Dorothy L. Sayers: The Holy Mysteries

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Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) was an English writer whose works at first glance seem oddly unrelated, as if she were an enthusiast unable to stay with any one field of endeavor or inquiry. She wrote the popular Lord Peter Wimsey detective novels. After she finished with Wimsey, Sayers wrote a series of works expressive of the teachings of catholic Christianity. Then she translated and edited medieval romances, most notably, Dante's Divine Comedy. *Fans of her detective novels, medieval scholars, even Christians who did not like her ideas or the ways she expressed them, all condemned her when she moved from one field to another. She was accused of insensitivity and dilettantism. Even a recent biography of Sayers has little to say of her life and work beyond the period of the detective novels.*

It is the contention of this essay that Sayers's work is not disjoint and that Sayers herself was not being arbitrary as she changed the subjects of her writing. On the contrary, all of Sayers' writing is of a piece, growing from a single root, all aiming at the same goal.

Much of Sayers' student life at Oxford was spent in the study of medieval French Romances. This material, a source of myth and modern fantasy, provides continuity of form and content for Sayers' entire work: mysteries, apologetics, and Dante. The stories of knights on quests, battling evil and saving damsels, provide the form for modern detective stories, some of the content for Christian apologetics, and find their fulfillment in Dante's work.

Within this larger framework Sayers used her writing as a means for confronting the central issues of her life. The development of her detective novels can be seen, on their own merits and in the light of her life and later work, to be a process of confrontation that leads her to accept and finally witness strongly to the truth of catholic Christian teaching. Her work on Dante is seen as a continuation of her explorations of Christian doctrine in the unified symbol system of Dante's Commedia.

The Divine Comedy *fulfills her life work: the medieval romances, the good and evil mythology of the detective story, and her theological investigations of the wartime and postwar periods. Sayers' work in Dante is the crown of a life of great consistency and purpose.*

I

THE medieval epics of romance and faith, the quests, *Chansons de Geste*, the allegories, the legends of saints and lovers, tend to be for the modern reader a source of fantasy. We read bowdlerized excerpts from the Arthurian cycle to our children as we would read *Winnie the Pooh* or *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*. When we sneak back to read these tales ourselves, we tell ourselves that they are escape literature.

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In its own day, however, this literature gave flesh to the experience of an entire civilization. Rather than escape, it gave its hearers an entry into the whole world of meaning of medieval culture: sacramental, sensual, violent, ascetic, morally both very simple and very complex. The epics were living mythology.

It was this literature that Dorothy L. Sayers studied when she went up to Somerville College, Oxford, in 1912. She studied it for the reasons that any of us study anything: she enjoyed it, it meant something to her. She had surely been exposed to the English medieval tradition in her clerical, scholarly home.

At Oxford Miss Sayers took first class honors in Medieval Literature. She studied and produced a verse translation of *The Song of Roland* which later (1957) served as the basis of her edition of the Penguin Classics edition of that medieval French romance. The medieval romantic material in which the younger Dorothy immersed herself at Somerville speaks of the pure knight on quests for good deeds and holy objects; it speaks of an ordered social structure where everyone knows his place and knows the rules of social behavior; it speaks of the clash of good and evil, heroism and cowardice. The values of the world of medieval literature are clear, if sometimes contradictory. In a later commentary on her *Song of Roland*, Sayers characterized the values of the romance:

> Paynims are wrong, Christians are in the right; courage and loyalty are all that matters; a noble death is the crown of a noble life.[1]

It is precisely this medieval romance, with its structure, content and values, that provides a source and model for all of Dorothy L. Sayers' subsequent writings. Her works are eventually given contemporaneity and force by her own Christian faith. The style and details of the story change from the medieval originals in their journey through time, but the basic outlines and assumptions of medieval romance are with Sayers throughout her working life as a novelist, apologist, and scholar.

Her work divides fairly clearly into five stages. (a) At Oxford she studied and wrote of the world of medieval romance, not examining her own life for reasons for her interest. (b) Her first novels carried the fantasy of the good white knight forward into the contemporary detective tale. (c) In her later novels, as I shall try to demonstrate, she used this same romantic quest motif, with the characters of her detective novels, to

[1] Dorothy L. Sayers, trans., *The Song of Roland* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 28.

explore and order the chaos of her own experience. The fantasy became a mythology. (d) When the quest was completed, Sayers explored and expressed the Christian assumptions inherent in both medieval romance and her own mythology. (e) Toward the end of her life she turned back to the medieval romance and the world of scholarship by translating and editing the *Divine Comedy*. This apparent return to the original medieval sources is more than a return. For Sayers, her work on Dante is a fulfillment of fantasy, mythology, and the Christian revelation.

It is precisely this unity in Sayers' work that is missed by Janet Hitchman in her recent biography of Miss Sayers, *Such a Strange Lady*.[2] This biography exposes its subject in her unpleasantness, unhappiness, and insecurity. It gives more data about Sayers' life than has been previously available, and this data is helpful, if incomplete. Hitchman shows us a woman of talent and intelligence unhappy in the world because of her insecurity. She does not show us the roots of Sayers' writing. She does not show us why people continue to read Dorothy L. Sayers and respond to her work. I believe that Miss Sayers is still popular because she had the courage to explore her experience honestly and use that exploration as the basis of a series of writings that have emotional and intellectual integrity. This contention is supported by much of Miss Hitchman's data. It is supported by a critical reading of Sayers' work that Hitchman began, but did not carry through.

