The Wizard's Alphabet Book: Illustration as Counter-Environment to the Digital World

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THE WIZARD’S ALPHABET BOOK

ILLUSTRATION AS COUNTER-ENVIRONMENT TO THE DIGITAL WORLD

CASA CREATORE D’ARTE
STEPHEN C.S. BARANY
MFA-IVC MMXXII
A wizard intervenes,
The tutor of future kings and queens.
Take refuge beneath his wings.
“Awake, O Sleeper!
I say to you, ‘Arise!’
Whoever has ears ought to hear,
And listen with their eyes.”
Abstract

THE WIZARD’S ALPHABET BOOK: ILLUSTRATION AS COUNTER-ENVIRONMENT TO THE DIGITAL WORLD
2022 MFA Thesis for Sam Fox Illustration and Visual Culture

This thesis essay accompanies a built installation of twenty-six densely drawn illustrations, each consisting of numerous creatures and objects whose names all begin with the same letter. Thus, each illustration represents a different letter of the alphabet. Printed on cloud-shaped substrates and suspended as a group in a 10” x 10” ring, the array of illustrations form a small space where viewers can immerse themselves in the act of free and careful looking. This essay elaborates on the ideas that propelled the design and construction of this illustrated installation.

This essay explores the potential for illustration to create a space for looking where children can practice and develop visual perception, recover a sense of wonder, and learn to navigate the complexities of a digital world awash in images. Drawing on the work of philosopher Josef Pieper, I unpack the potential for the visual noise of the digital media environment to create a literal and figurative blindness that interferes with individual autonomy and obfuscates the deeper meanings and connections written in the cosmos. The relationship between Merlin and Wart in Disney’s 1963 The Sword in the Stone (based on T.H. White’s book of the same title) serves as a hermeneutic metaphor for how the introduction of new perspectives can equip children with the tools of discernment and agency in the face of an overwhelming environment. Comparing the densely illustrated wimmelbook genre of picture books to the ancient Roman templum, I argue—with the help of Alfred Hitchcock’s The Birds and Marshall McLuhan’s concept of counter-environment—for the indispensable value of setting aside spaces for observation.

I argue that analog spaces set aside for careful looking can help viewers to develop adaptive skills for navigating complex, information-rich environments, especially those dominated by digital screens and Internet connections. Furthermore, the practice of careful looking helps to cultivate dispositions of receptivity and wonder and points to the possibility of a discernible meaning in the cosmos.
What does my life matter?
I just want it to be faithful, to the end,
to the child I used to be.
George Bernanos

A Wizard Intervenes

The Sword in the Stone

In the animated 1963 Disney film, The Sword in the Stone, a boy orphan named Wart (whose true name is Arthur) climbs a tree to retrieve his master’s stray arrow. Slipping on the bough, he tumbles through a thatched roof and into the study of an old wizard named Merlin. Exiting the world of a squire-in-training, Wart enters the enchanted world of a wizard who anticipated the boy’s arrival and had prepared a place just for him. As a future squire, Wart—as his name suggests—was a mere accretion of the feudal system, at the mercy of his master and the vicissitudes of a Fort Mayne world order where might makes right. Yet, Wart had a friend who knew his dignity as a person and foresaw his destiny as king. That friend was Merlin. And, for the good of Arthur and the good of England, Merlin intervened.

Thesis as Intervention

My thesis project, Alphabet Mobile, is primarily an intervention after the model of Merlin. Though not an intervention into the feudal system for the fate of a particular child, it is an intervention on behalf of all those who have become native to the digital media environment, especially children. I intervene because I suspect—as did philosopher Josef Pieper—that the ability to see is in decline. Of course, I refer not to the power of our eyes to respond to visual stimuli. (Medical technology keeps our eyes healthier than ever before.) Instead, I refer to a level of perception, a willingness and readiness to look deeply at the world and derive from this gaze a sense of meaning, relationship, and reality that transcends mere surface appearance. In his essay, Learning How to See Again, Josef Pieper expressed a fear that going below a certain level of this “spiritual capacity to perceive the visible reality as it truly is” would endanger the integrity of the human person as a spiritual being. At the time of writing, he believed humanity had already reached this minimum threshold. It was 1952.

Cited:

2 Fort Mayne is the phrase used in T.H. White’s The Once and Future King to describe the chivalric and social system before the reign of Arthur. It is an Anglicisation of the French for “strong hand” (la main forte) and denotes a system in which the strong use their advantage against others, or, put simply, “Might makes right.”
3 The Sword in the Stone, directed by Wolfgang Reitherman (1963; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Video, 2001), DVD.
4 By digital media environment, I mean a media landscape in which the digital screen is the dominant medium.

