

## The Importance of Being Dorothy L. Sayers

Barbara Reynolds

I have come a long way to talk to you about Dorothy L. Sayers. I don't just mean that I have come across the Atlantic. I mean I have come a long way in time. It is over half a century since I first met the remarkable person who has had such an enduring effect on my work. The date was 20 August, 1946.

I have described the occasion in my book *The Passionate Intellect*.<sup>1</sup> It was just after the end of World War II, a bleak time, known officially as a period of "Austerity," when people were eager to turn their minds once more to cultural matters. The Society for Italian Studies, which had been in abeyance, was reassembled and it was decided to organize a Summer School of Italian at one of the Cambridge Colleges.

There was much pessimism about this but I, being young, threw myself into the enterprise with enthusiasm. I was appointed the organizing secretary and despite immediate post-war difficulties I managed to persuade Jesus College to accommodate us for two weeks. At a meeting called to arrange the programme, someone, quite by chance, said, "Why don't we invite Dorothy Sayers to lecture on Dante? She'd be a draw." She had just begun work on her translation of the *Inferno*, which was announced as forthcoming on the back of one of the early Penguin Classics. The suggestion stunned us all. The Professor of Italian said gloomily, "She can't do any *harm*, I suppose."

Dorothy Sayers was then known chiefly as the author of very successful detective novels, featuring the aristocratic sleuth, Lord Peter Wimsey who shares with Sherlock Holmes a life which extends beyond fiction. Her successor in the hierarchy of detective fiction, P.D. James, has said:

Like his great predecessor, Sherlock Holmes, [Lord Peter Wimsey] entered into the mythology of detective fiction because he is a true original, larger than life, but never totally divorced from reality, eccentric but never grotesque, courageous but not foolhardy, both a symbol of that triumphant individualism and eccentricity which in the 1930's detective story readers demanded, and a recognizable human being. It is because of this essential humanity that he is still a hero today.<sup>2</sup>

The same applies to Harriet Vane, who is even now for many readers, especially female readers, a recognizable, living example of the modern, creative independent woman, battling with the still contemporary problem of reconciling the conflicting claims of the personal and the impersonal.

The creation of two such enduring characters and the achievement of twelve detective novels and three volumes of short stories which have never been out of print would seem to be sufficient to establish a writer's fame. But in 1937 Dorothy Sayers's career took a new and unexpected turn. She was invited to write a play for Canterbury Cathedral, where a series of dramas was being produced under the encouragement of the Dean, the Rt. Rev. George Bell, later Bishop of Chichester. One of these was the celebrated drama by T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*. The invitation was unexpected because Sayers had not then written anything on the Christian faith, apart from an early volume of poems, entitled *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*, published soon after taking her degree at Oxford.<sup>3</sup> The suggestion came originally from Charles Williams who had himself written a play on Cranmer

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for Canterbury and who had read and admired a brief poetic drama by Sayers, entitled “The Mocking of Christ,” included in the early volume I have mentioned.

She reluctantly consented, saying at first that she was not keen “to mug up a lot of information about kings and archbishops.” One event in the history of the Cathedral did, however, appeal to her imagination: the rebuilding of the Choir, destroyed by fire in 1174, and the fall from pride of the architect, William of Sens, who regarded himself indispensable to the work of God. The play, *The Zeal of Thy House*,<sup>4</sup> was so successful that she was invited to write another. For this, she chose the subject of Faust and entitled it engagingly *The Devil to Pay*.<sup>5</sup> The BBC then took notice and invited her to write a Nativity play. Entitled *He That Should Come*,<sup>6</sup> it was broadcast on radio on Christmas Day, 1938. This attracted much popular attention because of its lively and realistic dialogue and she was asked to write several articles on Christian belief for the national press. Thus it came about that the Director of Religious Broadcasting, the Rev. Dr. James Welch, was inspired to invite her to provide a series of plays on the life of Christ. This was her next great achievement. The twelve plays, entitled collectively *The Man Born to be King*,<sup>7</sup> made religious broadcasting history and established Sayers as a prominent lay writer and speaker on the Christian faith.