II

In his essay "The Guilty Vicarage," W. H. Auden admits to an addiction to detective fiction. After analyzing the magical function of mystery stories in terms of Aristotelian tragedy, sin, and the "mirror image of the Grail quest," Auden sums up his argument:

> The fantasy, then, which the detective story addict indulges, is the fantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence, where he may know love as love and not as the law. The driving force behind this daydream is the feeling of guilt, the cause of which is unknown to the dreamer. The fantasy of escape is the same, whether one explains the guilt in Christian, Freudian, or any other terms. One's way of trying to face the reality on the other hand, will, of course, depend very much on one's creed.[3]

[2] Janet Hitchman, *Such A Strange Lady: An Introduction to Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)* (London: New English Library, 1975). This book is the source of most of the factual data in this article.

[3] W. H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage," in *Academic Discourse*, ed. John H. Enck (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), p. 49.

Even Edmund Wilson, whose distaste for the detective genre is notorious, agrees that mysteries serve this reassuring, comforting function.

> Yet the detective story has kept its hold; had even, in the two decades between the great wars, become more popular than ever before; and there is, I believe, a deep reason for this. The world during these years was ridden with an all-pervasive feeling of guilt and by a fear of impending disaster which it seemed hopeless to try to avert because it never seemed conclusively possible to pin down the responsibility... [in the detective story] nobody seems guiltless, nobody seems safe; and then, suddenly the murderer is spotted and — relief — he is not, after all, a person like you or me. He is a villain — known to the trade as George Gruesome — and he has been caught by an infallible Power, the supercilious and omniscient detective, who knows exactly where to fix the guilt.[4]

Bruno Bettelheim, the child psychologist, has written a loving and compassionate book on the function of fairy tales called *The Uses of Enchantment*. In it he analyzes the functions that fantasy plays in the lives of children. Bettelheim speaks of the child's need to gain some control over the frightening turmoil of his feelings:

> He needs ideas on how to bring his inner house into order, and on that basis be able to create order in his life. He needs — and this hardly requires emphasis at this moment in our history — a moral education which subtly and by implication only, conveys to him the advantages of moral behavior, not through abstract ethical concepts but through that which seems tangibly right, and therefore meaningful to him. The child finds this kind of meaning through fairy tales.[5]

As adults we regress occasionally into our childish fears and chaos. We find the moral lessons of fantasy worth relearning, we find its reassurances comforting. As Auden says, the detective story reassures us of the ascendancy of good over evil and the ultimate union of all experience. Bettelheim makes almost exactly the same point. He is discussing the fairy tale motif of happy endings and the marriage of the prince and the princess:

> Ethically speaking that union symbolizes, through the punishment and elimination of evil, moral unity on the highest plane — and, at the same time, that separation anxiety is forever transcended when the ideal partner has been found with whom the most satisfying personal relationship is established.[6]

[4] Edmund Wilson, "Why Do People Read Detective Stories?," in *Academic Discourse*, p. 27.

[5] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 5.

[6] Bettelheim, *Uses of Enchantment*, p. 146.

Detective stories, of course, do not provide the archetypal comfort derived from fairy tales. They have not been through the centuries-long folk process of refinement. As Auden points out, most detective novels can be read once and never picked up again. But detective novels are fantasy and give at least a glimpse of archetypal unity and goodness. They provide one with that reassuring sense of order, without a conscious confrontation with one's own psyche. They fall into the category of "escape literature" because the reassuring and ordering is unconscious.

There is no reason to believe that detective fantasy serves a function for the author different from that which it serves for the reader. If the prodigious production statistics of people like Rex Stout, Agatha Christie, and Georges Simenon (over 80 books apiece) are indicative, detective fiction is written as it is read, quickly, for the effect. There is no major confrontation with personal reality. By report, Dorothy L. Sayers began writing mystery stories for money. She was not concerned about what function this fantasy material might be serving in her subconscious. And it probably served that reassuring function for Miss Sayers' writing after World War I that it served for the readers about whom Wilson speaks. Sayers' life was a kind of chaos. She was lonely, unsure of herself, and probably feeling angry and guilty. She had the guilt of her generation, to which Wilson refers, multiplied by her personal circumstances.

It is always dangerous, and often in bad taste, for a critic to dive into an author's work, pull out bits and pieces, and from these fragments to construct a picture of the author's psyche. In Sayers' work, however, there is a pivotal point, which marks a difference in the style and content of the Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries. These differences in style and content, it seems to me, can most easily be explained by reference to the life of the author. No other explanation makes sense.

The support for this contention lies in the detective novels themselves. The first books in the Wimsey series assume the spiritual cosmology of the medieval romances with no major innovations. Their world is the fantasy world of Bettelheim's fairy tales. Peter Wimsey is the white knight, and everyone is either good or bad. In the first book, *Whose Body* (1923), the reader is introduced to Lord Peter Wimsey, archetypal fey English lord and detective (as W. H. Auden called him, "a priggish superman")[7] and his circle. The plot and the characters are the stock English mystery story material well-handled: a Jewish merchant is cleverly murdered by a famous surgeon, but Wimsey exposes the mad scientist.

In the second novel, *Clouds of Witness* (1926), more of the Wimsey family is introduced in the course of a murder trial. The person on trial is Wimsey's brother, the Duke of Denver, who will not allow himself to be saved because he has too much honor to expose his mistress, with

[7] W. H. Auden, "Guilty Vicarage," p. 45.

whom he was bedded at the time in question. Wimsey, of course, is able to save his brother, and the damsel's honor.

The third book is *Unnatural Death,* originally published as *The Dawson Pedigree* (1927). Here Wimsey uncovers a truly evil murderess, an old lady's companion, who kills her for an inheritance. She is made to appear more evil by suggestions of lesbianism.

The fourth book in the series is *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928). Wimsey proves a valiant warrior, veteran of the Great War, innocent of the death of his grandfather. These are good detective stories, with just enough spice and unusual detail (for the day) to make them memorable.

