

Dorothy L. Sayers, Dante, and the Modern Reader

Chris Willerton

ABSTRACT

The strongest link between the medieval and Dorothy L. Sayers's Christian apologetics are her commentaries on Dante. She was less interested in medievalism than in the medieval itself, used as a mirror of her own century. One result is that Sayers does not discuss Dante's work in order to promote the gospel but rather finds the gospel fused into it. Her concern with reader response drives both her exposition of Dante and the Christian apologetic embedded in it: to rejoice in Dante, a reader has to suspend disbelief (and other habits of modern thought) and consider whether Christianity might be both true and desirable.

Dorothy L. Sayers's mastery of the medieval is obvious in her translations of Dante, *The Song of Roland*, and *Tristan in Brittany*, together with her Dante essays and introductions. Whether Sayers's medievalism is a vehicle for Christian apologetics is a different matter. Among the Inklings and their friends, Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams were the most adept at using medieval mythology, legend, and heroics to carry Christian conviction to those readers who cared to find it. Sayers preferred to use essays, radio talks, and religious plays as vehicles for defending Christianity—but only two of those plays are medieval in subject or style. The strongest link between the medieval and Sayers's Christian apologetics are her commentaries on Dante. I will show here that she was less interested in medievalism than in the medieval itself, used as a mirror of her own century. Furthermore, we will see that Sayers does not discuss Dante's work in order to promote the gospel but rather finds the

gospel fused into it. Her concern with reader response drives both her exposition of Dante and the Christian apologetic embedded in it: to rejoice in Dante, a reader has to suspend disbelief (and other habits of modern thought) and consider whether Christianity might be both true and desirable.

Sayers could, of course, take the direct route and use medieval material to carry Christian apologetics. In her two plays with medieval subjects, Sayers's apologetic intention is plain. When she sets *The Zeal of Thy House* in the 1100s and when she rewrites the Faustus legend in *The Devil to Pay*, Sayers is preaching to an audience mainly of believers. Both plays were commissioned for performance at Canterbury Cathedral, after all. Even the convicted need to hear apologetics to clear their thinking, and using medieval subject matter and settings has obvious opportunities. But when writing to persuade the unconvicted or clear up the muddled thinking of Christians, Sayers usually turned to speeches and essays. Her radio talks such as "The Christ of the Creeds" and her articles such as "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged" are examples. These examples do not add up to a simple contrast—medieval drama for the believers, modern prose for unbelievers. In Sayers's sensibility, the medieval is not far from the modern. Her play *The Just Vengeance*, performed in 1946 at Lichfield Cathedral, is a World War II airman's vision at the moment of his death and certainly accessible to those with faith and those without. But Sayers's introduction emphasizes that it is based on passages from *The Divine Comedy* and Thomas à Kempis, that it freely echoes Christian writers from the Apostles through Charles Williams and T. S. Eliot, and that its form is medieval—"a miracle-play of Man's insufficiency and God's redemptive act, set against the background of contemporary crisis" (*Four Sacred Plays* 280).

Having situated it generally, how may we describe Sayers's medievalism? We could say first that it is organic (as in *The Zeal of thy House*) rather than decorative. A famous example of decorative medievalism is Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel,"

which uses medieval archaism and cosmology to achieve the beauty-in-death aesthetic he cherished. Yet the Damozel herself is a lovesick Victorian ghost, not a creature of Dante or Chaucer. Similarly, stories of Robin Hood or King Arthur can be filmed with medieval decoration and manners or, with a few names changed, converted to Western, kung-fu, or science fantasy films. For their typical plotlines, one idiom will do as well as another, depending on which audience will pay for tickets or downloads. By contrast, Sayers's play *The Zeal of Thy House* is a complete fusion of medieval cathedral-building, theology, dramaturgy, and angelic commentary. No other era, occasion, character, or stage idiom would do the same work with its audience. When she speaks of writing "neo-medieval religious drama" (Jellema viii), she is not merely copying a style but aiming at artistic fusion worthy of the best of medieval drama.

