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Introduction

Writing on friendship in *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis said:

in most societies at most periods Friendships will be between men and men or women and women. . . . [the sexes] will seldom have had with each other the companionship in common activities which is the matrix of Friendship. . . . Hence in a profession (like my own) where men and women work side by side, or in the mission field, or among authors and artists, such Friendship is common.

(2000, p 86-88)

Lewis and Sayers shared a background of academic study at Oxford, of being known as popular writers with a large following, and of being public Christians—writing about and defending Christianity. Lewis wrote to Charles Moorman ‘To be sure, we had a common point of view, but we had it before we met. It was the cause rather than the result of our friendship.’ (Lewis, W., 1966, p 287-288) Carpenter reported in his book *The Inklings*: ‘She was the first person of importance who ever wrote me a fan-letter,’ he [Lewis] recalled, and he added, ‘I liked her, originally, because she liked me; later for the extraordinary zest and edge of her conversation—as I like high wind.’ (1978, p 189)

Their friendship developed through letters; the first of these was a fan letter from Sayers to Lewis on the appearance of *The Screwtape Letters*¹. Their letters are those of friends, written with humour and honesty, discussing each other’s works or a common project such as the volume of essays to honour Charles Williams. In this instance, Lewis had misunderstood the Oxford University Press’s attitude and wrote to Sayers, who replied with a typically forceful letter. When the

Press clarified the misunderstanding, Lewis sent their letter to Sayers with a handwritten footnote, ‘Best quality sackcloth and ashes in sealed packets delivered in plain vans at moderate charges’ (qtd. in *Letters* Vol. 3, p 155). Sayers replied, ‘My menu for tonight shall be Humble Pie, IPSISSIMA VERBA with sharp sauce, FRUITS meet for Repentance’ (*ibid.*).

They addressed each other quite formally until Sayers sent Lewis a Card with an allegorical drawing on the occasion of his move to Cambridge in 1954, eleven years after the first letter. He responded with a poem, beginning, ‘Dear Dorothy, I’m puzzling hard/What underlies your cryptic card,’ . . . and closing ‘No matter, for I’m certain still/It comes to me with your good will; /Which with my prayer, I send you back/Madam, your humble servant, Jack.’ (qtd. in *Letters* Vol. 4, p 196) Her own poem in reply is addressed to ‘Dear Jack’, as were her subsequent letters to him.

Sayers and Lewis took their responsibilities as Christians very seriously, by taking up the public defence of Christianity and dealing kindly and faithfully with the inquirers that their public work produced. Some of the best writing on Christianity from both of them is found in their letters, fortunately now more available to the reading public. Sayers was conscious of her own lack of spiritual experiences, and respected Lewis, despite his blind spot about women.² She recognized that he had what she had not, an experience of conversion, which becomes a powerful presence in his published works:

Also, apart from all this, he has experienced a genuine religious conversion, which is more than most of us have, and is always a little frightening in its effects because of the way it alters values. (*Letters* Vol 4 p 264)

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She was especially fond of the Narnia series:

All the books have that tension; I think it probably comes from the writer's very strong sense of the reality of good and evil. *The Silver Chair* is a very good one, and so is *The Voyage of the Dawn-Treader*. And they all come out right in the end! Also, the girls, on the whole, are given as much courage as the boys, and more virtue (all the really naughty and tiresome children are boys); and they are even allowed to fight . . . (*Letters* Vol 4 p 271)

Lewis, in turn, appreciated her work, especially the play cycle *The Man Born to Be King* which he reread each Lent (Phillips 2003 p 218) and her translation of Dante. On 15 November 1949 he wrote to her about her translation of *The Inferno*:

I've finished it now. There's no doubt, taking it in all, it's a stunning work. The real test is this, that however I set out with the idea of attending to your translation, before I've read a page I've forgotten all about you and am thinking only of Dante, and two pages later I've forgotten about Dante and am thinking about Hell. (qtd in *Letters* Vol. 3 p 465)

What does the Christian writer do?

