The Imagination: A Double-edged Sword
Piercing to the Marrow of Religious Dogma

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I grew up in a large, poor, and neurotic family. We had no social contact other than the public school system and the Nazarene church. Being a precocious reader, I learned early on that literature was my ticket out of there—the only ticket available to me. I spent most of my time on flights of fancy, mental vacations away from the real world. I thought everyone did this. I realized that most of the kids at school seemed to hate reading and that television was the entertainment focus at home, but I figured some folks simply preferred doing it in private—late at night or while locked in the bathroom. I couldn’t understand why I was always being told to “Quit reading! Get up off your fat butt and do something!” I will admit that I was indiscriminate, even promiscuous, as far as reading material was concerned. For example, I might read the Pentateuch (King James Version, including the “begats”) one day and Candy (the whole thing, not just the good parts) the next.

So, perhaps Mom was right to send me to stay with Grandmom for six months of spiritual reconditioning, and perhaps Grandmom was right to methodically bait her entire house with little piles of Christian books and magazines. Imagine her distress, then, when after a week under her tutelage she discovered me reading a secular novel, W. Somerset Maugham's Of Human Bondage. The scene is vivid in my mind as the first and last time I have ever actually seen a woman “wring her hands.” You see, she couldn’t do a thing about it. The book had been inexplicably given to her as a birthday gift just a few days before my arrival by her own dear mother-in-law, a saintly woman of such advanced age that she already had one foot in the River Jordan. Out of respect for the lady’s age and wisdom, the book had been placed, unread (the binding popped the first time I opened it), on the coffee table. Of course, Grandmom had “inadvertently” covered it with back issues of Herald of Holiness magazine. This ploy did not work. I’m a connoisseur; I always peruse the entire menu before making my selection; there it was, the last and most appetizing item available.

It took me weeks to read Maugham’s grand book. Weeks of games: Hide-and-Seek, Grandmother-May-I, Grandmom-Says—

Don’t you know that book is worldly? That it’s leading you away from Jesus? There are many, many fine Christian books in this house. Why don’t you read them? Fill your mind with purity and goodness. Someday, when you’re wiser and stronger in the Lord, you’ll feel sorry about the sinful books you’ve read, and the Lord will help you develop a taste for His literature.

The Lord’s Literature. For all the Grandmoms of the world—that is, hard-line “fundamental” Christians, henceforth known as HFCs—that means books that deal solely and absolutely with the HFC experience and that are generally sold only in Christian bookstores. To be sure, in recent years there has been some marketing crossover. It is not unusual to find a rack of “inspirational” books at the supermarket or drugstore, and a few books have had a fair showing in both Christian and secular markets—like Chuck Colson’s autobiography or The Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis. However, I dare you to come up with a single crossover example that is not either biographical or a children’s book, as are my two examples. The reason for this lack is the first cutting edge of that double-edged sword mentioned in my title: HFCs are scared shitless of the Imagination.

“Well, now, wait a minute,” my more competitive readers will be thinking, stuck back on that dare. “What about some of the books we read in high school, like Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter? Or, more recently, what about Matthiessen’s At Play in the Fields of the Lord, or even Updike’s A Month of Sundays? They all deal with religion, with a moral dilemma, with the interplay of good and evil. What about them?” Tch. Tch. No respectable HFC would read more than a few pages of At Play or Sundays before gasping and throwing it down as a work of the devil. They are much too explicit in their descriptions of spiritual doubt and sexual sin. Sin, especially the sin of a purported Christian, must only be alluded to in the Lord’s Literature. An HFC might finish The Scarlet Letter and accept it as passable worldly literature, but it would never be recommended on a general HFC reading list, because it is not adamant enough about the need of each person to accept Jesus Christ as his or her personal Savior. Obviously, At Play and Sundays would not fit this criterion either. So, I leave you with

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a double-dog dare to come up with even one crossover example of HFC fiction. Now, remember, it must be adult fiction. HFCs are allowed to read about spiritual doubt, sexuality, etc., within the context of reality, of a direct retelling of actual events, as long as the story-line leads to an epiphany in Christ, which, in HFC autobiography/biography, is a foregone conclusion. Well, while you think about it, let me take you back for one more brief visit with Grandmom.