Second, Sayers's medievalism consisted in seeing the so-called Middle Ages aright. When she wrote to T. H. White to praise his *Book of Beasts*, she assailed the popular stereotypes:

On Wednesday night I was saying angrily to a friend how I wished the somebody, instead of just sneering at "mediaeval credulity", would deal faithfully with the Bestiaries and the early travellers' tales, showing that quite a lot of the apparent absurdities (such as the Men with Long Ears and the Men with Huge Lips) were accounts, distorted by passing through many mouths and pens, of something that people had actually seen. (DLS, letter to T. H. White, 29 October 1954, *Letters* IV:175)

She goes on to say that medieval belief in fantastical beasts also derives from a lack of zoos and of convenient access to scientists and travelers with first-hand knowledge of faraway animals. Deflating stereotypes is typical of her critiques of lazy modern thinking.

That the medieval should illuminate the modern is one of Sayers's most productive convictions. Like historian Barbara Tuchman in *A Distant Mirror*, Sayers recognizes that the medieval

and the modern reflect each other. In her essay “Dante’s Cosmos,” Sayers maintains “that in many respects our thought is nearer to Dante’s to-day than perhaps at any period in the six intervening centuries.” Medievals and moderns would be less shocked at Galileo’s astronomy than were the people of his own century and less shocked by Darwin’s theories than were the Victorians (87). In introducing her translation of *Inferno*, Sayers finds city-states, Guelphs, Ghibellines, class struggle, political purges, and papal imperialism mirrored in the twentieth century: “If we make a kind of composite picture of the Balkans to-day [1948], and the Spain of the nineteen-thirties, with a flavour of post-Conquest England and a dash of the Scottish Highlands before the Union, we shall be in a fair way to imagine the complications of medieval Italy” (23).

Some differences in world view are more apparent than real. In “Dante’s Cosmos,” Sayers warns that “between one period and another there is a disparity of interest, which counts for much that the latter age is apt to put down to ignorance and stupidity in the earlier.”

The average educated modern pities the mediaeval for his ignorance of the new cosmology, but is not in the least abashed that he cannot pick out and name all the constellations of the Zodiac, and is completely flummoxed by the visible heavenly motions among which Dante’s verse moves with ease and fluency. In fact, he skips the astronomical bits, and is not ashamed to do so. (*Further* 88)

Different convictions about psychology, likewise, are taken as differences in conviction and information when in fact they were differences in interest. Medieval people “had practically no psychology of the sub-conscious” because they had no interest in it. Instead, they had an exciting new psychology of the conscious, thanks to new Latin translations of Aristotle being imported from the East.

Such examples undercut our smugness as well as the inaccuracy of our prejudices. Our knowledge of science far outweighs that

of the Middle Ages, but we must not assume that Dante had none. Though science had to conform to philosophy in his day, he explored it cheerfully—"In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the form of the literal story is . . . as much dictated by contemporary science as is that of any story of planetary adventure by Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, or C. S. Lewis." Were he rewriting the *Commedia* today, he would not have balked at an "Einsteinian ten-dimensional universe." Intrigued by "the ten heavens of his cosmology and the ten dimensions of ours," Dante would "find little difficulty in adapting his picture accordingly" (Introduction, *Paradise* 22, 23).¹ In "Dante the Maker," Sayers insists that "we are much more anthropocentric in our outlook than the men of the Middle Ages. We are apt to assign no value to Nature, except as she can be made to subserve human ends. That God and Nature should enjoy each other and themselves, without continual reference to us, is an idea which we find it hard to stomach" (*Poetry* 35). Where moderns come off the worse in comparisons of world views is not in factual knowledge but in significance for living.

Indeed, if I were asked to name the one particular in which the mediaeval spirit differed most profoundly from our own, I think I should have to reply, "its faith and hope in fulfilment". It believed that desire could be satisfied, that knowledge could be made perfect, that progress would some day cease because every potentiality had been actualized. It believed in happiness—we, for the most part, only in the pursuit of happiness. (89)

Is she overlooking witch-hunts, religious persecutions, and the Black Death, we ask? And Sayers might reply, are we overlooking fascism, the Holocaust, and the atomic bomb? Does our rejection of "faith

1 These phrases are probably Sayers's though they appear in the introduction to *Paradise* supplied by Barbara Reynolds. Following Sayers's death, Reynolds completed the translation and supplied the introduction and notes. But she identifies part of the introduction as "an adaptation of material left by Dorothy Sayers" (Foreword 10, n. 2), and this is the source for the quotations on cosmology and Einstein.

and hope in fulfilment” leave us happier than the medievals?

