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Reviews

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Reviews

Abstract

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Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography. James Brabazon. Reviewed by Nancy-Lou Patterson.

REVIEWS

Middle-earth Verité

The 1990 J.R.R. Tolkien Calendar. Illustrated by Ted Nasmith. New York: Ballantine Books. ISBN 0-345-36187-3.

For a number of years now, admirers of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien have had to face the art calendar season with trepidation and loathing. Their high hopes for decent Middle-earth artwork would be rudely dashed as soon as the calendars hit the bookstores. It had become an exercise in frustration. Not this year. Believe it or not, Ballantine is, at last, starting to get it right.

Beginning with the interior design, the 1990 Tolkien Calendar fares much better than the 1989 version. It is a visual relief to see the 1990 background left as a pristine white with soft yellow accents, as opposed to 1989's overpowering yellow background and awkward, dominating borders. (Both years' designs are by Alex Jay/Studio J.) 1990's design does, however, fail in its use of picture borders, which directly overlap the four corners of the paintings. The borders are an unwelcomed intrusion and unfair to the artist. They should have been eliminated.

The artist in question is Ted Nasmith, who provides all of the paintings in this calendar. His work here (with the exception of a few minor quibbles) is excellent. His faithfulness to Tolkien's text makes it difficult, for the most part, to argue against his artistic choices.

In January's "At the Sign of the Prancing Pony," Nasmith chooses a 'worm's-eye-view,' and this low angle effectively conveys the scale of the hobbits and the inn. There is a true sense of the deepness of the night versus the glowing warmth of the common room. The cat on the steps is a nice touch, too. The faces of the hobbits are somewhat sketchy and not fully realized (this is an early painting, dated 1975). However, taken as a whole, this piece works very well.

February's "Riders at the Ford" is a miracle of water and light. We see what Frodo is seeing, caught as he is in the shadow world of the Ringwraiths. The background is dim and its colors desaturated, which lends it a kind of dreary dreaminess. But the Riders are terrifyingly real and menacing. Nasmith's handling of the aquamarine waters is a marvel – it is easy to imagine the roar and fury. Light flickers and darts, dazzling the eye and energizing the surface of the oncoming torrent. Textual accuracy prevails, save only that the elf-horse Asfaloth is too small. Frodo should be dwarfed upon the great white stallion to enhance the feeling of the fading hobbit's vulnerability at this climatic moment.

In March's "Lúthien," Nasmith's attention to the na-

tural world could rival the work of the great Nature painters of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. One can fairly smell in the air the scent of the leaves and wildflowers. Here is the experience of 'green' in all its richness. The sunlight through the leaves is amazing – at once natural and supernatural. Again, it is light that transforms the work. In the midst of this heavenly light is Lúthien, a jewel with a ballerina's grace, robbed all in Sapphire. This is a far cry from Roger Garland's levitating mannequin of 1989! The little nightingale in flight by the trees is also a keen observation by the artist. Text and subtext – it's all here.

In April's "Wellinghall," Nasmith takes on the difficult subject of Treebeard. Each viewer will undoubtedly bring his/her own ideas about ents to this painting and will either heartily agree or disagree with the depiction. Yet once again the artist is true to the descriptions in the text, especially with the lighting effects in the hall and on the trees. The composition would have benefited by moving Treebeard from his half-hidden position in the corner to the center with the hobbits for some character interaction.

May: "Sam Enters Mordor Alone." This works much better here than on the cover of the calendar because here it is the entire painting seen in its proper format. The cover shows only a portion of the work. Sam's aloneness is expressed more poignantly with the vertical orientation. Mount Doom gasps its reek into the burning sky that is eerie enough to make one's skin crawl. There is also a nice juxtaposition of Sam's face with the glaring, unholy mountain.

June's "Rivendell" displays the sweeping enormity of Nature as convincingly as any of the great pantheistic landscapes of Frederick Edwin Church. If God is in the details, then Eru is certainly found in this "Rivendell." Those who have not seen the very large original painting are likely to miss Elrond's house amidst the richly varied landscape. It is just left of center of the painting.

July's "Pursuit in Rohan," like January's painting, is an older work. (This one is dated 1979.) Yet it seems to be more stylistically out of sync with the rest of the calendar than the January piece. The landscape itself does give the feeling of the wide-open grasslands and skies of Rohan, and is handled well. But the figures of Legolas and Gimli will likely stir up some debate. Legolas is too petite and delicate, and Gimli looks too sinister. Aragorn fares a bit better than the others, but remains rather bland. The border design on this painting is particularly annoying and intrusive.

