

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Creation and Creativity in Dara Horn's Novel In the Image

Illman, Ruth; Laato, Antti; Valve, Lotta

Published in:
Studies in the reception history of the Bible

Published: 01/01/2017

[Link to publication](#)

Please cite the original version:

Illman, R., Laato, A. (Ed.), & Valve, L. (Ed.) (2017). Creation and Creativity in Dara Horn's Novel In the Image. *Studies in the reception history of the Bible*, (8), 347–372. <http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe2020100883263>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Ruth Illman

Creation and Creativity in Dara Horn's Novel *In the Image*

I created you in my image. I am not created in yours!¹

In these words, God concludes his address to Bill Landsmann in Dara Horn's novel *In the Image* (2002) – a novel that paraphrases the biblical story of Job but situates it in present-day New York with flashbacks to the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe during the First as well as the Second World War. Born in Austria in 1929, Landsmann fled to Amsterdam as a boy together with his authoritative and anguished father, exchanging his given name William for Willem. A few years later, he became Bill as they fled across the Atlantic, just barely in time to escape the Holocaust. His life has been paved with hardship: disease, death, discrimination, deceit and dehumanization. All of this, Landsmann has endured with calm patience. But in his old age, as his wife dies and his house is flooded so that his entire lifework – thousands and thousands of carefully arranged slides, pictures taken on his numerous journeys documenting Jewish life in the most faraway corners of the earth – is shattered and destroyed, then, he has finally had enough. At that moment, he curses God, who builds up only to destroy.

Just like Job, Landsmann receives a response from God. Paraphrasing the biblical narrative, the God of Horn's novel asks him: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" God goes on to question whether the images that Landsmann so dearly treasured really depicted the heart of human existence, what it means to be a *mentsh*² in the most fundamental sense of the word.

¹ Dara Horn, *In the Image* (New York: W. W. Norton 2002) 269.

² Horn uses the Yiddish spelling of the word *mentsh* and, consequently, so do I (see e.g. *In the Image*, 43).

Touching upon every significant event in Landsmann's arduous life, God shows him that his images only reflect a superficial surface:

Did you photograph a canopy of hanging stars, or the flicker of a flame that eats a rag, stuffed into a pipe of gas – or the face of boy with nostrils charred, sleeping peacefully at last? [...]

Did you photograph the loneliness of a child raised in clothes too small, in a room too small, in a house too small, in a world too small for the smallest corner of his heart [...] or the soft brush of his mother's lips on his earlobe's edge? [...]

"Did you photograph the great gallery of dreams" and "Where are your slides of the gallery of un-lived dreams? [...]"

You take pictures of the ocean, of the ripples of its surface, but have you photographed the fullness thereof – the centuries of secrets buried at the bottom of the sea? For there are secrets there, deep secrets.³

After a number of similar examples, God concludes:

I dare you William Landsmann, to collect a gallery of images like mine. [...] These are my images, my universe, my eternity that I have planted here upon the dry land in your midst. I created you in my image. I am not created in yours! And God retreated into the whirlwind.⁴

The understanding of human beings as created by God in his image appears only three times in the Hebrew Bible⁵, but it is nevertheless an apprehension of fundamental significance to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theology alike.⁶ All three traditions advocate the idea that the universe is "freely created by one God who cares for it and offers human beings a special role to play in its develop-

³ Ibid. 267, 268, 269.

⁴ Ibid. 269.

⁵ Gen 1:26–27, 5:1–3, 9:6.

⁶ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1986) 11.

ment.”⁷ Within the Abrahamic traditions, the creator’s initiative can also be regarded as the source of all human creativity. In David Cheetham’s words, the works of artists can be understood as creations related to God’s initial creation but also to the inner landscapes of the heart.⁸ As such, they may provide a space for emphatic creativity and imagination.

In this article, I wish to address the idea of human beings as created in the image of God by focusing on the intersection of creation and creativity. As my primary theoretical approaches, I use Claudia Welz’s dynamic model for philosophically analyzing the *imago Dei* motif and Melissa Raphael’s aesthetic theology, using the idea of *Imago Dei* as an elementary point of departure.⁹ As my empirical case, I use a recent addition to the reception history of this biblical narrative: Dara Horn’s novel *In the Image*, published in 2002, which is an example of contemporary fiction writing addressing the idea of human beings as created in the image of God. I will also occasionally introduce results from my previous research on artists engaged in interreligious dialogue, as these artists elaborate on how they perceive of the connection between creation and creativity in their own work.¹⁰

Creation and Creativity

Why is a focus on art and fiction relevant for understanding the idea of human beings as created in the image of God? The question attracted my interest as I stumbled upon it in a previous research project, where it arose as an intriguing detour from the main re-

⁷ David Burrell and Elena Malits, *Original Peace: Restoring God’s Creation* (New York: Paulist Press 1997) 7.

⁸ David Cheetham, “Exploring the Aesthetic ‘Space’ for Inter-Religious Dialogue,” *Exchange* 39 (2010) 71–86 at 76.

⁹ Claudia Welz, *Humanity in God’s Image: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016). Melissa Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image: A Jewish Theology of Art* (London: Continuum 2009).