Right
Josef Pieper wrote his essay Learning How to See Again aboard a ship from New York to Rotterdam. He lamented in his fellow passengers the hasty unwillingness to pause and observe. The poster at the right for Radio Pirata illustrates a restless and pleasure-seeking visual noise antithetical to the sight Pieper wished to recover.

Hypothesis

At the time, Pieper attributed diminishing vision to the sheer quantity of visible things in the world. There was just too much to see! In response, he proposed two avenues for combatting the decline of vision: abstention (a kind of visual asceticism) and art-making (a practice that requires, develops, and rewards attentive perception). Seventy years later, the world is more awash in images than ever, and, while I agree that abstention and art-making are legitimate avenues for healthy adaptation, what may have seemed like manageable and conscientious steps to take in 1952 sound like leaps of faith today. Therefore, I propose a third way forward, one that requires less initial investment from the individual and that serves as a gentle training ground for continued perceptual growth. This third way is the invitation to wonder, and it is my own plan for a positive intervention in the flooded landscape of images.

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8 Pieper, 32. Pieper likens the overabundance of visible things to “visual noise,” a metaphor I will revisit later in this essay.
9 Pieper, 32.
The Tutor of Future Kings and Queens

Wart’s Agency

Vision, of course, is an individual and interior process. One person cannot see for another, nor can one person (except, perhaps, a parent) insist that another abstain from images or take up the practice of a visual art. However, one could seek to devise an activity for others where looking is an intrinsically motivating activity that also develops and sharpens perception. In The Sword in the Stone, this is exactly how Merlin structures his lessons for Wart. Merlin turns Wart variously into a fish, a squirrel, and a sparrow and introduces him first-hand to many other wonders—all of which open Wart’s eyes to the depth and complexity of the world beyond his head. (What child would not find these opportunities intrinsically motivating?) Merlin’s exercises are Wart’s invitation to wonder, and they allow him to understand through direct immersion what it means to step out of one’s usual environment and into another world.

Blindness and Autonomy

What is at stake in developing Wart’s vision (and our own) is autonomy, a necessary capacity for a king and for our own self-rule. Pieper named two risks of losing autonomy amidst the visual noise of his time. The first was that a loss of vision would uncouple a person’s connection with reality (which he regarded as the foundation of human spirituality), and the second was that the person without vision “inevitably falls prey to the demagogical spells of the powers that be.” These modes of blindness highlight the literal and figurative dimensions of vision as well as their near inseparability. While one might say that literal eyesight maps perceived physical space and that figurative sight maps conceptual or relational space, the distinction is barely tenable since the same language applies to both senses of sight without any difficulty: the ability to see allows a person to locate themselves in the world and navigate it with independence, confidence, and intention. The literal and figurative dimensions of sight translate directly to the literal and figurative dimensions of autonomy.

In Fort Mayne society, the systemic fault is a figurative blindness, which manifests tangibly for all to see. On one hand, the powerful are blind to the spiritual dimension of humanity and therefore act brutishly as though might makes right. On the other, the weak are blind to the injustice of their position and fall prey to the social tactics of the powers that be. As Merlin’s student, Wart prepares to cut himself off from both forms of blindness. In a symbolic moment of transformation, Wart draws a sword (an instrument of discernment) from a stone (a symbol of hard and unforgiving nature). This move grants him total autonomy from and over his environment. Arthur’s newfound strength, paired with Merlin’s education, provides the separation and equipment necessary for navigating the difficult personal disciplines and tall communal tasks that lay ahead for his rule.

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The first layer of a much more multivalent and mysterious lesson. (As it turns out, the wizard I impersonated had lessons in store for me as well.)

The journey of my iterative process led me to the idea of an oversized mobile, an installation where the viewer steps into the alphabet, which I represent as a letterless array of 26 illustrations, each a densely drawn amalgamation of objects and creatures whose names all start with (and therefore represent) a given letter of the alphabet.

This essay unpacks some of the meaning and intention embedded in this project. The image of Merlin and Wart recurs throughout the essay, largely because their imagined relationship has been so useful to my making and thinking during this thesis process, and because I cannot seem to shake the image of the two. I think there is something of each of them in me—though I know not what. Perhaps there is something of each of them in you, too.