After *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* Sayers wrote (with Robert Eustace as medical advisor) *The Documents in the Case* (1930). Peter Wimsey does not even appear in this book. It forms a break in the series of Wimsey books. In this book Sayers tries something new, because it is in this book that she begins the painful process of making conscious sense out of the senseless. Oddly enough, it is on this one book that Janet Hitchman is able to do a topnotch job of detective criticism. It is in her work on this book that Hitchman gives a glimpse of the heart of Sayers' work. She begins by giving a sense of Sayers' difficulties with men: her chasing after the young and romantic; her pregnancy; her marriage to Atherton (né Arthur) Fleming, who created for himself the image of dashing war ace, but whom Hitchman has shown to be a fraud. Hitchman shows how Sayers managed to fool herself for a long time over what her husband was like.

Following this exposition of Sayers' difficulties with men comes the analysis of *The Documents in the Case.* Hitchman sees in this book a reflection of crises in Sayers' life. Her parents had just died, and she was beginning to realize the difficulties in her marriage. Hitchman shows how Sayers used this book to explore her loss, her disappointment, and her identity as a woman by having the murder victim be a man much like her husband.

> It is difficult not to see Harrison, the victim, as Fleming [Sayers' husband]. He was pedantic and pompous, so was Fleming. He dabbled in water colours and crayon drawings, a hobby of Fleming. He bullied his wife, and demanded her utmost obedience — Fleming had tried to do this and failed. In this book [*The Documents in the Case*] Dorothy was telling him that he would never succeed; not warning him that she might poison him, that is a bit too fanciful, but showing how his attitude was poisoning their lives.[8]

[8] Hitchman, *Strange Lady,* p. 76.

It is doubtful if Fleming's shallow mind could take in the lessons she was trying to instil, he may not even have read her books, but at least she unburdened herself, and showed how a marriage could be futilely worn away.[9]

The Documents in the Case is probably the most self revealing book there is among her works. Apart from any disillusions Dorothy may have had over her marriage, 1928 and 1929 were sad years for her. Her father died in the September of 1928 and her mother followed him ten months later.[10]

If *The Song of Roland* and the first four Wimsey novels fit the definition of fantasy, *The Documents in the Case* begins a kind of writing best called mythology. When ancient and primitive peoples experience the world around them as chaos, they tell themselves a series of stories to explain the significance of their experience. The stories are called myths, the series is a mythology. We still live by sophisticated versions of these mythologies. When a person living in the present age experiences his life as chaos, he either accepts a mythology he finds around him, or, if he is able, he forges his own.

The contemporary scholar, Joseph Campbell has done an important four volume study of world mythologies called *The Masks of God.* The fourth volume is called *Creative Mythology.* In this volume he speaks of this contemporary forging of mythologies.

> ... the individual has had an experience of his own — of order, horror, beauty, or even mere exhilaration — which he seeks to communicate through signs; and if his realization has been of a certain depth and import, his communication will have the value and force of living myth — for those, that is to say, who receive and respond to it of themselves, with recognition, uncoerced. Mythological symbols touch and exhilarate centers of life beyond the reach of vocabularies of reason and coercion.[11]

Campbell goes on to define this creative mythology functionally. The first function, he says, is to

> reconcile waking consciousness to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of this universe *as it is*: the second being to render an interpretive total image of the same, as known to contemporary consciousness.... A third function, however, is the enforcement of a moral order.... The fourth and most vital function of a mythology, then, is to foster the centering and unfolding of the individual in integrity, in accord with (d) himself (the microcosm), (c) his culture (the mesocosm), (b) the universe (the macrocosm), and (a) that awesome ultimate mystery which is both beyond and within himself and all things.[12]

[9] Hitchman, *Strange Lady,* p. 77.
[10] Hitchman, *Strange Lady,* p. 78.
[11] Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. 4.
[12] Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology,* pp. 4-6.

I certainly do not intend to claim that Sayers' work is earth shaking art of great genius. I do claim that in her later detective novels Dorothy L. Sayers is exploring just such a deep experience of reality as Campbell describes. She uses her detective novels to communicate her experience. In this process her detective novels take on the quality of a mythology as Campbell defines it. Her work is transformed. It begins as fantasy which does not express reality directly but resolves, at least temporarily, subconscious psychological conflicts. It ends as mythology which confronts experience as chaos, and conquers the chaos in expressing it.

It surprises me that Hitchman does not see the organic link between the self-exploration of *The Documents in the Case* and the later Wimsey books. The book immediately following *Documents* is *Strong Poison* (1930). Halfway through this book comes the turning point mentioned earlier.

> That was the second time Wimsey had been asked not to alter himself.... As the taxi lurched along the rainy embankment, he felt for the first time the dull and angry helplessness of mutability. Like the poisoned Athulf in *Fool's Tragedy,* he could have cried, "Oh, I am changing, changing, fearfully changing!"[13]

Strong Poison has some serious weaknesses in plot and in Wimsey's character, but it introduces a problem which will occupy Wimsey and Sayers for six years. It begins a romantic quest that overflows this and several other books.

The problem is Miss Harriet Vane. Miss Vane, writer of detective fiction, is defendant in a poisoning trial, and, of course, Wimsey saves her life. Under normal circumstances, an author would have had the young lady swoon in gratitude in her savior's arms and the book would end in a minor blaze of passion. In fact, the book ends on an unresolved chord:

> "I intend to marry the prisoner."
> "What?" said the Duke. "Good Lord, what? what?"
> "If she'll have me," said Lord Peter Wimsey.[14]

These are the last words of the book.

