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Crystal Downing
Messiah College

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Within the four-course banquet of Dorothy L. Sayers letters, Barbara Reynolds, the masterful caterer, sneaks in a tantalizing appetizer that has been passed over by revellers at the Sayers feast. The juicy tidbit, appearing in a footnote, is a quotation from a 1944 letter sent to Father Herbert Kelly in which Sayers states,

I have just been reading Dr Jernov's The Church of the Eastern Christians, which was so attractive that I almost wanted to rush out and get converted to Orthodoxy immediately. There seemed to be so many points on which the Eastern attitude to things connected, or at any rate complemented, the Western, and had a warmth and richness of charity and imagination which is lacking in the legalism and formality of the West. Why have we been so ignorant all this time about the Eastern Church?" (Ltrs 3: 472, nt. 1)

I will argue in this essay that Sayers, even as she asked this question, had long been a Russian Orthodox Christian without knowing it, that borscht was already part of her intellectual banquet. But first I must digress in order to explain how I arrived at this hyperbolic conclusion.

My interest in Russian Orthodoxy developed as I wrote my book, Writing Performances, the goal of which was to impress non-Christian scholars with Sayers' critical sophistication—not in spite of her Anglo-Catholic convictions but because of them. This was no easy task. When Oxford University Press, based on other work I had published, showed interest in a proposal, I sent them an excursus explaining why Sayers needed to be taken more seriously by the academy at large. Oxford responded that it couldn't publish my book because Sayers wasn't taken seriously enough by the academy at large.

The problem, I think, is as follows. At the height of the so-called "Golden Age" of detective fiction, Dorothy L. Sayers garnered wealth and fame for her whimsical creation, Lord Peter Wimsey. However, somewhat like Lord Peter's relatives who regarded detective work as degrading to an Oxford-educated aristocrat, scholars of Sayers' day regarded detective fiction as demeaning for an Oxford-educated writer. Both Peter and his creator, in the eyes of their peers, had sullied themselves by their endeavors.

In 1936 it got worse. Sayers married off Lord Peter to a mystery-writing commoner and then set aside detective fiction to investigate a different kind of mystery: that of Anglo-Catholic Christianity. This new stage in her career alienated more people than before: Peter Wimsey fans were dismayed at the Lord's disappearance, and, in 1941, religious conservatives were horrified at Sayers' revisionist stagings of their Lord. Meanwhile, the modernist intelligentsia disdained Sayers' theological writings even more than her best-sellers.

In response to this marginalization, my book argues that Sayers brilliantly problematized modernist paradigms at their very height, becoming a critical theorist ahead of her time. To substantiate the sophistication of her perspective, I parallel it to the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, who has been celebrated in our own day as among the greatest of the forward-thinking philosophers and literary critics of the twentieth century.

Born in Russia in 1895, two years after Sayers' birth, Bakhtin was exiled in 1929 for Christian affiliations which made him sensitive, like Sayers, to the limitations of modernist discourse. However, unlike Sayers, whose outspoken advocacy of Christian dogma rendered in popularistic terms makes members of the academy uncomfortable, Bakhtin has

been [appropriated] by scholars in many different fields—feminist theory, film, literary criticism, cultural studies, ethics—perhaps because his religious assumptions were suppressed by Soviet totalitarianism. (Downing, "Introduction")

And, you guessed it, those religious assumptions were embedded in Russian Orthodoxy. As Anthony Ugolnik argues in The Illuminating Icon, Bakhtin's literary theory clearly reflects the Eastern Orthodoxy of his homeland (Ugolnik 158-73).

