

JOY AND THE MIND OF THE READER

Annie Crawford on Why We Should Read

Why do some people like books so much? What is it about arbitrary lines of ink sequenced on a page of paper that gives so many so much joy? My Facebook feed is about half filled with book memes, and a quick internet search will give you a taste of this happy literary humor. You can also find an abundance of articles extolling the virtues of reading: the expansion of knowledge, emotional experience, entertainment, exercise for the mind, increased creativity, an antidote to stress, relational connection, and personal growth. However, all of these wonderful reasons to read still beg the old philosophical question — why? Why do these things matter? Is knowledge or emotional experience an end in and of itself? Or are these intermediary goods that serve an even greater end?

Moreover, there are many ways to attain these various literary goods. There are many ways to learn and many means by which we can explore imaginary people and places and worlds: theater, film, painting, gaming, theme parks, and more. As technology expands and proliferates, why have e-readers not done away with books? Why have internet articles and pdfs and videos and webinars not replaced hardback non-fiction yet? Why persist in the antiquated method of reading a book when one can visit the same imaginary world by

watching the film? What makes reading with book in hand a uniquely satisfying and deeply joyful activity that millions of people cling to? Shakespeare's Benedick ought also to have wondered, "Is it not strange that tree pulp could hail souls out of men's bodies?"¹

The stubborn persistence of old-school printed books among a remnant of cultural dinosaurs gestures toward a common answer for both these ends and means questions. Unlike the passivity of watching a film or play, reading is itself a more creative activity. When we read, we more actively participate with the author in creating the meaning of the story out of the materials of this world. By some creative act of magic, an author embeds an entire world into a small stack of inked paper, and by some reciprocal act of magic, a reader releases that entire world from its humble binding. This gives us great joy as a foretaste of the eternal communion we were created to share; embodied participation in the divine life of the creative, Triune God. This is the ultimate end we long for in all our pursuit of knowledge, emotional experience, adventure, and connection. We were made for intimate creative partnership with the Cosmic Author and reading allows us to practice Heaven.

While teaching modern literature to seniors at a Christian Classical school the past few years, I have been reviewing literary theories from Plato to Postmodernism, trying to integrate them into a coherent, edifying framework I could offer my students. The question that dominates modern literary theory is: What is the source of meaning? Does the meaning come from the life or intent of the author? Does the meaning reside only in the

¹ Reworded from *Much Ado About Nothing*, II.3.61-62.

actual text itself, regardless of what the author meant to say? Or is the meaning created by the activity of the reader? The more I read and taught, the more I felt certain that meaning is and must be found in all three, in the life of the author, the text itself, and the mind of the reader. These are the three necessary sources of meaning that work together to create the one unified, living whole work of art, and the three sources cannot be separated.

In other words, literature forms a mode of communication analogous to the divine Trinity; literature exhibits a Trinitarian structure. The Father, the Author of being and truth, begets the Idea for a story and originates its meaning; the Son is the Word, the embodiment of the originating Idea and the incarnate image of the Father's thought; and the Spirit is actively present in the reader's mind, proceeding as the creative Power that illuminates us to see and understand what the Father and the Son have created. Moreover, this dynamic, Triune pattern is finally sufficient to explain the joy we experience in reading a good book. To participate in meaning-making is to commune with God, the ultimate Good and the final end for which all things exist.

Being familiar with Dorothy Sayers's work, I realized that the Trinitarian structure I perceived in Literary theory was the mirror image of the Trinitarian creative theory that Sayers articulates in her book, *The Mind of the Maker*. Sayers argues that because we are made in the image of the creative Triune God, human creativity also participates in a Triune structure. Citing Aquinas, Sayers first explains that our knowledge of God is analogical; that is, we know something of what our heavenly Father

is like through our experience of earthly fathers.² Likewise, Sayers insists, we can also know something of God as Creator through our experience of being human creators, from our experience as artists.³ Sayers spends the rest of her book elaborating how her experience as an artist reveals a Trinitarian structure to creativity that gives us analogical knowledge of God and a better understanding of our creative work.

Sayers describes how God the Father, who is the mysterious and unseen origin of all being, is analogical to the mysterious and unformed “Idea” that rouses an author to creative activity.⁴ Just as the heavenly Father is inaccessible to us except through the incarnate image of the Son, so the human author’s Idea for her creative work is also inaccessible to the artist except through self-awareness in the creative, embodying Activity. As St. John explains in the opening to his Gospel, “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.”⁵ We all know this analogically by experience; we are struck by an Idea, we want to say or do or make something, but we only know what that originating Idea is *as* we say or do or make it. As many writing teachers put it: you do not really know what you

² Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (1941; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 1987), 22-23. Note: Sayers opens this chapter with a quote from Aquinas’s *Summa Contra Gentiles*: “Those things which are said of God and other things are predicated neither univocally nor equivocally, but analogically.”

