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May 15, 1986 (letter 17)

Dear Colleague:

We human beings are endowed with a powerful imagination which can be used to explore truth about the world and ourselves or to build castles in the air--that is, create images that satisfy our desires. Richard Wollheim in The Thread of Life uses John Stuart Mill and Madame Bovary as examples. One day Mill asked himself whether he would be happy if all the social and economic reforms he and other Benthamites had desired were to come about. He was at pains to put all that he knew about himself and the world into the envisaged picture, and the answer he got was "No!" This answer came to him as a shock and it triggered the great mental crisis of his life. Consider next Madame Bovary. In the weeks following the great ball at La Vaubyessard, she allowed her mind to fill with daydreams in which she returned to the chateau as the vicomte's favored guest, traveled to Paris, conversed with ambassadors and duchesses, etc. Now, as Wollheim sees it, the important difference between the two cases is this. Mill used his imagination for the purpose of enquiry. He envisaged in such realistic detail that his image could deliver an unexpected shock as though it were something external to him. By contrast, Emma's image was a totally nonresistant opalescent bubble--an unanchored fantasy.

Various interesting questions come to mind. One is the moral standing of such fantasies. They seem reprehensible because they can easily become substitutes for reality. I dream so often of helping old ladies across busy Park Street that I feel I have in fact done so, and hence am deserving of praise. I credit to myself a virtue that I have not earned. But won't such imaginings prepare me for the worthy act? The answer is not at all clear: my energy may be entirely dissipated in imaginary acts so that none is left for helping real people. On the other hand, bad desires and longings may also dissipate in fantasies so that they need never find expression in the real world and do mischief.

Another question is this. Is someone like Emma Bovary really capable of vivid fantasies? Emma is, after all, a fictional character and her fantasies are all supplied by someone known to be exceptionally imaginative--Flaubert. I submit that, in general, our fantasy life is rather poor. Our daydreams are usually so colorless that we have to be supplied better ones by the advertisers of Madison Avenue. Their images are meant to stimulate us to action. But a standard moralistic criticism of fantasy is that it dissipates mental energy and forestalls rather than stimulates action. Having seen so many glorious posters of Hawaii I feel I have already been there. So why bother to act? Why risk having my beautiful dreams shattered by reality? Or do advertisers succeed (more or less) because they are simply trying to transfer us from one fantasy to another that is hardly more substantial?

Have a fantastic summer!

J. Fu