**Thesis Purpose and Goals**

*Alphabet Mobile* springs from my own desire to similarly equip young people for undertaking the tall tasks of self-rule and communal service that await them in the digital media environment. My hope is to give them the vision needed to stand back from their environment and draw out from their own nature the instrument of discernment. I desire that no children lose their connection with reality nor fall prey to demagogical powers. I desire that every child knows their dignity and has the opportunity to choose their potential. To this end, I desire to help children practice and cultivate a robust and discerning vision of reality. Since I cannot, like Merlin, transform them into other creatures or transport them into other worlds, I take up my pen and draw.

*Alphabet Mobile* is my attempt to create an illustrated experience that motivates viewers to look carefully and consider deeply the images they encounter. While designing *Alphabet Mobile*, I inhabited the persona of a wizard-tutor and asked myself: *How would a wizard design an alphabet book?* Surely, he would not be satisfied with the humdrum plane of a page, but instead, in *Fantasia*-like fashion, he would conjure all of creation into a fantastic pedagogical parade. Just as certainly—since a wizard cannot work without winking—the depiction of the alphabet would only be
Above
Detail of my drawing for the letter H.

Opposite
Visitors explore the illustrations in Alphabet Mobile at the MFA IVC Thesis Show Opening on April 30, 2022 at the High Low Gallery in St. Louis, Missouri.
(Credit: Stephen Barany)
The Birds

Alfred Hitchcock’s 1963 film, The Birds, challenged Americans’ mainly friendly notions of birds. In the movie, a woman, Melanie, travels to Bodega Bay outside of San Francisco to deliver a pair of lovebirds for the daughter of her acquaintance and love interest, Mitch. When Melanie and Mitch first catch sight of one another in Bodega Bay, a seagull attacks Melanie and interrupts their moment. Over the next few days, birds amass in increasing numbers and, with increasing aggression, wreak havoc on the small bay town. The birds’ attacks include chasing down a group of defenseless school children, injuring many adults, and directly killing at least two people, whose corpses are found with their eyes pecked out. The movie concludes with Melanie, Mitch, and Mitch’s family escaping in Melanie’s car, leaving behind a landscape overcome with birds.15

I bring up this Hitchcock horror to explain in visual shorthand how I assess the risks of the image-rich digital media environment. In a balanced, natural ecology (say, before the age of mechanical reproduction), images maintained a healthy coexistence with their makers. By definition, the quantity and influence of images in pre-mechanical societies was of human scale and proportion. A single artist or studio can only produce so many paintings or sculptures, and, even then, only after years of great toil and training.16 A given people can only make one work like Notre-Dame de Paris every hundred years, if at all.

Take Refuge Beneath His Wings

Birds

Although Merlin and Wart have been a primary inspiration for this project, a second hermeneutic metaphor, that of birds, will prove helpful for elucidating the concepts at play in Alphabet Mobile. Birds carry impressive symbolic weight in human cultures across time. Birds are both predator and prey, majestic and base. They deliver messages. They are fleet and fleeting. They occupy the air and transcend human life. They are atmospheric to human auditory and visual perception, yet they capture our eyes and our imagination. It is no wonder that the universal encounter with birds has led human cultures to observe, name, consume, and interpret them. For the purposes of this essay, birds will help me to illustrate the problem of our vision and explain the intervention I propose for that problem in Alphabet Mobile.
However, the easy ability to create, reproduce, and share images at prolific speed and quantity throws a humanly scaled ecology of images out of balance. Computers, portable personal screens, and mobile internet compound this imbalance exponentially. As with The Birds, images in daily life have slowly amassed in quantity over time. It is no single image or species of image that terrorizes us, but the swarm in total. Their effect is cumulative and environmental, and the change in environmental conditions affects the whole community. Children are especially vulnerable, and those who succumb totally to the change—who become victims of the environment or who cannot adapt accordingly—lose their eyes and even their life.

The Way is Shut

The production studio vetoed Hitchcock’s preferred ending of The Birds because it was too scary and too expensive. As Mitch and company drove out of town, they would pass a scene of great destruction, littered with bodies almost like a war zone. They would narrowly escape another avian assault, this time on a country road with gulls stabbing through the canvas top of the convertible. Then, the car would speed away towards San Francisco to cross the Golden Gate bridge, its massive network of support cables covered by birds beyond number.17

At first glance, this sounds too harmless to be scary. Afterall, flocks are only natural, and we see birds dotting powerlines all the time. Yet, the terror of the bridge-of-birds ending comes not from what it depicts but what it suggests: Legions of more birds await. Even small triumphs are doomed to fail. And, worst of all, the threat is global, which means there is no escape. The bridge—the route to return, the path to safety, the connection to civilization—has already fallen. The way is shut.

