9-15-1976

Dorothy L. Sayers and the Inklings

Joe R. Christopher
Dorothy L. Sayers and the Inklings

Abstract
Notes known connections to Lewis and Williams on Sayers's part (through the evidence of letters). Speculates on ways they may have influenced each other. Includes an excerpt from a Sayers letter on the Narnia books.

Additional Keywords
Inklings—Relations with women; Lewis, C.S.—Friends and associates—Dorothy L. Sayers; Sayers, Dorothy L.—Friends and associates—C.S. Lewis; Sayers, Dorothy L.—Friends and associates—Charles Williams; Sayers, Dorothy L.—Relation to Inklings; Williams, Charles—Friends and associates—Dorothy L. Sayers
lizard at his ear and his abrupt transformation into a kind of Sagittarian horseman.

"Vividly imagined...memorable pictures..."—the very words imply a different world from the one we best know. They draw us on, or back, into the world of myth. And what is this world of myth like? Whatever else it is, it is the opposite of atomic and the reverse of solid. No wonder Ovid chose "Metamorphoses" for the title of his general account of it. It is a world where, instead of cause-and-effect, we find a sequence of shapes and patterns gradually changing into each other. It is a world where everything flows. The very last word one would choose, if one were trying to convey a taste of its quality, is "solidity."

In that world, both during Lewis's life and since his death, there has been a steadily growing interest, a growing awareness of the fact that there was once a time when that kind of consciousness was collective; a time when it was, for mankind, the normal way of apprehending the world around him; when it was his "common sense"; when it was the ground thing, including things about the spirit, which we no longer know—except in what we call "the unconscious." In this mythic, or symbolic type of consciousness, which was not finally extinguished until the time of the scientific revolution, Lewis, as he showed in The Discarded Image and elsewhere, was very much at home. With that, kind of question about it he was not at home at all.

Lewis had practically no use for theories about myth and very little patience with its relations to anything that could be called belief or knowledge. He held, in short, that there was no relation at all, or certainly no discoverable one. He criticized the "de-mythologisers" in theology, but his own determination to keep the two separate was absolute. Knowledge, or belief about matters of fact, was one thing; myth and all it stands for another. He always went out of his way to insist that his own works of fiction were fiction, without relation to fact. And it is so, he tells us in the Preface, that we are to take the narrative and descriptive parts of The Great Divorce as post-Cartesian reality principle, the great divorce between matter and spirit. However it might be in heaven, for man on earth to search for any thing in the two Lewises them selves. And paradoxically it is in the book; and it is insisted on throughout. Some have no doubt seen it as a cunningly didactic invention—to take the reality principle itself of twentieth century men (including Lewis himself as known) and use it as a means of pointing them to a greater reality. But I have reason to believe that was not the way it came about. It was begotten genuinely of his own inner life. It arose quite naturally out of an intercourse—call it struggle, if you prefer—between the two Lewises that had been going on in there for a long time. And thus it was that between them they were able to create a violent indeed, but also novel, and perhaps important symbol. If you want a philosophy of imagination, you must look into the universal law of polarity, of which Cole-ridge speaks, and into all that follows from it. But if you are content with a symbol of imagination's relation to truth, a symbol of myth, a symbol of symbolism itself, you may find it in The Great Divorce.

Dorothy L. Sayers & the Inklings
by Joe R. Christopher

LET ME BEGIN WITH the fact that Dorothy L. Sayers was not an Inklings. This needs saying because several authors, including Janet Hitchman, have said she was. Hitchman, in her Such a Strange Lady: An Introduction to Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) (p. 177). This is going to be typical of popular writing on Sayers and the Inklings, I'm afraid—because, after all, she does not have a common interest with Williams and Lewis.