August: "At the Foot of Mount Doom." The despair of Frodo and Sam is almost palpable. Nasmith handles

violent ash storms and glowing rivers of lava with equal skill. He fills the choking air with a rain of death, then freezes the action a second before the hobbit's salvation. Virtuoso technique and emotional impact combine to great effect in this piece.

September: "The Oathtaking of Cirion and Eorl." This scene is from *Unfinished Tales* and it is amazingly accurate. Again Nasmith gives us a wonderfully observed Nature. The billowing clouds, the snow-capped and tree-clad mountains, Elendil's mound and tombstone—all give the viewer a feeling of the verisimilitude of Middle-earth.

October: "Nazgûl." This painting is thrilling in its perspective. Nasmith puts the viewer up in the air with those bone-chilling creatures. The roiling menace of the clouds, eerily lit by a cold, bleary moon, shows the very skies of Mordor in torment. The Eye in the Dark Tower is like a scarlet stab of dread. "Nazgûl" is quite an achievement.

November: "Green Hill Country." Here are grasses and trees that draw their vigor and color from the earth, from rain, and from the sun. Treetops tinged with orange and red hint at Autumn. Majestic clouds inhabit the skies. Compare this with the acidic greens that color Garland's Middle-earth paintings and it is clear that there is no comparison. Nasmith's powers of observation of nature are enormous. It's all in the details—the lovely details!

December: "Minas Tirith at Dawn." Truly a case of saving the best for last. This is Nasmith's jewel in the crown. It is hard to imagine a Minas Tirith more closely and lovingly observed. Here indeed is a city of true grandeur—a reflection of the glory of ancient Gondor. There is also a wealth of particulars: rising mists, falling waters, lush lawns and grazing sheep, with just a glimpse of tilled farmland. And then there is the mountain—the massive Mindolluin. This is *real* geography and geography glowing in the rising sun. The timelessness of the scene is broken only by the thundering of Shadowfax and his companions, who put us back into the tale at a specific time and place. Nasmith is nothing less than stunning in his architecture and his accuracy. The calendar-size reproduction hardly does justice to it. The large original painting has to be seen to be believed.

Artistically, this calendar is a major success. One hopes Ballantine recognizes this and acts accordingly to ensure a strong future for the *art* of the Tolkien Calendar. And let us hope to see Ted Nasmith's unique, expansive visions of Middle-earth for many years to come.

— Paula DiSante

[Editor's comment: I am very proud to say that Ted Nasmith is an active member of The Mythopoetic Society. He displayed the large original paintings that were used in the 1990 Tolkien Calendar at the 1989 Mythopoetic Conference in Vancouver, to the delight of all. He also donated two of the British versions of the Calendar for the Society auction, which brought high prices. He and his beautiful wife and children live in Toronto. I personally admire his work, especially his vistas and geography. I would presume to say that J.R.R.T. would be impressed and delighted.—GG]

I Call You Blessed

C.S. Lewis and Don Giovanni Calabria, *Letters: A Study in Friendship*, translated and edited by Martin Moynihan (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1988), 125 pp. ISBN 0-89283-619-9.

An unexpected gift laid in our hands from an unimpeachable source, this exquisite book crowns Lewis' life and letters. On the first of September, 1947, Blessed Don Giovanni Calabria, the founder of Casa Buoni Franchelli in Vernona, Italy, wrote a letter in Latin to C.S. Lewis expressing admiration for *Le Lettere di Berlicche*—which most readers of *Mythlore* know as *The Screwtape Letters*. This opened a correspondence as supernal at that book's was infernal, demonstrating a series of virtues which are the obverse for which *Screwtape's* correspondence was the reverse. Don Calabria is called "Blessed" because he has been beatified (a step before sainthood) by his beloved Roman Catholic Church. As no formal method exists among Anglicans, we cannot officially call Lewis the same, but Don Giovanni could: he wrote to Lewis, "I call you blessed and always shall," "*Te beatum dico et dicam*." I can give you the Latin because this enchanting book is printed with Latin text and English translation on facing pages.