Sayers offers many comparisons to make us analyze our own assumptions, especially when we need to see how culturally bound they are. In introducing her translation of *Purgatorio*, Sayers remarks that journalists in the future “will use ‘twentieth century’, as ours use ‘medieval’, by way of a handy term of abuse for such crudities, cruelties, and superstitions as they may happen to disapprove” (46). One such assumption is the modern view of Hell. In her essay “The Meaning of Heaven and Hell,” she chides modern writers for

a kind of conspiracy . . . to forget, or to conceal, where the doctrine of Hell comes from. One finds frequent references to “the cruel and abominable *mediaeval* doctrine of hell”, or “the childish and grotesque *mediaeval* imagery of physical fire and worms”. People who write about Dante are often concerned to sneer at him, or alternatively to pity him, for being compelled by “the crude superstition of his age” to believe in these things under menace of excommunication and torture: or else they eagerly assure us that he was too clever really to have believed in them, and was actually a Gnostic heretic or a nineteenth-century liberal, engaged in debunking the Roman Catholic Church in an elaborate satirical cryptogram.

But the case is quite otherwise; let us face the facts. The doctrine of Hell is not “*mediaeval*”: it is Christ’s. It is not a device of “*mediaeval* priestcraft” for frightening people into giving money to the Church: it is Christ’s deliberate judgment on sin. (*Introductory* 44-45)

Corresponding to our prejudice about Hell is our prejudice about Heaven. Sayers pushes modern readers to “grasp the central idea of what is *meant* by the concept of Heaven itself.” Moderns assume Heaven is the reward for spiritual progress. In fact, “two of our favourite catch-words have absolutely no meaning in Heaven: there is no *equality* and there is no *progress*.” *Equality* is our code-word for the determination to pull even with superior people. It is actually envy. Because there is no envy in Heaven, “there is no progress at

all in the sense of ‘bettering one’s self’ or ‘getting even with other people’” (*Introductory* 56-57).

As we turn to the topic of Christian apologetic, we should ask whether Sayers’s jabs at modern culture will help or hinder. If they put us off, we could begin to think Sayers a kind of medieval chauvinist. But that would be *our* mistake as culture-bound readers. Remember her audience. As Barbara Reynolds says,

It should be remembered that these lectures were written during and immediately after World War II, at a time when the collapse of European civilization was imminent. Dante’s message concerning sin and virtue seemed, to Dorothy Sayers, startlingly relevant to the current situation and she made it part of her war work to explain and interpret it from this point of view.

Her aims in persuasion are broader than orthodox Christianity, of course. Barbara Reynolds writes that, in a handful of her Dante lectures and an introduction, Sayers gave “a definition of the enduring standards, the continuity, the essence of our civilization, that which is permanent in a time of change” (“Permanent” 153). This is an important link among her, Williams, Tolkien, and Lewis. Generally the three Inklings fashioned new things from medieval material while Sayers expounded the medieval itself (by translating and interpreting Dante and *The Song of Roland*).² Yet all four take up the medieval for the sake of truth that the twentieth century resisted. Sayers’s introductions, essays, and speeches on Dante are all of a piece with her *Begin Here: A War-Time Essay* (American subtitle *A Statement of Faith*), *The Mind of the Maker*, and *Unpopular Opinions*. Of her own century, she writes that the widespread lack of clear thinking, definite theology, and historical understanding has made formerly great nations vulnerable to propaganda, economic corruption, and a crippling selfishness. And of the centuries of European history and classical myth referred to in Dante, she

2 Sayers translated but did not write the introduction to *Tristan in Brittany*.

finds the same thing—propaganda, corruption, selfishness. These persistent failures in wisdom, justice, and personal virtue are both secular (failures in civilization) and, in a Christian view, religious (failures in acknowledging God). As she writes in the preface to *The Mind of the Maker*, the “laws” of human nature are not political strictures but facts, ineluctable as the “law” of gravity. The great Christian creeds are true because God does not change, nor does human nature. When laws of human nature are defied, the same sins result in every century.