³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵ John 1:18 (ESV).

think until you write it down. It is only in the act of incarnation that the thought or Idea is actually revealed.

You might reasonably ask, if we have no access to the inspiring Idea directly, how do we know there is an originating Idea separate from the creative action? Sayers's writes, we know this from "the fact that the [creative, embodying] Energy itself is conscious of referring all its acts to an existing and complete whole. In theological terms, the Son does the will of the Father."⁶ We see this truth when an author will fuss and search until they find the right phrase that fits some unseen, mysterious Idea that is guiding the creative work. If that originating Idea were not there, we would have no way to judge whether or not a word or phrase or paint stroke was "just right." Something, some ideal Idea, is judging our work as we create. That Idea that inspires our creative work is analogous to the divine, hidden Father originating and directing the Son's creative process in the world.

What Sayers calls the Energy corresponds analogically to the divine Son, whom St. John calls the *Logos*.⁷ Sayers believes that

The Energy itself is an easier concept to grasp, because it is the thing of which the writer is conscious and which the reader can see when it is manifest in material form. It is dynamic — the sum *and* process of all the activity

⁶ Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, 39.

⁷ The term *logos* is derived from Greek philosophy and is difficult to translate directly. It is commonly translated as "word" but refers to the reason, logic, pattern, intelligibility, principle, or wisdom that undergirds all reality.

which brings the book into temporal and spatial existence . . . It includes, though it is not confined to, the manifestation of the book in material form.⁸

In other words, the Energy is the expression of the Idea in both the creative activity and the embodied thing, just as Jesus Christ is both divine creative person and embodied man.⁹ In Colossians, St. Paul proclaims clearly that by Christ “all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things were created through him and for him.”¹⁰ Paul affirms Christ the Logos as the active, personal Power that created the world and then also immediately proceeds to affirm that Christ Himself has entered into and become part of that created, embodied world: “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.”¹¹ Christ the Son who both creates

⁸ Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, 40.

⁹ While Sayers proposes the term “Energy” to identify the Second Person of the Creative Trinity, I find the term “Embodiment” to be more helpful because it denotes both creative activity and the created thing, both the energy of manifesting the Idea and the thing manifested. While the Second Person of the Trinity is begotten and not created, the body of the man Jesus is a visible part of creation, an object in the world that we can encounter and perceive. The term embodiment better encompasses both natures of Christ. As an author, it is appropriate for Sayers to emphasize the active work of creation, which explains why she would prefer the term Energy or Activity (which she uses synonymously). However, from the reader’s perspective, we primarily encounter the author’s creative Energy in its embodied, physical form, in the book that lies on our bedside table. In this essay, Energy, Activity, and Embodiment will be used interchangeably.

¹⁰ Col. 1:16-17 (ESV).

¹¹ Col. 2:9 (ESV).

and embodies the will or Idea of the Father is “Distinct from the Idea itself . . . [yet] essentially identical with the Idea — ‘consubstantial with the Father.’”¹²

The third part of the creative process in Sayers’s Trinitarian scheme is analogous to the Holy Spirit; it is the illuminating Power that brings the text alive to both the author himself and the reader. The Holy Spirit is the Power which conceives in us, as He did in Mary, the divine life, the Logos of meaning. As it is in Trinitarian theology, the Power of the creative process is the most difficult to understand rationally but the easiest to experience personally. Sayers argues that “from the reader’s point of view [the Power] is the book. By it, they perceive the book, both as a process in time and as an eternal whole.”¹³ It is by the Power that the reader reacts to the work personally and dynamically.

Together these three aspects — Idea, Energy, and Power — form the whole creative process just as the three holy persons form the whole Creative Triune God. Sayers insists that the three cannot be wholly separated or exist without the other. She explains that,

[T]hese three are one, each equally in itself the whole work, whereof none can exist without the other. If you were to ask a writer which is “the real book” — his Idea of it, his Activity in writing it, or its return to himself in Power, he would be at a loss to tell you, because these things are essentially inseparable. Each of them is the complete book separately; yet in the complete book all of them exist together.

¹² Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, 40.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

He can by an act of the intellect, “distinguish the persons” but he cannot by any means “divide the substance.” How could he? He cannot know the Idea except by the Power interpreting his own Activity to him; he knows the Activity only as it reveals the Idea in Power; he knows the Power only as the revelation of the Idea in the Activity. All he can say is that these three are equally and eternally present in his own act of creation, and at every moment of it, whether or not the act ever becomes manifest in the form of a written and printed book. These things are not confined to the material manifestation: they exist in — they are — the creative mind itself.¹⁴

This last sentence is profound: whether or not you write that book, the time you spent thinking about it creatively participated in this Triune structure, just as the Divine Son existed eternally with the Father before the creation of the world or the incarnation. Accordingly, whether or not it results in a physical manifestation, all our thinking is a kind of creating that reflects the Trinitarian structure of Being in whose image we are made. Whether or not we have a particular vocation as an artist, we are all essentially creative beings. We are all stamped indelibly by this Trinitarian pattern; it is our mode of being.