C.S. Lewis exchanged letters in Latin with Don Calabria between 1947 and 1954, and following his correspondent's death, continued to write to Don Luigi Pedrollo until two years before his own death. His letters open with a lament that at an age of fifty most of his writing career is behind him (readers of the Narnian Chronicles, one of which at least Lewis is sent letters to Verona, will chuckle at these famous last words), and conclude with a poignant remark to break the reader's heart: "I know that you pour forth your prayers both for my dearly-longed-for wife and also for me who—now bereaved as it were halved—journey on, through this Vale of Tears, alone." (p. 107)

This book contains at least two astounding dicta which ought to cause reams of paper to be filled: the terseness, intensity, and compression of Latin evidently fitted Lewis' pen well, and Moynihan's translation rings with Lewis' authentic voice, one which is quite distinctive from that of Don Calabria. First, Lewis writes, "Satan is without doubt nothing else than a hammer in the hand of a benevolent and severe God." (pp. 33, 35) One takes this like a blow in the chest, the whole book of *Job* in a clenched fist.

Second, and maybe even more astonishing, is this declaration: "United in wedlock with the eternal Godhead itself, our nature ascends into the Heaven of Heavens." (p. 47) We are to be, or at least the English says so, the husbands and wives of God. This message, which deserves comparison with Ransom's experience of the fruits of Perelandra in its bracing refreshment, occurs in the context of a passage on the Holy Communion, and along with numerous references to the Christian Year, rebuts forever any commentator who thinks Lewis did not enjoy his liturgical milieu. The Incarnation is said to be the principal

emphasis of Anglicanism, and such a passage will repay long meditation; presumably it was for Lewis the repayment of long meditation!

Two more notes, and then you must read the book for yourself: first, the great author, teacher, and scholar admits that his own personal temptations are, along with *acidie* (that "sloth" for which the modern clinical name is depression), "Longing to be thought well of" and "fear of rejection." (p. 47) I feel like saying "us lions," like the lion in Narnia who naively compared himself to Aslan, because I certainly could say — perhaps all academics could say — the same.

And second, in the midst of his outpourings of ecumenical charity, Lewis says quite honestly to Don Calabria that "we disagree about nothing more than the authority of the Pope." (p. 39) His love is given *despite* disagreements, not *instead* of them. Only this honest and candid love provides sufficiently fertile ground for reconciliation.

This essential little work is sure to spark significant discussions. In Heaven, where sanctity is, after all, finally decided, it should form powerful evidence for the defence.

— Nancy-Lou Patterson

Reveling in Myth

Robert A. Segal, *Joseph Campbell, An Introduction* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987).

The Summer 1989 issue of *Mythlore* contained a brief but valuable essay by Joseph Hauptman on "Joseph Campbell: Mythologist." (pp. 58-59) The recent interviews with Campbell by Bill Moyers on PBS will also have sparked interest. Those who do not know Campbell's works first-hand and have been inspired to seek out this major 20th century mythologist's large and in some cases expensive works are likely to be little daunted by their number and even by their richness, but as with C.S. Lewis, it is essential to read the man himself before attempting books about him. Even so, serious writers need as well as deserve commentators, and this brief study, with its excellent Bibliography of Campbell's work and interviews, as well as of reviews and articles about them, offers a most welcome key to unlock this complex subject.

Segal's method is admirably simple; first, he gives two chapters to *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, four chapters to the four volumes of *The Masks of God*, and one chapter to *The Mythic Image* and the *Historical Atlas of World Mythology* considered together. Secondly he considers "Campbell as a Comparativist," "The Origin of Myth," "The Function of Myth," and "Campbell as a Jungian." He goes straight to the heart of his matter in each of these chapters, writing with a trenchant clarity and a welcome brevity. He is particularly useful on the multiple contradictions of Campbell's works, and accurate as to the reasons for this trait.

Campbell, as Segal summarizes his findings in his Conclusion,

repeatedly contradicts himself on the central issue; why myths are the same, whether myths are the same, and what their message is. But these criticisms pale beside the prime one; that Campbell spends too much time reveling in myth and not enough time analyzing it." (p. 140)

The same cannot be said for Segal on Campbell: his study is useful, clear, and despite his criticism, a helpful guide for the Campbell reader, who may very likely be attracted rather than repelled by Campbell's tendency to revel in myth.

Nancy-Lou Patterson

The Chemistry of Literature

Maria Nikolajeva, *The Magic Code: The Use of Magical Patterns in Fantasy for Children*. Almqvist and Wiksell International 1988.