There is no nostalgia in Sayers’s view of the medieval, only disappointment that the nations have made so little moral progress since then. This disappointment and Dante’s example stimulate Sayers to call the reader to high endeavor. Quoting from Dante’s famous letter to Can Grande della Scala, she says Dante explains not only “the nature of allegory” but “the way in which he intended his book to be read” (*Inferno* 14). She applies his method thus: the reader is not to waste time over historical inaccuracies or to quibble over the judgments assigned by Dante but to focus on the results of each character’s free choice. A historical slip in Dante’s telling

need not, and does not, prevent us—as it did not prevent Dante—from saying: “If his deeds do not belie him, then in that man we behold something that is an embodied damnation”. Literally, we may or may not believe that such a man has cut himself off from redemption; but in any case, we can scarcely be mistaken in saying: “The man presents the image of something in civilization which will corrupt and ruin civilization; of something in myself which (if I do not recognize and repent it) will assuredly corrupt and ruin me”. (15-16)

DLS’s comments on the medieval have a dual purpose: she wants to help the reader get access to Dante, and she wants to help Dante get access to the reader. That is, she wants to reduce the challenges a modern reader faces, and she wants to help the reader become vulnerable to Dante’s influence. Some of her comparisons between

medieval and modern are benign and cheerful, part of her “Come join me” introductions to reading Dante. But other comparisons have a hint of indignation or collective self-blame about modern shortcomings—as if to say, “We moderns are slackers, self-absorbed and ignorant.” She doesn’t imply that reading Dante is the cure—as if he were seltzer for an upset stomach—but that the reading of Dante brings us into position to find our own cure—and God could be part of that cure.

Why would a reader be moved closer to Christianity by reading Dante and following Sayers’s introductions and essays? Dante and Sayers both knew that Christian persuasion must be emotional, intuitive, aesthetic, and social as well as rational. As Pascal phrased it, “Men despise religion; they hate it and fear it is true. To remedy this, we must begin by showing that religion is not contrary to reason; that it is venerable, to inspire respect for it; then we must make it lovable, to make good men hope it is true; finally, we must prove it is true” (III, #187). Those who read only *Inferno* will not see much of the lovable, and those who find the doctrine of Hell repugnant will probably feel little respect for Dante’s God. But other readers are the “good” people who “hope it is true” and will tramp on through Purgatory to Paradise. Sayers’s introductions and essays insist on awe, holy fear, humor, fascination, and the zest of a great journey as one reads *The Divine Comedy*, not to mention the sober satisfaction to discovering parallels between Dante’s era and the reader’s own. Nonbelievers will have to suspend some of their disbelief. In her *Inferno* introduction, Sayers insists that to read Dante accurately, we must put aside our favorite twentieth-century rationalizations. We have to

accept the Christian and Catholic view of ourselves as responsible rational beings. We must abandon any idea that we are the slaves of chance, or environment, or our subconscious; any vague notion that good and evil are merely relative terms, or that conduct and opinion do not really matter; any comfortable persuasion that, however

shiftlessly we muddle through life, it will somehow or other all come right on the night. We must try to believe that man's will is free, that he can consciously exercise choice, and that his choice can be decisive to all eternity. (10-11)

Christian apologists hope for exactly such readers, of course, who can judge a religious argument without the usual prejudices of their era. But Sayers also recognizes that mere reading habits and reliance on hearsay are obstacles to appreciation and accuracy. We must, she says, put aside common prejudices against Dante (“peevish political exile”) and against a poetic text. “If we ignore the theological structure, and merely browse about in it for detached purple passages and poetic bits and pieces we shall be disappointed People who tackle Dante in this superficial way seldom get beyond the picturesque squalors of the *Inferno*” (10, 11). We know, of course, that the picturesqueness of a medieval imaginative world can work for good or ill. Medieval strangeness annoys some readers and titillates others (even in its current manifestations in video games and films). But it stimulates some readers to expand their range of perception and recognition. This is why medievalism has potential for Christian apologetic. As Alison Milbank contends, “we need estranging techniques if we are to shock people into engagement with reality, so that they may appreciate the religious sense and we can begin to explain the Christian faith at all” (38).

