

Tinkering Gods

*The Plot of Paul Harding's novel, Tinkers: Characters as Metaphors for the Gods in
Greek and Roman Mythology*

by C. Omaña Villanueva

Paul Harding was a drummer in a rock band on tour of Europe when he made the choice to write. He had always been a prolific reader, but during one of his road trips between gigs he read a title that seemed to encompass all of humanity. His band broke up and it was then and there that he decided to write. He signed up for a summer writing workshop at Skidmore College and his teacher, Marilynne Robinson, steered him toward the Iowa Writers' Workshop (Harding, interview). In his first book, *Tinkers*, Harding describes the inner workings of the death of an old man. But in doing so, Harding uses such formidable descriptions and symbolic language that his work can be interpreted in multiple ways. Here, I propose that the three main characters of Harding's prose, George, his father Howard, and the minister (the unnamed father of Howard), can be interpreted as metaphors for the gods, Cronus/Saturn, Uranus/Caelus, and Hermes/Mercury of Greek and Roman Mythology.

What does the reader do with the plot of this book? It is a story that made “absolutely” all agents avoid taking on the book (Harding, interview). What is the appeal for the reader? Regarding plot in general, Bell states that “the one thing you will have no matter how lousy” is plot. He goes on to say that there’s only one question -- does it work? “Can it connect with readers, transport [them] through the power of the story?” (Bell 6). In *Tinkers*, the answer is yes. Now, what is the story about? Harding refers to this book as “piles of episodes.” He goes on to say that “it’s like a bunch of paintings in galleries” (“Interview”). An argument can be made that this book is just that -- a tour through an art gallery. Harding’s interest in art populates the book. While George is on his deathbed, we get descriptions of a “still life done in oil” (Harding 30) and that of “another oil painting hanging above the desk” (Harding 32). Both descriptions are very visual and so descriptive that the reader can be sure that what he or she is reading is exactly what the author is seeing. Reading this book is similar to taking an art gallery tour, but there is something deeper at work here. It’s more like a guided tour, the kind where we have headphones or perhaps a tour guide that give us the background from curators and historians of the art we are seeing. The scenes are rich and made even richer when put in the context of something greater, leading to theme. But, as Harding says, “I write entirely by character,” pretty much ignoring plot (Harding, interview). Why, though, does it resonate so? This statement from Harding is in line with what Frey mentions when he states that “plot is really nothing more than a recap of what the characters do” (Frey, 1996). It is proposed here that what we see as characterization is very much in line with the history of storytelling and the importance of metaphoric

language in our fascination with certain stories. In addition, much of this book's appeal comes from its deep exploration of archetypes of the psyche, reminiscent of the studies of Joseph Campbell, the poetry of Robert Bly, the fiction of John Gardner, and the movies of George Lucas. And Harding's characterizations can be interpreted as reflecting many of the traits of the Greek and Roman gods from mythology, from which storytelling today can trace its origins.

The book starts with George, the son of the protagonist, on his deathbed: "George Washington Crosby began to hallucinate eight days before he died" (Harding 7). George's character has many influences of Cronos, also known as Saturn, the name of the Roman god more commonly known today. Saturn is known for many things, especially nowadays as the god of time, hence the word "chronograph," an instrument for recording time with great accuracy. George is actually a clock fixer, and it all started with an antique broken clock he bought at a yard sale, as George remembers from his deathbed:

Poke your finger into the clock; fiddle the escape wheel.... Stick your nose closer.... Read the names etched onto the works: *Ezra Bloxham--1794; Geo. E. Tiggs--1832*.... Lift the darkened works from the case. Lower them into ammonia. Lift them out, nose burning, eyes watering.... File the teeth.... Fix the clock. Add your name. (Harding 15)

We know from mythology that Saturn is strict, precise. In science Saturn is the 5th planet from the sun and the most distant "god" that can be seen from earth with the

naked eye. In astrology, Saturn is known as the 6th planet or πλανήτης (planētēs), “wanderer” in Greek (the Moon is included as a planet), and is the limiting god that forces our soul to adhere to “structures” before moving beyond to the energy of the “spiritual” outer planets, which symbolize transcendental energies that we must encompass before we die (“Planets”). In the East, the term “enlightenment” is clearly an appropriate word for this process. In the West, “spiritual rebirth,” or maybe “transcendence,” is a similar process. Thus George, on his deathbed, is coming to terms with his life.

In exploring mythology further, Saturn (Chronus) castrated his father (Uranus), throwing his genitals into the sea (“Saturn in Mythology”). In much the same way, it is George that makes his father leave the house. George’s attempt to stop his father from a seizure precipitates the father abandoning his family. This separation of the father from his son can be interpreted as a type of castration. And because of his father’s abandonment, or exile, George carries this guilt until his father returns later in his life, which marks the resolution of the book. In astrology (and mythology), Saturn represents obstacles, suffering, absence, and is usually associated with fathers (“Saturn”).

In Greek and Roman mythology, Uranus was the father of Cronus, also known as Saturn. Uranus, the god, governs electricity, eccentricity, genius, unpredictability and sudden change (“Uranus in Mythology”). In *Tinkers*, Howard is a metaphor of Uranus, known as the god of the sky. Many of these uranian traits can be seen in Howard. The planet Uranus is the next planet beyond Saturn and has an elliptical orbit, much different than the other planets (“Uranus”). And it is Howard that Harding states “is the

main character of the book,” and the book, “Howard’s story.” He goes on to say the story is “terribly elliptical” (Harding, interview). Furthermore, regarding eccentricity, we see all the diverse and creative pursuits, paid and unpaid, that Howard is known for:

Besides fixing pots and selling soap, these are some of the things that Howard did at one time or another.... Shoot a rabid dog, deliver a baby, put out a fire, pull a rotten tooth, cut a man’s hair, sell five gallons of homemade whiskey for a backwoods bootlegger..., fish a drowned child from a creek. (Harding 35)

Not only did Howard exhibit uranian energy in his pursuits, he was also prone to epileptic seizures, proving as a sort of electrical conduit to the cosmos: “It was as if there were a secret door that opened on its own to an electric storm spinning somewhere out on the fringes of the solar system” (Harding 46). Harding goes on to describe how Howard could “taste the raw stuff of the cosmos” by being gifted with such “voltage” that he “became pure, unconscious energy” (Harding 47). Thus, Howard can be viewed as a strong metaphor of Uranus.