The Magic Code is Maria Nikolajeva's doctoral dissertation. Although the material examined is limited to "some 250 fantasy novels for children, mainly British, published 1900-1980," Nikolajeva has produced a great work of interest to all writers and readers of fantasy, even if not necessarily for children, novels or British,

Nikolajeva begins by charting the history of the genre of fantasy, both in terms of its definition as a genre, and in the development of works ascribed to that genre. Her contribution to the definition of the fantasme (c.f. phoneme), which is the smallest indivisible part of fantasy. It is not the same as "theme" or "motif."

The presence of fantasemes is what makes a text fantasy.

The fantasemes are abstract notions which in each particular text assume a concrete form, thus producing a number of variables (p. 113)

The weakness of the book is that she does not define *science fiction* with the same care as she defines *fantasy*. This leads her to statements such as "x is science fiction, not fantasy," when perhaps she would have been better leaving the statement as "x is not fantasy." This weakness is most revealing. Given that there are fantasemes (and the mythemes of Metelinsky which Nikolajeva used as a model), why not define scisemes? Or Westemes? Or Detecemes (with a sub-group, whodunemes?) A novel could then be seen as composed of these various elements. This "ficteme" theory of genre is implicit in the definition of fantasemes, but not made explicit in the book. Its absence points to the lack of theory about genre which is needed if the individual genre, such as *fantasy* is to be defined.

This lack of basic theory aside, the fantaseme theory is a valid approach. It does not reduce the work to a list: fictemes, unlike atoms, all are not the same. So a novel can never be expressed as a formula, as a substance may. Indeed, it is possible for one fantaseme in a great glob of other fictemes to be so powerful that the work is not generally accepted as fantasy, while the same fantaseme,

with other fantasemes may be so overwhelmed by other fictions that the work is not generally as fantasy, but rather as historical romance, a detective story, or whatever.

Two other negative criticisms are that, unlike her excellently supported reference to primary and secondary material, her critical comments can appear unsupported, unless one knows the materials as well as she obviously does. Secondly, there are some awful typesetting errors including "Farmer Jiles (sic) of Ham."

However, this is an extremely interesting and readable work. Maria Nikolajeva charts the source, use and disfavor of the various fantasemes such as *location* of the world. For example, the location underground which is out of favor now. She delves beyond the identification and categorization of the fantaseme to deal with previous criticism of the fantaseme. There are some brilliant insights, such as her comment on time relations between worlds: – in myth, the hero thinks himself gone a few days, but is gone for years; in fantasy, the hero thinks himself gone for years, but finds himself returned a second later. There are areas where I would disagree with Nikolajeva, such as where she describes as "late" the "educational tollbooth" which is found in Norman Juster's *The Phantom Tollbooth*, where I see its antecedents in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

She states that "authors seldom work deliberately with fantasemes," but supports this with a quote from Lloyd Alexander talking about archetypes (p. 115). Further investigation could have been made into why authors use fantasemes, and whether this is deliberate or not.

Maria Nikolajeva acknowledges that fantasemes alone do not a fantasy make. For her, they make the "fantasy chronotope":

a unique combination of temporal and spatial relations with one common denomination: magic, that is, the non-rational presence of extraordinary events, beings and objects." (p. 114)

Finally, the bibliography of primary sources is an excellent reading list.

— Pat Reynolds

The Passionate Intellect

James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography*, Preface by Anthony Fleming, Foreword by P.D. James (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1988), 308 pp. ISBN 0-575-04370-9.

When first published in 1981 as *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Life of a Courageous Woman*, this work, the long-awaited authorized biography, brought to five the number of lives of Dorothy L. Sayers which began with *Such a Strange Lady* published by Janet Hitchman in 1975. When I reviewed Hitchman's biography, I wrote, in what I think was my first review for the Mythopoeic Society, "No doubt there will be a more scholarly, fully annotated biography of Sayers; there ought to be."¹ Writing of her own work, Janet

Hitchman stated: "I think it has proved the right time to write a book about her because it has inspired everybody else to write books about her. In fact now an official biography has been commissioned."²

