

A CHRISTIAN LOOK AT EDUCATING ART & AESTHETICS

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INTRODUCTION

I think that most people would conclude that music, painting and literature should have some place within the school curriculum. However, there is probably less agreement and less appreciation as to the character and place that these particular arts and the aesthetic side of life generally should have within the life of the school. I see my present task as one of trying to give some insight with regard to the educational goals of aesthetics and art in a way that would hopefully provide some help to teachers and parents as they seek to nurture children to serve the Lord in these areas of life. To fulfill this task, even in a preliminary form, the following two requirements need to be met:

- 1) the development of some insight with regard to the aesthetic and artistic functioning of God's creation.
- 2) the deepening of insight in respect to the particular ways in which these should be developed in a Christian school within the Australasian cultural setting.

Only insofar as our insight on these matters is illuminated by the light of God's Word will our task in these matters bespeak a truly Christian character. Bearing this in mind, my paper will be divided into two parts. In the first I shall give consideration to (1) and in the second I shall give consideration to (2). {1}

1. A Christian Look at Aesthetics and Art

Let us first of all make some faltering steps in seeking to gain some insight into Art and Aesthetics against the setting of our Created, Fallen and gloriously Redeemed world. As there are any number of unhealthy and idolatrous attitudes and habits of thinking guiding our consideration of this whole subject, I think it needs emphasising at the outset that Art and Aesthetics have their home in this world that God has created and redeemed in Christ. They have no other existence than the one belonging to this creaturely life. Moreover, as God's image-bearers - called to serve God in caring for and unfolding the riches of God's creation to His glory - we should give the aesthetic, the artistic, the imaginative, their rightful place in life. This is not one that should protrude or dominate anymore than it should be rejected as evil or unimportant. It should be recognised as an integral part of God's wonderful creation, to be cultivated obediently by men and women in loving service of the Lord Jahweh.

Because art is sometimes considered esoteric - the preoccupation of the talented and the expert; and because aesthetics is sometimes regarded as a somewhat doubtful branch of philosophy, I think that I should not only affirm that art and aesthetics have their home within the creaturely functioning of God's creation, but also go on to try and make some attempt at locating this creaturely zone of existence with a view to trying to appreciate how God would have us respond to it in obedience. I want to do this in a way that is neither philosophically abstruse nor artistically esoteric. Rather I wish to appeal to your

concrete, down-to-earth life experience.

THE ZONE OF THE AESTHETIC

We all know something of the experience of climbing a hill or mountain, enduring the physical exertion for the reward of drinking in the view of the surrounding country-side. We all know that experience of walking along the sea-front, looking at the vast expanse toward the horizon, taking drafts of invigorating, clean salty, sea air into our lungs. Moreover, in the course of strolling along the beach we all know the experience of contemplating the variegated shapes of driftwood that have been cast up, sometimes carefully selecting pieces to decorate the house, garden or office.

In each of the cited instances we, as human beings, are responding to the typical aesthetic functioning of the natural objects of God's creation. In this respect it is of some importance to realise that the various reactions of wonder, contemplation, quiet detachment from the busy concerns that properly occupy our attention, are not merely 'subjective' - in the sense that they have no other cosmic reality than belonging to our own feelings. Natural creation does indeed function aesthetically, and, unlike animals, we men and women function as aesthetic subjects insofar as we are able to appreciate that aesthetic dimension of its functioning. It needs to be emphasised, however, that this faculty - aesthetic appreciation of the natural creation - requires cultivation; it is not something that we are born with. In this respect there is a similarity with our analytic faculty. We possess both by virtue of being created as men and women. Both, however, require to be shaped and unfolded in the course of life experience, with obvious educational implications. Let us consider some other examples from our full, concrete experience of life. We all know that we do not eat and drink simply because we are hungry or thirsty. Indeed, because of the aesthetic concern for taste, {2} the activity of eating and drinking in human life becomes extraordinarily complicated. For example we desire variety in our food and drink. Imagine having your favourite dish for breakfast, lunch and dinner every day of the week - even if it was rich in all our body requirements! Consider the problems that result from the malfunctioning of the aesthetic concern for taste: food preparations deficient in biotic needs; the habits of gluttony and drunkenness, etc. The answers to the problems that arise from such life situations, however, are not to ascetically deny the aesthetic dimension. Health concern in respect to food and drink certainly means giving due attention to correct biotic functioning. However, the latter should be in coherence with the correct functioning of the aesthetic and other aspects in which the actual events of eating and drinking take place. Again, we all know that we do not wear clothes simply to keep warm. Nor do we build houses simply to keep the rain out. We do not plant gardens simply to grow vegetables any more than we eat them solely to meet our biotic needs. In each of these activities there is an aesthetic aside to the way we exercise our cultivating task - the variegated taste of foods, the design of houses, gardens and clothes. But it never occurs in isolation. The zone of the aesthetic is located in a coherence with other elements or zones within creation. There is also an aesthetic side to the way we use language, to the way we write letters, to the way we give a lesson, a lecture or deliver a sermon. There is also an aesthetic side to a mathematical theory and to an essay on jurisprudence; to the way we pray and sing hymns or psalms.