Drawing a parallel between the steady and unnatural avian accumulation in The Birds and the growing heap of images available online is, to be fair, a despairing comparison. Do you really think that digital images can peck our eyes out, take our lives, and eventually consume all the world as we know it? Well, not exactly, but the fear is real. That a tidal wave of images might overwhelm humanity individually or collectively is at least possible—and far more probable than a universal shift in bird temperaments. The endless stream of online images already flows freely into homes and schools, eyes and hearts, and it shows no signs of relenting. What remains to be seen is if and how humanity can adapt to such a radical environmental shift. At least one thing is certain: There is no way back to old times and places. The bridge to former ways of life has fallen. That way is shut.18

18 I recall here the line from J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Return of the King. In the lore of the Eorlingas, a stony guardian sat before the Way of the Dead and spoke to two men who arrived there seeking refuge: “The way is shut. It was made by those who are Dead, and the Dead keep it, until the time comes. The way is shut.” J.R.R. Tolkien, The Return of the King, (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 46. In the 2003 film adaptation, the King of the Dead speaks these words directly to Aragorn who has come to summon the Dead to fulfill their oath. Passing into the realm of the Dead is a desperate act, a last ditch effort to find help against Sauron’s overwhelming forces. The Return of the King, directed by Peter Jackson (2003; Burbank, CA: New Line Home Video, 2004), DVD.

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Right
Wart’s Despair

Before Wart first tumbles into Merlin’s workshop, there seemed no escape for him either. The cards had steadily stacked against him, an orphan boy in a world of strength and arms. He has no muscle. He has no education. And he has no imagination that his life and world could be any other way. Castles and kings are all he knows. When Merlin asserts himself as Wart’s tutor, Wart protests, “But I’ve got to get back to the castle. They’ll want me in the kitchen.” Clearly, Wart has no conception of Merlin’s offer. So the wizard adapts and packages his intervention in a way that Wart can stomach. He replies, “Oh...well. Then we’ll pack and be on our way!”

Merlin’s first act as tutor is to conjure the whole world (symbolized by the eclectic and timeless microcosm of his workshop) into a magical parade that files neatly and rhythmically into his carpet bag. They head right away to Sir Ector’s castle where Merlin begins his lessons of unpacking the world and awakening Wart to reality.
Awake, O Sleeper!

Merlin’s Counter-Environment

The transportation of Merlin’s workshop to Sir Ector’s castle is more than a mere conjuring trick; it is pure artistry. Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1968 that “the role of art is to create the means of perception by creating counter-environments that open the door of perception to people otherwise numbed in a non-perceivable situation.” In other words, the artist’s role in society is to create counter-environments that awaken people to the commonplace conditions of their everyday environment. The goal is not to shock people per se—though shock is an understandable response to perceiving the environment anew. The goal is to equip people with better sensory tools for navigating their environment which is (almost by definition) imperceptible. A counter-environment for a fish would be anywhere outside of the water. A counter-environment for a boy might be inhabiting the body of a fish, squirrel, or sparrow. A counter-environment for a Fort Mayne castle might be the eclectic studio of a wizard. And a counter-environment for a world of digital images might be an analog space set aside for looking.

The Roman Templum

Counter-environments as a tool for practicing vision and gaining insight are not a modern invention. To cite one prominent and pertinent example: the ancient Romans embraced the power of counter-environments, albeit from the perspective of religion and not art. Roman priests called augurs practiced the interpretation of signs. They looked for potential omens among many natural phenomena including lightning and thunder, the entrails of sacrificed animals, and the behavior of animals, especially birds. Augers set aside a sacred space, called a templum, where they made their observations. The Latin word contemplari (meaning, “to gaze attentively, observe, or consider”) derives from this ancient practice as does our modern English word “contemplation.”