¹⁰ Ruth Illman, *Art and Belief: Artists Engaged in Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Routledge 2012).

search question. For several years, I studied art as a platform for interreligious dialogue, trying to learn how imaginative and embodied contexts such as visual, musical or mystical expressions of religion may provide innovative approaches to dialogue. In my book *Art and Belief* (2012) I followed the work of six artists who in their art engaged with questions of religious difference and dialogue. On the basis of a vast ethnographic material, I strived to see how they looked at religious difference, what motivated them to engage in dialogue and how they regarded the role of art in this context. All artists had their roots in the Abrahamic religions but approached issues of religiosity in different ways. Some considered themselves to be religious in a traditional sense; others describe themselves as distanced from institutionalized religion or as atheists. Some had renounced formal belonging to a religious institution and opted for an individualized position formed by spirituality and mysticism.¹¹

The link between God's initial creation and the human ability to act and relate creatively was emphasized by some of the artists in this study. Engaged as they were in artistic forms of dialogue, it was no surprise that all of them regarded the creative element as significant, emphasizing practice and imagination rather than principles. Most of them did however underline the need to combine artistic approaches with other forms of dialogue. Furthermore, the focus on creativity did not exclude an intellectual and philosophical aspect and many of the artists were thoroughly familiar with scholarly views on dialogue, which they implemented in their work. Thus, the emphasis on creativity did not amount to an anti-intellectual stance but, rather, philosophy and practical, aesthetic expressions seemed to nurture one another.¹²

Similarly, as part of her attempts to formulate a Jewish theology of art, Melissa Raphael has addressed the relationship between God's creation and human creativity in a commanding way. In her

¹¹ The artists included in the study were the author Susanne Levin, the multimedia artist Marita Liulia, the singer Chokri Mensi, the filmmaker Cecilia Parsberg, the conductor Jordi Savall and the author Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt.

¹² Illman, *Art and Belief*, 193.

view, the link is clear: God created the world out of his abundant goodness and his creative powers overflow as the gift of creativity to human beings. Thus, the human capacity for creativity and artistic work derives from the original creative act and the world can be regarded as a work of art that makes God visible – tangibly but also in an ethical and existential sense.¹³ The fact that human beings are creative is a sign of their “commonality with the divine,” grounded in the fact that humans are made in the image of the creator: “That God creates people in his image and who themselves make images tells us something about the transmissibility of value and meaning from God to the world.”¹⁴

The issues of creativity and interpersonal relationships are, however, not the most obvious questions to examine in relation to the thematic field at hand. As is made clear by the following summary of concerns that have been addressed within the frames of the *imago Dei* conversation, presented by Olli-Pekka Vainio, the issue pertaining to the image are both broad and varied. The issue of human beings as created by God in his image gives rise to questions that touch upon several different fields within theology and philosophy. Among these questions are, according to Vainio, at least the following (not exhausting additional inquiries):

1. Questions about *human (mainly cognitive) build-up*: What makes human beings into images of God?
2. Questions about *uniqueness*: How are human beings set apart from other creatures by being images of God?
3. Questions about *human value and dignity*: What is it about the image of God that makes all human beings valuable?
4. Questions about *function*: Does human beings as images of God have a specific role to play in the world?
5. Questions about the *current status* of the image: Has sin affected the image of God in humans?

¹³ Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image*, 46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 49.

6. Questions of *resemblance*: In what way do human beings resemble God?
7. Questions about *address and response*: How should the nature of the relationship between God and humans be understood?¹⁵

Many of these questions refer to fundamental aspects of human existence, to basic human needs and to the relationship between human beings and the divine. The questions touch upon ultimate concerns, such as apprehensions of human nature and of reality at large – questions that are deeply complex and ambiguous and lack straightforward, black and white solutions. The inexhaustible character of the question at hand is illustrated by Melissa Raphael, who argues that God, by creating human beings in his image, opens the possibility for humans to personify divine intentions and to appear as divine works of art: “The image of God in the human is [...] no mere authenticating ‘stamp’ but a mimetic or imitative revelation of God’s holiness.”¹⁶ In Raphael’s view, this likeness does not pertain only to spiritual, rational and moral traits – as has usually been claimed in Jewish and Christian scholarly traditions – but surpasses the unfortunate dichotomy between body and soul: “It seems reasonable to assume that the image of God characterizes the dynamic unity of a whole rational embodied, enspirited person.”¹⁷

Consequently, in presenting her four-part model for summarizing strategies towards the *imago Dei* motif, which will be presented at greater length below, Claudia Welz warns against simplifying the issue under study by fitting it into a clear-cut model. In fact, as concluded also by Vainio, no typology can exhaustively capture the width and breadth of the question of what it means to be the image of God. In Welz's view, the overlap between the various models for

¹⁵ Olli-Pekka Vainio, “*Imago Dei* and Human Rationality,” *Zygon* 49 (2014) 121–134 at 122.

¹⁶ Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image*, 48.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 49.