This, then was the figure of Dorothy L. Sayers in 1946, a celebrity we thought “would be a draw” on our programme, though we knew nothing about her qualifications to speak on Dante. Neither did anyone else. But a draw she certainly was. Two hundred people had signed up for our Summer School and on the evening when Dorothy Sayers was to lecture, another hundred members of the public took tickets for the event. As I have related in my book *The Passionate Intellect*, the lecture took me totally by surprise: it was the most impressive lecture on Dante I had ever heard. Here was a woman, I decided, I must get to know. To my great good fortune, I succeeded, and from then on the direction of my professional life was altered.

I continued to organize summer schools of Italian for several years and Dorothy Sayers was a permanent fixture on the programme. Her lectures were published later in two volumes, *Introductory Papers on Dante* and *Further Papers on Dante*,<sup>8</sup> which gave a new direction to appreciation of the *Divine Comedy* among general readers and of its relevance to the problems of the post-war world. I am glad to say that I spotted this as early as 1954, when I was invited to write a Preface to the first volume, in which I said:

This book on Dante by Dorothy L. Sayers makes possible a new relationship between Dante and the modern reader.<sup>9</sup>

Looking back across the interval of 58 years, I can see plainly now that on the evening of 20 August, 1946, when Dorothy Sayers gave her first lecture on Dante, though none of us realized it at the time, the reading of Dante by the English-speaking public, her writing career and the direction of my own work had reached a turning point. To take the first point alone: since the publication of Sayers’s translation of Dante’s *Inferno* in 1949, followed by *Purgatory* in 1955 and by *Paradise* which came out posthumously in 1962, the *Divine Comedy* has had at least two million English-speaking readers, vastly more in half a century than in the preceding six. Publication of the Penguin Sayers volumes still continues: all three are being brought out in revised format; *Paradise* is about to appear this Spring, with a new Introduction. This phenomenon has opened a wide gulf between Dante’s general public and Dante studies in the academic sense. University scholars and learned Dante Societies have, on the whole, disregarded Sayers’s translation and interpretation; many have in fact disapproved of it.

Since her death in December 1957, Dorothy Sayers has been increasingly a subject of interest and study, not only as a detective novelist, but as a writer on religious, moral and literary matters. She has been the subject of six biographies. Strange to say, although her work on Dante is marginalized in the universities, she herself has become an acceptable subject for academic study and analysis. Year after year, theses are written on one or other aspect of her work, conferences such as this are organized by universities to discuss her work. Independently, the Dorothy L. Sayers Society, since its foundation in 1976, has promoted the knowledge and enjoyment of her works. It now has close on 500 members, drawn from several European countries, as well as many from the U.S.A. It has acquired a valuable archive and publishes six bulletins a year, as well as proceedings of conferences and independent criticism and research. The Anglo-American review, *SEVEN*, intended more for the general reader than for the learned, regularly publishes articles on Sayers, as well as on the six other British authors who are the special interest of the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, Illinois.

What is it that Dorothy L. Sayers still offers today? Why do so many contemporary general readers regard her as a figure of importance and an influence on their lives? I have many times asked myself this question and

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I think, since writing her biography and publishing four volumes of her letters, as well as her childhood and school-day memoirs,<sup>10</sup> I am beginning to find a few answers. Some of them I have already suggested over the years in books, lectures and articles. The time has now come to draw on these in order to bring into focus the chief reasons why I find her legacy still relevant to the modern age.