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Though the interpretation of omens may seem like a silly preoccupation, the Romans took it very seriously and perhaps with good reason. Counter-environments provide the space for stepping outside the norm and gaining perspective. The wisdom of this approach is even built into English idiom: *to take a step back* or *to give someone a bit of space* are acts of withdrawal that permit a better perspective. The idea is that a shift in point of view leads to new or renewed vision (both literally and figuratively) such that one can adjust their visual or conceptual map of a situation. Stepping out of the norm and into a counter-environment is a method for recalibration, for acquiring more adequate compass bearings to use in navigation.22

The ancient Romans had something right when they built counter-environments dedicated to the observation of patterns in their search for direction. Need to know how to act in the urban political environment of Rome? Step outside the city, observe carefully, and consider what you see.

**Alphabet Mobile as Counter-Environment**

My primary intention with *Alphabet Mobile* is to construct a counter-environment to the digital media environment. It is an attempt to set aside a space (like the templum) for the observation of images (or “birds”) in a world teeming with them. Thus, I decided to make *Alphabet Mobile* as an immersive, oversized mobile. I wanted the viewer to enter into a new and distinct space—the artwork’s space—and not vice versa. I also wanted *Alphabet Mobile* to be large enough to invite the possibility of a shared experience of looking. So often, life in the digital media environment (read: a life of looking at screens) is a solitary visual experience. Despite the phrase “social media”, the digital act is almost always a locally solitary act, with every person browsing images on a private device. In *Alphabet Mobile*, there is no such thing as private browsing. It is always open, always communal, always a shared visual space.

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22 McLuhan, 238. “A poem or a painting is in every sense a teaching machine for the training of perception and judgment... The artist studies the distortion of sensory life produced by new environmental programming and tends to create artistic situations that correct the sensory bias and derangement brought about by the new form. In social terms the artist can be rewarded as a navigator who gives adequate compass bearings in spite of magnetic deflection of the needle by changing play of forces.”
Wimmelbooks and Counter-Environment

Creating a social space for looking is one reason why *Alphabet Mobile* as an “alphabet book” is not a book at all. During the thesis process, I spoke often of my desire to “explode the alphabet book” in my thesis. By this, I did not mean to destroy or denigrate the form of the book, but I did however want to depict the alphabet in a way that was alive, immersive, and primarily a social experience. Despite my avoidance of the book form for the purposes of this project, one genre of picture book did inspire many decisions in my thesis.

Wimmelbooks are densely illustrated wordless picture books that feature an abundance of characters and details as well as some degree of chaos. Cornelia Rémi’s insights on the value and characteristics of wimmelbooks greatly influenced my thesis decisions and priorities. Though I often shared the aforementioned desire to “explode the alphabet book” it might be more accurate to say that my thesis “explodes into three dimensions a wimmelbook based on the alphabet” so as to increase the impact of the wimmelbook’s immersive images and to construct a social space for looking.

Even in book form, wimmelbooks present a powerful counter-environment for readers. Per Rémi’s research, wimmelbooks encourage readers to practice and develop important skills not usually associated with books for infants, toddlers, and young children. These areas of growth include: developing narrative skills, mixing analytic descriptions with generated assumptions.

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23 I love books!

24 From the German “wimmeln” meaning “to teem or swarm with something.”


26 Rémi, 116.

27 Rémi, 120.

Above

A teeming scene by Ali Mitgutsch who is credited for establishing the modern wimmelbook genre, though artists like Pieter Bruegel the Elder and styles like Turkish miniatures long preceded him. (Credit: Ali Mitgutsch, *Come with Me to the Water*, (Germany: Ravensburger Buchverlag, 1994)).
menting a page into meaningful units, juggling visual and verbal symbols, sustaining a high degree of attentiveness and concentration, and, ultimately, coping with a complex world. Especially when compared to scrolling on a device, browsing image search results, or clicking through suggested videos, open-ended looking at rich and open-ended drawings “becomes an intrinsically rewarding act of experiencing oneself and the world” and becomes a cognitive training ground in which “players develop a vast repertoire of behaviors, which help them to handle the contingencies of life.”

Because wimmelbooks do not have words or directions, readers are free to explore the pages with a flexibility that mirrors the indeterminacy of the Internet, albeit with an important distinction. While the infinite possibilities of an Internet experience may lead to confusion, anxiety, or frustration, the wimmelbook’s plentiful-yet-limited number of inputs aims to support the reader’s perception and learning. This is contrary to the experience of a web browser, where users must willingly relinquish agency to algorithms in order to find, sort, and curate content; in a crowded online metaverse, trading agency for convenience is the only way to make sense of it all.