Even to call Sayers an "Oxford Christian"—a name some have used for the Inklings—is misleading to a degree. She was born in Oxford (her father was then headmaster of Christchurch Cathedral Choir School, but four years later he
moved to a living in the few country which Sayers depicted in *The Nine Tailors*, and she was educated there (she went up to Somerville College in 1912, and received a First Class Honours Degree in French in 1915, and an M.A. in 1920—Sayers depicted Somerville College right). But despite these details and later visits, Sayers was equally at home in London (like Charles Williams), working for Benson's advertising agency for nine years (she depicted Benson's in *Murder Must Advertise*); it was in London she had a love affair with John Cowper, a minor director of Russian, in 1921-1922, and with someone else the next year, which resulted in the birth of her illegitimate son on January 3, 1924. Indeed, she married in London in 1926 (in a civil ceremony) and lived there until World War II. After the war, in 1952, she became the Vicar's Warden at St. Thomas's Church (where Christopher Fry's *Sleep of Prisoners* was first produced), and later, after St. Thomas's was closed, became a Church Warden at St. Paul's—both churches in the same general area of London.

That's a less than an analytical paragraph, but it suggests the direction this note must take (if one leaves aside the thesis about Oxford and London): Sayers' career is an intriguing one of writing worldly mystery stories (parallel in a general way to her own life), deepening into more than puzzles in the last few—particularly *The Nine Tailors* and *Gaudy Night*—and then, after the play version of *Burban's Honeymoon* (1936), shifting abruptly into religious drama—*The Seal of Thy House* (1937) produced at Canterbury Cathedral. But Chicham has no real suggestion of what changed Say­ers' direction, nor of what caused Canterbury Cathedral to turn to a mystery novelist for a religious play in blank verse. All we have (as yet) is conjecture, but I don't mind offering my own: Charles Williams.

A. M. Hadfield, in her Introduction to Charles Williams (1959), writes of Williams' relationship to the number of young women who showed up at Amen House (the London home of the Oxford University Press) in the late '30s to see him: "C. W. might talk to you for an hour, he might take you out to tea, write letters to you, ring you up, make you read verse, learn collects, keep your temper once a week, write essays for him, but after a month your attention was more directed to the Holy Ghost and to Milton than to C. W."

I hardly think that Sayers at age 45 was likely to be infatuated in the same way as the young ladies, but I conjecture (it's no more than that) a similar thing happened. At any rate, in 1936 Charles Williams' *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* was produced at the Canterbury Festival; then, in 1937, Say­ers' *The Seal of Thy House* and, in 1939, her version of the Faust legend, *The Devil to Pay*. (Sayers went on to a second career in religious drama: *Come* (a radio-play), *The Man Born to Be King* (a radio-play cycle on the life of Christ, 1941), *The Just Vengeance* (a drama for the Lichfield Cathedral's 750th anniversary, 1946), and *The Daedal Contemplative* (for the Festival of Britain celebrations at Colchester, 1951)—as well as a non-religious comedy, *Love All*, produced in 1940 but never printed).

An even clearer but not so immediate influence of Wil­liams was Sayers' late career as critic and translator of Dante. She read Williams' *Purgatorio* when it appeared in 1943 (she says this in her essay, "...And Telling You a Story"

Then, because of Williams, she read Dante. Hitchman tells the story this way: "Mac [the nickname of Sayers' husband] was very interested in the Daedalists; step by step, 'Come on Dorothy! Dodgoblins!' [his nickname for the German V-1 missiles]... At the sound of Mac's warning, and the air raid siren, she rushed downstairs, grabbing the first book she happened to encounter, for she always, wherever she went, had to have something to read. One night she was seated in the cell and she realized that the book she had picked up was an old volume of Dante in the original mediaeval Italian. She was slightly annoyed, as she did not know any modern Italian but she knew that with her Latin and French, she could make a good deal of sense of The Divine Comedy. By the time the 'All Clear' sound she was hooked" (p. 177). That's probably not literally true—I would guess she bought the book out to read sometime already—but the reference to dodgoblins in her essay shows the time is correct. It is notable that Sayers dedicated her trans­lations of Dante's *Hell* and *Purgatory* to Williams, and no doubt if she had lived to finish the third volume, she would have dedicated it the same way.

