

Triune Analogies in Dorothy Sayers's *The Mind of the Maker*

“Praise Him that He hath made man in His own image, a maker and a craftsman like Himself, a little mirror of His triune majesty.

“For every work of creation is threefold, an earthly trinity to match the heavenly.

“First: there is the Creative Idea, passionless, timeless, beholding the whole work complete at once, the end in the beginning: and this is the image of the Father.

“Second: there is the Creative Energy begotten of that idea, working in time from the beginning to the end, with sweat and passion, being incarnate in the bonds of matter: and this is the image of the Word.

“Third: there is the Creative Power, the meaning of the work and its response in the lively soul: and this is the image of the indwelling Spirit.

“And these three are one, each equally in itself the whole work, whereof none can exist without other: and this is the image of the Trinity.”

--*The Zeal of Thy House*

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Following Augustine of Hippo and, more recently, R. C. Mobley and the *Lux Mundi* group of Anglican theologians, Dorothy Sayers in her work *The Mind of the Maker* sets forth an analogical study of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity that compares the various aspects of the Godhead to aspects of the human person. More particularly, Sayers compares the Godhead to author, book, and literary power. She also, in turn, uses various aspects of Trinitarian thought to critique the writing of fiction.

Sayers starts out by stressing that all human thought is metaphorical or analogical in nature. We cannot speak of anything without being dependent on analogies, so it should not surprise that we need analogical language to speak of God. Our analogies must have some relationship to human experience if they are to bear any meaning.

Broadly speaking, she compares

1. the work of God the Father to that of the Idea that the author has; she speaks of this as Book-as-Thought;
2. the work of God the Son is that of Energy or Activity, which is Book-as-Written;
3. and God the Holy Spirit likened unto Book-as Power.

Each of these interacts with the other. Just as the energy of the book makes the idea possible in the material world, so the power of the book is the form of the book as it influences and responds to the reader's experience of it. Like the Trinity, the poet writes for himself first--himself as both subject and audience and out of love for the work, and only secondarily for a social audience beyond himself. In the same way, the triune God creates the world out of his own communion of love, not with any need for us but out of simple gratuity.

The Energy of the Author is revealed in the characters of the book, who have a partial independence from the author; a good author does not make the developed character do just anything, yet his energy is still present in them. Likewise, the energy in a work brings forth great diversity but with an overarching unity that hold the work together:

We are thus considering the temporal universe as one of those great serial works of which installments appear from time to time, all related to a central idea whose completeness is not yet manliest to the reader. Within the framework of its diversity are many minor and partial unties-of plot, of episode, and of character. By our response to it, we are brought within the mind of the author and are caught up into the stream of his Power, which proceeds from his Energy, revealing his Idea to us and to himself. (59)

In a similar way, Sayers uses the analogy of the playwright, the stage, and actors to help us understand the mystery of freedom that God places in his creation. The love of the creator for the play does not force the roles to violate their embodied expressions, but he willing limits himself to the natural limits of the stage, the actors' abilities, and so on:

None of this delight will, however, be gained unless the playwright is devoured with a real love for material form—unless, in the writing of the play, his Energy has imaginatively moved upon the stage in the way I have tried to explain, and conceived its Idea in material terms of flesh and blood and paint and canvas. For the true freedom of the Energy consists in its willing submission to the limitations of its own medium. The attempt to achieve freedom from the medium ends inevitably in loss of freedom within the medium, since, here as everywhere, activity falls under the judgment of the law of its own nature. . . . Similar efforts towards an illegal freedom issue in unmanageable stage-directions, or a multiplicity of vast stage-sets, which no amount of engineering effort can hurry upon the stage swiftly enough to preserve the unties. The business of the creator is not to escape from his material medium or to bully it, but to serve it; but to serve it he must love it. If he does so, he will realise that its service is perfect freedom. (65-66)

In this sense, the good author respects the three-dimensional nature of her characters, “never, of course to the puppet-character, but only to those that have received a full measure of the author's life—and their escape from control is the measure of their free will” (74). What Sayers offers us here is a particular aesthetic and ethical set of analogies for why God does and does not choose to act in miraculous ways in history. God as author acts with miracles only when the story is truly prepared for them in a way that does not violate the Idea the author possess:

The study of our analogy will lead us perhaps to believe that God will be chary of indulging in irrelevant miracle, and will only use it when it is an integral part of the story. He will not, any more than a good writer, convert His characters without preparing the way for their conversion, and His interferences with space-time will be conditioned by some kind of relationship of power between will and matter. (83)

Sayers also explores the analogy of the literary autobiography as an analogy of the Incarnation. Just as 1) the literary autobiography has similar limits to that of other narrative books, so the Incarnate Son becomes one of us—fully human.

2) Yet, while the autobiography is one of the many books of the author, it also has a special status as that which interprets and explains the rest of the corpus. So Christ is the key to all humanity.

3) The autobiography is true to the essence of the author, but can only reveal that author partially; just so the Son reveals the Father's essence perfectly, but in expression is limited in this by his humanity.

4) However, this analogy does break down, for what Christ does perfectly, the autobiography can only do imperfectly, being subject to self-deception and even conscious lies: "the writing of autobiography is a dangerous business; it is a mark either of great insensitiveness to danger or of an almost supernatural courage. Nobody but a god can pass unscathed through the searching ordeal of incarnation" (92).