Wimmelbooks, however, work in the opposite direction. They are primarily sense-making spaces whose plentiful content facilitates and bolsters the user’s agency. Unlike web pages where ads are meant as distractions or even search and puzzle books where details are obstacles to a predetermined task, the details in wimmelbooks provide an inexhaustible supply of potential connections and interpretations. The reader freely determines their engagement, which the multivalent content supports and encourages. The teeming pages of wimmelbooks therefore become training grounds where children can practice truly self-directed perception and navigation that will make them more sophisticated users of digital technologies. This is why the key to wimmelbooks is not a limited (and limiting) word list in the back of a book, but the unlimited capacity for perception and meaning-making in the mind of the reader. This too is the key for Merlin, the key for Alphabet Mobile, and the key for the real and unmediated human experience of life in an increasingly complicated cosmos.

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28 Rémi, 121.
29 Rémi, 122.
30 Rémi, 128.
31 Rémi, 120.
32 Rémi, 129.
33 Rémi, 134.
I Say to You, “Arise!”

The Magic Key

“The Magic Key” is the name of a song cut from the original screenplay of The Sword in the Stone, an unfortunate omission because it deprived viewers an important hermeneutic for unlocking the intent of the film: to encourage reading and the life of the mind in the face of a brutal and overwhelming world. “The Magic Key” is relatively short and direct. Its lyrics are likely too didactic for modern ears, but they reveal unmistakably Merlin’s own position as an educator. Merlin sings, “What a glorious experience your life will be. A noggin full of knowledge is the magic key.” And, “You’ve got to learn the alphabet from A-to-Z. Letters make words, and words you’ll see are necessary for the magic key.”

Richard and Robert B. Sherman, the brothers who wrote this song, seem conscious only of the literal aspects of learning since they focused Merlin’s attention on the educational value of the book and the word. However, their choice to work as composers and to deliver this message as a song in an animated film is evidence that they also believed in the intuitive power of art and music. When Merlin casts his packing spell or transforms Wart into other creatures, he too evidences a belief that learning is more than the acquisition of information, but extends to include experience, intuition, and perception. “The Magic Key” lyrics point to the “glorious experience” of a life full of knowledge that is simultaneously discursive (discovered and

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34 Megan Woller, From Camelot to Spamelot: Musical Retellings of Arthurian Legend on Stage and Screen (New York: Oxford University Press US, 2021), 111.
36 In Leisure the Basis of Culture, Josef Pieper introduces the distinction between ratio and intellectus which can be generalized as the difference between thinking and perceiving respectively. To come to know through ratio is a discursive and analytical process. You might relate it to scientific observation or the comprehensive description of attributes and parts. To come to know through intellectus is a receptive and intuitive process. You might relate it to getting to know someone or having the sense that something is good, right, or fitting. The distinction between ratio and intellectus is a helpful lens for considering the often bipartite ways we come to know.
Poetic Consciousness

J.R.R. Tolkien, as an author and linguist, was very interested in the power of words to combine the literal and the poetic, to bridge the rational and intuitive spheres of thought. He identified the reawakening of a “poetic consciousness” as the central mandate of his vocation as a poet. Tolkien’s own eyes were opened to this poetic consciousness through his personal encounter with fairytales, where he “first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine.” The language and imagery of fairytales helped Tolkien to see that the word and the image, the symbol and its meaning, the rational and the intuitive, were all bound up in the same mysterious economy of discursive logic and intuitive perception.

In the figure of Merlin and his owl companion Archimedes, the audience of The Sword in the Stone sees an illustration of the interplay of discursive and poetic thought. The dry, factual, disinterested oversight of Archimedes is a foil to Merlin’s symbolic and associative vision. Their pronounced manners of speech further elucidate this characteristic difference. Archimedes often asks questions or provides sensible correctives while Merlin sings, spouts aphorisms, and generally fumbles about with the stuff and meaning of reality. Fittingly, each tutors and shepherds Wart in their own distinctive way throughout the story. As a duo, Merlin and Archimedes embody a caricature of the medieval mind: immersed deeply in symbol and metaphor and yet striving heroically to make logical sense of it all.

39 Named after the famous Greek mathematician and inventor.
Whoever Has Ears Ought to Hear

Music, Silence, and Visual Noise

Music and speech are more than catchy devices for memory or clever shorthands for modes of thought, they are also metaphors for adopting a receptive and meaningful posture towards life as an embodied creature. When Josef Pieper lamented the loss of vision among people, he likened it to a visual noise. Noise, which differs from silence and music, seems to indicate a certain absurdity or randomness of sound. Whereas silence and music indicate structure, order, and peace. Thus, to wait for silence or to listen for music amidst a noise is to presume (or, at least hope for) a perceivable structure or meaning within the noise. And to make space for silence or to create music amidst the noise is to impose (or at least, to attempt to impose) structure or meaning to the noise. The first disposition expresses a receptive hope; the second expresses an active love.