Joe R. Christopher wrote in anticipation of these works-to-come: "The chance of learning more about the complexities of her existence – not as a saint, but as a Christian, a woman, and a writer – is what makes the promise of these biographies so exciting."³ He was quite right, for as the works duly appeared, they explored these complexities, each in a distinctive way. The four studies which preceded the authorized biography were these: Janet Hitchman, *Such a Strange Lady, An Introduction to Dorothy L. Sayers* (1893-1957) (London: New English Library, 1975); Alzina Stone Dale, *Maker and Craftsman, The Story of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1978)⁴; Ralph E. Hone, *Dorothy L. Sayers, A Literary Biography* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1979)⁵; and Nancy Tischler, *Dorothy L. Sayers, A Pilgrim Soul* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1980).⁶ Just as Hitchman had said, both because of, and despite these efforts, an authorized biography was commissioned. Miss Sayers's son, Anthony Fleming, explained his authorization of James Brabazon's work like this: "Various accounts of Dorothy's work have already been published, without benefit of access to her private papers, and naturally therefore with varying degrees of accuracy." His mother's express wish not to allow a biography until fifty years after her death was thus put to rest by the person she had, one assumes, sought to protect by silence, the son born to her before her marriage, whose existence was first revealed publicly by Janet Hitchman. In fact, the preservation of many of the sources so important in Brabazon's work is due to Fleming's foresight. He and Muriel St Clare Byrne (one of Miss Sayer's closest friends from Oxford days to her life's end) concurred in the decision. These sources reveal the truth conveyed by Brabazon's original title — "The Story of a Courageous Woman."

As various critics have said,⁷ Brabazon's work fully rewards the appetites whetted by these precursors, and in precisely the manner prescribed by Christopher. Miss Sayers is analyzed "as a Christian, a woman, and an writer" by a biographer who knew her personally and well, in the maturity of her faith, her life and her *oeuvre*. In contrast with Janet Hitchman, who admitted that "I don't think actually had I known her I would have liked her personally,"⁸ James Brabazon quite obviously liked her very much. His work is not in the least an hagiography – again as Christopher hoped, he writes of her "Not as a saint" – but a study full of warmth, appreciation, clear-eyed judgement, and finally, compassion. He explains his method: "The bulk of my work has been among her letters, and the tiny proportion of these that I have actually quoted are individually itemized in the endnotes." (p. 297) A perusal of these reveals correspondence with at least forty-two persons, plus *The Times*. Those who received many letters include her parents, her cousin Ivy Shrimpton, her son Anthony Fleming, her dear friends Muriel Jaeger and

Muriel St Clare Byrne, her avowed master Charles Williams, and the man with whom she was deeply in love, John Cournos. These last letters are made known to the public for the first time and they afford a glimpse (which dazzles and devastates at the same time) into the furnace of the heart. All of the letters are interesting and many are fascinating. They show her as P.D. James describes her in a splendid Foreword: "Ebullient, pugnacious, and galling." (p. xvi)

Many of Miss Sayers's relationships are clarified by these letters, including that with Ivy Shrimpton. No one understands how their girlhood friendship was crowned when Miss Sayers entrusted her son to Ivy's care. Miss Sayers's love and concern for the child are made evident. The person he has become in adulthood is apparent in his Preface, which suggests that he had fulfilled the hope his mother and foster mother must have had for him. Again, her warm friendships both women and men emerge with vividness.

Along with the letters, Brabazon has depended upon Miss Sayers for another, equally important source of understanding. This lies in a pair of works which she wrote and then abandoned early in the 1930s: "My Edwardian Childhood" (33 pp., circa 1932), and "Cat o' Mary" (209 pp., circa 1934). The first of these is a partial autobiography of Miss Sayers's early life, and the second, an autobiography thinly disguised as a portion of a novel of girlhood, which parallels the first in every particular, according to Brabazon. From them he constructs a delightful picture of Miss Sayers's rectory childhood, a hothouse existence which nurtured her genius if not her knowledge of the world outside the walls of her own home. One hopes that these fragments, along with a generous selection of the letters, will be published before too long.

Besides correcting previous impressions about Ivy Shrimpton, Brabazon clarifies Miss Sayers's relationships with Eric Whelpston and John Cournos. He also presents a fuller and more sympathetic picture of her husband, Captain O.A. Fleming, whom she met some time after August, 1925, the year in which he had become divorced. A Scot, he had served in the Royal Army Service Corps, and had spent the war with the Twenty-Sixth Siege Brigade of the Royal Artillery (during which service he was gassed and shelled). He was the father of two daughters and was twelve years Miss Sayers's senior. During the war he was Special Correspondent to the *Daily Chronicle* and the *Sunday Chronicle*, and when Miss Sayers married him he was a correspondent of *The News of the World*, reporting upon "Motor-racing and crime." His gradual decline, through alcoholism and the latent effects of his war service, were borne with true gallantry by his wife. But she had come to him with battle scars of her own.

