Serving beauty:
Archetypal Hephaestus and the writer’s craft
By Elizabeth Eowyn Nelson, PhD

Let the beauty we love be what we do. –Rumi

I look upon fine Phrases like a lover. –Keats

There is an apocryphal tale about the English writer E. M. Forster that I have told on many occasions to my research students. One day, so the story goes, one of Forster’s more ardent admirers, a woman, spotted him at Piccadilly Station. He was about to board the train which, at that very moment, was chuffing loudly into the station and filling the air with a dense fog of steam like a curtain coming down between the novelist and his fan.

The fan had, of course, read all of Forster’s works and was eager for the next novel. Boldly, with quick, excited steps, she rushed up to him—as quickly, that is, as long skirts, layers of petticoats, and tightly-buttoned shoes would allow—and blurted out, “Mr. Forster! I’m such an admirer of your work. Please, can you tell me about your next novel?”

Gentlemen of the time were not accustomed to be accosted by unknown women in public places. So we can only imagine with what pomp the Great Man gravely turned to her and replied, “Madam. How can I possibly know what I think until I see what I say?”

I’m sure Forster’s ardent fan was disappointed, her burst of enthusiasm treated with disdain and she made to feel ridiculous for her boldness. But I would like to thank her for the wonderful gift she has given us because, as I imagine the story, E. M. Forster was surprised into speaking a truth that he had, perhaps never before, so succinctly articulated. Many of us cannot know what we mean until we see what we say. For writers, knowing begins as a dialogue between the self in the mind’s eye and the self on the page, but it must not end there.

I had occasion to remember this story about Forster and the fan in a recent conversation with one of my graduate students. It was dusk, and we were sitting in my office, where the beautiful quiet at the end of a satisfying day was palpable. We could exhale, and speak slowly, and relish the long pauses in our conversation as the dancer is inspired by momentary stillness.
“Two things, two principles I guess you’d call them, guide my writing,” I said to Susan. I paused, listening to the echo of my statement, testing its truth. I had been writing for 40 years, so boiling it down to two principles was either reckless reductionism or surprising simplicity. “The first is respect for my audience, my belief in their intelligence, curiosity, and discrimination. I imagine this reader—not the dull-witted, undereducated drone that conventional wisdom prepares us for—because it is more interesting. I imagine this reader because writing is a dialogue between me and my reader long before the work is published. Who wouldn’t prefer a lively conversation to a lethargic one?”

One of Susan’s eyebrows lifted as the corners of her mouth curled upward in a knowing grin. She and I had wrestled with ideas together many a time, enjoying the snap and crackle of two minds fully engaged.

I recalled a marvelous collection of essays by Ursula Le Guin, a smart, talented, and prolific writer, and a woman who does not pull her punches. She said that only the reader can complete our vision. Writing is an act of faith that the reader will even exist. ¹ She’s right. Though every writer I know has at least one manuscript gathering dust whose only reader was the person he or she imagined each step of the way—okay, and perhaps a long-suffering family member who loves us no matter what we do—that imagined reader is crucial to the author’s craft. If we want our work to endure, we are obligated to imagine our readers and gladly take responsibility for our impact on them. For instance, do we want to provoke or seduce? Is our intention to disturb or entertain? Yes, our fierce gaze is drawn to the center of the page—which, for a really preoccupied writer momentarily becomes the center of the cosmos—but the reader hovers around the edges, continually shaping the work.

A sudden breeze clattered the dry leaves of the Eucalyptus outside the window, recalling us from silent reverie. “What’s the second thing?” Susan asked quietly.

“Beauty.”

“Beauty? I’ve never heard you talk about that in class.”

I nodded. “I am guided by beauty. I dedicate hours and hours to crafting beautiful sentences and whole paragraphs, months and years crafting a beautiful book. Is everything I finish beautiful? Hardly. But I dedicate myself to beauty no matter how often I fall short because if it isn’t beautiful then it isn’t true, or not yet true.” Of course I felt the spirit of Keats’ in that moment. Arguably, one of the most frequently quoted and frequently debated passages from Romantic poetry, is the final couplet in Keats’ Ode on a Grecian Urn: “Truth is Beauty; Beauty is Truth/That’s all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.”

Susan replied, “Well, yes, so long as we remember that there are many truths.” We both laughed out loud: postmodernism ran in our blood and this was, after all, academia. At the very least we have to acknowledge our creatures even if we don’t always like them.