Creation and Creativity in Dara Horn's Novel In the Image

interpretation shows that there is a “surplus of meaning in these rich texts” that cannot simply be reduced to the “typical.”¹⁸ The image of God is not a mirror image, as Raphael formulates it: “that the human is made in the image of God does not render the human face an icon or cast of God. God cannot be read off from the human face.”¹⁹

It is within the context of “surplus meaning” alluded to by Welz that I believe art and creative approaches can offer renewed insights. Recognizing another person, different from oneself, as the image of God is not a routine question. Neither can it be done just because one *ought* to. Rather, an active effort is needed. This article argues that art can illuminate this central theological apprehension by awaking the human capacity for imagination. As Kwame Anthony Appiah states: conversations that reach across boundaries of identity and previous horizons of understanding often “begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from a place other than your own ...”²⁰ From this point of view, imaginative elements formulated within the context of art can provide significant starting points for such transformative practices that ultimately contribute to the understanding of otherness and other points of view.

Imagination and ethics are closely interrelated, Rosi Braidotti claims in a similar vein: ethical relations create possible worlds by activating resources, such as imagination, that previously have been left untapped. Imagination, hence, becomes the driving force that enables concrete interconnections with others.²¹ Any attempt to enter imaginatively into religious worldviews that are not one's own requires empathy, and vice versa: empathy itself requires

¹⁸ Welz, *Humanity in God's Image*, 43.

¹⁹ Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image*, 7.

²⁰ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton 2006) 85.

²¹ Rosi Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 (2008) 1–24 at 16.

considerable resources of imagination, Catherine Cornille claims.²² As Welz contends, being the image is a gesture that moves the viewer around: one cannot know or control in advance what the image will show – it might show aspects that are surprising, even unpleasant.²³ Within the field of art, empathy and imagination can allow participants to gain access to experiences and insights that are not part of their personal religious repertoire: imagination “frees us from confinement to our own immediate memory of experience and [...] opens the mind to the world of religious difference.”²⁴

The creative perspective, hence, neither eliminates nor petrifies difference but renders it accessible in a fruitful way. A work of art, at best, inspires a person to stretch her imagination and to reach beyond the conventional towards the previously unimagined. Hence, I conclude: the creative and the imaginative are intertwined as sources, tools, contexts and results of the quest to comprehend the creative act and the image of God. Despite its fictive character, a novel may provide space for creativity and imagination, adding a few more loops to the chain of interpretations that has been built by the manifold attempts to grasp what it might mean to be created in the image of God by Jews, Christians, and Muslims over centuries. In this article, Dara Horn’s novel will constitute our imaginative context. Before continuing the theoretical argumentation of this paper, therefore, it seems adequate to present more closely the novel and its writer.

The “New Yiddishist”

In 2002, Dara Horn (b. 1977) made her literary debut as a novelist with the intricate family tale and coming-of-age story *In the Image*, which won several literary awards as a notable first novel by a

²² Catherine Cornille, “Empathy and Inter-religious Imagination,” *Religion and the Arts* 12 (2008) 102–117 at 103.

²³ Welz, *Humanity in God’s Image*, 44.

²⁴ Cornille, “Empathy and Inter-religious Imagination,” 114.

Creation and Creativity in Dara Horn's Novel In the Image

young American-Jewish writer. At the time, Horn was a doctoral candidate in comparative literature at Harvard University, studying Hebrew and Yiddish. Since then, Horn has completed her doctoral degree, published three additional novels and today lives in New Jersey with her husband and four children.²⁵

In 2009, David Sax published an article entitled "Rise of the New Yiddishists," receiving a considerable amount of attention and coining the term "New Yiddishists" as a budding genre of literature in North America, including Dara Horn as a prominent representative.²⁶ According to Sax, the new millennium has seen the rise of a talented group of young Jewish writers who are "weaving tales bound in a newfound ethnic pride that has revitalized Jewish literature in America." These writers are described as one part Isaac Bashevis Singer and one part Philip Roth or Saul Bellow: by revitalizing the art of Jewish storytelling and turning the assimilation narrative of their predecessors up-side-down, they seem equally comfortable with their American and their Jewish identity.²⁷

The New Yiddishists seem to have emerged at a turning point in time for American Jewry.²⁸ Today, Jews are more integrated and accepted in the American society than ever before, but recent years have also seen an increase in religious terrorism as well as an ever sharper criticism of Israel, often followed by an increase also in anti-Semitic attitudes. "American Jews began to feel a nagging sense of otherness again," Sax claims, and thus, Jewish writers started to "look inward" for the first time in many, many years.²⁹

²⁵ Dara Horn Official Website, www.darahorn.com. Accessed 13 March 2015.

²⁶ David Sax, "Rise of the New Yiddishists," *Vanity Fair* 8 April 2009, <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2009/04/yiddishists200904>. Accessed 2 Aug 2014.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Sanford Pinsker, "Jewish-American Fiction in the 21st Century: Vibrancy and Diversity Mark the New Crop of Novelists and Story Writers," *My Jewish Learning*, http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Literature/Jewish_American_Literature/The_21st_Century.shtml. Accessed 13 March 2015.

²⁹ Sax, "Rise of the New Yiddishists."