Obviously, there is much to be learned about the Sayers-Williams friendship; all I can add is that it extended to Williams' family on Sayer's part, for the Wheaton College collection has a few short notes she wrote to his wife and son after Williams' death.

The friendship with C. S. Lewis is also largely unknown in detail. Lewis wrote in a letter (Beacon 20, January 1963, p. 81) that he had had tea with Sayers a few times—but never anything stronger, although that was neither her fault nor his. (Sayers was a great wine drinker, by the way.) Where, when, and why they met, we do not know. Do we have a few letters of their correspondence? Lewis's, of 10 November 1945 and 2 August 1945, in Letters of C. S. Lewis, ed. W. H. Lewis; Sayers, 'June' 13 May 1945, and 21 December 1953, in *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*, by Green and Hooper. From the latter volume, as well as Lewis's first letter, we know that Sayers (as well as Williams, according to Green and Hooper) was involved in the Socratic Club, Oxford during the days of Lewis's presidency. So a few of their meetings were probably on times when Sayers journeyed to Oxford to read a paper on a religious topic before that group. (At least one of Sayers' addresses before the Socratic Club—if she gave more than one—has been published: "Poetry, Language and Ambiguity" [delivered on 3 June 1954], in *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement, and Other Posthumous Essays*... [1963].)

Since the earliest of these letters is in 1943, it is possible that Charles Williams, after his removal with the Oxford University Press, to London, visited Oxford, met Lewis, and Sayers together. (Certainly Lewis and Sayers collaborated on a letter on the tenth anniversary of Williams' death, sent to the London Times.) On the other hand, Sayers gave a series of radio talks, Christ of the Creeds (never published, at least under that title in 1939; Lewis began work on his Broadcaast Talks (*The Case for Christianity* in the U.S.) in 1941—perhaps their introduction was through someone at the B.B.C. Or, of course, perhaps one of them just wrote to the other—such things do happen. In other words, as with the Williams-Sayers friendship, this essay is being written perhaps five or ten years too soon: no doubt more materials on Sayers will be forthcoming. Perhaps (wouldn't it be delightful?) Walter Hooper will edit the Lewis-Sayers corres­pondence. Perhaps, perhaps...

There are a couple of indications in these published letters of how valuable such a volume might be. In Sayers' letter of 13 May 1943, she urged him to write a book on miracles; a few weeks later, according to Green and Hooper, Lewis began work on *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. Were there other such cross influences? Besides, Lewis wrote to Sayers in his 10 December 1945 letter, "...you are one of the great English letter writers." That's reason enough for a collection!

Two items of Sayers and Lewis writing about each other can conclude this note. Sayers wrote a letter to the Spec­tator 195 (22 July 1955), p. 123, in which she corrected a reviewer who compared Aslan to an archangel; she continues, in these tales of Absolutely Elsewhere, Aslan is shown as creating the worlds (*The Magician's Nephew*), slain and arisen again for the redemption of sin (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Ward­robe*), incarnate as a Talking Beast among Talk­ing Beasts (*passim*), and obedient to the laws he has made for his own creation (*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*). "...the August archetype—higher than the angels and 'made a little lower' than they—is thus readily identified as the 'Lion of the Tribe of Judah'. Apart from a cer­tain disturbance of the natural hierarchies occasioned by the presence in the story of actual human beings, Professor Lewis's theology and pneumatology are as accurate and logical here as in his other writings.

If it is delightful to know that says read Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia, it would be even more interesting to have heard his final work. He wrote a panegyric on Sayers which, according to Hitchman, was being general by the Bishop of Chichester. (Perhaps the Bishop still has a copy?) Lewis was not a reader of detective stories (except for the Sherlock Holmes saga) and he was not greatly inter­ested in drama, but with a celebration of Sayers' Christian apologetics and her Dantean studies?