In *Strong Poison* Wimsey is suddenly anxious for a long term, satisfying relationship with Harriet Vane. This, following on the heels of Sayers' parents' deaths and her disappointment over Fleming would seem to indicate clearly that the process of self-exploration, or chaos ordering, begun in the non-Wimsey book was being carried over and continued. Hitchman evidently does not agree.

[13] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (New York: Avon Books, 1930), p. 71.
[14] Sayers, *Strong Poison,* p. 192.

Throughout *Strong Poison* Wimsey throws himself at Harriet Vane, and when he has saved her, she does not want to marry him. We learn through the following novels that she does not want to marry a man as a payment of a debt of gratitude and have to spend her life saying thank you to the man she has married. Wimsey, however, is persistent. He develops a routine of asking Harriet for her hand on certain ceremonial occasions, so that she will know he is still asking but will not be unduly inconvenienced. This routine is continued for six years and five Wimsey novels.

For the devoted Wimsey fan (and everyone who reads these novels is either bored or a devoted fan) *Strong Poison* is important and exciting not so much because it reassures as a mystery fantasy is expected to, but because it is the beginning of the Wimsey/Vane relationship. The character of Peter becomes more important than fantasy motifs and he becomes in this book more of a human being; still not a very believable human being perhaps, but a human being who is subject to death and mutability, and develops according to his own integrity. In allowing Peter to become more truly human, Sayers chooses to deal with real human issues and problems in the fairyland of detective fiction. Over the six Wimsey novels which follow *Strong Poison (Five Red Herrings, Have His Carcase, Murder Must Advertise, The Nine Tailors, Gaudy Night,* and *Busman's Honeymoon),* Sayers and Peter and Harriet have a three-way struggle in which the characters demand and receive an increasing amount of autonomy. Out of the struggle also, I believe, comes more order for Sayers' chaos.

Sayers' conquest of her chaos is the story of the relationship between Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane. It is the story of the slow untangling of an emotional knot. The untangling of this knot and the theological and aesthetic issues involved are all part of the reality of the characters Sayers has created, so that when Harriet finally feels free to say to Peter "Placet," it is as if a long, complicated symphony had finally picked up every variation of every theme and brought them to fulfillment in a great triumphant conclusion; that unresolved chord is finally resolved. The intellectual intricacies are given cohesion by the emotional satisfaction, and the emotional content is given form, context, and validity by the intellectual integrity of the whole process. The chaos has an order.

In *Strong Poison* Wimsey sets for himself a goal, just like a knight of the round table. Harriet implicitly makes clear the terms on which she can accept Wimsey's offer of marriage. The novels between *Strong Poison* and *Gaudy Night,* in which Harriet agrees to marry the now middle-aged Lord, are uneven, some poor, some excellent, but they are part of that emotional/intellectual process of resolution which the reader shares with Peter and Harriet, and with their creator, Dorothy L. Sayers.

The process of resolution, which begins in *Strong Poison* is also the development of Sayers' mythology.

If the novels which follow are read in the light of *The Documents in the Case* and *Strong Poison,* Miss Sayers' process of myth building becomes clear. Out of the chaos a dynamic and inclusive mythology begins to rise, finally completed in *Gaudy Night. The Five Red Herrings* (1931), which follows *Strong Poison,* is as far from the rest of the Wimsey books as it can be. Rather than being a novel based on character it is an attempt to do what Sayers had not done before: it is a book based on a timetable problem. As if to try to avoid Harriet Vane (who must contain at some level large amounts of Dorothy L. Sayers, as Miss Sayers herself both affirmed and denied), Sayers puts Wimsey in a Scots resort and gives him a problem of train schedules to work out, which he does with bad grace. The solution to the problem is long and tedious, and there is barely a single living character in the bunch. Miss Sayers may be trying to avoid something in this book, but she has begun a process that cannot be turned aside.

It seems that she tried to deal with the problem in the next novel, *Have His Carcase* (1932). Peter and Harriet are set down to deal with a summer resort throat-slitting. The two detectives scurry around, together and separately, solve the not very interesting crime in a not very interesting way, and when the novel is over are left exactly where they were at the beginning: frustrated about each other and unhappy about the situation as it stands. *Have His Carcase* is the last novel Harriet appears in as a character until *Gaudy Night.*

Murder Must Advertise (1933), is back to the level of quality of the earlier novels, if the reader is able to ignore some silly scenes involving Wimsey in a harlequin costume. One of the qualities which makes *Murder Must Advertise* an interesting book is the setting and the way the characters and setting are inseparable. It takes place in an advertising agency, and most of the characters are denizens of that agency: clever, cynical people who use words to manipulate the public and rather dislike themselves for it. The reason for the verisimilitude of *Murder Must Advertise* is that it comes right out of Sayers' experience. For the first time in her novels she is able to take settings and people she knows well; she is able to take the external data of her own life and use it as the stuff of the mystery story. Sayers spent many years writing advertising copy in an agency in London, and she has placed in her fictional agency a young woman, canny young Oxford graduate, Miss Meteyard, who must carry her own load in that man's world, must sling words with the best of them. Sayers is there, as she is in *The Nine Tailors* and *Gaudy Night.*

In *The Nine Tailors* (1934) there is a young girl of the manor of whose fortune Wimsey becomes trustee, who wants to grow up to do what Sayers and Vane both do, write popular fiction. The focus of the

plot is a Fen Country parish very much like the one in which Sayers grew up and her father served for so many years. The parish of the novel is served by a man very much like Dorothy's father. The plot here, as in *Gaudy Night,* is about the evil results of good intentions, which is an experience I expect Sayers knew. As in both *Murder Must Advertise* and *Gaudy Night,* the characters are people whom Dorothy knew. As in *Gaudy Night,* no one is really murdered. All the issues which are resolved in *Gaudy Night* are at least suggested in *The Nine Tailors,* even including the aesthetic problems of writing a novel. *The Nine Tailors* is the trial balloon that takes off. It does not directly involve the Wimsey/Vane relationship, but it involves all the issues surrounding that relationship. Sayers finds an order in those issues that involves her own background, deep feelings, and emotions. It works. *The Nine Tailors* is a successful book for her, because the solution to the issues fits; she is ready for the Wimsey/Vane resolution. The book works for the reader for many of the same reasons. Setting, characters, plot details, all ring true, as does the moral dilemma and its solution. No knowledge of prior books is required to enjoy it, nor is sympathy for Harriet required, which some readers find hard to muster.

