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Creative Spark
Essay 1, Draft 3
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Anthropomorphized Creativity

It starts at 2 o'clock in the morning, a blank sheet in front of your eyes and a blank brain behind. Whether for grades, for money, for for glory, for love, or for self respect, you have to put your thoughts down in a coherent form, but you cannot. You beg for the ability to shift out of neutral and get writing, but it doesn't come. And like any human being since we started carving into bone and shaping clay, you start to put in your mind's eye a face to what you are seeking. It has eyes, brows, a nose, and of course, a slight contemptuous smirk. That same tendency that has lead to the fashioning of idols now comes to you.

“The secret of creativeness,” (Carl Jung's phrase) like the philosopher's stone, is an abstraction that has tempted many great minds into building theoretical structures that try to explain the creative process, and that fail to do so for a majority of creative artists. Jung calls it a “transcendental problem which the psychologist cannot answer but can only describe.” In his essay “The Artist” Jung attempts to describe the creative process using the ideas and metaphors of his eponymous theories. These attempt to replace the artist, a living, breathing human being, with abstractions according to which the artist is an “impersonal creative process.” While I recently read through his essay “The Artist,” and through Nathaniel Hawthorne's story “The Artist of the Beautiful,” what came to my mind were those authors whose own creative processes did not fit Hawthorne's and Jung's notions. I can only chalk this up to my contrarian nature and to my choice of authors. Although more likely, it is because of my own idolatry.

The author Harlan Ellison doesn't relish being asked about the secret of creativeness, at least so far as it pertains to himself. Questions about it prompt him to give a brief explanation of how he gets his ideas from a mail order business in Schenectady, New York. (They also cause him to change colors all through the spectrum.) His glib response points to the difficulty of describing the creative process in a way that will carry from one artist over to many.

The challenge is compounded by the prejudices we have about the human mind in general. Every idea about the human mind is an abstraction that cannot but repel as many people as it attracts. One does not have to buy into Jungian theory in general to buy into his ideas about artists, but it certainly helps. It also helps if one buys into the Romantic view of the artist (and of the relation between the artist and his work), which Jung pushes implicitly in his essay. This is the notion that the artist is moved and seized by something completely outside of himself, of which he has no control. Such theories can seem almost bizarre in how they surrender the volition of a living human being to something that is made of inanimate matter. My experience and prejudices lean against this view.

Greek mythology gave another explanation for creativity that no doubt will not find favor with any of the authors we have read so far. This explanation shares Jung's view of the artist as a passive vehicle for the birth of a work of art. The Muses are sentient beings who have the power to give mere mortals the inspiration to create art. This they give to people of their choosing, for reasons we are not encouraged to guess. Those denied the inspiration of the muses must resign themselves to this dismal fate. Those who received it can be described as blessed, or as cursed, since starving in a garret isn't much fun.

In the notion of the Demiurge, Greek philosophy offers a better analogy for Jung's ideas on the creative process, one that often shimmered through my mind while I sought both things to write and scientific questions to explore. In an ethereal realm outside the one we inhabit, there are forms of shape and beauty that are pure and perfect. It is the role of the Demiurge, a god of sorts, to implement those forms, imperfectly, in our world. The artist is chosen and possessed by the Demiurge to produce in a work an example of pure beauty. In Hawthorne's story the artist is "etherealized" in his quest to create a pure mechanical replica of a living butterfly. For Jung this beauty comes from the work's origins in the primordial archetypes that haunt our unconscious. For a scientist, the beauty comes from a work that represents the pure forms expressed by the laws of nature. But any scientist who has thought about the idea of the

Demiurge likely develops a different view of how he acts, one best shown by Robert Frost's poem, *The Demiurge's Laugh*:

It was far in the sameness of the wood;
I was running with joy on the Demon's trail,
Though I knew what I hunted was no true god.
I was just as the light was beginning to fail
That I suddenly heard--all I needed to hear:
It has lasted me many and many a year.

The sound was behind me instead of before,
A sleepy sound, but mocking half,
As one who utterly couldn't care.
The Demon arose from his wallow to laugh,
Brushing the dirt from his eye as he went;
And well I knew what the Demon meant.

I shall not forget how his laugh rang out.
I felt as a fool to have been so caught,
And checked my steps to make pretense
I was something among the leaves I sought
(Though doubtful whether he stayed to see).
Thereafter I sat me against a tree.

Like any aspiring scientist, I would have given a body part or two, merely to be possessed by the Demiurge, even for a little while. I'd settle for a smile, or even wink from the demon. But like most, all I've received so far has been the occasional belly-laugh. Time spent in the sciences is enough to make one scoff at the notion of the Demiurge condescending to give a heartbeat's attention to a mere bald ape.