I am a generation younger than Dorothy Sayers. In fact, I was born on her twenty-first birthday, on 13 June 1914. My education was similar to hers and it was based on assumptions that have largely been eroded today. The chief of these was that the tradition of Western classical culture was the best possible training for the mind. Associated with this was another assumption: namely, that subjects were worth studying in themselves. The notion that a university education is “wasted” if a graduate does not find a job related to the subject of his or her degree would have been as incomprehensible to her generation as it would have been to mine. How could admittance to the world of scholarship and intellectual enquiry ever be wasted? People make free with the term “privilege,” applying it resentfully to the minority who had access to universities in earlier times. I would agree that Dorothy Sayers and her fellow graduates were privileged, not because they were wealthy, for most of them were not, but because of the implicit assumption in their time that subjects intrinsically of value set their minds and talents free to enter into permanent possession of a tradition and heritage. “Vocational education,” she wrote, “is the education of slaves.” Educationists of today continue to be confused about this, being increasingly influenced by political interests and the market-led approach, in which children and parents are seen as consumers, schools as competitive business, teachers as technicians and higher educational institutions as factories. It is difficult now, at least in England, not to be discouraged by the present limiting views of politicians who are denying future generations the right to self-fulfillment in intellectual discovery and achievement.

Delight in the creative power of the mind was something which characterized Dorothy Sayers all her life. This can be seen clearly in her childhood and school-day memoirs and in her adult correspondence, as well as in all her creative works, and I had the privilege over a period of eleven years of being exhilarated by it in her letters to me and in our conversations. In this respect, she was characteristic of her period, as well as being in this and many other ways individually outstanding.

The declaration of war on 3 September 1939 awakened her to the importance of harnessing intellectual vitality in the service of freedom. This is a vision which I now perceive to be one of her most important legacies and of still urgent relevance to us today.

The direction which her writing took during the years of World War II was unexpected at the time, but from where we now stand the reasons for it are quite clear. Of this period, one work of lasting importance is the treatise entitled *The Mind of the Maker*,<sup>11</sup> regarded by many theologians as one of the most original analogies of the Trinity. To appreciate it fully we need to see it in the context of contemporary events.

As soon as war was declared, her publisher Victor Gollancz invited his most marketable author to write what he called “a war-time essay,” expecting probably a brief pamphlet such as she had already produced on the subject of religious drama, for example: “The Greatest Drama Ever Staged” and “The Dogma is the Drama.”<sup>12</sup> Instead, she wrote him a book of 152 pages. The title was *Begin Here*.<sup>13</sup>

Ideas about education had long been occupying her mind and she now saw the need for reform of educational policy as vital to war-time morale and to post-war reconstruction. She felt the need to act fast and she was, indeed, far ahead of other thinkers at the time. Consider the circumstances in which she wrote: the nation’s shock of being at war, food rationing, the blackout, the fear of bombing and invasion—and here is the prophetic voice, immediately directing our attention, as though through a loud-hailer, to the need to re-arrange our priorities for reconstruction after the war. She writes:

It is important . . . to realise that the future does not exist “in the future,” vaguely and far off, but here and now. Second by second it is upon us, and every moment in our lives is a fresh beginning. . . . It is not too much to say that, whoever wins the war, the peace will be won by those, who, throughout the struggle, remained alert and ready, with a clear idea of what they wanted and an active plan for bringing it about.<sup>14</sup>

That is the meaning of the title of the book *Begin Here*.

The task, as she saw it, was urgent: “To put the Whole Man” (she might by now have made some concession to inclusive language and said “the Whole Person” or “the Whole Human Being,” or she might not—she did not easily conform to fashionable trends),

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the task, then was to put together again “the Whole Man,” who since the industrial revolution had become disintegrated, and to restore his full creative power, “tirelessly and eagerly creating.” The purpose of the book, to quote from her Preface, was to “suggest to a few readers some creative line of action along which they, as individuals, can think and work towards the restoration of Europe.” Note the phrases “a few readers” and “as individuals.” They are significant.

Already on 10 September, only one week after war was declared, she had published an article in *The Sunday Times*, entitled “What Do We Believe?” Already the theme she propounds is that of creativity:

Man is most god-like when he is occupied in creation. . . . Our worst trouble today is our feeble hold on creation. To allow ourselves to be spoon-fed is to lose our grip on our only true life and our only true selves. . . . If we truly desire a creative life for ourselves and other people, it is our task to rebuild the world along creative lines.

This is also the main thrust of *Begin Here*.