With regard to natural objects, the shaping of our aesthetic faculty is limited to that of an *appreciation* of the aesthetic functioning of God's creation. However, in regard to the

aesthetic functioning of creation insofar as it has been humanly formed, the aesthetic aspect functions in a new way: it enters as an element in the form-giving activity itself - whether this be in respect to the preparation of food, the making of clothes, the building and design of houses, the use and development of language etc. In turn this makes further demands upon the shaping of our aesthetic insight and skill: the variety of human cultural activity requires both *appreciative* and executive aesthetic insight. The nurture of this insight, together with the skills needed to execute them are part of the stuff of aesthetic education.

I have attempted to point to typical instances arising from our concrete life experience in which we may recognise the aesthetic functioning of God's creation as it is upheld by His Word. I have not tried to identify the aesthetic element too closely; nor shall I spend too much time trying to do so, partly because I believed it to be a very difficult matter, and partly because I'm not at all sure that this is the place to embark upon such an exercise. Nonetheless, I would like to distinguish two basic features of what is involved. The first is what Calvin Seerveld has termed 'suggestion' or 'allusiveness'¹, and the second is what I prefer to call 'stylistic coherence'. In the former the focus is upon the flows, pauses, jumps, surprises, driftings and other 'allusive' features present throughout creation. In the latter the focus is upon the way these and other features of creation are woven into a stylistic coherence. Thus there is a stylistic coherence to a tree, to a leaf, to an animal, to a city, to a park, to a home as much as to a painting, to a piece of music or to a poem.

One major point should be clear by now, I hope. Although art is a specialised activity requiring aesthetic gifts for which not everyone has the talent, all men and women are called to develop their aesthetic insight - both appreciatively and executively - so that their lives may exhibit a richness and their cultivating activity a styleful suggestiveness that bespeaks a deep, comprehending, wholehearted obedience to the Lord Yahweh. {3}

THE IMAGINATION

The second feature I would like to draw out for inspection is the **Imagination**. Few would deny that what we know as Art has a great deal to do with the imagination. Indeed, for that very reason many Christians have considered that Art should be avoided. Has not the Lord 'scattered the proud in the imagination of their own hearts'²? There can be no denying that problems that arise in life through the idolatrous and perverted use of the imagination. For this very reason it is imperative to gain some Christian insight into the working of the imagination and try to get straight the place of its products within the world of God's creation. I shall therefore try briefly to open up some of these issues before discussing them specifically in relation to art.

Imagination as 'Picturing'

In our everyday experience of God's creation we learn to recognise certain typical things and events: plants, animals, people, houses, forests, churches, wars, earthquakes, birthdays, marriages etc. We also learn something of how these various things function and how people react to different circumstances. In this way our experience of God's creation feeds our intuitive expectations as to the outcomes of events and the actions of people. However, our insight and reflection with regard to these typical realities is not limited by our concrete experience of them. We are able by means of our imagination to

experience these realities 'second hand' in 'the mind's eye'. Moreover, this ability of our imagination is the basis upon which a learned language is able to recreate events and acts of the typical realities of God's creation in a shared imaginative experience with other men and women. Consider the following three extracts:

*Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable house and happy disposition seemed to write some of the best blessings of existence and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex*³.

*Jean-Jacques Rousseau was very different. Born in Geneva, he was a Swiss, a Protestant, and almost of lower-class origin. He never felt at ease in France or in Paris society. Neglected as a child, a runaway at sixteen, he lived for years by odd jobs, such as copying music, and not until the age of forty did he have any success as a writer*⁴.

*'When Mr Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton*⁵.