Communion with God is both the fundamental source and the ultimate end of all our creative activity. The joy we experience in artistic creation comes from this participation in the Divine life, for joy is what we

¹⁴ Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, 41.

experience when our soul moves into the liminal space between heaven and earth. People commonly tell stories about feeling joy at a special event, at a beautiful meal, in a good marriage, in the birth of a child, on top of a mountain, or taking Eucharist. All these moments are sacraments (either holy sacraments of the church or sacraments of common grace) — spaces where the invisible God reveals Himself to us in visible ways. The liminal space of joy is entered when we bring our embodied life most closely into alignment with the sacred order — when our setting, bodies, affections, will, relationships, and mind are most wholly centered around an expression of Christ. In such moments, the veil between God and Man is stretched very thin, and we almost taste and see God just as we were originally made to taste and see. This is joy, the presence of God made manifest to our thirsty hearts.

Creative activity is one of these liminal spaces; we become like Christ as we actively perceive and creatively reflect the meaning that the Father has embodied in His created world.

Made in the image of this Creator God and called to participate in His creative activity, we are what Tolkien calls sub-creators. The whole cosmos is God's text through which He speaks to all people made in His image. We read the meaning of God's Creation text, God's world, and then we imitate the Creator as we creatively speak the meaning we see in the world to others through our own art. Artistic creators begin as readers of the divine text and then become authors who speak to others through their own created texts. As sub-creators, human authors are both readers and makers, for the meaning of our art is always drawn from the meaning of God's art.

To see this sub-creative process more clearly, consider George Herbert's poem "Virtue." The second stanza reads "Sweet rose, whose hue angry and brave / Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye, / Thy root is ever in its grave, / And thou must die." To write this poem, the poet must first read the meanings embodied in the rose itself; Herbert must first read God's art before he can create his own art. He must meditate on the rose — contemplating the significance of its bright color, bolder than any other in the garden. He must think about the meaning of the rose's thorns, scent, and immobility. Only after reading the meaning of the rose can Herbert himself write the meaning of the rose poem.

In his essay, "The Imagination: its Functions and its Culture," George MacDonald goes so far as to suggest that the name "Poet" or "Maker" is less suitable for the human artist than the name the "Finder."¹⁵ MacDonald argues that the poet does not make up the meaning of a rose or a grave; Herbert "has created none of the material that goes to make [his poem]."¹⁶ He takes forms already existing — the rose, the grave — and puts together the parts of his poem "according to the harmony of truths already embodied in each of the parts."¹⁷ MacDonald says that the poet works with the resonances of meaning "in the forms already, else they could be no garment of unveiling."¹⁸ In

¹⁵ George MacDonald, "The Imagination: Its Function and Culture," *An Unexpected Journal: George MacDonald* 3, no. 4. (Winter 2020): 3-56. https://anunexpectedjournal.com/the-imagination-its-function-and-its-culture/#_ftn2.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

other words, if the poet wasn't speaking about universal meanings already existing in creation, we would not be able to understand him.

Consider the reader of Herbert's poem. As human artists are both readers and makers, so human readers will also be both readers and makers. Remember that when Sayers described the indivisibility of Idea, Energy, and Power in the work of art, she insisted that this Trinitarian reality existed whether or not the book was ever written down. She argued that, "These things are not confined to the material manifestation: they exist in — they are — the creative mind itself."¹⁹ Therefore, because the Trinitarian structure of creativity is in the human mind itself, it operates in both author and reader. Reading is also a creative Energy wherein the reader actively searches for the Idea coming through the Embodiment of the text which the reader experiences as Power, as a dynamic living meaning. Consider, are you not right now actively working to understand this essay? Does not reading Flannery O'Connor or C.S. Lewis require of you, the reader, real creative Energy? A totally passive listener will not and cannot understand what his eyes pass over. We all know what it is like to read sentences and even paragraphs without any real understanding. This is why educators talk about needing to cultivate active readers; unless the reader's mind is actively engaged in the Energy of bringing the printed words to life, the text will have no meaning for the reader.

The hidden Idea of the author is the ultimate source of the meaning, yet it is inaccessible to us except through the Embodiment of the text. While the author

¹⁹ Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, 41.

experienced the Energy in the writing of the text, the reader experiences the Energy in the reading of the text. The writer does the work of *offering* meaningful connections between Creation and Text while the reader does the work of *perceiving* meaningful connections between Creation and Text. Both processes are incarnational and both require a creative Energy that connects Idea to Embodiment. As they say, it takes two to tango. Thus, both writing and reading are creative, meaning-making activities.