This early war-time book was a prelude to the great work which was soon to come, namely *The Mind of the Maker*, in which she constructs her analogy between the three-fold nature of human creativity and the Trinity.

Why did she write it? One answer is that the war changed everything. From being an entertainer, Dorothy L. Sayers became, almost overnight, an educator, an expounder, exhorting and urging us to new thinking and to social reform. The concept of creativity became a dynamic vision, which she enlisted, so to speak, in war service. Even before *Begin Here* was completed she was launched on a series of projects for social reconstruction. I mean her plans for a series of books to be entitled collectively *Bridgeheads*. By the end of September 1939 she had already drawn up a “Statement of Aims for the proposed *Bridgehead* series of books.” The over-all programme is majestic:

We shall try to quicken the creative spirit which enables man to build . . . systems in the light of his spiritual, intellectual and social needs. We aim at the Resurrection of the Faith, the Revival of Learning and Reintegration of Society.

This is truly breath-taking. In fact, the whole of the Statement is an inspiring document and would repay study nowadays. It is not easy to obtain. In published

form, it exists only as an Appendix to the biography by James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Life of a Courageous Woman*.<sup>15</sup> This is a pity, for it represents her positive reaction to international disaster and her vision of the opportunities she saw in it for good. Consider the relevance for today of some of these quotations:

We believe that the chief trouble among the nations today is fear—the fear of death and especially the fear of life. Human life is “fear-conditioned”: this is what depresses men’s spirits and paralyses constructive effort. We believe that this fear can only be driven out by a strong awareness of the real value of life. . . .

We believe that peace and stability are not attainable if considered as static in their nature or pursued as ends in themselves. They are the by-products of a right balance between the individual and the community. This balance is attainable only by a ceaseless activity directed to a real standard of value.

We believe that liberty and equality are not attainable by considering the individual man as a unit in a limited scheme of society (e.g., “economic man,” “political man,” “the worker,” etc.), but only by considering him as a complete personality, capable of self-discipline in a self-disciplined community; the aim of such discipline being the fulfilment of man’s whole nature in relation to absolute reality.

Particularly relevant to our problems today is the conclusion of the document, in which the chief aim of *Bridgeheads* is defined:

To awaken the nation to the need for an entire overhaul of the aims and methods of education in this country. This is at present directed chiefly or wholly to the end of securing gainful employment, and is neither satisfactory in itself (i.e. in the producing wise and happy citizens) nor even successful in its avowed purpose (i.e. it is powerless to check unemployment and does not fit people for the useful employment of leisure). The nation must be encouraged to take a very much wider view of the function of education, in better accordance with the needs of human nature

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and good citizenship, and to demand of its government that the necessary money for this better education shall be forthcoming. That is to say, that education which fits the citizen for peace must be taken at least as seriously as the armaments which fit him for war.

It seems to me a pity that this thoughtful, stimulating and still relevant document is hidden away from readers at the back of a biography which is now out of date. I don't know what can be done about it, apart from drawing your attention to it by means of these quotations, hoping that you will find the biography and look up the Appendix.

It is important also because it represents Dorothy Sayers's faith in the power of a few individuals to bring about change. For, amazingly, there were only three people behind the scheme: herself, her Oxford friend Muriel St. Clare Byrne and the novelist Helen Simpson. Nevertheless, they gained the support of Methuen's editor, E.V. Rieu, who later became the first editor of the Penguin Classics (one of the most influential and educative publishing ventures, I suggest, of the twentieth century). The proposal was accepted, advertising was made ready and seven titles were announced.

The first to appear was Sayers's own *The Mind of the Maker*. In a letter to Maurice Reckitt, accompanying a copy of the book, she wrote:

[It] is the first volume of a series called *Bridgeheads*, . . . of which the general idea is to deal with this business of "Creativeness"—both in theory and in practice. The object of this particular book is to start us off on the right lines by trying to examine, in the light of theology as interpreted by the writer's experience, what "Creativeness" it, and how it works, because the word is rapidly becoming one of the catch-phrases which people use without always understanding them very well.<sup>16</sup>

Dorothy Sayers knew very well that not everyone was gifted with creativeness in the sense of literary or other artistic talent. I think that by creativeness in general she meant independence of mind, the refusal to be spoon-fed and to conform passively to current fashionable trends. This is why I think that *The Mind of the Maker* can be more appropriately considered in the context of her ideas on education than, as it is usually classified, as a treatise on theology. It is an attempt to

defend individuality from uniformity, in other words, to defend the freedom to be oneself.