Despite their differing character, each of these extracts uses words that we readily appreciate as referring to the typical realities of our everyday experience of God's creation: people, their character, their aspirations, their various situations in life, the things that happen to them, birthdays, towns, countries etc. As we read them, each conjures up an elemental picture of people and places which lives in our imagination. We do not experience these people and places directly but through their 'living' in our imagination. Furthermore, the elemental pictures that are formed in our imaginations from each of these extracts may be further 'filled out' and developed if we were to read on {4} further. The possibility of forming these images is quite independent of whether or not the descriptions refer to actual people and places. It is solely dependent upon the ability of our imagination 'to picture' the experiential world that is symbolised by the language we use to describe our variegated experience of God's creation. Now this 'picturing' activity of our imagination need not be 'set off' by the lingual communication from someone else. We are able to 'picture' from within the resources of our own imagination, and, if called upon, to communicate this to others - using language or some other means of communication. Quite obviously there are similarities to be drawn here with the 'picturing' that occurs in dreams and hallucinations. However, for the present purposes it would not be fruitful to explore the similarities and differences involved. I simply wish to point out (i) that upon the basis of our intuitive grasping of the typical realities we experience in God's creation we are able to 'picture' such realities in a way that they literally 'live' in our imagination, and (ii) that this 'picturing' activity is not dependent of whether or not 'the pictured individualities' refer to actual people, places, events, etc. Finally, I would like to suggest that this 'picturing' of the imagination is a part of the reality of God's creation. It is not 'another world' or a 'separate reality'. It may differ from concrete reality, but it is nonetheless part of the fullness of the creation that is subject to the law of God.

Imagination as 'Inventive Reconstruction'.

If our imagination is able to 'picture' in the way discussed above, then what **real** significance is to be attributed to imagined objects and events which either do not refer to

real individual things, people, places and events, or else do not do so with the required canons of accuracy? There are two typical answers given to this problem: one is to deny that such products of the imagination have a relationship of reality to the things we experience every day, with the result that poetry, for example, although enjoyable in the attitude of 'aesthetic contemplation' is technically nonsense⁶. The second and countering attitude toward the imaginative world current today frankly admits its irrational, unscientific character, but rather glories in this admission, virtually setting up the dream, the hallucination and the artistic world of the imagination as the source of revelation⁷.

I would suggest that from a Christian viewpoint, both the cited views of the truth or reality of the world of the imagination are far from adequate, and involve distortions that result variously from an idolatry of man's analytic life on the one hand and his free imaginative life on the other. To develop something of an alternative view, I would like to consider the three literary extracts cited above from a somewhat different angle. My initial purpose in introducing these examples was to exemplify {5} the functioning of our imagination as 'picturing' and to emphasise that this activity was not dependent upon whether or not the images of our imagination corresponded to actual individual people, places or events. However, we can also use them to illustrate the problem of the **reality** of those things populating our imagination that do not correspond to actual individuals in the usual sense of the term. In the three cited examples we considered J. J. Rousseau, Emma Woodhouse, and the Hobbit Bilbo Baggins. If we were living in Paris or Geneva during the eighteenth century, we would no doubt have had the possibility of meeting Rousseau in the street. The same cannot be said of Emma Woodhouse with regard to nineteenth century England; as for Bilbo Baggins, the very time and place in which anyone might meet a creature resembling him is itself a problem. However, because we cannot meet the figures of our imagination on the street does not necessarily mean that they have to be viewed either as technical nonsense or as vehicles of a pseudo-mystic-revelation.

I would suggest that imagining is a mode of human consciousness that differs both from scientific theorizing and from the mode of the perceptual experiencing of the typical concrete realities of God's creation. However, I would suggest that all three modes of experiencing the world rest upon the same bed of our intuitive grasping of the reality of God's creation. Moreover the three modes of consciousness are not isolated from one another but rather constitute points of focus that are able to interpenetrate in our actual experience in many different ways. Imagination functions creatively in science and everyday experience as well as in art. Scientific knowledge enriches not only our everyday experience but also the possibilities of imaginative experience. Moreover, our everyday experience is deepened and enriched both by scientific insight and by a well-developed imagination (such as the ability to tell imaginative bedtime stories for children that arises from some aspect of our shared daily experience). However, this interpretation does not blur the distinctiveness of these three points of focus. Everyday life is focussed upon the typical individualities of creation (people, plants, houses, dogs, towns, schools etc). Scientific theorizing is focussed upon the functioning of these typical individualities under the sustaining and upholding power of the Word of God, in an endeavour to abstract this functioning in terms of a precise law-formulation. The attitude of the imagination is to universalise everyday experiences through a telescoping of multiple meanings into an imagined concrete experience. The characters of literature, for example, do not arise as creations ex-nihilo. They arise from the author's experience and insight of the functioning of God's creation. From the pool of these gathered insights he or she *inventively*