It is highly unlikely that Sayers or Bakhtin heard of each other, let alone read each others' works. But they both read Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), a Russian religious philosopher who was expelled from the Soviet Union seven years before Bakhtin's exile. Sayers cites Berdyaev in her letters, quoting from him several times in The Mind of the Maker, a book whose argument parallels in many ways Bakhtin's Author and Hero in Creative Activity (1920-24). I therefore believe that Berdyaev, author of The Meaning of Creativity (1916), either planted a seed of Russian Orthodoxy or watered an autochthonous interest in Sayers' soul.¹ Her "passionate intellect," however, did not recognize the growing bloom until she read Jernov's book in 1944. It may be no coincidence, then, that she wrote Father Kelly about her resulting attraction to Eastern Orthodoxy; for it was in a letter to Kelly seven years earlier (Oct. 1937) that she first formulated the Trinitarian theory of creativity that later took root in The Mind of the Maker. I am not suggesting that Sayers was aware of this coincidence; Kelly as a connector between The Mind of the Maker and Jernov was probably subconscious. It reminds me of the insight that Reynolds gives us in her biography and Volume Two of the letters, where she shows how Sayers, when she met Maurice Roy Ridley in 1935 and proclaimed him "the perfect Peter Wimsey," did not remember that she had seen him once before (in 1913) and had subsequently written a friend about falling "head over ears in love with him on the spot" (Ltrs 1: 79). Just as Sayers thought she was seeing Ridley for the first time in 1935, unaware of earlier exposure, so she thought she was encountering Russian Orthodoxy for the first time in 1944, unaware of earlier exposure, mediated, if even obliquely, through Berdyaev. In both instances she was tremendously excited by a "discovery" that was not new to her "subconscious."²

When Sayers writes Father Kelly about the later discovery, she explains that part of her attraction to Eastern Orthodoxy lies in its complementarity to the Western Church, "Western" referring, I would assume,

to the Catholicism of her own Anglo-Catholic tradition. Both Churches, though committed to the saving grace of the resurrected Christ, do not emphasize "conversion" and "the personal relationship with Jesus" that are so essential to Evangelical Protestantism. Sayers herself did not have a conversion experience, as she states several times in her letters, and she positively eschewed Evangelical pietism, advising Barbara Reynolds in a 1956 letter that, for her spiritual growth, she should avoid listening to "people like Billy Graham, because the sight and sound of so much naked emotion would most likely nauseate you" (Ltrs 4: 343).

Consonant with both Eastern and Western Orthodoxy, Sayers was also suspicious about the Biblicism of Evangelicals, telling one correspondent that "if anybody implored me 'in every letter' to read the Bible and quoted texts at me, I should feel an unregenerate urge to throw the sacred volume straight out of the window! . . . The Pharisees, after all, read their Bibles from cover to cover, and were none the better for it" (Ltrs 3: 524-25). In contrast, Sayers would have resonated with the Russian Orthodox view of Scripture as described by George Florovsky: "Scripture in its very essence does not lay claim to self-sufficiency. We can say that Scripture is a God-inspired scheme or image (eikon) of truth, but not truth itself" (48). Sayers herself asserted the Bible's lack of self-sufficiency when she responded to someone who wanted her to "write a book about the Scriptural sanction for the doctrine of the Trinity." She queried her correspondent,

[W]here is your Scriptural authority for the Scriptures themselves? On what texts do you rely for the make-up of the Canon as we have it? Where, for example, does the Lord say that there are to be those four Gospels and no more? . . . The doctrine of the Trinity was worked out and formulated in the Church—the same Church that is the authority for the Canon itself. (Ltrs 2: 367)

In Sayers' mind, if the Biblical canon is contingent upon Church history, Christians should study, and work to maintain, the traditions of those who formulated the canon—as do Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians.

However, it is on this very issue of the Trinity that the Eastern and the Western Church differ. According to theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna, the trinitarian metaphysic of the West, as outlined by Augustine in De Trinitate, was situated upon the concept of one "substance" in three forms, thus presenting God as "something in and of itself." In contrast, the trinitarian

theology of the East emphasizes that "communion underlies being." Hence "personhood," like that of the trinitarian God, implies "someone toward another" (86). To the Russian Orthodox, as Ugolnik notes, "Human beings shed all pretense of autonomy when they are viewed as shaping each other in a kind of 'co-being.' Humans are, in effect, reciprocally defined by each other in a model that draws directly on the Trinity" (110).

Emphasizing in a 1937 letter to Father Kelly that she did not get her trinitarian ideas from Augustine (Ltrs 2: 44, 46), Sayers privileged a Russian Orthodox view of communitarian faith over autonomous spirituality. In her 1941 address to the Archbishop of York's Conference at Malvern, she wishes that the Anglican church better demonstrated the "real community of feeling and interest" that can be seen in a company of actors: "I recognize in the theatre all the stigmata of a real and living church" (Church 59, 60). Some of these stigmata she had illustrated two years earlier in a sonnet appended to the published version of The Devil to Pay. Entitled "To the Interpreter HARCOURT WILLIAMS," the poem honors the man who acted Faustus in this play, as well as William of Sens in The Zeal of Thy House. Sayers begins the octave with images of interdependence—"Sound without ear is but an airy stirring / Light without eyes, but an obscure vibration"—and ends comparing these images to drama: "So is the play, save by the actor's making, / No play, but dull, deaf, senseless ink and paper" (Poetry 119). As Sayers well knew, a play can be created only through the interdependence of equally committed people, a dialogic performance wherein writer, director, actor, scene designer, and costume-maker listen to and learn from each other; for drama to achieve its purposes, the writing must be communally performed.