Lewis and Sayers had written in popular newspapers and spoken on the BBC defending Christianity. A disagreement arose between them over the Christian writer's responsibility to defend the faith when Lewis wrote to Sayers in 1946, asking her to write a booklet on Sin for a series of small booklets for Sixth Formers—17 and 18 year olds. (Brabazon 1981 p 256) This was a very reasonable request. She had produced articles and speeches defending and explaining the Christian creeds from 1937 onwards in addition to her two major works in this period, *The Man Born to Be King*, twelve plays on the life of Christ broadcast by the BBC from 1941-1943 and *The Mind of the Maker*, published in 1941 a treatise on creative mind which explains her analogy for the Trinity in the process of human creation. However, she refused this request. She was occupied, as she had been since 1944 with Dante, and had just finished her play *The Just Vengeance* for The Coventry Cathedral Festival and was also organizing her speeches and articles into two volumes, *Unpopular Opinions* which appeared in 1946 and *Creed or Chaos?* which appeared in 1947.

It might be argued that she refused this because a book about Sin for young adults would have to deal with sexual morality, as Lust is one of the seven deadly sins, and that involves discussing gender. When Lewis wrote to her asking her to write opposing the ordination of women, she replied, first asking if he were sure that there was such a movement and that it was serious and

mentioning her own uncertainty about the theological status of the doctrine, and discomfort with the Church's attitude to women:

Unfortunately, the Church's whole attitude to women has always been so pagan and oriental as to be very thorny in the handling. The most I find I can do is to keep silence. (*Letters* Vol. 4, p 388)

Secondly, she knew herself as a sinner both in having had an illegitimate child and in marrying a divorced person. Given how often Somerset House featured in her own detective stories, she must have worried that someone might discover her secret, and so bring not only personal distress to her, but through her, public disgrace to the Church. When she did write about sexual morality, it was to place it in context: it was not the only sin nor was it the worst possible sin³. She could hardly expand on this reason to Lewis; and she could not have written a book at that time as honestly as she would have had to write to meet her own standards of integrity. If this discomfort with the topic because of her own life and dislike of the Church's attitude to women, she could have claimed that she was too busy. Instead she made it an issue of artistic integrity, that she was not called to do this task.

Lewis questioned her about her refusal. He wrote that if deciding to accept work was influenced by what other people say, then, 'your "Six Other Deadly Sins" is about as good as it could be. And if you wrote a book on sin for this series, it would certainly be a good one. Against it stands your artistic conscience. I wish I knew what place artistic consciences will hold a moment after death.' (qtd. in Brabazon, 1981 p 236).

He had touched on Sayers's core concern as a person, a writer and a Christian, integrity in work. First she rejected the distinction between conscience and artistic conscience, and stated her theological starting point:

if you admit at all that gifts and talents have any sanctity in themselves (this is badly put—I mean, if you think God manifests Himself in the natural order *at all*—that a body is to be honoured for being a body, or a job for *being* a job, or an intellect for *being* an intellect) you have got to deal honestly with them and respect their proper truth. (*Letters* Vol. 3 p 252)

She admits that good workmanship can be an idol; but goes on to say, 'I don't somehow fancy showing up a lot of stuff to the Carpenter's Son and saying, 'Well, I admit that the wood was green and the joints untrue and the glue bad, but it was all church furniture' (*ibid.*). This was one of her hobby-horses, that pious intentions do not excuse bad workmanship.

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She was not basing her decision on what to write on other people's opinions; she echoed T.S. Eliot, 'You must not do even the right deed for the wrong reason' (*op. cit.* p 253). She was not claiming that authors write with no thought of their audience, but drew a distinction between two approaches, one which she considered valid and the other false.

'You must not look at them from above [your ivory tower], or outside, and say: 'Poor creatures; they would obviously be the better for so-and-so—I must try and make up a dose for them'. You've got to come galloping out shouting excitedly: 'Look here! look what I've found! Come and have a bit of it—it's grand—you'll love it—I can't keep it to myself, and anyhow, I want to know what you think of it.' (*ibid.*)

She knew that she and Lewis were good enough craftsmen to produce a passable product, even if inspiration, as she had defined it, were lacking, but thought it would be dishonest to do that rather than simply say, 'I'm sorry, it isn't there.' (*ibid.*) Her point is not just a selfish defence of doing what one wants to do, but of resisting the temptation to pride: 'One must do what one is called to do; but one isn't really the pole of the universe, and the thing won't really fall to pieces because one drops out for a moment till the next call comes.' (*ibid.*)

She saw working without an interior truth to communicate as producing the *ersatz*, and she returns to her point about conscience:

No, you can't divide the conscience into 'artistic' and the other sort. It's all one; and you can't serve God with lies; whether the lie is in the intention or in the workmanship is no odds—it will eat its way right through to the end. (*op. cit.*, p 254).