This generation of self-consciously Jewish novelists, including in addition to Horn, for example Jonathan Safran Foer, Nathan Englander, Michael Chabon and David Bezmozgis, are “vastly more comfortable in their Jewish skin” than previous generations of American Jewish writers, Sax suggests. They are well-educated opinion-makers on the contemporary American cultural scene with a command of both American and Jewish history, of English as well as of Hebrew and Yiddish and their “Jews-are-cool empowerment” is reflected in their stories. Their works are frequently filled with scenes and stories alluding to Jewish mysticism and Yiddish fables often bound to history, as the Jewish past is complicatedly tied to the present.³⁰ Sax concludes:

Jewish literature, from the Talmud to contemporary fiction, has always relied on interpreting the prickly contradictions of life through the past. Many of the stories of the New Yiddishists jump back and forth between generations of Jewish families, showing how the questions that we struggle with today are the same ones that Jews have dealt with before: How do we stay true to our heritage while living in a multicultural society? Are we Jews, Americans, or both? What is our place in this world?³¹

This description captures the novel *In the Image* well. As mentioned earlier, one of the main characters of the story is Bill Landsmann, an elderly Jewish refugee in a New Jersey suburb. He has one great passion in life: building a slide collection of contemporary lives and scenes that he encounters during his many travels around the world and that to him mirror and reflect biblical images and tales. At the opening of the book, Bill crosses paths with Leora, the best friend of his granddaughter who tragically died in a car accident as the girls were in high school. Leora is the other main character of this novel that follows her life forward through college, career and falling in love while simultaneously following Bill’s life backward, through several generations, to Amsterdam, Austria and

³⁰ Pinsker, “Jewish-American Fiction.”

³¹ Sax, “Rise of the New Yiddishists.”

Creation and Creativity in Dara Horn's Novel In the Image

the great wars of the 20th century. As the narrative develops, unexpected links between his family's past and her family's future are revealed.

Horn's novel combines secular and religious forms of literature and bears witness to a vast knowledge of Jewish sacred texts and sources.³² Quotes and themes from Jewish religious texts are alluded to and appropriated throughout the text, but as Rabbi David Wolpe contends in the preface to the novel: "It does not just use Jewish sources, it breathes them, and breathes into them the breath of life."³³ In an interview, also published in the edition of the novel referred to here, Horn confirms that the book of Job is the most important inspiration for her novel but that she has deliberately saturated the text with references to the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic literature. According to Horn, she wants to show that people are not shaped by their experiences, which they neither choose nor control, but by the way they react to these experiences, which is something they *can* choose and control.

Horn says she was captivated by the way early modern Hebrew and Yiddish writers referred to biblical language and rabbinical themes, even while writing seemingly secular stories or when criticizing the Jewish tradition. "I wondered," she says, "whether it was possible to create this sort of literature – using biblically anchored language within a secular text – in English." Thus, Horn strived to create a novel that could be read at many levels: as a historical family saga, as a modern New York love story or as a religious Jewish

³² To give a few examples: One of the main characters of the novel, Leora's boyfriend Jake, is an academic scholar specialized in the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, and discusses his notions at several points in the novel. An important story that is weaved into the novel as a reoccurring theme tied to the biographies of many of the novel characters, thus giving rise to deep analyses of the nature of Jewish identity and observance, is a story of how Jewish immigrants, when arriving by boat and entering New York harbor, threw their phylacteries overboard as signs of the old world they were leaving behind. At several occasions, the characters listen to sermons or reflect independently on passages from different Jewish scriptures, implementing them in their own contexts and times.

³³ Horn, *In the Image*, unpaginated.

commentary. In doing so, Horn aimed at introducing a new style for American Jewish literature, one that would be more closely tied to the ancient Jewish narrative tradition.³⁴ Thus, Horn's novel and her way of working are indeed well captured by the description of "New Yiddishists" presented above.

As the title of Horn's novel reveals, the ethical and theological question of what it might mean for human beings to be created in the image of God, although it is not mentioned directly in the book of Job, is one of the most central and mesmerizing themes of the book. Before introducing examples of how the question is dealt with by Horn in her fictive writing, a theoretical framework for the analysis needs to be introduced.

Imago Dei

As discussed previously in this paper, the theme of human beings as created in God's image has been extensively analyzed and debated among theologians and philosophers throughout history. Among the multifarious contributions to this debate, one can identify a number of major analytical trajectories that have been widely followed when elaborating on this biblical idea.³⁵ The heart of the matter can be traced to the dialectic relationship between visible and invisible evoked by theme: what does it mean for a human being to be a visible image of an invisible God? Different commentators have indeed assumed very different understandings of what an image is and how it is related to its source. To create a comprehensive understanding of the motif, however, one must allow the human image to have both material and immaterial traits – to be tangible, embodied and visible but simultaneously referring to the transcendent and invisible.³⁶ In her article "Imago Dei: References

³⁴ Ibid. unpaginated.

³⁵ Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 68–73.

³⁶ Marc Cortez, *Embodied Souls, Ensouled Bodies. An Exercise in Christological Anthropology and its Significance for the Mind/Body Debate* (London: T & T Clarke 2008) 3.

to the Invisible,” Claudia Welz has identified four prominent models for the treating the *imago Dei* motif. Her clear elaboration of the topic is helpful in structuring the complex interpretative field under study and will therefore be used to structure the current analysis.