The same, of course, holds true when "the dogma is the drama," to use Sayers' famous phrase. In a 1942 talk delivered to the North London Presbyterian Fellowship of Youth, Sayers explained that the Sacrament of Communion is "never wholly individual. Each communicant makes and partakes of the sacrifice in the name of the whole Church" (Worship 42). Significantly, when this statement was published by VII in 1995, Colin Buchanan, a bishop in the Anglican Church, commented in the next issue of VII that Sayers' perspective was not properly Anglican. Perhaps he felt this way because Sayers had developed a view of worship that was more Eastern than Western. Note Ugolnik's explanation of Russian Orthodox liturgy: "I am not here to save myself alone,' says the worshiper in the liturgy. 'In allowing God to save me, I cooperate

with God in saving others'" (134). This cooperation is highly dramatic in Russian liturgy, with worshipers standing and moving around the sanctuary for the entire service, some sprawling on the floor with arms outstretched in obeisance to God, others kissing icons, all chanting three times the "thrice-holy hymn": "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us" (Ugolnik 77). Perhaps learning from Jernov's book about the drama of the Russian Orthodox worship inspired Sayers' enthusiastic letter to Father Kelly. For, indeed, Sayers repeatedly conceived of Christianity in dramatic terms. Not only did she write drama about dogma, asserting that Christian dogma was inherently dramatic, she believed that dogma itself "tends to issue in a ritual drama," and that "The central drama of Christian worship is the rite of the Mass" (Sacred 24). For her, Mass "is the reenacting upon the stage of the world of the great drama of the Passion—a drama acted in His name by priest and people" (Worship 43). Significantly, Sayers' emphasis on performativity, wherein the "acting of the thing done effects the consecration" (Worship 42), is a fundamental assumption of Russian Orthodoxy.

The biggest impediment Westerners encounter when they seek to embrace Russian Orthodoxy, of course, is the veneration of icons. Jernov may have helped Sayers shake off the shudder Westerners often experience when they witness what looks like idolatry. Russians see, rather than an idol, "an emblem of Incarnation" when they view an icon (Ugolnik 45). Just as God took shape for believers in the form of Christ's flesh, so the sacred takes shape for Russian believers in the form of Christ and his saints painted on wood. Icons thus participate in the sacred reality to which they refer. This "sanctification of materiality," as Ugolnik calls it (45), is consonant with the "Affirmation of Images" that Sayers so loved in Dante (and which is lucidly recounted by Reynolds in The Passionate Intellect). For the Russian Orthodox, humans themselves become images affirmed by God. As Ugolnik notes, "Humans 'image forth' their Creator, and in that process they become icons of Christ, conveyors of the 'sacred image'" (78).

It was this intense belief in the "sanctification of materiality"—as endorsed by the Incarnation—which led both Sayers and Bakhtin to a trinitarian view of creativity.³ For Sayers, the material form of a work of art, like the body of Jesus, is the "Energy" or "Activity" that proceeds from the "Idea" of the Creator-Author, generating "Power," as does the Holy Spirit, through the response of the beholder-reader. At the simplest level, "Idea" corresponds to a Book-as-Thought, "Energy" to a Book-as-Written, "Power" to the Book-

as-Read (Mind 122). However, it would do disservice to the complexity of Sayers' thought to limit her trinitarian aesthetic to such bald terms, for elsewhere in The Mind of the Maker she establishes that Idea, Energy, and Power are dialogically interdependent, operating, I might add, like the Russian Orthodox view of the Godhead:

The Idea, that is, cannot be said to precede the Energy in time, because (so far as that act of creation is concerned) it is the Energy that creates the time-process. . . . The writer cannot even be conscious of his Idea except by the working of the Energy which formulates it to himself. (Mind 40-41)

Bakhtin makes a very similar point in Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity: "An author creates, but he sees his own creating only in the object to which he is giving form, that is, he sees only the emerging product of creation and not the inner, psychologically determinate, process of creation" (6). To regard thought as preceding language is to reflect an Arian view of creation, wherein God created the Son. For both Bakhtin and Sayers, the Energy of the Hero is begotten, not made.