reconstructs a world of places, people and events which, in some measure, is an attempt to grasp the more universal conditions of human life in an imaginative exploration that permits the nuance of exaggeration to enhance and exemplify the meaning of creation through an imagined concrete setting of people and places. In this way, for example, certain typical places, people and events of Victorian England are inventively reconstructed in the novel 'Emma', with the purpose of grasping the general cultural and social conditions, as well as characters that lived in them in an imaginatively conceived set of circumstances. The 'Lord of the Rings', on the other hand, has no particular historical or social focus. It is an imaginative exploration into a more general consideration of the condition of man - being a further instance of an imaginative grappling with the universal conditions of existence as imaginatively reconstructed by Tolkien. {6}

Vanity and Wisdom in Imagination

'Keep your heart with all vigilance for from it flow the issues of life'⁸

'He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts'⁹

From a Christian viewpoint, all of men's life springs from spiritual roots that are anchored in the religious commitment of his heart to the true God or to an idol. From his religiously anchored transcendent selfhood flow the many issues of life affecting personal character, social relationships, social structures, scientific life and the life of the imagination. Thus, if we are to correctly discern the working of the imagination, in addition to examining the *structural* features that we have so far examined, we must also give attention to the *directional* features. The latter have to do with the whole question of *obedience* to the ordinances of God as they are bound to the covenant of God with man in creation. First and foremost this involves the primary religious issue: Who is God? Who reigns over creation? - Jahweh or an idol? Secondly, this involves the question of obedience to God's ordinances in family life, personal life, social and political life, in industry, in education unto the uttermost parts. The *direction* of the imagining activity of men is therefore shaped at root by the spiritual background of the world and life view they share and live out of. When man's imagining activity is shaped and led by idolatry, then indeed God scatters and judges men as they are caught up in the vanities of their own inventive reconstructions. The Christian calling, however, is clear: to develop the imaginative faculty in a way that is fed by a deeply Biblical view and experience of life, seeing the realities of creation and of man's place within it, of sin and restoration through God's grace as the warp and woof of the life we experience not only in our everyday experience of the typical individual thing's of God's creation, but also in the attitude of the imagination.

ART

So far I have made very little specific mention of Art. I have done this purposely - in the belief that the basic issues to which we should address ourselves, if we are serious in striving for an educational life of greater obedience, are more those having to do with the 'creational stuff' out of which art, amongst other things, may come. I say this for the

following reasons: first, we should not think that our children (or ourselves as adults for that matter) will learn what they should about art simply by a study of the world of art as these have been historically formed. Many devote their whole lives to this activity, and, whilst providing many valuable detailed insights, very often have little insight into what it's all about. Second, we should in the *first* instance be educating our children neither to be artists nor to appreciate art. Our task as God's co-workers is one of opening up children to the riches of God's creation so that they may increase in knowledge and insight and be more the effectively shaped to serve the Lord joyfully and obediently within it. Insofar as art is concerned, I think that prior attention should be given to the opening up of the aesthetic dimension of creation and of the development of the faculty of the imagination. However, art is very important, and consideration of the aforementioned should include and lead onto a rich and healthy involvement with the arts. Lack of space precludes me from giving anything by way of detailed discussion of particular arts, {7} and I shall content myself with stating the following theses regarding the meaning of a work of art, its relation to the wider reality of God and his creation, and the manner of experiencing a work of art.

