

## CREATORS

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**Keywords:** Creation myth, creator, God, author, artist, imitation, reality, second nature, representation, symbolizing, genius, creativity, liberal arts, imagination, automata, self-consciousness, self-perception, irony, sarcasm, sub-creators, secondary world, possible world, worldview, illusion, reality, self-reflective, metaphor.

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### Summary

The idea of artist as Creator is culturally and historically determined. There are times and cultures where such an idea is absolutely impossible, while other cultures (or periods of their history) would ridicule any other definition of artist. The idea of artist as Creator is closely connected with a number of notions crucial to culture history such as cosmological ideas, mimesis doctrines, the notion of genius and creativity etc, being themselves subject to permanent historical change. Creators differ from memorists and prophets not in the narrative strategies they use but in the type of self-consciousness they have. That means that both Creators and memorists might use one and the same set of narrative strategies. For example, M. Lermontov and S. Bronte. Authorial self-consciousness of creator is characterized by hyper reflectivity, the object of the Creator's reflection being the process, the origin and nature of the idea rather than its content. When reflecting upon conventions the author inevitably discloses their arbitrary (vs. natural) character, exposing the fictionality of the created world and its characters. Creators tend to play God games comparing their own creative work to the Act of Creation, the Author to the Almighty or renowned Creators. Creator tends to double his/her "I" while creating, both subjects being constantly in dialogue. Cervantes, Shakespeare, Stern were the most outstanding creators of the past, the 20th century faces a number of artists of the type J. Joyce, V. Nabokov, L. Pirandello, J.L. Borges, J. Barth, U. Eco to name a few. (see *Memorists*)

### 1. Creation Myth

In primitive societies creation myths where something is created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, are quite rare. To the ancient Indian and Greek thinker the notion of *creatio* is unthinkable. It is more often that all things are assumed to have been created from an

existing order, such as a primeval ocean. These cosmological myths in contrast to *ex nihilo* type might be labeled sub-creation or transformation ones. While what captured the imagination of the theistic strand in Jewish, Muslim and Christian thought was expressed in Genesis: “In the beginning God created the Heavens and the earth. And the earth was waste and void; and the darkness was upon the face of deep: and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good [...] And God created man in his own image [...] And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:1-4, I:27)

The notion of divided or merged creative forces acting simultaneously in struggle, or in sequence often mimicking one another is rather common.

In Avestan Literature, for example, Ahura Mazda is considered to be creator of only of that which is good while Ahriman is in charge of all that is evil. Though in earlier versions of the myth both good and evil forces were the twin spirits who met in Ahura Mazda as in a higher unit.

Creators might also act as manifestation of the uncreated (or self-created) unity. As in Egyptian cosmology: where in the beginning there was nothing but primordial abysmal ocean, Nun, from this arose the hill. On which Atum created himself and then generated a pair of divinities. The rest of creation proceeded step by step from their sexual union. In Memphite theology the uncreated Ptah produced gods in conjunction with Nun, the unlit abyss, who later created all other objects in the world from his own thought. This type of creator might be labeled as sub-creators, or re-creators (transformers).

In postulating *creatio* Judeo-Christian-Muslim theism protects not only God’s unlimited freedom to create but also man’s freedom, though limited, to be creative. While the cosmological idea of re-creation or transformation might also be seen as having great potential for culture history, since it tends to come back in this or that form to philosophy, theology and art. It might be easily traced in Gnosticism and related systems or thought, and is easily discovered in the history of mimesis, one of arts basic concepts. (see *Visionaries*)

## 2. Imitation (Mimesis)

*Mimesis* – Greek, *imitatio* – Latin for imitation. The term exists since antiquity. Its etymology is obscure. Some linguists maintain that it originated with the rituals and mysteries of the Dionysian cult. It doesn’t occur in either Homer or Hesiod. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. the term moves into philosophy where starts to mean reproducing the external world.

For Democritus (460-371 B.C.) mimesis is an imitation of the way nature functions. Thus we imitate the swallow to build a house, we imitate spider when we weave, and we imitate the nightingale when we sing.

In Athens Socrates (469-309 B.C.) introduces a different notion for mimesis – copying of the appearances of things. Later Plato and Aristotle further developed the idea.