It is on *The Nine Tailors* that Edmund Wilson vents his spleen in an article subsequent to the one mentioned above. On the basis of the first article people had written to him suggesting he read Sayers, specifically *The Nine Tailors.*

> Well, I set out to read *The Nine Tailors* in the hope of tasting some novel excitement, and I declare that it seems to me one of the dullest books I have ever encountered in any field... [15]

He complains about the detail on bellringing, clichéd English country characters, the plot, the ecclesiastical detail, and Lord Peter, the "dreadful stock English nobleman of the casual and debonair kind..." with his "awful whimsical patter..." He then administers a Wilsonian *coup de grace*:

> I had often heard people say that Dorothy Sayers wrote well.... But, really, she does not write very well: it is simply that she is more consciously literary than most of the other detective story writers.... In any serious department of fiction, her writing would not appear to have any distinction at all. [16]

It is useless to try to defend Sayers on this point. Wilson's observations are correct, if overstated. Sayers' prose style is self-conscious, sometimes annoyingly so. Her situations and characters are not terribly

[15] Wilson, "Why Detective Stories?," p. 29.
[16] Wilson, "Why Detective Stories?," p. 29.

original. Wilson's observations are all, to a point, correct. His argument, however, finally loses its effect. He says, "I found it dull." He then gives reasons. I can say, "I enjoyed it," and give my reasons. I can say, in Campbell's terms, that I "receive and respond" to her mythology. I recognize the struggle and respond. Unlike Wilson I like bells and ecclesiastical detail. But Sayers is defensible on more objective critical grounds.

Wilson admits to having skipped large portions of the book. On finding that he had met these characters before in bad English novels, he jumped ahead looking for suspense and action. He was bound to be disappointed, for Sayers' books, for better or worse, hang on her characters. Sayers does use stock characters from the English comedy of manners tradition. Many of her characters never come to life: the village rustics in *The Nine Tailors* remain, for the most part, village rustics. The same is true in her other books. But Sayers has an ability to take characters out of the mannered tradition and bring them to life. Peter Wimsey and all the characters close to him, the characters who carry the spine of the story and of the mythology, come to life. This is the life that is the life of any novel. If Wilson had read more carefully he might have seen it.

It is the ability to draw characters that makes *Gaudy Night* a good book, and the culmination of her work. Sayers has learned how to let people live in fiction. If you do not like Sayers' characters, you will not like *Gaudy Night.* In *Gaudy Night* (1936) Peter and Harriet are reunited, ready to come to grips with the problem that has been annoying and upsetting them for the previous six years. They finally face the relationship head on, while Harriet is having to face several other things: the integrity of her writing, the nature of the academic life, the nature of evil, and, most important, herself and her stubbornness and fear. The book weaves together themes, action, the city of Oxford itself, the characters, and comes to a real and exciting resolution.

The details of plot in *Gaudy Night,* as in *The Nine Tailors,* come in great abundance from Miss Sayers' own life. She was born in Oxford, attended Somerville College, and received one of the first First Class Honours awarded to a woman there. The novel is set in a women's college like Sayers' Somerville, where relationships with men are a rather thorny subject, a setting in which Harriet's relationship with Peter is made doubly difficult. The difficulty, however, clarifies the relationship. In the context of the lives and problems of these single women, Harriet sees many of her own problems from a new perspective.

The crime is sordid, but not murderous. A college servant sends a series of nasty anonymous notes to students and dons. The pressure caused by these notes brings about anger, distrust, and near-tragedy in the college. It also brings about a great deal of self-examination by the

staff as they realize that any of them could have done it. Harriet comes into the situation to solve the mystery. At the same time she tries to write a mystery novel and deal with Peter Wimsey. It is only when Wimsey himself arrives on the scene, still the white knight, that all the problems are solved.

At the end of *Gaudy Night* Peter speaks to Harriet of the difficulty of the preceding five years:

> "If you have found your own value," he said, "that is immeasurably the greatest thing.... It has taken me a long time to learn my lesson, Harriet. I have had to pull down, brick by brick, the barriers I had built up by my own selfishness and folly. If, in all these years, I have managed to get back to the point at which I ought to have started, will you tell me so and give me leave to begin again? Once or twice in the last few days I have fancied that you might feel as though this unhappy interval might be wiped out and forgotten."
> "No; not that. But as though I could be glad to remember it."
> "Thank you. That is far more than I expected to deserve." [17]

This union of Peter and Harriet points beyond itself. It is a union in the soul of their creator. It is love redeeming and making new. There is no need to write more.