This is closely connected with her views on work. In an address she gave in May 1940, entitled "Creed or Chaos?", she said:

The modern tendency seems to be to identify work with gainful employment; and this is, I maintain, the essential heresy at the back of the great economic fallacy which allows wheat and coffee to be burnt and fish used for manure while whole populations stand in need of food. The fallacy being that work is not the expression of man's creative energy in the service of society, but only something he does in order to obtain money and leisure . . .

If man's fulfilment of his nature is to be found in the full expression of his divine creativeness, then we urgently need a Christian doctrine of work, which shall provide, not only for proper conditions of employment, but also that the work shall be such as a man may do which his whole heart, and that he shall do it for the very work's sake.<sup>17</sup>

That is the main reason why she wrote *The Mind of the Maker*: to direct people's thinking towards the value, not only for themselves, but also for society, of working and living, as she termed it, creatively. She called it "Creative Citizenship." In March 1941 she went to Eastbourne (she was travelling all over the country in response to invitations to address groups of people, especially the Forces, when war-time travelling was no joke). The address she gave there was entitled "Why Work?". She proposed what she called

. . . a thorough-going revolution in our whole attitude to work. . . . That it should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of the work itself; and that man, made in God's image, should make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing.

This is the speech in which she coins the oft-quoted aphorism: "The only Christian work is good work well done." This has been construed in an absolute sense and consequently it has been found too dismissive. It should, however, be read in the context in which she said it, namely the failure of the Church, as she saw it,

to understand and respect the secular vocation and in having allowed work and religion to become separate departments:

The official Church wastes time and energy, and, moreover, commits sacrilege, in demanding that secular workers should neglect their proper vocation in order to do Christian work—by which [the Church] means ecclesiastical work. The only Christian work is good work well done.<sup>18</sup>

This is another way of say: “All good work well done is Christian work,” or, to quote the Latin aphorism: “laborare est orare.”

In her Preface to *The Mind of the Maker* she states the Christian affirmation of the Trinity, as formulated in the Nicene Creed, of which the structure, she believes, can be shown to exist in the mind of man and all his works. And she sums up:

*If* [her italics] these statements are theologically true, then the inference to be drawn about the present social and educational system is important, and perhaps alarming.<sup>19</sup>

The sign-post could not be clearer. She set up another, equally clear, in 1944, in her paper entitled “Towards a Christian Aesthetic,”<sup>20</sup> in which she suggests a method of establishing the principles of what she calls “Art Proper” (as distinguished from the pseudo-arts of amusement and magic) upon that Trinitarian doctrine of the nature of Creative Mind which, she believes, underlines them. She finds that we have no Christian aesthetic, no Christian philosophy of the Arts, but she adds:

This may not be a bad thing. We have at least a new line of country to explore, that has not been trampled on and built over and fought over, by countless generations of quarrelsome critics. What we have to start from is the Trinitarian doctrine of creative mind, and the light which that doctrine throws on the true nature of images.<sup>21</sup>

She said that sixty years ago. How much progress have we made in exploring this “new line of country?” Not much, I think.

It happens that I have undertaken to be the interpreter of many aspects of her work. I did not intend this, it was something that came about over the years. I

can only hope that I have not misinterpreted her. If she were here today to speak for herself, which of her concerns would she now emphasize? I think the urgency she felt about creative citizenship and about our attitude to work are two, which is why I have chosen them for this address. I think she would also say to me: “Warn them about the loss of freedom in literary criticism.” In her own time she was well aware that it was being eroded.