Hell and Heaven

In another essay titled *Music and Silence*, Pieper recalls C.S. Lewis’s claim that neither silence nor music can exist in hell because either an infernal noise or an oppressively impenetrable silence would make both speaking and listening impossible. If Lewis’s speculation is true, it would seem that hell banishes the dispositions necessary for communication. It permits no active love and allows no receptive hope, and “if the disposition of acceptance and love is absent, not only can there be no feast, but no song either!” Hell must be a place where the music and harmony of creation is imperceptible.

Heaven, on the other hand, we imagine as a place of clear light and angelic chorus. Here, all creation gives praise. The close association of heaven or paradise with the harmony of word in poetry or music is nothing new. In *The Magician’s Nephew*, C.S. Lewis depicts Aslan’s creation of Narnia as a song. In *The Silmarillion*, J.R.R. Tolkien depicts Ilúvatar’s act of creation as a chorus. Both authors certainly found inspiration for these allegories in the Christian association of Jesus Christ with “the Logos,” the spoken word of God, the ordering first principle of creation through whom all things were made and eventually redeemed.

The Creator’s Gift

Akin to these creation accounts, poetic and artistic expression (not limited to music but including all forms of art) “build on a loving acceptance of the world and of human existence.” The Creator creates out of love, and so does every maker who imitates the Creator. Merlin loves creation, he loves Wart, and he cannot wait to introduce the two. He is bursting with hope, song, and words of wisdom. Anything he can give to Wart he will. This dynamic of love from Creator to creature that a maker imitates is easy to understand. It is like the parent who desires the best for their child and shapes a world for them. This however represents only half the equation. The giver needs a recipient. The singer needs a hearer. The tutor needs a pupil. For the disposition of active love to bear good fruit, a disposition of receptive hope must await and accept it.

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And Listen with Their Eyes

The Monk’s Contemplation

The monk in the Christian tradition is one who for love of God has left the world to adopt a life of contemplative prayer, which is “essentially a listening in silence, an expectancy” for the voice of God. The monk leaves “the world” behind as a radical form of self-emptying which makes him more available to God. However, the decision to retreat from the world is not a retreat from creation, of which the monk is a part. In fact, William McNamara called contemplative prayer, “a long, loving look at the real,” and Thomas Merton said the purpose of Christian meditation is “to deepen the consciousness of [the] basic relationship of the creature to the Creator.” In other words, the monk’s asceticism prepares him as an empty vessel to be filled with right relationship with his neighbor, with his surroundings and creation, and especially with his Creator. The contemplative monk’s remote way of life does not break these relationships, but in fact makes them stronger and purer.

Childlike Receptivity

When Christ places a child in the midst of his disciples, he exhorts them to be childlike, which means (at least in part) to have an open heart and open hands. A child is receptive to the gift of relationship and the gift of natural goods in a way that is not bound up in the self-aggrandizement or self-seeking often associated with adulthood or the “real world”. The pure gaze of the child has no duplicity within it, and so a child “gazes into the world with an intensity and purity that wonders at the smallest event.”

Jesus teaches the same disposition in the Gospel account of his visit to Martha and Mary. Martha is caught up in the worldly concerns of serving, while Mary sits at the Lord’s feet listening and gazing. “Martha, Martha,” says Jesus, “you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

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51 Mark 10:15
52 John 1:47
53 Caldecott, 32.
54 This Scriptural example again reinforces the distinction between discursive and intuitive thought. The words “discourse” and “discursive” come from the Latin discurrere which means “to run about, run to and fro, hasten.” On the other hand, the words “intuition” and “tutor” come from the Latin intueri “to look at, consider,” and tueri “to look at, watch over” respectively. Jesus juxtaposes Mary’s scurrying about with Martha’s looking and considering, and he affirms that Martha has chosen the better part. This insight has implications for prayer and other aspects of life in addition to describing modes thought as already explored in this essay. “Discourse (n.),” Etymology, accessed April 7, 2022, https://www.etymonline.com/word/discourse. “Intuition (n.),” Etymology, accessed April 7, 2022, https://www.etymonline.com/word/intuition.
55 Luke 10:38-42
Merlin’s Book of Nature

When Merlin removes Wart from the adult world concerning castles and chivalry, he places him back in the center of creation and gives Wart the opportunity to choose and experience the better part. *The Sword in the Stone* depicts Merlin as a bumbling dreamer with his head in the clouds, but this belies his primary strength as a tutor: Merlin is childlike. Merlin maintains a living sense of wonder, humility, and radical receptivity. Despite his age and learning (or, perhaps due to them), Merlin is willing and eager to accept that all is gift and that a wizard is not his own.

