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Mythopoesis

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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Abstract

Discusses and elaborates on Sayers's conception of creativity as a Trinitarian process, composed of idea, energy/activity, and power.

Additional Keywords

Creativity and creation; Sayers, Dorothy L. *The Mind of the Maker*

Mythopoesis

A Column by Sarah Beach

Down the ages, some of the most heart-felt poetry written deals with the creative process, particularly the loss of inspiration. Yet, anyone who has written a well told tale, or painted an especially effective picture, is conscious of the labor involved in successfully completing the work. These two aspects of the creative process – inspiration and labor – seem especially contradictory when one attempts to describe mythopoesis. On one hand, any attempt to write the history of a fantasy world backwards from a particular story cannot be done without generating conflicts or a degree of shallowness. Yet on the other hand, backwards is the only way the “history” appears to the writer.

Many a writer has labored under the assumption that these two forces are the only ones working in the creative process. Dorothy L. Sayers in *The Mind of the Maker* (Greenwood Press, 1970) makes a powerful argument for calling the process trinitarian. In her book, she uses the metaphor of the human maker to study the Holy Trinity, and then points out that the comparison works in the other direction as well.

She then proceeds to offer the following equation:

The Father = idea
 The Son = energy/activity
 The Spirit = power

For a greater personal clarity (but no violence to Sayer's main arguments), I offer the following word substitutions:

The Father = idea = P-function (*pater*)
 The Son = form/technique = F-function (*filius*)
 The Spirit = communication/energy = S-function (*spiritus*)

With these terms it becomes much easier to describe the creative process, and explain the actual experience of “inspiration versus labor”.

The P-function, that is, the story ideas that a writer gathers, operates “outside time”. What this means is that a Sub-creator will enter his fantasy world through a particular story he wishes to tell, and then acquire the “history” of this fantasy world in a seemingly chaotic fashion. He may find that the first story he wanted to tell occurs in the middle of his world's history, that the next story occurs at the world's beginning, the third at the end, the fourth just before the original tale, and so on. “Inspiration” or idea-gathering is not a tidy process. It is not a formal process.

The F-function is a formal process. This aspect of the creative trinity involves the “physical” nature of the ideas gathered in the P-function. It involves both the choice of format for containing the idea (will it be poetry or prose? drawing or sculpture?) and the technique of the artist. The F-function of the creative process is perhaps the easiest of the three to teach aspiring writers. To this function belongs the activity, the practice, of learning composition – in any of the arts. Sir Joshua Reynolds in his *Discourses* to the Royal Academy em-

phasizes that the practice, study, and knowledge of one's art is a matter of labor, and that without that labor, that form and technique, ideas would be shapeless. Concisely, he states in the *Second Discourse*, “excellence is never granted to man but as the reward of labor.” Mastery of technique will give ideas their best incarnation. To quote from the *Second Discourse* again:

If you have great talents industry will improve them; if you have but moderate abilities industry will supply their deficiency. Nothing is denied to well-directed labor; nothing is to be obtained without it.

The third corner of the creative trinity is supplied by the S-function, the energy or communication of the work, or as Sayers calls it, its Power. It is what the artist puts into it and what the audience gets out of it. It is that which is communicated. It is in the S-function of mythopoesis that the Sub-creator's love for his creation makes its presence known. Without the S-function, a creation is only going to be two-dimensional, form and idea, and it will fail to communicate.

An awareness of these three functions of the creative process allows one to understand the many moods of creativity. Indeed, it allows not simply understanding but the ability to describe the moods. There will be times when the artist has what he knows to be a good idea and also the most suitable form for that idea, but he has – at that moment – no feeling for it, no urge to communicate. Or he may have acquired mastery of techniques and form, be filled with a desire to communicate, and yet be directionless, without a solid idea. Or he may be possessed of an idea and the burning desire to communicate it, and yet at a loss, lacking the “correct” form. In each case, the artist who trusts his sense of what “fits” is likely to wait until the missing third presents itself, while the artist who “just wants to get it done” will impose the third component and let it go at that.