In creating a language rich in symbolism and metaphor, Harding presents us with a blank canvas of sorts that we, as reader, can project our own inner psyches on. Harding pays special attention to father and son relationships, and how much of Harding’s prose resonates with more feminine archetypes having a basis in Greek and Roman mythology is beyond the scope of this essay. Paul Harding has said that “there’s very little plot” in *Tinkers*. Instead, he says he writes by character, as was previously mentioned. If we, the reader, look at George as a metaphor of Saturn, and Howard, as a

metaphor for Uranus, what do we make of the unnamed minister who is Howard's father? In many ways he has similarities to Howard in that he is epileptic and isolates himself from the family in order to compose sermons. He accidentally bites Howard during a seizure and then succumbs to an unmentioned mental illness, and then he is assumed murdered by members of his congregation. It is tragic. So Howard's father, the patriarch of the family and the shadowy background to the story, is absent from his son's life, as well. In interviews, Harding likens our nameless minister and family patriarch as "a ghost" and "legendary figure" (Harding, interview). In the novel, Harding writes, "Howard thought to himself, That's right; my own father was always in the room upstairs at the walnut desk tucked under the eaves, composing" (Harding 127). How we interpret this character is more complicated. It could be said that the minister embodies the energies of Mercury, or the god Hermes in Greek mythology. Mercury was the messenger to the gods ("Mercury"), and in his daily sermon-writing and ministerial duties, Howard's father exhibits the Mercury-like quality of communication but as a messenger of God. When we look at these traits in isolation, it is insufficient to our understanding of the story. An interesting feature of this book is the presence of four annotations that populate the text, and they seem like they are straight out of an encyclopedia: *Cosmos Borealis*, *Crepuscule Borealis*, *Tempest Borealis*, and *Cometa Borealis*. Each is at least one-third of a page long. What to make of the titles is not explored here. One author interprets them as a secondary, "parallel narrative" (Cirakli, 2014). But here, I would like to consider these as the writings of Howard's father. The writing is descriptive, rich in language, and communicates the New England landscape,

rather communes with it. Poetic phrases, such as “Light skin of sky and cloud and mountain on the still pond.... We whispered across the galaxies, Who needs Mars?” (Harding 45) make us look to the heavens. And later, we are grounded in some sort of ethereal existence with phrases such as “The bark of birches glows silver and white at dusk” (Harding 55) and, in the next: “The sky turned silver. The pond turned silver from the silver sky. It looked like a pool of mercury” (Harding 59). And lastly, just before the book ends, we get prose such as this:

We entered the atmosphere at dusk. We trailed a wake of fire. We were a sparkling trail of white fire hurtling over herds that grazed alluvial plains. The purple plains: steppe and table, clastic rocks from an extinct river strewn over the bed of an extinct ocean.... We were a burning fuse. We barely caught a glimpse of the darkening world below us before we burned away to nothing. (Harding 159)

We can interpret these elliptical passages like little elegies, each a proclamation of hope and also a visual record of the soul on its ascent into the cosmos. Hermes, or Mercury, was a guide to souls, travelers, and the divine messenger of the gods (“Mercury (in Astrology)”). And the descriptions paint a picture of a landscape alive and at odds with the bleak landscape often depicted in the text. It is very reminiscent of Frost’s poem, where the narrator says, “Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice” (Frost 1-2), juxtaposing the two ways that all life on earth will end. In the novel, we see the unforgiving landscape that is there at our feet and in our veins throughout the text, with a sprinkling of elegies that seem as if they were spoken by nature, herself. Howard’s

father's elegies are able to stand out among the rest of the text, and for the reader, transcend the bitterness and harsh reality of the story. In this way, Howard's father is key to our story, just like Mercury is key to harnessing the energies of the gods.

To interpret Harding's characters as metaphors for the gods of Greek and Roman mythology could be inaccurate. But for Harding, it probably would not matter. He says, "The best art doesn't have points" (Harding, interview). But as readers, we look at the plot line, in this case the story line, and try to make sense of it. Why does this book resonate with so many readers, men and women alike? Perhaps it is its sadness and suffering which all of us experience as we grow old. Perhaps it is death, that ultimate and paradoxical goal of life that awaits us all. The hope, or the transcendental message of Harding's book, is that we, as humans, believe that we will rise above our own lives, our own bodies, and in doing so elevate our consciousness and find meaning, however we choose. For Harding, being a fiction writer means that a "big part of [his] job is just exploring the power of metaphor" ("Interview"). In doing so, Harding has likely created a work of art that speaks not only to this generation, but to generations of the future. It transcends time and place, giving us glimpses into our origins, making us look deep within ourselves as we explore landscapes external and internal. *Tinkers* has the ability to work itself into the realm of dreams to touch on what it means to live an ordinary life with expectations of our mystical journey ahead. If we believe what we read, then this book is a guide to our final resting place next to the gods in the distant cosmos. And as we each make our journey toward death, *Tinkers* becomes a part of our modern-day mythology.

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