This is the sense in which Sayers's medievalism works as Christian apologetic. Sayers argues not for a return to the medieval but reclamation of the permanent values that were bodied forth in *The Divine Comedy*. Whether in her own stories, poems, and plays or in Dante's *Commedia*, the dogma is the drama. In her own statements on presenting the gospel, Sayers uses a good deal more vinegar. Her concern is not that the apologist will lack confidence in the gospel's beauty but might be promoting a sentimental substitute.

Let us, in heaven's name, drag out the divine drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slipshod thinking and

trashy sentiment heaped upon it, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction. . . . It is the dogma that is the drama—not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving-kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death—but the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world, lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death. Show that to the heathen, and they may not believe it; but at least they may realize that here is something that a man might be glad to believe. (“Dogma” 27-28)

Obviously there are exceptions to the formula I’ve suggested (reworking the medieval vs. expounding the medieval). Tolkien and Lewis reworked the medieval but also were master expositors of it for an academic audience. Williams was no mean expositor in *The Figure of Beatrice* (which inspired Sayers to honor him as “a poet’s critic”). And Sayers is not the only writer to bridge “imaginative” work and social criticism. Lewis’ space trilogy, Narnia stories, Screwtape letters, and *Till We Have Faces* rest on the same convictions as *Mere Christianity*. T. S. Eliot’s medieval *Murder in the Cathedral* and his plays with modern settings share ideas with his own *The Idea of a Christian Society* and *Christianity and Culture*.

Before drawing final conclusions about Sayers’s medievalism and Christian apologetic, let us inspect a character who was himself a fan of Dante—Lord Peter Wimsey. If Sayers’s varied works are all products of her remarkable sensibility, should we see a connection between the famous detective and the medieval? In her often-quoted phrase, Sayers called Wimsey “an eighteenth-century Whig gentleman, born a little out of his time, and doubtful whether any claim to possess a soul is not a rather vulgar piece of presumption” (*Mind* 131). Nonetheless, the knight-errant side of Wimsey, his love of artifice and ornate speech, his Oxonian sense of *gentillesse*, the courtliness of his wooing Harriet, and his joining of poesy to martial skill are features that make him at least Spenserian if not Chaucerian. Edward Petherbridge, who played Wimsey for the

BBC, saluted him as “something Dorothy L. Sayers, in her vision of chivalry, created” though he immediately argues a Renaissance-style versatility (“Toast” 45-46).

Does Lord Peter stand for chivalry? Is Sayers’s medievalism a thread running through his character? If it is, what connection could there be to Christian apologetic? For a modern definition of chivalry, *The Lord Peter Wimsey Companion* gives “The rules of behaviour and propriety, the purpose of which, if observed by all parties, is to allow all persons to enjoy themselves comfortably. They are an outgrowth of, but not a part of, chivalry in the medieval sense as practised by the Medieval Courts of Love” (“Law of Chivalry”). This definition certainly catches the better behavior of Lord Peter and his class. In *Gaudy Night*, the instances of bickering, hostile allusions, and competitiveness among the women dons could be summed up as lack of chivalry. Still, it is a modern definition. Sayers points out in her introduction to *The Song of Roland* that, in the early Middle Ages, *chivalry* simply denoted the code for the *chevalier*, a man of high station in full battle gear with his war-horse (33). As the chivalric romance replaces the epic, chivalry becomes attached to the Code of Courtly Love, the knight-errantry of the Round Table, and eventually to Tennyson, the Pre-Raphaelites, and the entertainment media of our era. There are two points in this popular view of chivalry that do appear in Wimsey—the uncanny patience of his courtship and his outgrowing the role of knightly rescuer.