“There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream, The earth, and every common sight, To me did seem Apparelled in celestial light, The glory and the freshness of a dream.”

So writes Wordsworth, in a poem recollecting childhood, a description which matches the western archetype of the wizard as an impractical visionary clad in robes covered in stars. The wizard “to me did seem apparelled in celestial light, the glory and the freshness of a dream.” Maybe this is why the wizard archetype fascinates children; he is a living metaphor for a mature, childlike spirit. The wizard is a grown-up with all the right kinds of knowledge and responsibility, whose seriousness is matched only by his playfulness, and, most importantly, who never lost his childlike spirit or wonder of creation.

A Constellation or Pie in the Sky?

We do not see the stars today. Light pollution has mostly blotted them out of our daily consciousness. Maybe this fact is just one more metaphor for the ways electric technology insulates us from nature and the experiences of our ancestors. Even if by some luck, all the light went out for one night in all the world, would we see constellations or just so many dots? Some might find humility in remembering our smallness, while others might despair of our insignificance. While some would feel a renewed sense of meaning, responsibility, and giftedness, others would know with finality the meaninglessness, aimlessness, and unimportance of it all. In *Alphabet Mobile*, I pose an overarching question: Is there something to discern from our place in the cosmos or is it all just pie in the sky? Is that a figure in the templum or just a flock of birds? Was Merlin a starry-eyed mentor or a deluded deceiver?

Pointing to the Possibility

As an invitation to wonder at the gift of creation, *Alphabet Mobile* is not as much an alphabet or wimmel-book as it is a mediated book of nature, a microcosm of creation that places the viewer at the center, like a child in the midst of it all. Recalling the moment in Genesis when God brings all the creatures to Adam to receive their names, *Alphabet Mobile* assists the viewer to encounter creation anew, to establish relationships with and between the depicted figures, and to adopt a posture of receptivity to the givenness of all creation. *Alphabet Mobile* is meant to point towards the possibility that there is more than meets the eye, always and in everything.

A tradition in Christianity is to juxtapose the so-called “Book of Nature” with the “Book of Scripture.” Contained in this idea is the belief that nature itself is a form of divine revelation, that the Creator signed his work and left behind his fingerprints for us to find. Often, when we think of the great religions of the book, we think of words written or printed on the page. Yet, “the Christian faith is not a ‘religion of the book.’ Christianity is the religion of the Word of God, a word which is ‘not a written and mute word, but the Word which is incarnate and living.’” As the Gospel of John makes clear, this living Word (or, “Logos”) is Jesus Christ himself, through whom all things were made.

And so, *Alphabet Mobile*, which begins as a playful exercise about letters and inhabiting the personality of a wizard ends as a meditation on natural wonder and creation itself as a mode of divine revelation.

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56 The primary message of an old cistercian who gave me my first lessons in monastic contemplative prayer in 2014.
58 Genesis 2:19
59 C.f. 1 Thessalonians 5:18
60 C.f. Wisdom 13
62 John 1:1-5

Opposite

Christ the Creator points towards the stars, the birds, and all creation—which in turn point back to him. (Credit: *Book of Hours. Use of Rome*. 16th C. Illumination. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. https://jstor.org/stable/community.14620403.)
Epilogue

This whole thesis process was motivated by love and fear. I love children and my own childhood, and I hope that somehow my career as an illustrator can help adults and children alike to grow in childlike wonder. Yet, I also fear for children today. I fear that insofar as a child uses a screen and observes all its flitting images, it is the screen that absorbs the child and their childhood and not vice versa. The hard light of a screen is a meager ration for those holding out their heart and hands for something more substantial. May we who are adults, who have left our childhoods behind, be willing to exert the effort and the influence and the energy to give our children the good gifts and good relationships they long to receive from us. As at the beginning, I ask and respond again:

What does my life matter?
Or, this artwork matter?
Or, anything else matter?
I just want to be faithful, to the end, to the child I used to be.
Bibliography


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