She had been deeply in love with John Cournos, but he wished to make her his lover while using contraception. This she would not do. As a result of the impasse, they parted. He married and she found a lover who made her

pregnant. This man is described by Brabazon for the first time. Miss Sayers wrote to her parents in 1922: "I am coming home for Xmas on Saturday with a man and a motorcycle." (p. 96) In April of 1923, Miss Sayers became pregnant and John Anthony was born January 3, 1924. On January 1, Miss Sayers had written to Ivy asking her to take a soon-to-be-born child so that its mother would be able to continue working and thus support it. She later admitted to Ivy that the child was her own but her own parents never learned the truth. She had hoped the father - "Bill" as Brabazon calls him - would marry her and accept the baby but he did not.

Since reading Brabazon's description of Miss Sayers's liaison with Bill, who was a motor-mechanic, familiar with motorcycles and automobiles, one sees a number of incidents and characters in her novels in a new light. Perhaps the likeliest candidate for a delicately revengeful portrait of Bill is - I suggest it in a spirit of play, no more - "the Goyles person," as Lord Peter calls him in *Clouds of Witness* (1926). The Dowager Duchess says "all I remember saying to Peter was that Mr. Goyles manners seemed to me to lack polish, and that he showed a lack of independence in his opinion." (Ibid., p. 177) Goyles's situation is explained by Lady Mary: "George had simply no money. He'd really given everything he had to the Labour Party." (Ibid., p. 178) She claims they had planned to elope in a motorcycle and side-car. When Lord Peter interviews Goyles, "The young man began by blustering a little," (Ibid., p. 189) and looking resentful." (Ibid., p. 190) In fact on the night of the planned

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elopement he had found a corpse and bolted – “I was in a very awkward and stupid situation,” as he explains. (*Ibid.*, p. 191) Mary, aware now that he is not after all a murderer, as she had concluded on finding her brother with the corpse, but merely “such an ass,” (*Ibid.*, p. 193) sends him away. He had left her, as it were, holding the body, as Bill had left Miss Sayers holding the baby. This portrait is not without charity, if a little patronizing; by the time the book was published, Miss Sayers had married. Her husband, whatever his fate, was her last and longest lover.

Brabazon deals with Miss Sayers's literary and scholarly works in their context: they are part of her life story. He does add some well-chosen comments of critical appraisal, but he also uses the works to throw light on their author. At least three poems, a dozen articles, a play, an apologetic work, and six of the detective novels are quoted. The reader who is familiar with Miss Sayers's works will find these insights telling. Brabazon's book is, in a word, simply essential. Readers of *Mythlore* will want to read it again and again as a meditation on the life of this remarkable woman.

One incident which occurred in the last years of her life seems to me to invite commentary. On Maundy Thursday at St Thomas's Church, Regent Street, John Wren-Lewis confronted Miss Sayers with a criticism of her life's work: the charge, as phrased by Brabazon, was “that the only aspect of Christianity that these writers [including C.S. Lewis and T.S. Eliot, attacked by Kathleen Nott] really cared about was the dogmatic pattern.” (p. 261) Miss Sayers replied with a long letter written on Good Friday, which Brabazon calls the “most important and most interesting” (p. 263) of all her letters. It is “both a confession and a justification for what she has done and what she is.”

What Miss Sayers wrote is this: “I am quite without the thing known as ‘inner light’ or ‘spiritual experience’. I have never undergone conversion.” (p. 262) She was, she wrote, “quite incapable of ‘religious emotion’.” She did not, she continued, confuse aesthetic pleasure with moral virtue, or sympathy for the dying Christ for “crucifying the old man in myself.” And she knew that religion was not mere sexual sublimation. Then she uttered what will, I fear, come to be a much-quoted and profoundly misunderstood confession: “Of all the presuppositions of Christianity, the only one I really have and can swear to from personal inward conviction is sin.” (p. 263) She freely agrees that she is “in love with the pattern” and loves with a “passionate intellect.” For her, this is “the only point at which ecstasy can enter. I do not know whether we can be saved through the intellect, but I do know that I can be saved by nothing else.” (p. 263)

The rest of the letters in what became a prolonged exchange are not quoted except for what Brabazon calls “an admission that seems to me fatal to her argument”:

that the Creeds are not in fact statements of ultimate and unalterable truth, but are the results of revisions, based on experience, or earlier drafts; and “there is no reason why there should not be other such revisions, except that the schism between East and West has deprived us of the

means to call a General Synod.” (p. 265)