**Truth and Truing**

Upon reflection, I realized that I didn’t mean “true” in an ontological sense. Susan surprised me into an insight that, until our quiet conversation, I hadn’t seen. I am grateful to her. I mean true in the sense that a skilled craftsman refines and shapes an object into something graceful, balanced, and lithe—a little like Keats’ Grecian urn, come to think of it. Guided by the principle of Beauty, writers true their work though long, difficult hours of writing, reflecting, and revising. We don’t know what we mean until we see what we say, and it takes great patience to see it at all.

There’s a belief that writing is easy for writers. Those who have it tough, according to this, are all those beginning writers or non-writers or frustrated graduate students. That’s simply not so. Writing is difficult, period. But don’t listen to a writer whine and complain about how difficult it is without also knowing the other side of the story which, when we’re whining, we’re apt to forget. We wouldn’t write unless we loved it, unless it was a joy. To wit: I cannot conceive how bereft my life would be without writing.

So who is this person in me, in all writers, who practices Love and is dedicated to Beauty during the long, difficult process of truing the work, the one to whom Rilke speaks when he says, “that something is difficult must be one more reason for us to do it.”² Who takes delight in serving Beauty with all the skill and ability he or she possesses? Who is sometimes tortured in this service but nonetheless remains steadfast? If your imagination bends toward the Greek tradition, it is Hephaestus, the lame craftsman god and husband of the beautiful Aphrodite.

It frequently comes as a surprise to students that the fairest goddess of them all—Paris did, after all, award Aphrodite the apple and thus set in motion the train of events that led to the Trojan war—should be married to a blunt, bent, and hobbling male. Considering the Greek emphasis on beauty, of which Aphrodite is merely one exemplar, Hephaestus surprises by being part of the Greek pantheon at all.

Yet in one of the more famous paintings of Hephaestus, a Reuben, the god possesses something else perhaps more valuable to an Aphrodite: vigorous, muscular vitality concentrated wholly on his craft. He is unique among gods because he works and, though the other gods may view this necessity as degradation, we can see it as exaltation.

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Murray Stein\(^3\) considers Hephaestus the most inventive of all the gods, perhaps second only to Hermes, who effortlessly created the lyre and a pair of marvelous sandals within hours of his birth.\(^4\) Shortly thereafter Hermes traded the lyre to his big brother Apollo in exchange for the caduceus staff, and assumed the role of divine messenger. But Hephaestus remained a craftsman, slowly and patiently extending his skill by taking on increasingly intricate tasks.

For this reason alone, Hephaestus is an excellent archetype to bear in mind for writers, especially beginning writers, who may fantasize being a successful prodigy like Hermes who could, and did, create works of genius on the spot. Occasionally a whole sentence may emerge that way, but a whole work? Almost never. Imagining Hermes could give any writer an inferiority complex. Imagining Hephaestus can renew a writer’s love of craft itself, a love of working as much, or more, than the complete and finished work.

The ugly Hephaestus embodies devotion to *arête* or excellence, that most Greek of virtues, which was advocated by another strikingly ugly figure, Socrates. In fact, I have great affection for Hephaestus precisely because he isn’t beautiful. His devotion to beauty, his dedication to his craft, makes him beautiful. Beauty, in Hephaestus, is an intentional work and not an accident of birth.

After one of his parents (depending on which story you read) throws the crippled god down from Mount Olympus, Hephaestus finds sanctuary with two beautiful sea nymphs, Thetis and Eurynome. He expresses devotion to his adopted mothers by making exquisite jewelry, laboring privately this way for nine years. The apprenticeship of Hephaestus in the cave—long a symbol of the feminine womb—is that period of time all beginning writers need to develop the skill, knowledge, and confidence that will eventually allow them to seek wider attention. It is creative gestation, as the number nine makes plain. And, just as Hephaestus needed Thetis and Eurynome, the developing writer needs the protection and appreciation of a good enough mother to nurture embryonic talent. Mothering, in this sense, describes function, not gender. The role may be played by either father or mother, or by another family member, or perhaps by a good friend, mentor, or teacher.

After emerging from the creative shelter of his life with Thetis and Eurynome, Hephaestus claims the golden Aphrodite; she does not willingly consent. No self-possessed woman relishes being dispensed with as the prize in a business transaction, least of all the Goddess of Love and Beauty. Not surprisingly, then, Hephaestus’ marriage


to Aphrodite is a torment. Though he serves Beauty, she does not serve him, but goes where she will.