Plato (427-347 B.C.) comes to think of the whole complex relation of Becoming to Being, Particular to Idea, as a kind of Imitation. Thus his *Timaeus* presents the universe itself as a work of art, made by a divine craftsman, a demiurge who fashioned the world by copying an ideal pattern thus hinting at analogy between the human artificer and the divine demiurge.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) accepts Imitation as a fundamental human instinct of which poetry is one manifestation, along with music, painting, and sculpture. His innovation is a redefinition of *mimesis* to mean not a counterfeiting of sensible reality but a presentation of “universal”. By universals he means not metaphysical entities like the Platonic Ideas but simple the permanent characteristic modes of human thought, feelings, and actions. That is imitation of generalized ‘reality’ rather than of individual objects, persons, or actions, which “eliminates what is transient and particular and reveals the permanent and essential feature of the original” as S.H. Butcher argued in 1898. Imitation thus means to Aristotle not faithful copying but a free and easy approach to reality.

More specifically, the imitation is lodged in the plot of the poem; and by ‘plot’ (mythos) Aristotle means not merely a sequence but a *structure* of events, so firmly welded together as to form an organic whole. It follows that the poet’s most important duty is to shape his plot. He cannot find it already given; he is a poet only so far as he is a builder (poietes, “maker”) of plots. Thus Imitation comes very close to meaning “creation”. But the poet’s creation is not of some «second nature» existing only in his fancy; it a valid representation of the actions of men according to the laws of probability or necessity.

Alongside the Aristotelian concept of imitation, another of very different provenience took on increasing importance in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. This was the relatively simple idea of imitating the established “classics”, the great models of achievement in each genre.

The ancient theory of imitation is founded on two typically Greek premises: 1) the human mind is passive and, therefore, able to perceive only what exists; 2) the existing world is perfect and, therefore, nothing more perfect can be conceived, as W. Tatarkiewicz summarized it.

In the Middle Ages when new ideas occur, art is to concentrate either on the invisible world (which is more perfect than the visible one) or if dealing with the visible world, it should search for traces of eternal beauty. A shift from imitating to symbolizing is quite inevitable here. As a result the theory of imitation is put aside in the Middle Ages and the term is rarely used.

The Renaissance inherits three major concepts of imitation from antiquity 1) the Platonic: a copying of sensuous reality; 2) the Aristotelian: a representation of the universal patterns of human behavior embodied in action; and the Hellenistic a rhetorical: imitation of canonized models. Though each of these is further complicated by deviation or variant interpretation the theory of imitation becomes again the basic of art and poetry.

Later during Classicism the doctrine obtained its higher side. Now Imitation of the great writers of the past need not and should not be merely a copying of devices of arrangement and style, but a passionate emulation of their spirit. John Dryden (1631 – 1700) an English poet, playwright, critic, and theorist put it in his ‘Essay of Dramatic Poesy’ this way: Those great men whom we propose to ourselves as patterns of our imagination, serve us a torch, which is lifted up before us, to illuminate our passage and often elevate our thought as high as the conception we have of our author’s genius”. Here imitation is united with its opposite, inspiration. W. Tatarkiewicz outlined the development of the theory of imitation from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century as having two tendencies: 1) some theoreticians who voiced the Aristotelian concept defended the principle of imitation at the expense of some concessions; 2) others who adhered to the Platonic concept abandoned it completely. Though, between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was no principle more commonly applied than *imitatio*.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century is preoccupied with the idea of being faithful to nature, rather than to antiquity. The term imitation acquires a pejorative meaning, denoting something unauthentic, forced, and disappears from the theory of art completely.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century doesn’t use either the term *imitatio*, or the principle, which for ages played the leading part in the theory of art.

### 3. Liberation of Arts and Artist

Ever since the Greek philosophers called art an “imitation of nature” their successors as E. Gombrich puts it, have been busy affirming, denying, or qualifying this definition.

Their own mythology would have told them a different story. For it tells of an earlier and more awe-inspiring function of art when the artist did not aim at making a ‘likeness’ but at rivaling creation itself. The most famous of these myths that crystallize belief in the power of art to create rather than to portray is the story of Pygmalion.