Welz's first type of interpretation is the *functional model* emphasizing representation. This model conceives of God's image as the “prototype [...] to which the human being is to correspond,” as a copy to the original. This idea can be discerned in the Vulgate where the translation of Gen 1:26–27 was made under the influence of Plato's philosophy. Still it begs many questions: Are human beings living *manifestations* of God on earth, or is God rather *represented* by human beings on earth? Is there an identity between humans and God, or rather a mere similarity – a likeness? According to Welz, the original Hebrew text is enigmatic at this point, containing an unsolvable ambiguity between similarity and dissimilarity, immanent and transcendent.³⁷ This has led many advocates of the functional model to claim that the only thing one can take for granted is that God is the single agent in the plot: the one who, by creating humans, opens up a person's relationship to her/himself and to the world. Thus, “human existence is not independent of God but lived in relation to him.”³⁸ The functional model, although widely acclaimed, can be criticized for its tendency to reduce the motif of human beings as the image of God to the simple assumption that human beings are Gods representatives on earth.³⁹

Welz's second category is the *mimetic model* emphasizing resemblance. As the Bible offers only a few short statements establishing the fact that human beings are created by God in his image (the verses noted above: Gen 1:26–27; 5:1–2; 9:6), theology has seen a wide range of speculations on the question of *how* humans resemble God and what this resemblance amounts to.⁴⁰ Augustine,

³⁷ Welz, *Humanity in God's Image*, 27–28.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 29.

³⁹ Vainio, “*Imago Dei* and Human Rationality,” 121; Welz, *Humanity in God's Image*, 29.

⁴⁰ Welz, *Humanity in God's Image*, 30–31.

one of the most prominent advocates of this model, finds the resemblance reflected in the threefold aptitudes of the human mind – memory, intellect and will – that according to his view mirror the Trinity. This interpretation presupposes a Christological reading of the original text, however: claiming that the original resemblance has been lost through human sin and now needs to be repaired and that Christ is the only complete image of God.⁴¹ Welz, on her part, suggests that the resemblance should be understood on another level: not as an attribute that the human possesses or does not possess, but as a gift and a character of the relationship itself. Hence, as for example Bonhoeffer has argued, the likeness can be seen as an analogy of the relation between humans and God, characterized by both freedom and responsibility. “One cannot lose what one does not possess,” Welz notes, in relation to the problem of the lost image.⁴²

Welz presents the *relational model* emphasizing encounter as her third model. In this model, the image is not understood as a status, something that the human being possesses, but rather as something that comes to her from the outside.⁴³ As above, the image is the result of God’s turning towards the human being and establishing the relationship. The key to understanding the theme, in this model, is thus the event of being addressed.⁴⁴

The relational model finds an influential advocator in Karl Barth, who claimed that the image has nothing to do with what we are or do: rather, “the human being is God’s image in being human.”⁴⁵ Similar readings of the motif can be found in all three Abrahamic traditions.⁴⁶ The close connections to the tradition of dialogue philosophy are evident, and this model has also been used

⁴¹ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 73–76; Vainio, “*Imago Dei* and Human Rationality,” 123, 132.

⁴² Welz, *Humanity in God’s Image*, 31–32.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 32–33.

⁴⁴ Vainio, “*Imago Dei* and Human Rationality,” 121.

⁴⁵ Welz, *Humanity in God’s Image*, 33.

⁴⁶ Vainio, “*Imago Dei* and Human Rationality,” 122–123, 125.

Creation and Creativity in Dara Horn's Novel In the Image

extensively in efforts of advocating dialogue among cultures and religions.⁴⁷ Buber's dialogical stance naturally springs to mind: "Living means being addressed," as he famously writes in *Between Man and Man*.⁴⁸ Also Emmanuel Levinas advocates a similar understanding, claiming that the relation one has to the other is not a rational but an ethical question: the face of the other that speaks to me "tolerates only a personal response, that is, an ethical act."⁴⁹ Consequently, Drew M. Dalton contends in his analysis of Levinas, it is the possibility of considering oneself as created which "begins to stir within the heart of the subject through the ethical encounter with the Other." Hence, the ethical appeal emerges in the trace of the creative act.⁵⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, on his part, formulates this legacy as human kinship and solidarity:

First and foremost we meet as human beings who have so much in common: a heart, a face, a voice, the presence of a soul, fears, hope, the ability to trust, a capacity for compassion and understanding, the kinship of being human. My first task in every encounter is to comprehend the personhood of the human being I face, to sense the kinship of being human, solidarity of being.⁵¹

In this model, thus, the image of God is not a silent one and being this image is a prerequisite for human life and interpersonal relationships. To quote Welz: "before human beings can say anything, God has already addressed them and called them to live a life of dialogue with him and with each other."⁵²

⁴⁷ Illman, *Art and Belief*, 61; Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image*, 43–44.

⁴⁸ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Routledge 1932/2002) 12.

⁴⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 1969) 219, 304.

⁵⁰ Drew M. Dalton, *Longing for the Other: Levinas and Metaphysical Desire* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 2009) 178–179.

⁵¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion is an Island," in: Fritz A. Rothschild (ed.), *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity* (New York: Continuum 2000/1965) 309–324 at 312.

⁵² Welz, *Humanity in God's Image*, 35.