If that is so, Brabazon argues, then the Creeds are “arrested” – out-dated – and “no longer have the breath of life in them” “And that being the case, what was Dorothy offering to our century after all?” But this recognition of the historicity of the Creeds does not in fact present a problem. If, as in the case, Christians who accept the findings of biblical criticism and historical scholarship – about the dates, authorship, and hermeneutics of scripture – can nonetheless find the Bible to be the Word of God, then surely Christians who are informed about the historical accidents which produced the Creeds can nonetheless give them credence! Providence operates, for Christian thought, within the chances and accidents of history. The “fullness of time” – the occurring of events at exactly the opportune moment – can be seen in the events at Nicea. Surely Miss Sayers wrote her play *The Emperor Constantine* about precisely this.

What is more, church people in England who chose to abandon the Creeds – Bishop Robinson of *Honest to God* is but one example of those eager to announce God's Death – can be seen from today's vantage point to have been quite unsuccessful at re-filling the pews of the Church! Perhaps Miss Sayers was more of a prophet than Wren-Lewis thought.

What especially concerns me, however, is Miss Sayers meaning when she said that she was “without the thing known as ‘inner light,’” and that the only presupposition of Christianity to which she can swear “from personal inward conviction is sin.” In both of the utterances she uses phrases fraught with specific meaning: Phrases which are actually technical language. The “inner light” refers to the experience of the mystic. By no means all Anglicans, let alone all Christians, put their trust in the experiential excesses – the “religious emotion” – of what used to be called “enthusiasm.” Miss Sayers is here disavowing both, whether she does so from humility, as Brabazon suggests, or from a kind of religious fastidiousness (felt by more than a few Christians toward both mysticism and enthusiasm) is not entirely clear. And I hasten to add that mystical enlightenment, mystical union with God, charismatic experience, and the whole range of religious phenomena are by no means absent from Anglicanism. More importantly, however, Miss Sayers includes in her second disavowal the extremely pregnant term (said in paraphrased form) “conviction [of] sin.” For many Christians this has been the first and vital step in the movement of the soul toward the fountainhead of forgiveness which lies in Christ. Miss Sayers sense of sin must indeed have been entirely heartfelt. She had been an unwed mother and her only husband was a divorced man. Both situations continued as fully or half-concealed sores on the body of her conscience for half her lifetime. Love, companionship, motherhood, all were soiled for her by irregularities which to a rectory-bred only daughter, however deeply she strayed into the sophisticated world of her era, can never have been entirely forgotten.

Furthermore, the phrase implies that she desired, and felt she knew where to look for, forgiveness. Not for her the defiance, the pretending not to care for the values she had overthrown. By publicly espousing Christianity (without an intervening conversion) she clung to the only hope she could see; the only hope, in Christian terms, that she had. Traditional Anglican worship is often accused of being too preoccupied with penitence. The General Confession is enshrined in the very heart of the Prayer Book Eucharist. But the rolling words of this beautiful prayer must have been balm to her seared soul, and the General Confession from Mattins, repeated day after day, year after year – "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, And we have done those things which we ought not to have done" – pour like clear water over the repentant spirit parched for mercy and release.

Christians who experience the conviction of sin can be profoundly open to the love of that God "who hasteneth nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sin of all those that are penitent," in the words of the Prayer Book Collect for Ash Wednesday. Christianity offers the food for many hungers: for some, mystical enlightenment; for some, ecstatic religious emotion; for some, like Dorothy L. Sayers, forgiveness for those who feel the conviction of sin.

When Miss Sayers was writing her apologetic works, one of the major charges levelled against Christianity was that it offended against reason. She, like C. S. Lewis, was at pains to prove that this was not the case. The Creeds certainly lend themselves to rational explication, and indeed there are theologians of more recent date who have made good use of dogma. I think especially of Mary McDermott Shideler, whose *A Creed for a Christian Sceptic* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1968), is a strong argument for credal belief. But there has been something of a watershed in these matters, and writers on religion have turned from discursive forms to what Suzanne Langer called "presentational" forms. Works of art are presentational forms, which display truth rather than arguing for them. The imaginative works of C.S. Lewis have come to be preferred by many recent commentators over his apologetic works (though these too continue to be enjoyed in some camps). In the same way, the imaginative writings of Dorothy L. Sayers are proposed by Brabazon as her most lasting works. There is no irony in this; quite the contrary. She was a genius of catholic proportions capable of the fullest range of literary, scholarly, and artistic expression. And her "passionate intellect" shines from every facet of her work, from the most whimsical to the most profound. As Brabazon remarks,

A world that prefers experience to tradition will swing back again in due course, needing the ballast of ancient wisdom; they will find few who state more simply, more relevantly and more entertainingly what the wisdom of the Church has concluded about the condition of mankind. (p. 276)

Or of womankind, one hastens to add!