From this perspective I find myself doubting the Romantic view of the artist, or at least doubtful of my chances of being an artist of that stripe, one able to surrender volition and thus create, well, much of anything, and more inclined to look at a competing view of the artist, that of the artist entrepreneur. William Shakespeare didn't suffer for art. Neither did Mozart. Both of them had fun and made money. Shakespeare didn't write scripts for eternity. He thought them up for rehearsals, often adapting them from ballads or Greek and Roman classics. His works didn't emerge out of the ethereal realm. They were put together by combining Shakespeare's inspiration with his need to work with his actors, survive the Byzantine machinations of the British court, appease the Anglican censors, fit his plays within his theater, fill it with paying

crowds and entertain the peanut gallery. He had to have spent far more of his time juggling these concerns than being possessed by the Demiurge, listening to the Muses, or plunging into “the healing and redeeming depths of the collective psyche,” as Jung might put it. It is particularly absurd to think of a play of Shakespeare's as a work that emerges fully formed out of another realm and into his mind and then his quill. His works were so compromised by the constraints of the world around him that those compromises themselves became beautiful art. Shakespeare's creative success is a good example to study (as best we can) because as he was, we too are hosed.

The Demiurge has laughed at my expense, and like the prom queen way back in the day, the Muses have not answered my calls. Denied the rapturous experience described in Hawthorne's “The Artist of the Beautiful,” or Jung's essay “The Artist,” I've still been able to receive inspiration from another spirit, albeit a lower one. This is the spirit of the staircase. It is the lot of every Parisian to suffer the frequent indignity of a conversation with his neighbor or concierge in which he is out-witted and out-smarted. Afterwards, when he walks up to his apartment, *l'esprit d'escalier* comes to whisper in his ear the perfect retort to a line said a few minutes before. Of course, it is too late to hop back down the stairs and deliver the crushing words. This is why for the French, the spirit of the staircase is a cruel poltergeist. To professional comedians, *l'esprit d'escalier* is a bread winner. Engineers know all too well a similar phenomenon, the spirit of the evening commute. All too often an intractable problem becomes solved when one has left the office and is travelling home.

The spirit of the staircase and that of the evening commute are due to human nature. When we concentrate on a creative task, we expend more effort suppressing ideas than bringing them to conscious attention, because we want our hands working and tongues wagging right there and then. To bring those same thoughts to the fore requires the opposite approach. It is when we are mildly distracted by the walk up the uneven stairs of a Parisian building or the drive up Interstate 93 that ideas can filter out of the unconscious. Of these, a few are worthwhile. What happens next depends on whether we have the discipline to come back to the writing table or

drawing board, and build on what the spirit of the staircase gave us. This experience isn't rapturous; it does not involve losing oneself in a revelation from the ethereal realm. But it's all I've received so far, a sentence here, a program hack there, and those moments when small whispers came to me for my writing or for my programming, while I drove away from the lab, those are the moments that continue to shimmer in my mind. While a new insight appeared in my mind's eye, a mundane landmark would glow in the setting sun. While a new paragraph would echo in my skull, the drone of an NPR anchor would compete for my attention by way of the car radio. When I was thinking about this essay, the spirit of the staircase didn't whisper in my ear so much as it cleared its throat, reminded me of its existence, and not a moment too soon, of course.

The scientist and the artist both seek to bring beauty into the world. The scientist seeks to probe further into the pure symmetries that underly our world. The artist seeks to create whole expressions and evocations of the instincts that drive us to seek our mates, nurture our young, build our nests and serve our tribes. An artist who succeeds at this also achieves a scientific accomplishment of sorts: he finds a new hypothesis about the human mind. The hypothesis is his work, his subjects are his audience, and the experiment, the unveiling. What sets him apart from the scientist is that the artist's work isn't as easily reproduced. His hypothesis about the human mind is difficult to recreate in another work. Meanwhile, the engineer and the artisan, rather than plunge into what Jung calls the depths of the collective psyche, merely dip their toes in it. Their creative actions are piecemeal, and part of more mundane work. Rather than be seized by the Demiurge, they are teased by a lesser spirit. Rather than create a complete work of art, they put little touches of art in the occasional aspect of their work here and there. So far I find myself among the latter set. And when I read overly abstract descriptions of the creative process, I cannot resist the urge to anthropomorphize it until it has a human-like form, especially when I'm struggling to finish an essay for a deadline.