It was when I began to edit her letters that I realized what importance she attached to this matter. She had written to me about it several times, but there are many emphatic letters about it to other people. I have taken up this topic in the journal *SEVEN*<sup>22</sup> and am pleased to report that there has been an encouraging response. It is a matter which I hope to pursue further, though not in detail in this paper, which is already growing long enough. I will, however, quote from one letter she wrote on 4 April 1946:

It seems to me that those generations of young people who grew up between the wars had it insidiously impressed upon them that to admire, simply and whole-heartedly, any great thing merely for what it obviously was, meant that they had somehow been “had—had for suckers”—taken in by a three-card trick. To fall at the feet of achievement was a sign of callowness which exposed one to shrugs and knowing smiles of the initiate. No work must be admitted great until one had explained it in terms of the maker’s psychological experience; and since the majority of “makers” are men of like passions with us, it frequently happened that by the time one had explained the work in those terms, one had explained away the achievement. After that, to admire and worship would be plainly the act of a fool.<sup>23</sup>

The freedom to respond personally to works of art, in fact, to *enjoy* them independently of current critical fashions or of the burden of received opinions, is something that needs continual vigilance. Dorothy Sayers herself had exerted independence of mind in her response to Dante. Coming upon him late in life, precisely in August 1944, when she first began to read *The Divine Comedy* at the age of 51, she harnessed her delight in her “discovery” to show its immediate relevance to the evils of society and the problems of the post-war world. It was necessary, she believed, to present Dante to her contemporaries as a living poet

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who had something vital to say to them there and then. In this individual interpretation and application, she departed from the main trends of Dante scholarship and made thereby an important stand for the freedom of the reader.

“Reading is one of the first freedoms.”<sup>24</sup> This recent assertion by the author and critic Victoria Glendinning may seem to be a statement of the obvious. It is not, however. It is a warning. We do not realise that we possess a freedom until we are in danger of losing it. Dorothy L. Sayers warned us about this half a century ago. Since then matters have got worse, owing to the narrow parameters laid down by university faculties and the commercial prudence of publishers. If she were here today, I am certain that she would commend this matter to you urgently. In her absence, I would draw your attention to my reconstruction of her views in my article “Intellectual Tyranny: A Rebellion?” published in last year’s volume of the journal *SEVEN*.<sup>25</sup> You will find, if you read it, that she is by no means a lone voice. Let us hope that, before it is too late, there will be many more.

<sup>23</sup>*The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*, letter to Philip Mairet, Volume 3, p. 224.

<sup>24</sup>*The Times Review of Books*, 22 November 2003, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup>Volume 19, pp. 17-30.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Kent State UP, 1989, pp. 54-59.

<sup>2</sup>*Seven: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, Volume 10, 1993, “Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Novels Today”, pp. 19-30.

<sup>3</sup>Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1918.

<sup>4</sup>London, Gollancz, 1937.

<sup>5</sup>London, Gollancz, 1939.

<sup>6</sup>London, Gollancz, 1939.

<sup>7</sup>London, Gollancz, 1949.

<sup>8</sup>London, Methuen, 1954, 1957.

<sup>9</sup>loc. cit. p. vii.

<sup>10</sup>*Dorothy L. Sayers: Child and Woman of Her Time*, 2003, Carole Green Publishing, 2 – 4 Station Road, Swavesey, Cambridge CB4 5QJ, U.K.

<sup>11</sup>London, Methuen, 1941.

<sup>12</sup>See *Creed or Chaos?*, Methuen, 1937.

<sup>13</sup>London, Gollancz, 1940.

<sup>14</sup>op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>15</sup>London, Gollancz, 1981, pp. 278-282.

<sup>16</sup>*The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*, Volume 2, edited by Barbara Reynolds, 1997, pp. 263-264.

<sup>17</sup>*Creed or Chaos?*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. p. 59.

<sup>19</sup>P. x.

<sup>20</sup>*Unpopular Opinions*, London, Gollancz, 1946, pp., 29-43.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid. p. 42.

<sup>22</sup>Volumes 19 and 20, 2003 and 2004.