— Nancy-Lou Patterson

Notes

1. Nancy-Lou Patterson, "A Rose in Stoneware," *Mythprint* (November 1975), Vol. 12, No. 5, p. 4.
2. Janet Hitchman, "On Writing Such A Strange Lady," *The Sayers Review* (July, 1977), Vol. I, No. 4, p. 21.
3. Joe R. Christopher, "Works in Progress on Dorothy L. Sayers," *The Sayers Review* (May, 1978) Vol. II, No. 1, p. 23. Christopher gave comments on three of the authors, which can be compared with Hitchman's remarks, quoted above: Alzina Stone Dale said of her efforts to avoid Hitchman's errors: "I think I'll pass!" (p. 22) Ralph Hone described his "Critical Biography" as "scrupulously documented, choicely illustrated." (p. 23) James Brabazon (still in mid-effort) lamented difficulties with the letters "stuck in the library at Harvard." (p. 23) which Christopher correctly identified as Sayer's letters to John Cournos.
4. Praised by the present reviewer in "Sisterhood and Straw Bedding," *Mythlore* 21 (Summer, 1979), Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 16-17, for "her charmingly written, serenely balanced, and profoundly Christian biography," (p. 16) this work "presents as a major unifying factor for Sayers's actions her insistence on intellectual integrity," according to Christie McMenomy, *The Sayers Review* (September, 1980), Vol. IV, No. 1, p. 26.
5. In this book, Sayers's life is "presented with remarkable sympathy and thoroughness," according to my review, "Sayers in Silver," *Mythlore* 22 Fall, (1979), Vol. 6, No. 4, p. 27; but Christie McMenomy points out that in his literary analyses he "warns the reader to exercise caution when reading Sayers' personal life into her works," and then violates his own dictum, in her review in *The Sayers Review* (January, 1981), Vol. IV, No. 2, p. 13.
6. My review, "Dorothy and Miriam," in *Mythlore* 27 (Spring 1981), Vol. 8, No. 1, states that "by relating the pilgrimage of Sayers's life to the development of her literary works, Tischler has thrown a profound light upon both life and works," (p. 33) while Joe R. Christopher says that she "offers an interpretive biography of Sayers, seeing her life within a Christian framework," in his review in *Mythlore* 30 (Winter, 1982), Vol. 8, No. 4, p. 46.
7. Brabazon's work was hailed by Joe R. Christopher in *Mythlore* 29 (Autumn, 1981) Vol. 9, No. 3, with the remark that "the fifth biography of Sayers is by far the best," (p. 43) and Dr. G. A. Lee wrote in *The Dorothy L. Sayers Society Bulletin*, No. 34, 1981, that "Mr. Brabazon has produced far and away the best biography of DLS to date, though earlier ones are by no means superseded." My review, "Queen of the Castle," in *Mythlore* 30 (Winter, 1982), Vol. 8, No. 4, concludes by saying of Brabazon that "One is grateful to Anthony Fleming for choosing him." (p. 23) In addition to the five biographies of Sayers there are two monographs on her literary works, two collections of essays, and two bibliographies (not to mention substantial essays in various studies of the detective novel). In the interests of completeness (and not including works in progress), I list them: Literary Monographs: Mary Brian Durkin, OP, *Dorothy L. Sayers* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980); Dawson Gaillard, *Dorothy L. Sayers*, (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981); Collected Essays: Trevor H. Hall, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Nine Literary Essays* (London: Duckworth, 1980); Margaret P. Hannay, Editor, *As Her Whimsy Took Her: Critical Essays on the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1979); and Bibliographies: Colleen B. Gilbert, *A Bibliography of the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers*; Robert B. Harmon and Margaret A. Burger, *An Annotated Guide to the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977).
8. Hitchman (1977), P. 21.
9. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Clouds of Witness* (London; Victor Gollancz, 1974 [1926], p. 174.