After she realized I was not going to quit reading Of Human Bondage, Grandmom decided on a different tactic, a compromise: "Will you at least read a good Christian novel, too? One that has been a great blessing to me every time I've read it?" It was called In the Twinkling of an Eye, a phrase that the more discerning of you will recognize as a quote from the New Testament. The use of scriptural texts as titles is common among HFC writers. The plot centered around the relationship between a drunken bum heathen and his HFC wife. No matter how much he beat on her she never complained, just kept quoting scripture at him and praying out loud for his soul. Then, one day, when he's just about to wallop her a good one up the side of the head with a tire iron, she disappears. Whoosh! Just like that she's gone, and he realizes that "the garbage" she's been spouting about the Rapture, the Second Coming, or Whatever You Choose to Call It, is true. The last chapter finds him on his knees begging for God's mercy. The moral of the story is obvious, cut and dried, black and white. It's Heaven or Hell, honey; there ain't no in-between.

Notice that the book's plot hinges on a point of fantasy—the Rapture. It is only through the Imagination—that frightening, indefinable, uncontrollable process—that one can conceive of a Rapture, a future event that has no correlative in the past or present. For other points of dogma as well, whether explicitly or implicitly stated in HFC fiction, readers must rely on the imaginative process. The Creation, the Virgin Birth, Christ's rising from the dead, His Spirit living in the Christian's heart, Satan, Hell—all of these concepts become real to the HFC through the power of the Imagination. Here, then, is the second sharp edge of that double-edged sword: HFCs must rely on the Imagination for a functional framework on which to hang their brand of reality. Yet, the imagination is the root of all sin, is sin in many cases. We all remember when Jimmy Carter, a famous semi-HFC, publicly confessed to the sin of "committing adultery in his heart." That means he imagined himself having sex with someone other than Rosalynn. Simply imagining himself in a sinful position put him in as much danger of hellfire as actually doing IT. This shows how strongly HFCs feel about the negative power of the Imagination. What a paradox, then, that it is an imaginative process—a conjured image of Hell—that brings people to their knees in the "fundamental" religions and that keeps them there for the duration of their earthly lives. HFCs are playing with a sharp sword indeed.

It is important to note that HFCs are not afraid of paradox as such. In fact, they revel in their interpretations of the many paradoxes found in the Scriptures. HFCs do not see ambiguity in their own hands as a drawback; they see it as an advantage, as a weapon. No matter on what side their opponent stands, they have a cutting edge facing that direction. No matter which way they turn, they can find scriptural references to back up that particular position. An unbiased and/or liberal Bible reader might see the paradox inherent in the holy text as indicating the flexibility of God's involvement with humankind. For example, if He is a God of wrath, a consuming fire, on one occasion, and a gentle, loving Savior on another, then surely His nature encompasses all points in between and beyond these extremes, making him capable of a fair response under all circumstances. This is not the way HFCs view the paradoxical nature of Scripture. Instead of seeing the entire broad spectrum, they see only ultraviolet and infrared. Scriptural paradox, for them, justifies an either/or paradigm of thinking. For example, they interpret the aforementioned dual nature of God like this: In the Old Testament He is a God of wrath; in the New Testament He is a loving Savior. Therefore, unless you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, you will be dealing with the God of wrath, who is going to kick your butt into Hell the first chance He gets.

Thus, imagination cannot work for both good and evil; and, since there is even a question about its purposes to begin with, it is best simply to throw it into the evil pile once and for all. It is this type of thinking that led to the Calvinist ban on music (it might stir more than the soul), to Jonathan Edwards's denunciation of the Novel as a genre of literature, and to the Nazarene church's proscriptions against dancing, coed swimming, movies, theater, and drinking coke (people might see you from a distance and imagine you were drinking beer and might begin drinking beer themselves since it's apparently okay for you to do it, all of which might eventually lead to alcoholism, misery, and an eternity in Hell). In the hands of others, any paradox is a threat to HFCs. It hurts them deeply (actually it pisses them off; but, since anger is a sin, they react as if hurt) when someone questions them about the absurdity of being both predestined and a possessor of free will, say. Or about the fact that Jesus Christ, a poor, humble man who never asked for a shekel from his followers, has as disciples rich, gloating men and women who regularly plead for beaucoup bucks without an iota of embarrassment. And, to a question about the imaginative paradox—the manipulative use of the imagination by HFCs in spite of the fact that they consider it to be terrifyingly evil—they might answer something like this:

It bothers me to hear you talk about the mysteries of the church as if they are imaginary. It is true that Christian speakers and writers often use a carefully constructed imaginative approach to present the realities of the spiritual world, but that does not make these realities any less real.

We do not fear the imagination. After all, in all things we are victorious through Christ. We simply know that it is matters of the mind and heart that are most often used by Satan to lead people astray; therefore, we encourage the average Christian to simply stay away from such temptation.