In his reply⁴ to her letter, Lewis wrote:

'I don't think the difference between us comes where you think. Of course one mustn't do *dishonest* work. But you seem to take as the criterion of honest work the sensible desire to write, the 'itch'. That seems to me precious like making 'being in love' the only reason for going on with a marriage. In my experience the desire has no constant ration to the value of the work done. My own frequent uneasiness comes from another source—the fact that apologetic work is so dangerous to one's own faith. A doctrine never seems dimmer to me than when I have just successfully defended it. Anyway thanks for an intensely interesting letter.' (qtd. in Brabazon, 1981 p 236)

Brabazon, Sayers's official biographer, comments, 'to the simple but trenchant accusation that she seems to confuse what she ought to do with what she feels like doing, she appears to have no convincing reply'. (*op. cit.* p 236-237) A colleague of mine has suggested that Sayers's position was similar to that of a carpenter saying, 'Sorry, I don't feel called to making bookshelves today.' If being a writer is comparable to being a carpenter, and as both are crafts it is a fair analogy, Sayers's position about artistic integrity seems weak indeed. To discover how she justified her position, I turn to examining her reasoning,

First, I think that in the letter I quoted above, Sayers had displayed humility and a trust in the providence of God to provide a spokesman for His purposes. Neither she nor any other writer was indispensable to the purposes of the Almighty. In her reply to this letter⁵, she restated her conviction that the truth must be present to her 'imaginative intellect' before she can proclaim it.

She then went on to explain her general discomfort with writing apologetics: she hated seeming to 'lay claim to more "faith" and "spirituality" than I have. I have always been very careful to make my statements as factual and impersonal as possible.' (*Letters* Vol. 3 p 255) but she then complains that whenever she does write apologetics it is misreported. 'If I write "the Church affirms . . ." the next thing is a report: "Miss Sayers avows her personal belief in . . ." ' (*ibid.*) She believed that in apologetic work, but not in creating fiction or plays, she can become a victim of her own propaganda: 'In a work of art I could not—all the insincerities would come screaming to the surface and destroy plot, characters and even language, because then I am writing in my own medium and will suffer no falsehood.' (*ibid.*)

To his charge that she is confusing the 'itch' to write with her Christian duty, she reminds him that with the exception of *The Mind of the Maker*, 'everything, almost, I have written has been a commissioned job.' To accept any job honestly, she must ask, if she has any truth 'asking to be communicated.' If not, then neither the money nor the audience nor anything else should influence her, or any other artist, to accept the job. (*op. cit.* p 256)

She observes a key difference between them in their perceptions of God:

I think one of the causes of misunderstanding between us is that the only kind of love I understand at all is the kind that you put the lowest—the love of the artist for the artefact. . . . 'our Father' would only suggest to me the mildest of mild affections, whereas 'our Maker' really is a 'lord of terrible aspect'. Nobody needs to tell me why God should want to make a thing, or why He should want to

make it with an independent will (that's what we'd all like to be able to do) or why He should be distressed when it went wrong, or wallop it savagely back into shape, or why the only means of getting in contact with it would be to make Himself part of His own fiction: I know all that from the inside, so to speak. (*op. cit.* p 257)

Lewis had written novels, he had experienced this process. This is one reason, I believe, she cared so deeply that he understood her viewpoint. In his reply to this letter he wrote, 'The only difference is that I see nothing but doubts where all looks self-evident to you. That may well be because you're a real writer and I'm only a half-timer.' (qtd in *Letters* Vol. 3 p 258)

Sayers replied to this, reminding Lewis of his own work:

But in fact, in your prophetic moments, you are with me—that is, if the corrupt artist in *The Great Divorce* is in Hell *because* he is a corrupt artist. He has turned from serving the work and making the work serve him, but for some other reason. And I don't think it matters very much what, or how specious, the other reason is. (*ibid.*)