Of course, Sayers did write more. If *Strong Poison* is the *Inferno* of Sayers' own personal *Divine Comedy*, and the first 3/4 or so of *Gaudy Night* is the *Purgatorio*, then the last of *Gaudy Night* and *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937) are the *Paradiso*. Bliss is reached and plumbed. Peter and Harriet are married in fine style in Oxford and then rush off to their honeymoon house, only to find a corpse in the cellar. The last book was called forth from a play by the same title written by Sayers in collaboration with her old friend, Muriel St. Clare Byrne. But when the murderer is discovered in this last novel, the life goes out of the Wimsey family. They have served their purpose, the mythology is complete, the quest finished. Sayers' mind was elsewhere.

An important task of any future biography of Dorothy L. Sayers will be to fill in the years from the late 1920's to the mid-1930's with hard factual data which Hitchman could not obtain. It would be very nice to know what experience of love and wholeness, whether conscious and active or subconscious and passive, was taking shape in those years, and being given form in the series of novels from *The Documents in the Case* to *Busman's Honeymoon*.

[17] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (New York: Avon Books, 1936), p. 380.

III

Once her quest was complete, Sayers explored the content of the mythology she had developed. She stepped back to take a look at the assumptions on which her epic was based. The language in which she wrote of her work, however, was not the language of anthropology and comparative religion. She was at home in an older intellectual tradition. She is speaking here of the poet's experience beginning to take shape in his head:

> He no longer feels himself battered passively by the impact of external events — it is no longer something happening *to* him, but something happening *in* him; the reality of the event that is communicated to him in activity and power. So that the act of the poet in creation is seen to be threefold — a trinity — experience, expression, and recognition; the unknowable reality known in its expression; and power in the recognition; the whole making up the single and indivisible act of creative mind.
>
> Now what the poet does for himself, he can also do for us. When he has imaged forth his experience, he can incarnate it, so to speak, in a material body — words, music, painting — the thing we know as a work of art. [18]

This is Trinitarian language. As Christian theology has Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Sayers' experience of art has experience, expression, and recognition, or as she says elsewhere: idea, energy, power. Her Trinitarian language speaks of an infinite God who becomes a man and is known in his creation as power. This language refers back to one of the roots of medieval romance, and the mythology deepest in Sayers' own past. As a girl, Dorothy, a good Victorian preacher's daughter, must have sat through many sermons, and learned the catechism backward and forward. She knew the Christian mythology better than most.

Even after she had left home for Oxford and was in the midst of her most rebellious period, Dorothy could not have escaped Christianity. Theological discussion of all shades of belief and nonbelief was breathed in as part of the Oxford atmosphere. It is possible that she was aware of the residual presence of a young Fellow of Queens who had left to become headmaster of Repton school only two years before she arrived at Oxford in 1912. The young priest was William Temple whose rise from Repton to St. James, Picadilly, to the See of Manchester, to the See of York, to the See of Canterbury was as swift as it was newsworthy. Whether she heard of him at Oxford, or only later as he rose to prom-

[18] Dorothy L. Sayers, "Towards a Christian Aesthetic," in *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*, ed. Roderick Jellema (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 79-80.

inence, his clear thinking and lively leadership of the English Church must have presented the young woman with something to think about. By the time she was much older she acknowledged a debt to the then archbishop.[19] The cornerstone of Anglican theological thought in the 20's and 30's was the doctrine of the Incarnation, and Temple was one of its foremost exponents. The Incarnational theology was based on careful consideration of the doctrine of the Trinity. If Sayers did not know Temple, they drank from the same spring.

As she saw her own inner self take flesh in the novels following *Strong Poison,* she must have realized that the experience she was having was described in the Christian theology that was so much a part of her life. The order she had found for her creation, the experience of unity she had known, was what the Church claimed to be part of the structure of reality.

The created order, says Christian doctrine, is God's self expression. Creation is shown its own perfection and the very nature of its creator in the unique event of the Messiah. Jesus is the Christ, the second person in the Trinity present to his people as a man. Jesus is the event in which the Infinite shows itself in the finite. As Temple expresses it:

> ....it is of the very nature of God that He should reveal Himself. The Logos, thought or speech, is the means by which a mind reveals itself to another. To say then that this eternally exists in relation to God and is itself Divine is to affirm of God that He is in His own nature self-revealing. The whole process of that revelation which has been going on through history and through prophets, comes to complete fulfillment in the Incarnation.[20]

Temple's understanding of the doctrine of the Incarnation can be distilled into four points: (a) God's self-expression, (b) God's love, (c) man's freedom, (d) man's responsibility.[21]

Sayers' understanding of her art takes this same form, with the same four results.

> 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 realize that its service is perfect freedom.[22]

[19] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to be King: A Play-Cycle on The Life of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943), p. 26.

[20] William Temple, *Mens Creatix: An Essay* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1917), p. 317.

[21] Joseph Fletcher, *William Temple: Twentieth Century Christian* (New York: Seabury Press, 1963), pp. 19-21. This material on Temple is in part taken from Fletcher's explanation of Temple's work.

[22] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (1941; reprint ed., Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970), p. 66.

In other words, the artistic creator, in his incarnation knows freedom, love, and responsibility, both as creator and as creature.

> The mind of the maker is generally revealed, and in a manner incarnate, in all its creation. The works, severally and jointly, are manifestations within space-time of the Energy and instinct with the Power of the Idea.... The personality of the creator is expressed partially, piecemeal, and as it were impersonally or through created persons.
>
> Christian doctrine further affirms that the Mind of the Maker was also incarnate personally and uniquely.[23]

Incarnation is self-expression, she knew incarnation by experience.

Sayers discovered that as she gave flesh to her painful experiences in detective stories, she was doing exactly what the Church said God does in His creation.

> The point I shall endeavor to establish is that these statements about God the Creator [in the Creeds of the Church] are not, as is usually supposed, a set of arbitrary mystifications irrelevant to human life and thought. On the contrary, whether or not they are true about God, they are, when examined in the light of direct experience, seen to be plain witness of truth about the nature of the creative mind as such and as we know it.[24]

As she gave flesh to her experience in Peter and Harriet, she discovered that she was giving flesh to this central doctrine of the Church.