- (i) A work of art is imaginatively conceived by the artist, and, as such all effort should be made to appreciate and experience the work in this way,
- (ii) A work of art has a concrete form resulting from the shaping activity of the artist in his attempts to objectify his imaginative insights in an aesthetically rich manner using skills appropriate to the chosen medium:
- (iii) Although the work of art functions in all dimensions of God's creation, it is qualified by its aesthetic functioning. As such it should be judged primarily according to the excellence or otherwise of its 'allusive' qualities and of the way these are shaped and woven into a stylistic coherence.
- (iv) Just as the imagination envisages from a certain perspective or world and life stance, so the work of art, as something to be imaginatively experienced, bears a characteristic spiritual stamp deriving from the perspective or vantage point embodied in its concrete form.
- (v) Men give concrete form to the process of exercising their cultural task of shaping and opening up of God's creation by means of a *Cultural Ideal*. (Examples are: the Corpus Christianum ideal of the Middle Ages, the Liberty, Equality, Fraternity ideal of modern democracy, revolution and socialism, the free enterprise of American business life, the Communist ideal of a classless society, etc). A cultural ideal is nothing more than the positive form given to the driving impulse of the spiritual direction of the cultivating activity. As such, cultural ideals are frequently embodied in works of art, which thereby sustain, develop and give critical comment upon their outworking as they help to give shape to the way of life of which they are part. As examples of this we may consider the role the Mass in the Counter Reformation, the Opera in the High Italian Renaissance, the Oratorio in 18th Century England.¹⁰ More specifically we might consider the cultural ideals embodied in Michelangelo's 'David', in Handel's 'Messiah', and at the more popular level 'Ein Feste Burg' and 'The Marsellaise'. It is largely because cultural ideals are embodied in art that the latter provide such a very good barometer of the outlook, condition and hopes of a cultural period in historical development.
- (vi) A work of art is neither a mere copy of extra-artistic reality, nor a reality that

can stand independent of its relationship to the wider reality of God and creation. A work of art imaginatively opens up the meaning of God's creation in either an obedient or a disobedient way. As such the work of art deepens and enriches our insight and our experience of God's world, but to appreciate this meaning it is necessary to experience the art work in a coherence with the rest of creation¹¹. {8}

2. Some Consequences for Curricula

Against the background that I have tried to develop above the aesthetic functioning of creation, the faculty of the imagination, and the experiencing of art, I would like to turn to the specifically educational task in the Christian School. In the light of the discussion of the first section, I think that the task of the Christian School with regard to art and aesthetics may be examined under the following four headlines:

- (i) the aesthetic functioning of creation.
- (ii) the development of the faculty of the imagination.
- (iii) artistic activity
- (iv) a study of art in relation to man's life.

I have already emphasised that in respect to the task of education I consider the first two the more important, especially at the more elementary stages of schooling. In making this statement, I do not wish to give the impression that I do not think it right that young children should engage in painting, music making, reading literature, writing stories and the like. Quite the contrary. My point would be that the object of engaging in such activity is that they gain concrete experience of the aesthetic side of creation and have their imaginations extended and developed. Moreover, I would suggest that these educational objectives may be assisted if the development of aesthetic insight and imaginative ability is supplemented by non-artistic means. I would suggest that any detailed and disciplined attempt to study art in relation to man's life should only be undertaken at the more advanced stages of schooling, with children thirteen and over.

In what follows I shall attempt to sketch in a few details as to how the curriculum may begin to take shape around the four types of activity that I have just cited.

THE AESTHETIC FUNCTIONING OF CREATION

How does one teach aesthetics? I don't know any easy or quick answer to this question. However, to grapple with it, I again emphasise that we should not see it as a task of ramming home a certain body of theory as the necessary ground for any aesthetic action; nor should we try to encourage children in a self-expression of their likes and dislikes. We should be concerned with the task of alerting and deepening their awareness of and their insight into the aesthetic side of creation. This means that teachers should always appeal to the child's actual experience of creation, encouraging a reflection upon and an opening up of that experience in the child so that he or she may grow in their ability to sensitively weigh and appreciate the aesthetic side of God's creation as it functions in coherence with other aspects.

To this end I make the following more concrete suggestions:

- (a) Why do we go for walks in the mountains, in the forest or near the sea? Why is it that we smell and look at flowers? These are just a few elementary examples of the ways in which we appreciatively experience the aesthetic side of creation. Both through a direct encouraging of such experience and an analytical reflection upon it, the Christian school should awaken children to the wonder and awe, the delicacy and the strength evidenced in the aesthetic features of God's natural creation. Moreover, through a {9} reading of such passages as Psalms 147, 148 and Job 37-41, children may also be awakened to the confessional side of these experiences. Just how these things should be incorporated into lessons is something I don't feel qualified to be able to answer. However that attempts should be made to try is something I feel quite sure about.
- (b) Why should we try to keep the house tidy, the garden weeded and the playground tidy? Such activities have a definite aesthetic side to them by virtue of a stylistic coherence that is destroyed when a 'mess' is created. To care for, maintain and develop this coherence in the home, the garden and in the school grounds is an integral part of man's stewardship of this earthly creation. Beginning with such examples drawn from the child's own experience, the aesthetic aspects of keeping and tilling gardens, cities and industries can be opened up. So too can the aesthetic aspects of the problem of waste. What happens in a home when one room is reserved for storing all the junk, with no attempt being made to keep it tidy? What happens if all the weeds from the garden are thrown next door? An integral part of our stewardship is bound up with the question of dealing aesthetically with waste - so that piles of such material do not become heaped in one spot to become cesspools. This whole issue is obviously related to that of industrial waste and the mass dumping of sewerage etc. To deal responsibly with these complex issues obviously requires taking into account far more than the aesthetic functioning of creation. It requires proper consideration of all aspects of creation as it functions in coherence. However, I raise them in this context because it seems to me that these problems have assumed such importance because of the cultural dominance of a vision of life that has paid insufficient attention to the aesthetic dimensions of man's cultivating activity and far too much attention to the possibilities of sheer technical earth-moving power. If we are to redress this situation Christianly then our children must be opened up to the aesthetic side of creation in the tasks of keeping the whole house clean and the whole garden free of weeds without dumping them on our neighbour.
- (c) What is wrong with swearing? Most of us are familiar with language that consists in every second word being a swear word. Most of the time people using this turn of speech are not deliberately intending to curse and blaspheme. By and large they are aesthetically lazy and impoverished in their use of language, and they seek to make up for the lack of ability to make verbal emphasis in the degrading and bastardized manner referred to. I think we should educate our children to see swearing in this particular way, and thereby expose the calling for us to develop a mode of speech that is rich in nuance and strong in its ability to make emphasis without becoming aesthetically lazy. This

in turn can open up the study of words, of speech, and ways of expressing ourselves to others that have not only aesthetic but many sides to them.

There are many other ways in which the aesthetic functioning of creation may be brought into focus directly from the child's experience. The way in which a new building coheres and adds to the rest of the cityscape; the reasons for people wearing different sorts of clothes; home and school interior decorating; health and taste in foods, etc. Finally, it is important that children have a rich experience of reading stories, of acting, of painting, of playing, of making music, etc., in order that they may have something of a store of experience to appreciate something of the problems and joys involved in the aesthetic realities of style, coherence, allusiveness, etc. {10}

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FACULTY OF IMAGINATION

Most children already have quite an active imagination by the time they come to school. All too frequently, however, this tends to be stifled rather than developed by the school. The task of the latter should be one of seeking to further develop this faculty in ways of obedience to the creation ordinances of God. I shall try to look briefly at this very important subject in the light of the analysis of the functioning of the imagination already dealt with in the first part of this paper. There I distinguished between *structural* features of the imagination - 'picturing' and 'inventive reconstruction', and *directional* features. The latter have to do with the religious roots of what is envisaged by the imagination, with particular reference to the character of the life wisdom to which it bears witness. My specific proposals with regard to the nurturing of the imagination involves bearing in mind the following basic aspects of what is involved, and accordingly suggesting that lesson situations be varied in a way which focusses upon only one of them at a time.

1)Picturing	structure
2)exaggeration	structure
3)inventive reconstruction	structure
4)life wisdom	direction

I shall discuss each of these in turn, trying to give some concrete suggestions as to how they might be carried through. These are, of course, tentative, and may very well be modified or added to. Although many of the activities I suggest have the elements of 'art-like' activity, I want to stress that the prime focus is not upon the improvement or development of aesthetic excellence through a concern for technical matters. That is appropriate for a focus upon artistic activity, but what I have in mind here is rather an 'imagination class' in which the prime focus is upon the nurture of the faculty of the imagination.

Picturing

Let me illustrate what I have in mind by way of some examples.

- (a) If children are listening attentively to a story, then they will be actively 'picturing' the places, people, events that are being read to them. They may be asked to draw a picture of some character or event in the story. They may be asked to complete

the story for themselves after the teacher stops reading at a suitable point. A variation on this last theme can come about by giving the barest elements of a story - so that certain characters and situations are conjured up in their imaginations, with the task of developing the story. This exercise may be attempted either upon an individual or a class basis.

- (b) When the class is out on a picnic they may like to give names to various parts of their immediate environment. This exercise would require a 'picturing' of the various scenes of the environment, thereby seeking to discover some of its allusive features. Again the class could listen to a piece of music together. The children could be asked to imagine themselves as actors in a film for which the music is the sound track, and be asked to report upon 'the film'.