She maintained a clear distinction between imaginative and apologetic writing:

I don't really accept the difference between 'art' and 'applied art'. I mean, I think things like *Man Born* and *The Just Vengeance* are just as much shelves as the other, only larger, and (in my case) more honestly constructed. . . . The only rule I can find is to write what you feel impelled to write, and let God do what He likes with the stuff. (*op. cit.* pp 258-259)

It seems to me, reading this, that she is trusting her imaginative intellect to God; not falling into a false spirituality of 'I hate doing this therefore it must be God's will.' She replied to his comment that doctrines never seem dimmer than when he has just defended them (what an insight into the trials of a minister's or priest's life!). She didn't restrict that problem to religion, 'It is a nemesis that attends *all* art and *all* argument' (*ibid.*), particularly in dialectic. Once again she reminds him that physical fatigue has a great influence on perception. 'The first reaction to anything you have just finished is exhaustion and disgust, which transfers itself from the work to the whole subject.' (*op. cit.* p 260) This letter seems to close the issue between them. Their correspondence moves on to other issues, the next letter in Reynolds's edition has Sayers commenting favourably on Lewis's *Miracles*,

congratulating him on his honorary doctorate from St Andrews, and telling him about her new hens: 'In their habits they display, respectively, Sense and Sensibility, and I have therefore named them Elinor and Marianne. . . . [she goes on to describe their respective habits and closes with] But you cannot wish to listen to this cackle. . . . (*Letters* Vol. 3 p 305) Lewis replied: 'I loved hearing about Elinor and Marianne. You are a real letter writer. I am not.' (qtd. *ibid.*)

Sayers's position

To support my claim that Sayers was not simply elevating her wants into her 'Christian duty' I turn to a letter Sayers wrote to a young man who had confronted her in the vestry at St Anne's Soho, on Maundy Thursday 1954. He contended that she, like Lewis and Eliot made Christianity too much an intellectual exercise. She wrote back describing her own experience as a Christian, lacking or rather disliking religious emotion, and without, she considered, spiritual experiences, but with a passionate intellect. She wrote that she had nothing to give but the Creeds and the popular reply was:

'But do you believe all these petrifying dogmas?'—Listen: it does not matter to you whether I believe or how I believe, because my way of belief is probably not yours. But if you will only leave me in peace until some truth so takes hold of me that I can honestly show it to you through the right use of my own medium, then I will make a picture for you that will be the image of that truth: and that will be not the Creeds but the substance of what is in the Creeds. But unless it is living truth to me, I cannot make it truth to you: I should be damned, and you would see through it anyhow; bad work cannot be hid. (*Letters* Vol 4 p 140)

Her standard is consistent with what she had written to Lewis nine years before. She went on to describe what 'her sort' in which I believe she intended to include Lewis and Eliot, could do:

1. We can write a book, play or other work which genuinely and directly derives from such fragments of religious or human experience as we ourselves have (*The Zeal of Thy House*—the sin of the artist; *The Just Vengeance*—which is about the choosing of God through the only values we know). . . .
2. We can (if we feel like it) write a direct statement about our own experience. (*The Mind of the Maker*). . . .
3. We can show you in images experiences which we ourselves do not know, or know only imaginatively. (*The Man Born to Be*

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King). Because in this, we do not need to pretend anything about ourselves. . . .

4. We can interpret another man, who has what we have not (we can translate and edit Dante). Our intellect can assess him and our imagination feels what he feels. . . .
5. We can, so far as our competence goes, help to disentangle the language-trouble by translating from one jargon to another. For this we need to know both jargons thoroughly. (*op. cit.* p 141-142)

If we look at these five types of work, apologetic work would fall under type 2, a direct statement of our own experience, or type 5, a translation of one jargon into another. Sayers's own non-fiction writing falls into two categories. She wrote about her experience not only in *The Mind of the Maker* but also in pieces such as 'A Vote of Thanks to Cyrus,' 'Why Work?,' 'Creative Mind' and 'Towards a Christian Aesthetic.'⁶ She translated the Gospel story from Biblical language to contemporary language in essays such as 'The Greatest Drama Ever Staged' and 'The Triumph of Easter'; she handled the translation of theological jargon into contemporary language in 'Creed or Chaos?' and 'The Dogma is the Drama.'⁷ Her proposed 'Oecumenical Penguin,' a project designed to show the unity across the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Free Churches on the Creeds failed because there was never a clear understanding between the theologians and Sayers on their respective responsibilities.