After the death of Wimsey, when detective fiction no longer served as her mythology, Miss Sayers began to explore and express her own Christian faith and the teaching of the Church. Her chaos had taken shape. From seeking the shape she moved toward an examination of the shape she had found.

She examined it in various forms: stage plays (*e.g. The Zeal of Thy House,* 1937); radio plays (*The Man Born to be King,* 1943), essays (collected in such books as *Unpopular Opinions,* 1946). The most complete expression of her understanding of both art and theology is *The Mind of the Maker* (1941). This book, which appeared six years after *Gaudy Night,* expressed in systematic, theological terms the understandings that had taken flesh in her earlier mystery stories. In fact, all the issues she explores explicitly in her later, theological work take shape in the characters of the mystery stories. One can follow the development of her ideas on basic human issues through the detective novels and beyond to the theological works: issues such as creation, freedom, determination, evil, spirit, incarnation, and love.

[23] Sayers, *Mind of the Maker,* p. 87.

[24] Sayers, *Mind of the Maker,* p. xiii.

For example, the question of the independence of the work of art from the creator is developed from *The Nine Tailors* to *Gaudy Night* to *The Mind of the Maker*. This issue is central to a theology of the Incarnation. If a character who makes an idea flesh is not truly free and alive, then what it incarnates is not free and alive. This issue of freedom is made up of many related elements: self-expression, freedom, predestination, love, and several others. In *The Nine Tailors* it is a minor matter for a minor character, the young would-be novelist.

"H'm!" said Wimsey. "If that's the way your mind works, you'll be a writer one day."

"Do you think so? How funny! That's what I want to be. But why?"

"Because you have the creative imagination, which works outwards, till finally you will be able to stand outside your own experience and see it as something you have made, existing independently of yourself. You're lucky."[25]

The same issue is central to the whole plot of *Gaudy Night* and is made explicit and resolved as the mystery is solved. Peter, discussing one of the characters in Harriet's novel, says:

"He has, you see, a gloomy conviction that love is sinful in itself, and that he can only purge himself by taking the young woman's sins upon him and wallowing in vicarious suffering.... He'd still be a good, and a pathological goop, but he would be a bit more consistent."

"Yes — he'd be interesting. But if I give Wilfred all those violent and lifelike feelings, he'll throw the whole book out of balance."

"You would have to abandon the jig-saw kind of story and write a book about human beings for a change."

"I'm afraid to try that, Peter. It might go too near the bone."

"It might be the wisest thing you could do."

"Write it out and get rid of it?"

"Yes."[26]

The issue of the creature's freedom is then handled more abstractly in *The Mind of the Maker*.

[25] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World; Harbrace Paperback Library, 1962), p. 106.
[26] Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 255-256.

....the creator's love for his work is not a greedy possessiveness; he never desires to subdue his work to himself but always to subdue himself to his work. The more genuinely creative he is, the more he will want his work to develop in accordance with its own nature, and to stand independent of himself. Well-meaning readers who try to identify the writer with his characters or to excavate the author's personality and opinions from his books are frequently astonished by the ferocious rudeness with which the author himself salutes these efforts at reabsorbing his work into himself. They are an assault upon the independence of his creatures, which he very properly resents.[27]

For these very reasons Sayers might resent this essay, which uses her life to explore her works. And yet Sayers has Harriet say, in the selection from *Gaudy Night* just quoted, that she must use the problems of her life in her art. Sayers herself used Dante's life to help in understanding his work. The critic's responsibility is to respect both the life and the work of an author, each in its integrity. The critic tries to find the unity and consistency in the author's life and work without violating either. In *The Mind of the Maker* Sayers herself expressed the unity of her work. She spoke of the artist looking back over her work.

....if he looks back along the sequence of his creatures, he will find that each was in some way the outcome and fulfillment of the rest — that all his worlds belong to the one universe that is the image of his own Idea. I know it is no accident that *Gaudy Night*, coming towards the end of long development in detective fiction, should be a manifestation of precisely the same theme as the play *The Zeal of Thy House*, which followed it and was the first of a series of creatures embodying a Christian Theology. They are variations upon a hymn to the Master Maker; and now, after nearly twenty years, I can hear in *Whose Body?* the notes of that tune sounding unmistakably under the tripping melody of a different descant[28]

Sayers understood her own quest in relation to an unfolding of incarnation. Her work is personal mythology as Campbell expresses that concept, but for Dorothy L. Sayers it is more. It is experience given shape and meaning, but the meaning and shape are the very meaning and shape of the universe as expressed in Christian doctrine. The shape and meaning finally become more important than the fantasy forms which had carried them. Christian teaching replaces the detective story as a tool for personal exploration.

This is, in effect, the same distinction between the process and the content of fantasy that Auden draws in his essay. "The fantasy of escape is the same, whether one explains the guilt in Christian, Freudian, or

[27] Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, p. 106.
[28] Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, p. 207.

any other terms. One's way of trying to face the reality, on the other hand, will, of course, depend very much on one's creed." [29]

IV

Sayers' move from mystery stories to theology confused, surprised, and angered many of her readers. The public wanted her to stay predictable. But she would not do what the public wanted. She effectively articulated the truth of catholic Christianity for England before, during, and after World War II.

After the war, in the late forties and early fifties, Sayers' work seemed to change direction again, so that she was again accused of inconsistency and dilettantism. She became interested in Dante, taught herself medieval Italian, and translated and edited the *Divine Comedy* for the Penguin Classics.