The major purpose of such exercises is simply to encourage the development of the actual 'picturing experience' of the imagination. The purpose of 'reporting' is simply to provide some indication as to how actively and effectively the children apply themselves. {11}

Exaggeration

Most people are aware of the game of charades. If this is done by mime, then the lack of freedom to use verbal means of communication forces people to exaggerate certain movements in an effort to symbolise what they have in mind. What I have in mind here is basically a variation on the theme of charades. The focus is upon the exaggeration of certain features of ordinary experience for the purpose of suggestive symbolisation. To achieve this, the imaginative faculty has to seize upon certain features at the expense of others - so that the imagined thing is 'seen' in a certain way, one that highlights those aspects of the real situation which most suggestively symbolises its meaning. This exercise of the imagination works most effectively in situations in which the children are required to symbolise in ways that have certain restrictions placed upon them. When faced with the challenge to communicate in this way they will respond by appropriately exaggerating those features of the mode of expression which has been allowed. Consider, for example, the following possibilities:

- a) voices without words
- b) facial movement
- c) bodily movement
- d) drawing in schematic outline - in the manner of cartoons
- e) metaphorical and onomatopoeic usage of words

Inventive Reconstruction.

Once some progress has been made in the aforementioned activities, some attempts may be made to put together something a little more extended. In this the focus should be upon the attempt to put together a coherent imaginatively conceived object. Although this would require no less emphasis upon the activity of the imagination in the manners already discussed, it will inevitably involve a greater measure of analytical reflection if it is to be carried though effectively. I offer the following examples of what might be done:

- a) Voices with words used onomatopoeically*

There are many ways in which this medium may be explored in the way envisaged above. One would be the chant-like repetition of suitably related words that is apparent in many children's songs. (e.g. Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor, Rich man, Poor man, Beggar-man, Thief).

b)Voices without words.

This could be explored in more complicated ways as a development of what is involved above. e.g. a more sustained and developed symbolisation of a storm or a busy street.

c)Bodily movement without voice

An extended mime-dance treatment, of a story, or something more abstract would provide much scope here.

d)Bodily movement with voice

The possibility of a short dramatic sequence is an obvious possibility. However, it should not focus exclusively on dialogue, and should make maximum use of movement and tonal use of sounds.

e)Written expression

This is an obvious possibility that could develop from exercises involved with 'picturing' as in above. {12}

Life Wisdom

The development of the structural features of the imaginative faculty should proceed hand in hand with the development of its directional features. There is sometimes a tendency for Christians to think that they should always give priority to this aspect of the life of the imagination. I think it educationally unwise to always concentrate upon the directional focus. Giving it undue attention will stifle the development of the child. Rather the directional focus should regularly form the focus of a particular lesson whilst permitting the remainder to have other points of focus. The object of the lessons as a whole should be to develop a fully rounded imaginative life in the children - with the structural and directional aspects indissolubly linked. No particular lesson can achieve everything.

In developing the specifically directional features, I think that the lessons should concentrate upon the Scriptures, with particular reference being paid to those portions in which the imagination plays a significant part. In this respect the parables - both in the New Testament and in the Old Testament - are a rich source of imaginatively wrought wisdom. Possessing a profound simplicity they readily lend themselves to the development of the directional focus for the imaginative faculty. Another rich source is the book of Proverbs. With this in mind I would suggest the following as a concrete example of how the directional aspects of the imaginative faculty may be developed in a Christian school:

(a)Read, discuss and reflect upon the life wisdom taught in a particular parable or proverb.

(b)Invite the children to visualise the sort of situation dealt with by the parable - perhaps as unmentioned 'onlookers' or 'participants'.

(c)Encourage them to employ various exaggeration techniques to highlight the important features of the life wisdom embodied in the parable or proverb.

(d)Encourage the children to cast the same life wisdom into a parable situation of their own making.

(e) Invite them to inventively reconstruct this in several of the media suggested in the previous section, this time taking special care with regard to the Life Wisdom that such 'reconstructions' embody.

ARTISTIC ACTIVITY

We have now given some attention to the two areas which I consider to be most important with regard to the education of art and aesthetics in a Christian school - at least in the early stages. Again I would like to emphasise that without an adequate grounding in them, attempts both at performing - even good - art works and trying to appreciate and criticise them, tend to lack the necessary depth and intuitive grasp necessary to appreciate what it is all about. However, I don't want to convey the impression that I think that the school has no task with regard to the nurture of artistic skills. I do. The extent and way in which it should do so is a very complicated matter. On the one hand, many of the skills dance, painting and music are far too specialised to be given a great deal of attention by the school. On the other hand, many of the elementary skills for these arts can and should be nurtured by the school. The ability to move in time, to paint, to follow music, and to have some appreciation of being able to make music as part of a group - singing and playing percussion instruments - seems to me to be quite appropriate for the school, and a necessary part of a general education. Where those with more special skills, developed outside the school, may participate and contribute, then I think this is all to the good. {13}

Finally, the activities of singing and dancing for relaxation and enjoyment, without too close attention being given to technical expertise or to developing the imagination, needs to be a part of the healthy life of a school. Similar comments could be said with regard to the nurture of music and possibly the other arts, in the worship activity of the school.