The last model presented by Welz is the *dynamic model* emphasizing (con)formation. This model is presented in some Greek translations of Gen 1:26–27 in the early Church which were made under the influence of Plato’s philosophy, asserting that the fundamental aspect of being an image of God is the striving to “minimize the distance to the ‘original’ as much as possible by means of ethical striving.”⁵³ In later commentaries, this model has been tied to an evolutionary understanding of the motif, making the *imago Dei* into both a human predisposition and the goal for the human process of cultivating one’s ethical self.⁵⁴ Such an understanding of the theme can be found for example in Meister Eckhart’s mystical theory, where human beings, instead of already being the image of God, must strive to *become* this image. Becoming the image of God is nevertheless not the result of human striving or education but is accomplished through grace alone: only by becoming completely still and giving up one’s own activity can one become the image.⁵⁵

As mentioned earlier, Welz concludes by noting that a schematic model often becomes reductionist by streamlining a multitude of rich approaches into simple typologies. Indeed, most researchers tend to use models that include several of the above-mentioned categories and the diversity within each category is also significant. Welz is therefore interested in developing the analysis of *imago Dei* towards greater nuance by applying perspectives from modern semiotics and *Bildwissenschaft*.⁵⁶ Keeping these cautions in mind, I want to return to the context of art and explore how the focus on creation and creativity can be understood against the backdrop of this scheme – first by shedding light on my research among artists engaged in interreligious dialogue, then by returning to Dara Horn’s novel *In the Image*.

⁵³ Ibid. 38.

⁵⁴ Vainio, “*Imago Dei* and Human Rationality,” 122–123.

⁵⁵ Welz, *Humanity in God’s Image*, 40.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 44.

Creation as a Basis for Common Humanity

In my research on artists engaged in interreligious dialogue I have mostly come in touch with the third model for interpreting the image of God presented above, that is, the relational model focusing on the event of being addressed and human responses to the call of the creator. As the focus of this study was on dialogue, it was natural that the idea of human beings as created by God in his image was mostly addressed within a dialogical context, paralleling the third level of Welz's typology. It is often argued that the apprehension of a shared origin, provided by the *imago Dei* motif, offers a particularly promising starting point for the dialogue among Jews, Christians and Muslims as it adds an existential dimension to interpersonal relations: the other is to be loved, not only out of social politeness but "for the sake of God."⁵⁷ It addresses the believer's ability to do justice to the human other, "the stranger who is not in my image but is nevertheless in God's image," to quote Jonathan Sacks.⁵⁸ It is thus a question of interpersonal relations within the larger frames of relationships to God.

Within the tradition of dialogue philosophy, the view of all human beings as created in the image of God is linked to a vision of what, adapting the terminology of philosopher Raimond Gaita, can be denoted common humanity.⁵⁹ The emphasis on human beings as dependent on and intrinsically connected to each other and the apprehension of identity as constituted only in relation to a counterpart caters for an existential position where life becomes meaningful only if one strives towards dialogue with others.⁶⁰ Thus, the ability to respond to the other as another legitimate perspective on

⁵⁷ Asma Afsaruddin, "Celebrating Pluralism and Dialogue: Qur'anic Perspectives," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 42 (2007) 389–406 at 405.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilisations* (London: Continuum 2002) 60–61.

⁵⁹ Raimond Gaita, *Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (New York: Routledge 2002).

⁶⁰ Maurice Friedman, *A Heart of Wisdom: Religion and Human Wholeness* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1992) 4–5.

the world is regarded as integrated elements in the process of creating a common humanity. The idea of a common humanity springs from the insight that we are all human beings living in a world inhabited by other human beings and that dialogue can serve to uncover our “ultimate commonalities as human beings” while still honouring the dignity of difference.⁶¹ Common humanity thus implies a moral fellowship where all people are allotted an equal status as moral agents.

As mentioned above, within the Abrahamic traditions, this perspective is rooted in the belief that God created the world as a home for all people and human beings in his image. Affirming the humanity of all in their sacredness as beings “created of a single soul” (following the Qur’anic expression) is intrinsic to such a religious understanding.⁶² The connection between alterity, to adapt the terminology of Levinas, and common humanity is nevertheless an ethics of heteronomy where I – as a subject part of a specific context as well as a broader common humanity – am brought into existence only by the other and thus become irreplaceably responsible for her.⁶³ Levinas regards the relation to the other as essentially asymmetric in character: the face of the other summons me; it judges me and posits me as responsible. The other, who dominates me, is “the stranger, the widow, the orphan,” and I am obligated to answer to this call.⁶⁴ In understanding interpersonal relations, hence, Levinas commences not with the self, but with the other who is never under my control, always out of reach:

The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other’s place; we recognise the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Afsaruddin, “Celebrating Pluralism,” 393.

⁶² Ibid., 394.

⁶³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 215; Dalton, *Longing for the Other*, 161.

⁶⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 247.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 43.

Creation and Creativity in Dara Horn's Novel In the Image

The keywords in this quote, for the current analysis, is "resembling us, but exterior to us," which capture the essence of interpreting the image of God in humans within the frames of reference provided by dialogue philosophy. Encountering strangers always means encountering particular strangers; a person is not just a specimen of the human species but "all of humanity in one."⁶⁶ Returning to the fundamental questions related to issue of being created in the image of God, listed by Vainio and presented earlier in this study, it is above all questions 3 and 7 that stand out as relevant in a dialogue philosophical treatment: Questions about *human value and dignity* as well as questions about *address and response*.

