The life of the individual is the life of the mass. Lost is all sense of the eccentric, of solitude, of contemplation, and of the aesthetic, for consciousness is now fully shaped by the technical. The meaning of the lines of Keats's observation, on the Grecian urn in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," is lost: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"— that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

In the technological world not only is beauty lost—all sense of human folly is lost. Along with beauty, it is folly that humanizes. The sense of folly as integral to human affairs that we find in Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* (*Ship of Fools*) is eliminated in the technological consciousness. The wisdom of folly cannot be found in technical activity. Without folly, as well as beauty, there can be no truth. The sense of the world as a stage, on which each individual plays a role, disappears. With the disappearance of privacy is the disappearance of prudence. Individuals find themselves alone in the technical system. The elements of the traditional society, of friendship and conversation, are gone. Persons feel themselves compelled to show that they exist by expressing their opinions and imprudently "posting" them, electronically. It is a desire to have an affirmation of one's existence. Yet it is as hollow as the Cartesian *cogito*. It is the hollowness of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men."

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

It is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?
Estragon: Yes, let's go.
They do not move.

Behind them is the bleak landscape of the loss of imagination, the bleak landscape of the technical and the hyperreal—*ex nihilo nihil fit*.