In that letter, she clarified her understanding of the priest's life and responsibilities and distinguishes that role from the role she played as a writer:

If I were, it would be my profession as well as my vocation to subdue every other consideration to that of preaching to every sort of person; to study the 'contemporary situation' in all its aspects; to learn and make contact with every type of person, so as to be able to speak to their condition and in their language and to present to them the whole content of the Faith, and not only those bits of it on which I could speak with the special authority and sincerity which come of personal experience. In order to perform the last part of the task (which is the perilous part) I should have undergone a training directed (in theory at any rate) to protecting both me and my hearers from the risks of hypocrisy, and providing at least a technique on which to fall back when conviction and inspiration failed me. And also it would be recognised that I did not speak primarily for myself but for the Church—and this, though in some ways it limits the appeal of the official clergy to the common man these days, is in other respects a

safeguard for everybody concerned. (*Letters* Vol 4 p 136)

Sayers's understanding of her role was based on her place in the Christian community, a lay person not a priest, the medium she was called to work in imaginative literature, and the presence or absence in the writer's life of experience relevant to the proposed work. Thus, she is not like a carpenter refusing to make bookshelves, but a carpenter refusing to make steel bookshelves, i.e. refusing to work in a different medium although she has general skill in making that would ensure that the finished shelves would hold books. I believe her reluctance to undertake the project stemmed primarily from her belief that she had written all she had to say as a Christian apologist and now was called to work on Dante.

A second reason for the correspondence, I believe, was Sayers's discomfort with Lewis's active intervention into the public battles of their day. She wrote to Brother George Every,

One trouble about C S Lewis, I think, is his fervent missionary zeal. I welcome his able dialectic, and he is a tremendous hammer for heretics. But he is apt to think that one should rush into every fray and strike a blow for Christendom, whether or not one is equipped by training and temperament for that particular conflict. If one objects that God has put nothing into one's mind on the subject, he darkly hints that one has probably mistaken one's own artistic preferences for the voice of the Holy Ghost. (*Letters* Vol. 3, p 314)

She was not alone in her feeling that Lewis was too quick to react; Brabazon states, 'I myself remember hearing Eliot, on one occasion, mildly wondering whether God really required the strenuous efforts of Dr. Lewis to push him back on to his throne.' (1981, p 235) I may say, that I am grateful that Lewis did write so much and leave us such a heritage. Sayers believed that

one gets the best of Lewis, not in the apologetics, and certainly not in those Broadcast Talks, . . . but in the three novels and in the Narnia fairy-tales, in which Christ appears as a talking Lion, and even the girls are allowed to take active part in the adventures. Lewis has a remarkable gift for inventing imaginary worlds which are both beautiful and plausible—very unlike the dreary mechanisms of the space-fiction merchants. (*Letters* Vol 4 p 264)

She in her evaluation of Lewis's work as in her own life values the imaginative literature above the expository writing. Both are necessary, but she believes

that her imaginative writing is a better Christian witness. In a letter about the final play in *The Man Born to Be King* she wrote:

one of the actors came up to me during rehearsal, just after we'd been doing the 'my Lord and my God' bit, and said, 'That's the first time I've ever heard the Atonement explained—so as to mean anything, that is. Which shows the advantage of putting things into words of one syllable, without technical theological terms, and linking them up to the *action of the story*. [emphasis in the original] (*Letters* Vol. 2 p 380)

For effective writing about the destructive power of evil in human lives, a good detective story may make a much more lasting and true impression on the reader than a short treatise on sin. Given Sayers's and Lewis's skills as imaginative writers, skills which are rare especially combined with deep, intelligent faith, it seems reasonable that they should not work in a less congenial medium unless there is a personal experience that the writer can communicate to convey the truth.⁸ Lewis paid a tribute to her conception of the Christian artist in his 'A Panegyric for Dorothy L. Sayers' when he wrote: 'She never sank the artist and entertainer in the evangelist.' (1982, p 122) and goes on to quote her introduction to *The Man Born to Be King*, where she makes clear that her object was not to do good but 'to tell that story to the best of my ability, within the medium at my disposal—in short to make as good a work of art as I could.' (qtd. *op. cit.* p 124)