Sayers, also explores the origin of evil, and she puts forth a variation of the privation argument, being influenced in part by Nicholas Bedyev. Evil does not exist as a possibility without the good; non-being is only an inactive potential until it is actively chosen. God in his perfection avoided creating the potential wrong, but he still subjects his creation to the wills of his "characters" who may (in fact, have) chosen evil:

That, according to Christian doctrine, is the way that God behaved, and the only way in which we can behave if we want to be "as gods". The Fall had taken place and Evil had been called into active existence; the only way to transmute Evil into Good was to redeem it by creation. But, the Evil having been experienced, it could only be redeemed within the medium of experience—that is, by an incarnation in which experience was fully and freely in accordance with the Idea. (107)

The role of the Incarnate Son and the poured-out Holy Spirit is comparable to book and power in another way. The Energy/Activity of the book is necessary for the Power of the book to act on an audience, which it does with an ever increasing incarnation of itself in others, even as it multiples itself with increasing power in a community of readers of interpreters: "Who indeed? Neither resistance nor resignation will do anything here. To Love-in-Energy, the only effective response is Love-in-Power, eagerly embracing its own sacrifice.

In other words, the perfect work of love demands the co-operation of the creature, responding according to the law of its nature" (137). Sayers admits that love can be a "ruthless" passion, and that the artist can be ruthless in pursuit of perfection in a work of art. Part of this is the refusal of the artist to absorb characters into the author. Those who refuse to do this suffer from imperfect works of art. Indeed, to some extent all human authors fall into this at one time or another.

Sayers suggests that there are three "scalene trinities" that authors can commit:

1. **"Father-ridden" works** are those that seek to impose the Idea on the work at the expense of character development or without sensitivity to plot, believability, etc. Such authors are falsely "prophetic" in their believed authority and are closed to criticism from without. Their works are larger in conception than in actual execution.
2. **"Son-ridden" works** suffer from a style out of proportion to the architectonic structure. Such authors refuse to successfully embody their characters in the material world and

suffer from a lack of true, precise expression. They are all activity with no real literary power.

3. **“Ghost-ridden” works** are all emotion without form or coherence. They in lacking self-critique are without any wisdom. They expect audience response but have nothing substantial to offer.

Sayers suggests that authors can, thus, be guilty of literary heresies:

- Gnosticism—a denial of the material life of the story or play;
- Manichaeism—story in which characters are only symbolic gestures without any true dramatic life;
- Arianism—“all technique and no vision”;
- Patripassianism—authors who make it up as they go along, subjecting the Idea to the torrent of Activity, that is process without structure.

Such men are dangerous; since Energy, if it cannot issue in creation, may contrive to burst its prison somehow and issue in its own opposite. The uncreative artist is the destroyer of all things, the active negation; when the Energy is not Christ, it is Antichrist, assuming leadership of the universe in the mad rush back to Chaos. (163)

Sayers concludes by separating the creative artistic analogies she has been setting froth from the simpler “problem-solution” technique of detective fiction:

1. The detective problem is always soluble. It is, in fact, constructed for the express purpose of being solved, and when the solution is found, the problem no longer exists. A detective or mathematical problem that could not be solved by any means at all, would simply not be what we understand by a "problem" in this sense. But it is unwise to suppose that all human experiences present problems of this kind. There is one vast human experience that confronts us so formidably that we cannot pretend to overlook it. There is no solution to death.
2. The detective problem is completely soluble: no loose ends or unsatisfactory enigmas are left anywhere. The solution provides for everything and every question that is asked is answered. We are not left with a balance of probabilities in favour of one conclusion or another; . . . Now, our tendency to look for this kind of complete solution without lacunae or compensatory drawbacks badly distorts our view of a number of activities in real life.
3. The detective problem is solved in the same terms in which it is set. Here is one of the most striking differences between the detective problem and the work of the creative imagination. The detective problem is deliberately set in such a manner that it can be solved without stepping outside its terms of reference. . . . But life is no candidate for the Detection Club. It makes unabashed use of all the forbidden aids (not excepting Mumbo-Jumbo and Jiggery-Pokery); and frequently sets its problems in terms which must be altered if the problem is to be solved at all.
4. The detective problem is finite; when it is solved, there is an end of it-or, as George Joseph Smith casually observed concerning the brides he had drowned in their baths, "When they are dead, they are done with" . . . The struggle is over and finished with and now we may legitimately, if we like, cease upon the midnight with no pain. . . . But this is the measure, not of the likeness

between problems in detection and problems in life, but of the unlikeness. For the converse is also true; when they are done with, they are dead. (194-205)

Now the artist does not behave like this. He may finish a book, as we may finish a war or set up the machinery of a League, and he may think it is very good and allow his Energy a brief sabbath of repose. But he knows very well that this is only a pause in the unending labour of creation. He does not subscribe to the heresy that confounds his Energy with his Idea, and the Son's brief sabbath in time with the perpetual sabbaths of the Trinity in Heaven. For the thing he has made is a living thing, and it is not sterile. It continually proliferates new themes and new fancies, and new occasions for thought and action. (206)

Discussion Questions

- Some have criticized Sayers' argument in *The Mind of the Maker* as being too dependent on a late Romantic view of human creativity and not open enough to models of artistic production that are more process-oriented or shaped by audience response. Do you think this is a fair criticism? Why or why not?
- Likewise, some have suggested that Sayers' analogies work best with the kind of fiction and drama that she wrote, yet these also reveal their limitations. What limits can you think of that Sayers' argument might possess?
- Yet again, some have suggested that Sayers' viewpoint is too dependent upon Western versions of the Trinity that too easily assign individual roles to the life of the Godhead without acknowledging the divine energies of the persons in their overlapping power. Any truth to this?
- On the other hand, how might Sayers' set of analogies help us to better understand the interrelationship of the Triune God, the doctrines of Incarnation, Atonement, and Pentecost, as well as our human experience of them?
- Equally, how might they help us understand her fiction? What insights do they offer into her working methods and craft?
- Finally, do you find her model of "scalene trinities" helpful in diagnosing problems in literary fiction?