Of course it is readily apparent to all but the most blind HFC leaders that it is impossible to keep "babes in Christ" away from secular entertainment entirely. In our society, read-
ing is essential to survival. At an early age everyone at least attempts to learn how to do it, and we have a strong tradition of using secular rhymes and fairy tales as first readers. Although there has been some effort by HFCs to supplant this secular tradition with Christian rhymes and stories, it has been largely unsuccessful. To be sure, HFC parents ply their children with Bible stories, but they also use traditional books like *Mother Goose* and *Aesop’s Fables*. In fact, it is in the realm of children’s literature that HFCs are most tolerant, as is evidenced by the wide acceptance of the fantastic *Chronicles of Narnia*. For whatever reason, the best fiction currently being written by Christian writers is in the area of children’s literature. Katherine Paterson, the only writer to win two Newbery awards (the equivalent of two Pulitzers for juvenile fiction) twines a theme of Christianity through her books, including the award winners—*Bridge to Terabithia* and *Jacob Have I Loved* (note: Scripture as title).

It is wonderfully amusing to see what HFCs do about the most predominant form of secular entertainment around—the movies. Often they are actually addicted to watching films (mainly on TV) and have a hard time justifying this to themselves. To do so, they must come up with silly, Christian interpretations of the movies they really like. Several HFC denominations have endorsed certain hit movies as being Christian in theme or tone—the *Star Wars* trilogy, *E.T.* (excluding the “penis breath” line), etc. Also, a few Christian groups have formed their own production companies that make feature-length films and show them in major theaters across the country rather than in church fellowship halls. Billy Graham Enterprises has turned out several creditable HFC movies in recent years, although it is significant to note that they have all been based on autobiographical books—*The Hiding Place* and *Joni* are two examples. Needless to say, HFCs everywhere were thrilled a few years back with *Chariots of Fire*. No excuses or rationale necessary, they simply sat their butts down and watched it again and again. And, imagine, it came from a secular production company!

Still, as far as adult-fiction reading material goes, HFCs are severely limited. *In the Twinkling of an Eye* is quite representative of what is generally available, although the highest caliber of writing can be seen in Eugenia Price’s historical romances. She manages to push the quality of her books several notches above that of the generic romances sold in the grocery stores; but, due to the sublime Christian theme she ties herself to, her stories never come close to the height of the genre attained by Mary Stewart and Daphne du Maurier. And, of course, her books appeal to women only. (I hope. Can you imagine some guy getting off on Christian historical romances?)

Isn’t it about time one of you took me up on that double-dog dare? There is one book that fits the bill, you know. The biggest best-seller of all time! The *Holy Bible*! Now, if you thought about it but didn’t mention it because of a problem with the wording, specifically with the term *fiction*, then you understand the HFC mind very well indeed. HFCs want to exploit the fact that the Bible is the best-selling book in the world, the greatest example of crossover marketing ever. They want to see it in every motel, every home, every school in the world. But, more than that, they want it to be read. As nonfiction. Unfortunately, in the case of public schools, the Bible is allowed to be taught formally only in classes with names like “Bible as Literature.” Now, here’s a paradox for you: When HFCs speak of the Lord’s Literature they do *not* refer to the Bible. “Bible as Literature” is anathema to them. “The Bible is *not* literature. It is *fact*,” Grandmom would say. In HFC schools the Bible is taught as simply that—“BIBLE”—within a lesson plan that most closely resembles what might be used in a secular psychology class. The Bible is seen as the definitive text on human behavior, its motivations and consequences, written by the Great Master Himself (God, not Freud).

You will only rarely hear an HFC extolling the beauty of biblical language, a main occupation of those “Bible as Literature” teachers. Instead, you will hear phrases like “Let’s prayerfully consider what God is trying to tell us in this passage” or “Let us not remain babes in Christ, feeding only on scriptural milk; let us feed on the meat of the Word.” In other words, they spend a lot of time complicating things, trying to contort Scripture to cover every conceivable human dilemma. This has reached the point of absurdity with certain topics, like masturbation, which simply aren’t addressed in the Bible. The closest appropriately condematory passage for masturbation they could come up with is the one dealing with Onan’s spiteful use of coitus interruptus as a means of contraception. The part where it says “he spilled his seed on the ground” makes it sound sufficiently masturbatory, I guess.

As everyone knows by now, HFCs believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible. It is not allegorical. They even take Christ’s *parable*s literally. “Why should Jesus make something up when he knows everything? Of course these events actually occurred.” Because of this literal stance, HFCs are hard put to deal with certain passages in the Bible. I have never heard or read any reference to the *fact*, as stated in the book of Genesis, that, after the Sodom and Gomorrah episode, Lot spent several months in the hills drunkenly fucking his two daughters, eventually producing children/grandchildren, with nary a word of disapproval from God. And, of course, the *Song of Solomon* gives them fits. How to explain this sensual love song! “Well, it’s referring to the kind of relationship the believer should
have with his Lord," they'll say. "Oh, really," I say. "I'm supposed to 'let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth for his love is better than wine' and I should 'seek him by night on my bed'?