In his chaste, elaborately mannered, and determined wooing of Harriet Vane, Wimsey can certainly be connected to the medieval gallantry of Mallory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*:

But the old love was not
so; men and women could love together seven years, and
no licours [lecherous] lusts were between them, and then was love,
truth, and faithfulness: and lo, in like wise was used love
in King Arthur’s days. (Bk 18, Ch. 25)

There are sound reasons—psychological and novelistic—for Harriet’s long refusal to marry Peter (he proposes repeatedly over five years). Not the least is that Sayers needed time to develop a soul in him, so to speak. It is not a consciously Christian soul—Wimsey insists to Harriet in *Gaudy Night*, “I have nothing much in the way of religion, or even morality, but I do recognize a code of behavior of sorts. I do know that the worst sin—perhaps the only sin—passion can commit, is to be joyless.” He insists that his marriage proposal is addressed to her as an equal, that he would not accept her as a martyr or a mistress—“I will not have surrenders or crucifixions” (496). In their insistence on integrity and mutual respect, Vane and Wimsey seem very modern and feminist. But *integritas* is just as germane to *gentilesse* as to modern gender equity. Chaucer made this case in “The Franklin’s Tale.” The most successful marriage in *The Canterbury Tales* is based on mutual submission. Because Arveragus submits to Dorigen, and she to him, Dorigen has both “hir servant and hir lord” in the same man. Peter’s speech to Harriet—“I will not have surrenders or crucifixions”—will remind some readers of the Franklin’s remark “Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye.” Love cannot be forced. Both women and men, says the Franklin, “desiren libertee” and hate to be constrained. For lovers so intellectual as Peter and Harriet, *integritas* is the reason they need liberty. To accept constraint would be to compromise their identity and honor.

Issues of liberty and constraint were at the heart of Sayers’s planning of *Gaudy Night*. As she says in her 1937 essay “Gaudy Night,” she had failed to marry Peter off to Harriet in *Strong Poison* “because I could find no form of words in which she could accept him without loss of self-respect” (79). “If the story was to go on, Peter had got to become a complete human being, with a past and a future, with a consistent family and social history, with a complicated psychology and even the rudiments of a religious outlook.” So she “chipped away at his internal mechanism through three longish books” (79-80). Peter’s challenges in these three—*Strong Poison*

(1930), *The Five Red Herrings* (1931), and *The Nine Tailors* (1934)—take him through an abrupt trajectory. As Robert Kuhn McGregor and Ethan Lewis point out, the novels overlap, their events taking place over a mere fourteen months (December 1929 to January 1931) (91). In the tumultuous year of 1930, Peter rescues Harriet from a murder conviction, solves a mysterious death in Scotland, and discovers that he had helped cause a man's death in a village in the fens. As 1931 arrives, Peter's transformation is accomplished. When he meets Harriet in Oxford in 1935 to solve the puzzles of *Gaudy Night*, he has learned unselfishness and vulnerability. Paradoxically, he has become less medieval. "If he is more virtuous, he is less chivalrous; he is happy to accept women as equal human beings" (McGregor and Lewis 117).

But does the story of Lord Peter's growth aid a Christian apologetic in any way? Very possibly, especially in *The Nine Tailors*. At its end, Wimsey has been stunned by coincidences that look more and more like Providence, and the suffering of good people like Will Thoday has marked Wimsey for life. Rev. Theodore Venables, rector of the little fenland church, has tutored Wimsey in the ways of Providence. Wimsey does, at the least, attain "the rudiments of a religious outlook," in Sayers's phrase. As McGregor and Lewis conclude, Wimsey is not converted at the end of the novel. "But he is fully aware of a power greater than his own. In the face of that power, Lord Peter Wimsey has reached within himself and found the capacity to be a truly decent human being. Peter has indeed acquired a soul" (117).