THE STUDY OF ART IN RELATION TO MAN'S LIFE

The more disciplined activity of studying and analysing works of art and their meaning is one that should not be undertaken until the latter stages of the educational development of the child. After thirteen would be my estimate of the appropriate time to begin an exercise of this nature. As such it is a very big subject in its own right, and one that I cannot hope to do justice to here. Suffice to say that attention should be given to obtaining some grasp of the history to the different arts in ways that bring to light the dominant cultural ideals, and that this general survey approach should be accompanied by a more detailed attention being given to some particular works. Where possible these works should be experienced live - if they are performing arts. Perhaps it should be said that just because it may not be appropriate to study and analyse art works until a later stage, that does not mean to say that children should not be encouraged to experience them - in the appropriate way - well before that. The analysis of works of art is far more effective if it is based upon actual imaginative experience of them. Indeed without this and some appreciation of the cultural significance (in the sense of embodying cultural ideals that have their roots in religious driving motives) then the study and analysis of art in relation to man's life can be somewhat empty¹².

Summary

By focussing upon these four features - the aesthetic side of creation, imaginative development, artistic activity, and art in relation to man's life, then I believe that the necessary scope and range of a Christian curriculum in art and aesthetics may be appreciated. However, alongside the many other activities that need to receive attention in the school, I well appreciate that the task is a daunting one. However, that should not prevent us from moving on towards the goal, in the grace of God. {14}

Footnotes

¹ C. Seerveld 'A Turnabout in Aesthetics to Understanding' pp. 12-13. Institute for Christian Studies, 'Obedient Aesthetic Life'. AACS Discovery Lecture. Also 'A Christian Critique of Art and Literature', pp 74-75.

² Luke 1:51

³ 'Emma' by Jane Austen

⁴ 'A History of the Modern World' by R. R. Palmer and J. Colton, p. 206

⁵ 'The Lord of the Rings' by J.R. Tolkien.

⁶ I. A. Richards 'Science and Poetry' in 'Criticism, the Foundations of Modern Literary Judgement' ed. Mark Schorer. Margaret Macdonald 'The Language of Fiction' in 'Philosophy Looks at the Arts' ed. J. Margolis.

⁷ This attitude has been fostered by Romanticism, Idealism, Existentialism as well as Freudian and Jungian Psychology. Even such diverse figures as John Dewey, 'In the end, works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience'. 'Art and Experience' p. 105. Suzanne Langer, 'The only way we can really envisage... ultimately the whole direct sense of human life, is in artistic terms... Self-knowledge, insight into all phases of life and mind, springs from artistic imagination'. 'Problems of Art'. p. 71, and Herbert Read, 'If we could speak our dreams we should dictate continuous poetry', 'The Nature of Literature', p. 105, add their various leanings to this particular slant.

⁸ Prov. 4:23

⁹ Luke 1:51

¹⁰ The latter, for example, involved a rather complicated juxtaposition in which a long-standing belief in England's destiny in the purpose of the world was read into the Bible in a way that confused England with Israel. Thus, in such oratories as 'Israel in Egypt' and 'Samson' the typical Englishman would see the problems and destiny of his own country being enacted and embodied in a cultural ideal. 'Messiah', in this respect, is an untypical oratorio. Its continuing popularity has not been linked to this cultural ideal in quite the same way.

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of art, and the various issues that surround it, I would suggest that the reader consult the following: "Shaping School Curriculum" ed. by G. J. Steensma and H. W. van Brummelen especially the chapters on Aesthetics pp. 72-104. Signal (1977). 'Art Needs No Justification' by H. R. Rookmaaker I.V.P. (1978), 'A Christian Critique of Art and Literature' by C. Seerveld. Wedge, etc.

¹² For a further discussion of some of these issues, I would recommend the reader to look at the chapters on aesthetics in 'Shaping School Curriculum' ed. by G. J. Steensma and H. W. van Brummelen, Signal (1977), and works such as 'Modern Art and the Death of a Culture' by H.R. Rookmaaker IVP (1970).