Ovid’s Pygmalion is a sculptor who wants to fashion a woman after his own heart. He prays to Venus for a bride modeled after his statue, and the goddess turns the cold ivory into a living body. In other words the sculptor here is not imitating nature, he creates what nature lacks and moreover asks nature to imitate his art. The idea turned to be both fruitful and challenging. Dozens of works of art, poetry and music were dedicated to the theme.

In historical perspective, though, the problem of artist as creator was to be paved by the liberation of artists, accompanied by increasing public interest to their personality. In Greece, where slaves mainly executed manual work, painters and sculptors hardly ranked higher than slaves, since, like other craftsmen they had to toil for money. The technical rather than the creative achievements were valued in a work of Art. The concept of a distinction between ‘liberal’ (worthy of a free man) and ‘vulgar’ arts survived in one form or another up to the Renaissance, forming the basis of secular learning in the Middle Ages. In the early Renaissance the lowly positive accorded to the visual arts was increasingly contested, providing a theoretical basis to raise them from the status of manual skill to the dignity of a liberal exercise of the spirit. The most

formidable champion of the visual arts was Leonardo da Vinci (1452 – 1519) Florentine artist, scientist, and thinker, the most versatile genius of the Italian Renaissance), who more than anyone else was responsible for creating the idea of the painter as a creative thinker.

Leonardo da Vinci extolled the power of the artist to create. In that hymn of praise to painting, the “Paragon”, he calls the painter, the Lord of all manner of people and of all things. “If the painter wishes to see beauties to fall in love with, it is in his power to bring them forth, and if he wants to see monstrous things that frighten or are foolish or laughable or indeed to be pitied, he is the Lord and God.” Indeed, the power of art to rouse the passion is to him a token of its magic.

“It happened, Leonardo continues, that I made a religious painting which was bought by one who so loved it that he wanted to remove the sacred representation so as to be able to kiss it without suspicion. Finally his conscience prevailed over his sighs and lust, but he had to remove the picture from his house.” It might be assumed that his own creations would appear more naturalistic than they are. A sense of imagination and free invention is openly apparent in his painting and drawn compositions. The elements of mystery, ambiguity and fantasy in his creations can be explained in his own terms, in that he acknowledged the merits of *fantasia* (imagination) and the necessity for *invenzione* in the creation of his own artistic world.

And yet Leonardo, as E. Gombrich puts it, if anyone knew that the artist’s desire to create, to bring forth a second reality; finds its inexorable limits in the restrictions of his medium. Today we read of Leonardo’s project to build a “flying machine”, but if we look into Leonardo’s notes we will not find such an expression. What he wants to make is a bird that will fly or a mechanical lion that will walk up Louis XII and open a compartment in his chest, unbosoming a model of royal coat of arms, the fleur-de-lis. The claim to be creator, a maker of things, passed from the painter to the engineer – leaving to the artist only the small consolation of being a maker of dreams.

The production of automata flourished in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, partly due to the influence of René Descartes (1596-1650), who referred to ‘living forms’ as ‘organic machines’. To demonstrate his doctrine the philosopher constructed an android, which performed somersaults on a tightrope.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the distinction between automata and art became less clear because of the changes in artistic self-consciousness and notion of creation, thus among other things great interest in kinetic art increased.

To relate man the maker to God the Creator was a commonplace with Medieval Thinkers. But to describe the poet as “another god” as J.C. Scaliger (Julius Caesar Scaliger, 1484-1558, had the highest scientific and literary reputation of any man in Europe) did it was not only an innovating idea but also rather daring one. The analogy was more flattering to human self-esteem than might have seemed permissible in the Middle Ages. Scaliger’ doctrine of genius is peculiarly important. Genius is something divine and innate, associated with enthusiasm (*furor poeticus*). In 1585 Bruno (1548-1600) argued that genius is the origin of the rules of art.

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**Valery Timofeev**, Senior lecturer at the department of the History of Western Literature of St Petersburg State University. He was born in Vyborg in 1957 and educated at Vyborg English Language School and St. Petersburg State University. He majored in English language and literature. He taught English at St. Petersburg University until 1991 when he started lecturing Western Literature at the same University. His MA thesis was “The Gormenghast Trilogy by Mervyn Peake” followed by PhD thesis “The didactics of John Fowles”.

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