Let us return to the stanza from Herbert's poem, "Virtue." Only by my own experience of roses and graves can Herbert communicate to me. If I do not participate in meaning-making activity by drawing from my own reading of creation to actively reconstruct the meaning the poet offers me, the meaning of the poem will be lost to me. The poet cannot force his readers to directly receive the meaning of the poem; the reader must also engage in the creative communication process.

Furthermore, my own experiences of roses and tears and graves will bring further layers of meaning to the poem that Herbert could not have explicitly intended, yet which become part of the poem's Power for me, and perhaps for others if I write a piece of literary criticism. The activity of reading is thus also a three-fold reality, a Trinitarian reflection of the activity of writing.

To help us grasp the Triune structure inherent in the reader's activity, let us rephrase Sayers's summary of the creative process with reference to the reader:

These three are one: the **Energy** of reading — which is to search out and perceive the **Idea** embodied in the text — and the **Power** or experience of the living truth manifested by

the Energy — each equally in itself the whole work of reading, whereof none can exist without the other. If you were to ask a reader which is “the real book” — the author’s Idea of it, the reader’s Activity in reading it, or the reader’s experience of its Power, he would be at a loss to tell you, because all these things are essentially inseparable.²⁰

This is why we experience such joy in reading; it is a creative activity that also participates in the Triune life. Just as authors have great joy in communion with the Creator through their creative Energy, so readers also have great joy in completing this creative process through their own participatory Activity.

In a passage from his book, *The Romance of The Word: One Man’s Love Affair With Theology*, Father Robert Capon captures well the joy of creation at the heart of Triune Communion. He tells about the day God-in-Three-Persons decided to create the world:

God the Father looked at the whole wild party and said, “Wonderful! Just what I had in mind! Tov! Tov! Tov!” And all God the Son and God the Holy Spirit could think of to say was the same thing, “Tov! Tov! Tov!” So they shouted together “Tov!” And they laughed for ages and ages, saying things like how great it was for beings to be and how clever of the Father to think of the idea, and how kind of the Son to go to all that trouble putting it together, and how considerate of the Spirit to spend so much time directing and choreographing, and

²⁰ A rewording of Sayers from *Mind of the Maker*, 41. Emphasis mine.

for ever and ever they told old jokes, and the Father and the Son drank their wine in *unitate Spiritus Sancti*, and threw ripe olives and pickled mushrooms at each other per *omnia saecula saeculorum*. Amen.²¹

We want this joy. We want to add something to the beauty of the world and to share in delight over the things we have made, to praise and be praised, to laugh and commune over the glory of it all. We want to be part of the great creative cosmic conversation and that participation begins with reading well, by actively listening to the meaning of things manifest to us in the word.

If we are properly catechized in a Christian worldview, we should be prepared to see Trinitarian structure not only in writing and reading but everywhere. As Sayers explains,

The Trinitarian structure which can be shown to exist in the mind of man and in all his works is, in fact, the integral structure of the universe, and corresponds, not by pictorial imagery but by a necessary uniformity of substance, with the nature of God, in Whom all that is exists.²²

To help us better understand this, Sayers appeals to Augustine and provides her own translation of a passage from *On the Trinity*:

²¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Romance of the Word: One Man's Love Affair with Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 176-7.

²² Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, xiii.

A trinitarian structure of being is not a thing incomprehensible or unfamiliar to you; you know of many such within the created universe. The trinity of sight, for example: the form seen, the act of vision, and the mental attention which correlates the two. These three, though separable in theory, are inseparably present whenever you use your sight. Again, every thought is an inseparable trinity of memory, understanding, and will. This is a fact of which you are quite aware; it is not the concept of a trinity-in-unity that in itself presents any insuperable difficulty to the human imagination.²³

If we have not seen the Trinitarian structure of reality and literature before, perhaps it is because we have been un-catechized by secular culture, or it may be that we are like fish that have failed to notice the water. Perhaps we did not notice the Trinitarian structure of reality before because we have never experienced anything but Trinitarian relationship.

However, this Triune structure explains why we have such joy in reading, a joy that is greater, more intimate, and more enduring than the joy we have in passively watching a film. We long to be caught up in the Divine life for which we were made. As the deer pants for the water, so our souls long for the Triune God.²⁴ Something in us is drawn irresistibly to those moments and activities that offer the deepest draughts of that Divine life. And so we read, practicing for the day when

²³ Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, 36. From Augustine, *On The Trinity* 1.1.

²⁴ Psalm 42:1 (ESV).

we can enter into the pages of the Heavenly Story with not only our imaginations but with our whole selves.

Bibliography

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Annie Crawford

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