For instance, in one of the more famous incidents of Aphrodite’s extra-marital enthusiasms, Hephaestus attempts to capture the goddess *in flagrante delicto* with Ares, the Greek god of war. The archetypal craftsman weaves an extraordinary net of gold and casts it over the lovers, but in the end it is Hephaestus who looks foolish. How can anyone, even a god, capture Beauty? Love her, yes. Serve her, certainly. But capture her?

Like Hephaestus, writers weave nets of gold again and again to capture Beauty. Beauty will not stay, but the net remains, a winking reminder of the intricacies of our craft.

**Beyond Beauty**

Dusk is Aphrodite’s time, when the opalescent sky shifts from glowing orange-reds to chilly indigo blue like a warm lovers’ bed growing cool after the Goddess departs. Susan and I gaze out of the office window, now a square of black. Aphrodite was indeed gone, for now.

“So Hephaestus had his revenge,” I tell Susan. “Aphrodite and Ares were caught in his golden net.”

“Yes, but then they escaped.”

“Ah, but only after the damage was done, so to speak. Because here is the really clever part: Hephaestus knows eros is fleeting. By binding the lovers past the moment of desire, eagerness to bed quickly turned into eagerness to leave.” I pause. “You are right, though, in another way. Once Hephaestus removes the net, Aphrodite leaps up, joyfully, and speeds to Cyprus—unashamed and unscathed. There the Graces bathe and anoint her in ambrosial oil and swathe her round ‘in gowns/to stop the heart… an ecstasy—a vision,’ or so says the poet.”

Susan’s expression becomes quizzical and indignant. “That doesn’t seem right. Aphrodite loses none of her beauty or charm or desirability. She can be an adulterer over and over again and Hephaestus will never make Aphrodite feel remorse.”

“Remorse isn’t even in her vocabulary. Neither is loyalty.”

Susan shakes her head. “Sounds like a bad marriage.”

I nod my head. “Yes, it does. So it’s a good thing Hephaestus has a second chance.”

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We have no information about what happened after Hephaestus trapped Ares and Aphrodite in bed together, but we do know that Hephaestus marries again. And this time, it is a happy union. The story unfolds in *The Iliad* this way:  

Hephaestus’ adopted mother, Thetis, visits the lame smith to implore him to make a shield for her son Achilles who is fated to die in the Trojan War. As she approaches Hephaestus’ home, Charis, one of the three Graces, steps forward and greets her warmly. Thus, the marriage of Charis to Hephaestus is presented as a *fait accompli*, with at least the suggestion that they have enjoyed a lovely home together for some time. In this brief but telling passage, Charis is as graceful as her name implies. Her generosity toward Thetis is a fine example of *xenia*, the proper relationship between host and guest which was sacred to the Greeks and many other peoples.

For the writer, the graciousness of Charis symbolizes the attitude we can take toward the ideas, figures, and objects that appear on the doorstep of our mind. Fiction writers seem especially to know this, but the liveliness of the imagination is equally important to writers of nonfiction. The essential point is that just as Charis welcomes Thetis and conducts her to Hephaestus, writers need grace to conduct the gods into their work. “Who is on my doorstep today, as I sit down to write?” “What do they want of me?” “How can I best use my skills to fulfill their request?” These are some of the questions a writer may ask when they adopt an archetypal approach to the craft of writing. Thetis requests a shield, but it is Hephaestus who envisions it and then turns that vision into an exquisite work of art. And, as *The Iliad* makes plain, this is no easy or quick task. The gods may initiate the work, but it is up to the writer to envision how to do it and then labor, lovingly, over the actual doing.

Compared with Charis, Aphrodite begins to look a bit like a Trophy Wife. No doubt she is a vision, an ecstasy. As the Goddess of Love, how could it be otherwise? But Aphrodite is a particularly public vision. She’s the one everyone wants. In Charis, Hephaestus seems to have found his soul’s companion, the beloved he can live with in simple happiness. Hephaestus continues to serve Beauty, but now his life has charm and elegance, too.

Like Hephaestus, writers ultimately must find the inner companion who can lend grace and beauty to our words. We all need our own Charis so that we are free to imagine a cosmos and eagerly toil to bring it into being.

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7 Here I am informed and inspired by Murray Stein’s excellent discussion of Hephaestus and Aphrodite in *The Hephaistos problem*, (1993), which I referred to earlier.
References