On the rare occasions when all three functions are working evenly, in unison, the artist will experience the wonderful elation poets speak of, be it called “inspiration,” “The Muse,” or “magic.” When the creative trinity is singing in a three-part harmony, the artist will feel that never has his work been so easy, for the ideas will be coming smoothly, yet never will he have worked so hard, searching for the *right* word or angle, taking care that the *right* choice will be made even in the smallest detail. And through it all will run a joy and delight in the whole process, the ease and the labor. But any novice should be warned: this is the rare experience, it is not the everyday experience. It comes unexpectedly, and it cannot be pursued. It *can* be prepared for, by gaining mastery of technique, but one cannot command it to appear. This, say some poets, is what it is like to be God, and they are not far wrong. But let Sir Joshua have the final warning voice about “inspiration.”

Continued on page 50

Chinamen was meant" denounces the Sage for thus forestalling their "swarms". This, I think, requires no comment. Turn them to Vietnamese or Latins and it could be written now.

At the end of the poem, the meter changes to a kind of chant, first of imprecation, then of mercy toward Guiteau the slayer. The nation went ahead and hanged him, though a modern jury would probably recognize Guiteau as psychotic. Something in the whole affair made for poetic effort and Guiteau himself recited a deranged and dreadful elegy upon the scaffold:

"Glory hallelujah! Glory hallelujah!
I am going to the Lord.
I saved my party and my land,
Glory hallelujah!
But they have murdered me for it,
And that is the reason I am going to the Lordy..."

Poor nobby, they did murder him for it. But he hadn't saved anything.

Oddly, the reason blistering in Guiteau's mind, the motive behind the shooting, was never mentioned in *The Sage of Mentor*. It was "spoils", the old custom of handing out federal jobs to political hacks regardless of merit. Garfield was embracing reform: Guiteau was a thwarted job applicant who

had championed his election. Party factions are not the stuff of monumental poetry and the whole matter was ignored by The Unknown. He had immortal longings in him.

I trust this poem will be kept, by collectors and museums, as a memento of its time and as an odd little example of an attempt to revive mythological themes in serious literature. The attempt failed; he brought no leaven of original fantasy to the old materials, the times themselves were unpropitious to such literature, and it is hard to mythologize events like the Republican Convention of 1880, as The Unknown tried in Canto III. But for those of us with a passion for history, it is a reminder that what are "minor events" to us struck contemporaries as earth-shakingly significant. Obscured and overshadowed, Garfield was a man with a life and loves and we need to remember that. The fortitude with which he bore his last suffering was heroic and it's good to be reminded that he was mourned.

"'Twas finished; and a silence fell once more
On the stupendous scene; and then was heard
A chorus of sweet harmonies; the door,
Gem'd with a starry nimbus, at a word
Spoken by th' Invisible, wide opening,
The Sage of Mentor passed with phantom wing."

I hope it was so.

Mythopoesis: continued from page 48

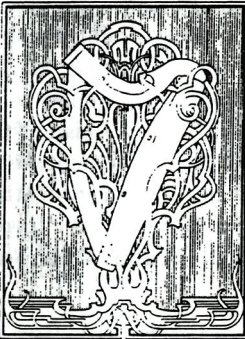
Such is the warmth with which both the ancients and moderns speak of this divine principle of the art [i.e., inspiration]; but, as I have formerly observed, enthusiastic admiration seldom promotes knowledge. Though a student by such praise may have his attention roused, and a desire excited of running in this great career, yet it is possible that what has been said to excite may only serve to deter him. He examines his own mind, and perceives there nothing of that divine inspiration with which he is told so many others have been favored. He never travelled to heaven to gather new ideas; and he finds himself possessed of no other qualification than what mere common observation and a plain understanding can confer. Thus he becomes gloomy amid the splendor of figurative declamation, and thinks it hopeless to pursue an object he supposes out of the reach of human industry. (Reynolds, *Third Discourse*)

Idea, form, and the desire to communicate: these three are the means by which creativity works. An awareness of their functions assists the Sub-creator in ordering his creation, and acquiring the patience needed for mythopoesis.



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Quenti Lambardillion: continued from page 20

sil	Q S,364	white flame, shine, radiate, shine with white or silver light; see thil; A,38
tar	Q S,265	king, queen, noble, father, high, royal; S,364;A,39
tie	Q A,40	road
tul	Q A,40	come
tuv	Q A,41	find
u-	Q III,250	just, immediately
-uva	Q R,58	(future tense); I,394;A,41;U,317
ye	Q III,250	behold; Trans. Dr.