Lewis's position, which can be interpreted as requiring writers who are Christian and good craftsmen to take up public challenges to the faith, put a higher value on the public conversation about Christianity than Sayers did. Perhaps Sayers's experience as a copywriter taught her how little of the public discourse in newspapers and magazines had any lasting significance and how little of it any readers retained. And perhaps writing copy to sell Christianity was too reminiscent of writing copy to sell Coleman's Mustard, with all the moral ambiguities that working in advertising presented, which she showed in her novel *Murder Must Advertise*.

There cannot, I think, be a final judgement that in their controversy Lewis was right and Sayers was wrong or vice versa. It opens questions of inspiration and craftsmanship as well as deeper theological issues. To say that Sayers was wrong to understand 'the itch' to write as a prompting of the Holy Spirit depends on a theology of total depravity which Sayers, who falls into the tradition of natural theology, would reject. To question our identification of our wants with God's will is the responsibility of every mature Christian aware of how easily each of us can deceive ourselves. Their differences illustrate the richness of the communion of

saints, how God can use our limitations to fulfil His purposes; and how much we need to live in dialogue with other Christians.

Notes

¹ 13 May 1943 see *Letters* Vol. 2 p 409.

² 'I am glad you got hold of Lewis(C.S.) I like him very much and always find him stimulating and amusing. One just has to accept the fact that there is a complete blank in his mind where women are concerned. Charles Williams and his other married friends used to sit round him at Oxford and tell him so, but there really isn't anything to be done about it. He is not hostile . . . (*Letters* Vol 4 p 263) To Mrs. Robert Darby Sayers wrote: 'Do you like C S Lewis' work, or are you one of the people who foam at the mouth when they hear his name? I find most of his books illuminating and stimulating, but others are put off by his vigorous rationality which they mistake for intellectual arrogance—and I do admit he is apt to write shocking nonsense about women and marriage.' She then recommends *The Problem of Pain*, *The Great Divorce*, and the Space Trilogy (*Letters* Vol. 3 p 375)

³ In her speech at the Archbishop of York's conference on The Life of the Church and the Order of Society she said: 'Suppose, during the last century, the Churches had devoted to sweetening intellectual corruption one quarter of the energy they spent on nosing out fornication—or denounced legalized cheating with one quarter the vehemence with which they denounced legalized adultery. But the one was easy and the other was not.' (Malvern 1941 p 72) In the work Lewis mentioned in his letter, 'The Other Six Deadly Sins' she began by noting that at that time, 1941, immorality was synonymous with sexual sin. So she stated: 'About the sin called *Luxuria* or *Lust*, I shall therefore say only three things. First, that it is a sin, and that it ought to be called plainly by its own name, . . . Secondly, that up till now the Church, in hunting down this sin has had the active alliance of Caesar, . . . and Thirdly, there are two main reasons for which people fall into the sin of *Luxuria*. . . sheer exuberance of animal spirits, . . . or sheer boredom and discontent (1947 p 65-66)

⁴ Brabazon quotes this letter and dates it August 8 1946, Barbara Reynolds dates Sayers reply to this August 5 1946. I am taking Reynolds's dating as correct, and propose that Lewis's letter may be dated August 3.

⁵ dated 5 August 1946 in *Letters* Vol. 3.

⁶ 'A Vote of Thanks to Cyrus,' 'Creative Mind' and 'Towards a Christian Aesthetic' appear in SAYERS, D. 1946. *Unpopular Opinions*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd. 'Why Work?' appears in SAYERS, D. 1947. *Creed or Chaos*/. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.

⁷ All of these essays are in *Creed or Chaos?* (*op. cit.*)

⁸ Lewis's critical work was, of course, part of his vocation as a university don; it may be what he meant when he called himself not a real writer, but a 'half-timer' quoted above page 5.

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