Lord Peter's example is not itself a defense of Christianity but it could lead a reader vicariously along the trajectory Pascal describes, that a hearer must find religion reasonable, then venerable, then desirable, all before finding it true. Reared carefully in the Church of England, Wimsey already thought religion reasonable—or at least embraced by reasonable people—and venerable. But suffering with Rev. Venables' flock through the murder investigation and a two-weeks' flood, Wimsey has a fresh grasp of how desirable the faith is

to humble people. Though he never finds religion true, he has come at least this far. To borrow again Sayers's phrase from "The Dogma Is the Drama," Wimsey has grown sufficiently to "realize that here is something that a man might be glad to believe." A given reader, who "toiled and wrought and thought" with Wimsey through his trials and discoveries, could draw closer to the same point. Though the medieval seems far from the novel, Wimsey may function for some readers like the character Dante does for others—provide a powerful consciousness for a reader to inhabit, moving with the characters through struggle and suffering to illumination.

To make a conclusion, let us connect Sayers to two basic principles of Christian apologetics through art. One principle, as Andrew Davison suggests in *Imaginative Apologetics*, is that wonder and reason are not really separate:

Apologetics should be a matter of wonder and desire, not least because reason at its most reasonable is itself a matter of wonder and desire. It is the work of the apologist to suggest that only in God does our wonder reach its zenith, and only in God do our deepest desires find their fulfilment. The apologist may labour to show that the Christian theological vision is true, but that will fall flat unless he or she has an equal confidence that it is supremely attractive and engaging. (Introduction xxvi)

Granted that wonder and desire must combine, what is the term for success in using art for Christian apologetics? Say that a reader and an artist (and perhaps a helpful guide like Sayers) have collaborated so that the reader feels a new conviction with both mind and heart. It could be any new conviction, major or minor. Shall we use active or a passive voice to describe the chance? Do we say that this reader *is converted* to a new conviction or *is convinced* of its truth? If reading is transactional and some apologetic text has helped bring a person nearer to God, then the convert's volition had to be part of the conversion. Yet the common declaration (at least in evangelical cultures) is in the passive voice—"I was saved." Converts declare

that they were recipients, not instigators, of salvation and usually give the Holy Spirit credit. Some doctrine of human depravity is embedded in that view of conversion. But Sayers seems to remind us that the most important term for success in apologetics is sometimes *recognition* or *realization*, perhaps even *vision* or *epiphany*. The reader/hearer/spectator is not only an object of conversion but one of the enactors.

Here is an example of active participation in a realization, an experience of Sayers's while writing notes for her *Inferno* translation. She had wondered why the episode of the Giants had been placed where it was:

And while looking for the answer, I quite suddenly **saw a vision** of the whole depth of the Abyss—perhaps as Dante saw it, but quite certainly as we can see it here and now: a single logical, coherent, and inevitable progress of corruption. . . . I saw the whole lay-out of Hell as something actual and contemporary; something that one can see by looking into one's self, or into the pages of tomorrow's newspaper. I saw it, that is, as a judgment of fact, unaffected by its period, unaffected by its literary or dogmatic origins; and I **recognised** at the same moment that the judgment was true. (*Introductory Papers* 128, emphasis added)

A reader's "browsing" that finds only "picturesque squalors" is exactly a failure to achieve conviction or realization. So a second artistic principle is to break through the "browsing." Complacency or passivity could keep a reader from some realization, and the writer's best resource could be a dash of strangeness. As Alison Milbank contends, "We need estranging techniques if we are to shock people into engagement with reality, so that they may appreciate the religious sense and we can begin to explain the Christian faith at all" (38). This brings us back to the broad theme of how the Inklings used the medieval. The strangeness of the medieval may only titillate or annoy certain readers (it always has, from Malory to our own video games and films). But it stimulates other readers to

expand their range of perception and recognition, opening them up perhaps to the spiritual. This is exactly the expectation that Sayers gives the modern reader so candidly in introducing her translation of *Inferno* in 1948:

If we know how to read it, we shall find that it has an enormous relevance both to us as individuals and to the world situation of to-day. Dante's Europe—remote and strange as it seemed to the Liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—had much in common with our own distracted times, and his vivid awareness of the deeps and heights within the soul comes home poignantly to us who have so recently rediscovered the problem of evil, the problem of power, and the ease with which our most God-like imaginings are “betrayed by what is false within”. (9-10)

Much of Sayers's achievement with medieval literature was to lead readers past the strangeness that baffles and onto the strangeness that leads to illumination.

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