The recognition of common humanity was identified as one of the most fundamental features in my study of artists engaged in interreligious dialogue. From a dialogue philosophical point of view, the ability to respond to the other as fully another perspective on the world presupposes the idea that all such perspectives find a place on the richly varied palette of human existential options. The notion of common humanity was given a religious connotation by some of the artists, but not by all of them. Furthermore, some of them linked it to the Abrahamic framework of human beings as God's intrinsically good creation; others referred to the idea on a more unspecified, spiritual level. Thus, for those artists who found the idea of God creating human beings in his image a relevant religious narrative, this representation was strongly seen to imply the event of being addressed and responding by turning towards other human beings in open, respectful relationships.

"An Entire World Lived and Breathed in the Image"

The same two questions, that is, human dignity and relationality, pertaining to human beings as the images of God appear as the most important ones also in Dara Horn's novel, although in a rather different manner. While her focus in the novel is not directed to-

⁶⁶ Heschel, "No Religion Is an Island," 312.

wards interreligious dialogue, it does contain a significant analysis of intra-religious dialogues between different kinds of Jews: secular and religious, Modern Orthodox and Hasidic, European and American. The novel also deals at length with the interpersonal relationships between the different characters and their ways of finding a way to recognize the image of God in faces so different from their own. Thus, the relational and ethical aspects of the imago Dei motif stand at the fore also in this context: creative and imaginative as the artists' work mentioned above, but also fictive.

In the novel, it is Bill Landsmann's old-fashioned and religious paternal grandmother who introduces him to the understanding of human beings as created by God in his image. As mentioned above, Bill grows up in the 1930s in Vienna with his mentally feeble mother and a father who has renounced the traditional ways of his childhood village, shaven off his sidelocks and started a tailoring business that is open also on *Shabbat*. As they visit the grandmother far away in the countryside, Bill's mother, on one of the rare occasions when she has the strength to relate to her son, shows him how to draw the silhouette of his hand on a paper. As she gently holds his hand in place, Bill draws the shape of his mother's bigger hand on top of the image of his own hand as well. "See, now you are making an image of your own hand, but you're also making an image of mine;" his mother says. To this his grandmother unexpectedly responds: "Her image is yours and yours is hers anyway, you should know, because all men are made in the image of God."⁶⁷

Bill finds this statement puzzling – as is the whole way of leading a traditionally Jewish life that he encounters in his grandmother's house. She speaks in a funny way that he can understand only after getting used to it for a while (Yiddish, that is) and says things that sound like they were taken from some "strange old book." To him, this is alluring, but his father gets angry and sneers in German: "Mother, can't you stop filling the child's head with this barbarian trash?" But Bill's grandmother stands by her views: in your "pre-

⁶⁷ Horn, *In the Image*, 98.

cious city" you can fill his head with any nonsense you like, she responds: "But when I'm in this house I say what I mean."⁶⁸

A few years later, when Bill's mother has been sent to a mental asylum and he has fled to Amsterdam with his father, the incident reoccurs in Bill's mind as he tries to hide the fact that he is circumcised in the Rijksmuseum's urinal, where he has slipped in despite the sign at the entrance saying: "No Jews allowed." There, he ponders his grandmother's words and whether or not he is made in the image of God. "What God would stand at a urinal [...] hiding his sex in his hands because he was afraid a stupid guard would see that he had the Covenant sealed into his flesh," he wonders. Bill also recalls a bewildering story they read in school where a man called Job said: "After my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God."⁶⁹ With his skin destroyed in this way, he wonders, will he ever, from his flesh, see God?⁷⁰

For preteen Bill Landsmann, the image is a very concrete issue: an odd idea his grandmother has revealed to him which is functional in character. To be the image of God means to be like him – a replica, perhaps distorted, of the original. At the urinal in Amsterdam, this seems almost ridiculous to him. In a different time and a different place, New York at the turn of the millennium, Leora and her boyfriend Jake discuss the image in a rather different context. To Jake, a scholar of history and expert on Spinoza's philosophy, the image is something you have to choose to believe in – setting rational speculations aside and embracing a special kind of seeing. "You have to really believe in what's in the image, without thinking about it at all – just believing it," he says to Leora.⁷¹ In this instance the questions of resemblance and function, so important to Bill, are irrelevant. Instead, it is the ethical and interpersonal aspects of the image that rise to the fore. Referring to the relational model for interpreting the imago Dei motif, one could rephrase Jake's vision

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Job 19:26 as cited in Horn, *In the Image*, 95.

⁷⁰ Horn, *In the Image*, 98.