You get the point. These HFC folk disdain emotion. One of their favorite jingles goes something like this—"The three Fs: Fact, Faith, Feeling. In that order. God says it; I believe it; someday I might feel it," they chant. An emotional response to the Godhead is of lowest priority to HFCs. So—and here's the funny part, the laughable paradox—why are their church services almost always oriented around a feverish emotional pitch to get people to accept Christ and empty their pockets?

If you don't know what I'm talking about, turn your cable channel to one of those Christian stations and take a quick peek. The men and women you'll see there are not isolated masters of the technique—this type of thing goes on every week in thousands of little churches across the country. I can't tell you the number of "moving" sermons I have sat through in my life. Certain plots are more popular than others: agonizing renditions of missionaries being killed by savages always work well, and so do the ones about ministers who have fallen into sin (read: adultery). The endings are varied to elicit a specific response from the audience. For instance, if at least one of the killer savages subsequently accepts Jesus Christ as his personal Savior, then the minister is mainly trying to get money for the church's missionary effort.

In spite of a dearth of good adult fiction, HFCs do have a story-telling tradition. It's just not in book form. It's an oral tradition. Listen to Jimmy Swaggart, one of the top draws of video evangelism. Goodness, the guy is an incredible storyteller, and his sense of mystery, and acceptance of it, will be increased.

Some of the stories these romancing ministers tell verge on the grotesque. It made national news several years ago when Oral Roberts informed his audience that he had been visited by a 900-foot-tall Jesus who had just dropped by to inform him that his financial problems would soon be solved. Needless to say, the prophecy came true: Oral received a total of five million bucks in mail-in contributions the month following his Giant Jesus story. Many of you are probably unaware of the incredible frequency with which appearances are made by spiritual beings to HFCs, particularly those in positions of leadership. Why, an HFC minister in my own town had repeated encounters with the Archangel Michael, I believe it was, a few years ago. Maybe it was just an ordinary seraphim, I can't remember.

Now, how seriously do you think you or I would be taken if we told such tales? So how do these guys get away with it? Because the Imagination is either Good or Evil, remember? For an HFC, a vision of Jesus, or whatever, is either True or False, capital letters. There is no room for a lower-case excuse of it just being "his imagination" or, even lower, "a lie." And it is easier for everyone concerned to believe it was True rather than the awful alternative—that it was False, a manifestation of Satan. HFC bigwigs intuitively understand this aspect of the HFC rationale and use it for all its worth.

It is a rare HFC, indeed, who can step back and dispassionately observe reality, his own or any other. And, of course, it is even more rare for such an HFC to be an artist, specifically, a writer of fiction. In her essay "The Church and the Fiction Writer," Flannery O'Connor, a Catholic writer whose stories often deal with the HFC mentality, gives her viewpoint of what being a "religious artist" entails. Because her analysis fits the HFC writer as well as the Catholic writer, I have taken the liberty of substituting "HFC" where she writes "Catholic."

The HFC writer, insofar as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for. But this should enlarge, not narrow, his field of vision. The HFC who does not write for a limited circle of fellow HFCers will in all probability consider that he is writing for a hostile audience, and he will be more than ever concerned to have his work stand on its own feet and be complete and self-sufficient and impregnable in its own right. When people have told me [for example] that because I am an HFC, I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am an HFC, I cannot afford to be less than an artist. (Mystery and Manners, p. 146)

O'Connor does not downplay the difficulty of combining religion and fiction. Further on in the same essay, she says:

Many well-grounded complaints have been made about religious literature on the score that it tends to minimize the importance and the dignity of life here and now in favor of life in the next world or in favor of the miraculous manifestations of grace. When fiction is made according to its nature, it should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete, observable reality. If the writer uses his eyes in the real scrutiny of his Faith, he will be obliged to use them honestly, and his sense of mystery, and acceptance of it, will be increased. To look at the worst will be for him no more than an act of trust in God; but what is one thing for the writer may be another for the reader. What leads the writer to his salvation may lead the reader into sin, and the HFC writer who looks at this possibility looks the Medusa in the face and is turned to stone. (pp. 148-49)

Or, to use the biblical allusion of my title instead of O'Connor's Medusa metaphor, the writer will be brought up short by "the word of God, [which is] quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). Neither of us is insinuating that the aware Catholic/HFC writer is doomed to a type of death—i.e., permanent writer's block. But, certainly, a realistic assessment of life accompanied by a healthy astonishment before the incredible variety of form and substance present here on earth should leave the religious writer humbled. Prone to insightful Imagination.