With the incarnation as the basis of their aesthetic, Sayers and Bakhtin regard writing performances in humanizing, rather than objectifying, terms. Bakhtin states, "spatial form is not sensu stricto the form of a work as an object, but the form of a hero and his world" which is in "relationship" with the Author-Creator (Author 89). While, for Bakhtin, the "hero" refers to the product of any writing performance, as does the "Energy" in Sayers' triad, the actual hero of Sayers' detective fiction might nevertheless—if somewhat whimsically—illustrate Bakhtin's paradigm.

In her earliest letters which allude to Lord Peter Wimsey, Sayers' hero seems to be "living his own life," as Bakhtin puts it. When she writes in 1936 "How I Came to Invent the Character of Lord Peter," Sayers refers to him as an independent "hero" rather than a literary invention: "My impression is that I was thinking about writing a detective story, and that he walked in, complete with spats, and applied in an airy don't-care-if-I-get-it way for the job of hero" (qtd. in Brabazon 120). She thus mirrors Bakhtin's sense that "It is this extra-aesthetic reality of the hero that will enter as a shaped reality into the work produced" (Author 199).

The independence of the Hero from the Author reflects the independence God has granted human creation. The Idea of the Author, according to Sayers, "does not desire that the creature's identity should be

merged in his own, nor that his miraculous power should be invoked to wrest the creature from its proper nature" (Mind 132). Liapunov's translation of Bakhtin employs the same word "merge" as a warning against imbalanced authorial activity: "Where the author merges with the hero, the form we get is, indeed, no more than pure expression in the sense of 'expressive' aesthetics, i.e., it is the result of the self-activity of the hero in relation to whom we failed to find an exterior position" (Author 84). Both Sayers and Bakhtin therefore regard the author's relation to the hero as echoing the theological paradox of free will and determinism.

I'd like to close giving you a final parallel between Sayers and Bakhtin that I only discovered while doing research for this essay: both of them loved cats! Sayers' letters are graced with affectionate references to and cute drawings of her feline friends, and sometimes she even assessed the worthiness of authors based on whether they liked cats. I'm quite sure Bakhtin would have loved the analogy she employed in her essay "Creative Mind" to spoof the contemporary idea that science can get closer to the truth than religion:

The desperate attempts of scientists to reduce language to a kind of algebraic formula in which the same symbol has always the same meaning resemble the process of trying to force a large and obstreperous cat into a small basket. As fast as you tuck in the head, the tail comes out; when you have at length confined the hind legs, the forepaws come out and scratch; and when, after a painful struggle, you shut down the lid, the dismal wailings of the imprisoned animal suggest that some essential dignity in the creature has been violated and a wrong done to it nature. (93)

Sayers recognized that language, like a cat, directs the thought processes of those who attempt to control it for their purposes. Therefore, anything created out of language will also, like the cat, have a mind of its own. This, of course, ties into Sayers' trinitarian aesthetic: just as the fully human Jesus, not being a mere "tool" of Creator God, had a mind of his own, so the "Activity" or "Hero" of a literary work, as expressed in language, has a mind of its own. And, once again, we see Sayers' theory harmonizing with that of Bakhtin, who regarded "the work of art as a living artistic event . . . and not as something that has been . . . reduced to the bare empirical givenness of a verbal whole" (Author 189).

Or perhaps a better way to illustrate Bakhtin's sensibilities is to invoke a practice of the peasantry to

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which he subscribed. Russian Orthodox peasants would not allow dogs to occupy a space containing icons, but cats they saw as "spiritual and hence acceptable in the presence of an icon" (Ugolnik 162). And who knows? Perhaps that is the ultimate reason Dorothy L. Sayers considered converting to Russian Orthodoxy!

Notes

- ¹ Sayers explicitly attributes her sense of the Imago Dei—the image of God manifest in humans—to Beryaev's The Destiny of Man, which provides an epigraph for the fifth chapter of Mind.
- ² Reynolds states that Ridley's "appearance had contributed in [Sayers'] subconscious to that of Lord Peter Wimsey" (Ltrs 1: 346, nt. 2, emphasis mine). See also Reynolds, Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul (55-57).
- ³ The remainder of this essay, until the final two paragraphs, is based on passages taken from my book, Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers.

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