

*Imagination is funny / it makes a cloudy day sunny . . .*

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1851 novel *The House of the Seven Gables* we meet a young man named Holgrave who in a fit of frustration cries out: *Shall we never, never get rid of the Past. It lies upon the Present like a giant's dead body! . . . Just think a moment; and it will startle you to see what slaves we are to by gone times.* As a citizen of this new enterprise, the United States of America, free of the old regimes of a worn out Europe, Holgrave is frustrated by whatever holds him back from being a free man, a free thinker, master of his destiny. Change not stability should be our modern priority. And so the best way to know anything is the modern way: to weigh, measure, calculate, test, define, subdivide . . . not to rely on imagination, fantasy, the fairy tales of our past but on science. Imagination (including religion) is the birthplace of illusions.

However, since the days of Holgrave, many a scholar has taken up the defense of imagination. Imagination values facts as much as science does but ultimately it seeks out *the story, the drama that lies behind the facts* – which is what our Bible and, yes, Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson try to do – seeing life not as an object like a vase or cabbage or electronic energy but as a vision that speaks to us by way of God and angels or a sunrise that stops us in our tracks or a landscape before which we cannot repress our need to call it “heavenly”. Imagination tells us there is story out there that wants to speak to us, to include us in its drama.

Indeed, may we not say that imagination *precedes* science in our efforts to know who we are and where we are and where we're going? Take NASA, our national aerospace program, with all its science and technological know-how. Does that quest to reach the moon and now the planet Mars have no relation to the great, even ancient products of our imagination - like God's command to Abram to *go to the land I will show you*; the command to Moses to lead his people out of slavery, across a sea, *toward a promised land*; the *Odyssey* of Homer, Ulysses trying to find his way home to Ithaca; the *Aeneid* of Virgil, the Trojans leaving the ruins of Troy to find a place ultimately called Rome, which is still a place of pilgrimage; the quest for the Holy Grail – Dorothy's search for the Emerald City, even Gene Kelly's irrepressible need to recover the vanished village of Brigadoon?

Is it not our culture's imagination (or may we call it faith?) that motivates our scientific discoveries, our invention of the telegraph, the telephone, the incentive to flight, to undersea travel, to the Internet as a place of endless destinations? Great achievements of modern times – but I think it can be proved that the dream came before the fact.

As for Holgrave in Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables* – his antipathy toward anything but bare fact slowly changed under the influence of the newly arrived young Phoebe. Phoebe in Greek means bright or shining – and indeed Phoebe brought enough brightness and grace to the *House of the Seven Gables* to revive the hope of its gloomy old residents (her cousins) and allow Holgrave's heart to begin to influence his head.

*Imagination is crazy / your whole perspective gets hazy / Starts you asking a daisy / what  
to do, what to do.*