⁷¹ Ibid. 176.

with the words of Heschel cited above: to embrace another as the image of God one must strive to “comprehend the personhood” of the human being one is facing, sensing “the kinship of being human” and the “solidarity of being.”⁷²

The novel also describes a context where a lack of belief in the image becomes the odd and contested alternative; where believing in the image is a self-evident point of departure. Leora’s high school sweetheart Jason, who becomes Yehudah as he renounces his secular Jewish background for an Orthodox Hasidic lifestyle, is plagued by dark suspicions as his young wife Rivka does not become pregnant within the first year of their marriage. He ponders his alternatives: asking her the simple question “Do you want to have children?” seems as ridiculous as asking whether humans had been created in the divine image: “something so obvious that no one bothered to think about it.” In his earlier life, as Jason, this would have been quite a natural question for a young newlywed couple to discuss, but in his current life – as an observant Hasid – this is a question with only one perceivable answer. Yet, Yehudah had begun to “wonder the unwonderable. Maybe, just maybe, Rivka didn’t believe in the divine image, and didn’t want to replicate it either.”⁷³

A final example of how the question of human beings as created in the image of God is engaged in Horn’s novel is yet again tied to Bill Landsmann. In America, he is often asked to tell the dramatic story of how he fled first Vienna and then Amsterdam, how he lost everything and finally arrived in America and built a new life there. However Bill is reluctant; he feels the real story would disappoint the expectations of his interlocutors, whose understanding of Holocaust refugees is a romantic and heroic adventure story. But if Bill ever tells his story, he thinks to himself, he will rewrite the stereotypical script so that

⁷² Heschel, “No Religion Is an Island,” 312.

⁷³ Horn, *In the Image*, 217.

Creation and Creativity in Dara Horn's Novel In the Image

[...] what was lost is what was really lost – not the city apartments, not the music boxes, not the Royal Copenhagen china, not all the things that can easily be replaced in some other country a few decades later, but a language, a literature, a held hand, an entire world lived and breathed in the image of God.⁷⁴

In this passage, the understanding of the *imago Dei* is widened and deepened significantly, and I believe this phrase can serve as a key to Horn's reading of the biblical motif. At this point, it is clear that none of the four models presented above can exhaust the meaning of the image. Equally, all the main questions typically addressed in academic studies of this motif presented above will fall short, even if joined together, of fully explaining the meaning it may carry for an individual in her lived reality to perceive of herself as being created by God in his image. This is the point where we stumble over the "surplus of meaning" alluded to by Welz, the point where fiction can bring in a novel perspective, illuminating aspects that had been left unnoticed before. For Bill, the image of God in human beings cannot be restricted to questions of resemblance, function or characteristics – not even to ethics and interpersonal relations. For Bill, the fundament of a life worth living and a reality in which it is worthwhile to call oneself a human being – even a *mentsh* – is "lived and breathed in the image of God." It is the hand that is held by a loved and lost mother, it is an "entire world."

Conclusion

"You were created in my image, I was not created in yours!" With these words, the God of Horn's novel sets the order straight: the creative initiative comes from God and only as a result of his initial act can human beings exist, be creative in their turn and respond to the address of the creator by turning towards other human beings. The response as such becomes an ethical act of affirming the image of the Creator in all created beings – however different from oneself

⁷⁴ Ibid. 71.

they may be. The understanding of God, of human beings and of their relationship with one another presented in Horn's novel can thus give interesting illumination to the question of how creation and creativity intermingle in the *imago Dei* narrative.

In this analysis, I sought to address the idea of human beings as created in the image of God by focusing on the intersection of creation and creativity. To meet this goal, a four-part typology of the primary models for understanding the motif in earlier theological research, suggested by Claudia Welz, was employed – bearing in mind her cautious remark that most analyses of the image surpass any single model with neat categories as the theme seems replete with multiple patterns of meaning. Tracing the uses of the image by artists engaged in interreligious dialogue – leaning on material from a previous study – it was obvious that the third model presented by Welz was most prominently deployed, that is, the relational model emphasizing the event of being addressed. In Horn's novel, the main focus of the study, none of the models seemed to constitute the single most important one although all four were alluded to in varying degrees. Furthermore, several of the key questions pertaining to analyses of the *imago Dei* discussion listed by Vainio were engaged, creating a broad and diverse reading of the question at hand without making any categorical claims that could simplify and streamline the complex issue in an reductive way. Above all, the analysis highlighted the relevance of paralleling the imaginative with the ethical in engaging the art as an arena for theologically relevant and compelling reflections. Furthermore, the analysis gave concrete illumination to Melissa Raphael's claim that the image of God in humans includes body, mind and soul in a comprehensive image, the "dynamic unity of a whole rational embodied, enspirited person."⁷⁵

As a tentative response to the question of how creation and creativity are interlinked in a work of fiction such as Horn's – deploying a perspective and tone of address that is deliberately informed

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 49.

Creation and Creativity in Dara Horn's Novel In the Image

by religious views and saturated in Jewish scholarship – I suggest its ability to harbor and illuminate this excess of meaning. By tapping into the resources of human imagination, lives other than one's own become at once graspable and thinkable – perhaps even understandable. Art and fiction do not have to be reasonable in any way, they can move in time and space, consciousness and reality without being restrained by the regular predicaments of human life. Consequently they can, at best, serve as gateways into the deep existential realms opening up within the scope of the question at hand. In the end, the ethical and dialogical implications of what it might mean for human beings to be created in the image of God rise to the fore:

For if God is represented to the world by his image in the human, what humans do to one another is also done to God.[...] The *imago dei* states a principle 'of dialogue, of reciprocal addressability. The theology of image implies mutuality of demand and claim'.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image*, 50, quoting David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press 1993) 8.