Hitchman has suggested that Sayers found in Dante (as, says Hitchman, she had found in Jesus) some kind of vicarious love relationship. If there was a close relationship, it was certainly not that of lovers. More probably Sayers thought of the late poet as a brother, for they shared the same mother and father. They shared the same experience. Their mother was the Church. For each the Church was the bearer of the second person of the Trinity, incarnate for man's salvation. Their Father was God, Creator and lover of what He had created. They shared experience of love affairs that revealed to them in flesh the love of the Creator, and opened to them the fullness of the truth of the Word of God.

For Dante the love affair (if it can be called that) was his own with Beatrice, who became the one in whom he found the love of God revealed, who called forth the *Commedia*. For Dorothy L. Sayers the love affair was that between Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane (if there was another, more concrete, we do not know). As she worked out their relationship, she discovered what the Church had meant all along when it talked about love and salvation. In the introduction to her *Divine Comedy* Sayers speaks of Dante and Beatrice in a way that makes clear the link between Sayers and Dante.

> Dante... is the image of every Christian sinner, and his pilgrimage is that which every soul must make, by one road or another, from the dark and solitary Wood of Error to the City of God.
> Beatrice... [is the one] in whom he seemed... to see Heaven's glory walking the earth bodily.... Beatrice thus represents for every man that person — or, more generally, that experience of the Not-self — which, by arousing his adoring love, has become for him the God bearing image, the revelation of the presence of God. [30]

[29] Auden, "Guilty Vicarage," p. 49. See note 3 above.

This link of the experience of incarnate love would have been enough to bind Sayers to Dante Alighieri. But Dante and his *Comedy* turned out to be far more for the detective novelist turned apologist. The *Divine Comedy* was for Sayers the fulfillment of a life given shape by the medieval romances. It was the fulfillment of her fantasies: *The Song of Roland*, where "paynims are wrong, Christians are right," [31] and the early detective novels where the author/reader can, as Auden said, indulge "the fantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence, where he may know love as love and not as the law." [32] In the *Divine Comedy* the Christians are right, and love is certainly known as Love.

Dante's work was also the fulfillment of Sayers' mythology. Her later novels are a quest for realization in the love of Peter and Harriet. The *Commedia* is a quest for realization in the love of Beatrice. In both cases, as has been said, the earthly love bears a greater love in its belly. Dante called Sayers back to the academic life, which she had always loved, and, in a sense, never left.

The *Divine Comedy* is even a fulfillment of Sayers' apologetic writing. The unity of catholic Christianity that Sayers expresses in her writings is nowhere given the coherence it gains in Dante, unless it is in Thomas Aquinas, whom both Sayers and Dante had read.

In the *Divine Comedy* Sayers' love of the quest myth, her personal mythology expressed in the mystery stories, and her Christianity all found expression. Her work on Dante expressed the consistency of her whole life. It is somehow appropriate that she died before the translation of the *Paradiso* was quite finished, since Paradise is not something to be achieved in this life.

Although scholars have not paid much attention to it, Sayers' work in Dante may be her most substantial and lasting gift to the world. The notes and explanations, written with both scholarly discipline and an insider's knowledge and experience of catholic doctrine, are the best I have encountered.

But for detective fans, Dorothy L. Sayers' most important work is her detective novels. It is in these novels that she did her hard theological investigations. These are the authentic personal mythological explorations of her own experience, they are also good stories. In the Wimsey novels human experience is dealt with in its complexity; issues

[30] Dorothy L. Sayers, trans., *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri The Florentine: Cantica I Hell (L'Inferno)* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1949), pp. 67-68.
[31] Sayers, *Roland*, p. 28. See note 1 above.
[32] Auden, "Guilty Vicarage," p. 49. See note 3 above.

and emotions and events interact. Sayers' Wimsey/Vane mythology is like Israel's mythology of the Old Testament. As God acted in her life, as new events in her personal history threw the old order and assumptions into chaos, the mythology had to grow and expand to accept the new data, the new facts shedding light on the reality of her life and the life of the world. This is the process that Israel went through as it wrote its record of itself in the Old Testament. As was the Old Testament mythology, Sayers' personal myth was fulfilled in incarnation.

It is important to remember that Miss Sayers' faith was the full faith of the Church, her God the God of history. It would be easy to view her personal mythologization in the context of a personalist theology in which the Gospel is real on the level of individual myth and psychology alone. In her writings on the Church and the world, Sayers made it clear that her own personal experience was the type, the microcosmic experience of the basic reality of the universe. Her redemption was not simply her own personal salvation, but part of an event affecting the entire universe; the incarnation she experienced in her art was part of that ultimate incarnation in the history of Israel 2000 years ago.

It would be patently false to claim that Dorothy L. Sayers is one of the great figures of Twentieth century literature. Her novels are limited by a certain middle class snobbery, the narrowness of the detective genre, and by some serious, if occasional, flaws in the writing craft. Those who have gained from these novels deep and lasting pleasure, however, can hope that Miss Sayers may be granted a joyous footnote or two in the volumes on the writing of this century.

But if there is anyone a hundred years from now who cares about theology and should be moved to write a book about theology in the Twentieth century, I would urge him (or as is likely, her) to save a page or two for this heroic woman and her epic. Reference to Miss Sayers would probably not fit in a chapter on "Theology and Twentieth Century Philosophy," for Miss Sayers was not an academic theologian and her work broke no new ground, excited no controversies. She belongs, I suspect, in a chapter on Preaching or Evangelism, for she shared her pilgrimage and her faith in unique ways through her detective story mythology, Lord Peter Wimsey, the White Knight, and Harriet Vane, that rather odd damsel.