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A Difference of Degree: Sayers and Lewis on the Creative Imagination (Chapter in *The Faithful Imagination*)

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A Difference of Degree: Sayers and Lewis on the Creative Imagination

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Dorothy L. Sayers and C. S. Lewis were writers who thought deeply about the creative imagination, the creative process, and the relation of these to their Christian faith. Both were practitioners, as well as theorists, producing multiple works of fiction, drama, apologetics, and poetry. Both wrote for a variety of audiences including scholarly and popular and believed that literary works could be entertaining as well as edifying, could both delight and teach, as the classical and renaissance writers put it. Finally, both authors addressed the creative imagination in their essays, books, and letters. While a comprehensive treatment of their respective theories of the creative imagination would require a book-length study, my aim is to describe each writer's theoretical view and to explore one particular disagreement that arose between the two in response to Sayers's book, *The Mind of the Maker*.¹ Finally, I hope to provide some explanation for the different views by looking at two addresses, one by Lewis and one by Sayers, in which each author attempts to formulate a Christian aesthetic.

In *The Mind of the Maker* (1941), Sayers writes that “the characteristic common to God and man is . . . the desire and the ability to make things.”² Sayers arrives at this conclusion from her reading of Genesis, noting that in the beginning God created man in His own image. Sayers admits that the expression “in His own image” has occasioned a good deal of controversy³ but then goes on to contribute to the controversy herself by giving her interpretation, pointing out that whatever the meaning of image it is something shared by male and female alike. After asking the question, “How can he [man] be said to resemble God?” Sayers asserts:

1 Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

2 Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, 22.

3 Sayers, 21.

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Looking at man, he [the Genesis author] sees in him something essentially Divine, but when we turn back to see what he says about the original upon which the "image of God" was modeled, we find only the single assertion, "God Created." The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and the ability to make things.⁴

For Sayers, then, God and humans are both creators. As she states, "God is the archetype of the creator; the artist is a type. . . . The mind of the maker and the mind of the Maker are formed of the same pattern, and all their works are made in their own image."⁵ This may seem a bold statement (as we shall see later, C. S. Lewis thought it much too bold), but Sayers goes on to make an even bolder claim: "It is the artist who, more than other men, is able to create something out of nothing."⁶ Sayers expands on this idea, noting that artistic creation is not simply a rearrangement of what already exists, a rearrangement of "matter" as she calls it, because the amount of matter in the universe and its possible rearrangements are limited. On the other hand, Sayers suggests:

But no such limitation of numbers applies to the creation of works of art. The poet is not obliged, as it were, to destroy the material of Hamlet in order to create a Falstaff, as a carpenter must destroy a tree-form to create a table form. The components of the material world are fixed; those of the world of imagination increase by a continuous and irreversible process, without any destruction or rearrangement of what went before. This represents the nearest approach we experience to "creation out of nothing," and we conceive of the act of absolute creation as being an act analogous to that of the creative artist. Thus Berdyaev is able to say: "God created the world by imagination."⁷

Continuing the analogy, Sayers suggests that poets are known through their work as God is known through His creation. The minds of poets are revealed through their poems, which communicate the content of their minds and of their experiences to readers and evoke a response from them. This is analogous to the workings of the Trinitarian Godhead. The Father is the idea, the generative form of the poem; the Son is the Energy by which the idea is incarnated in a work of art; the Spirit is the Power responsible for the communion

4 Sayers, 22.

5 Sayers, 182.

6 Sayers, 28.

7 Sayers, 29.

between the poet's mind, the poem, and the audience.⁸ For Sayers, it is this Trinitarian analogy that is most significant, and she spends the rest of *The Mind of the Maker* exploring the many ways in which the creative imagination and artistic process reflect the Trinity.

In a review of *The Mind of the Maker*,⁹ C. S. Lewis praises Sayers's book, noting that it is the first "little book on religion" he has read in a long time in which "every sentence is intelligible and every page advances the argument." But he also registers a serious dissatisfaction with that argument. Lewis's complaint focuses on his fear that Sayers has granted the artist too high a position as creator. He wishes that Sayers had stressed throughout the book that the analogy between God as creator and Author as creator is merely an analogy. He makes clear that his concern stems from his view that the current age has idolized human genius, calling this one of our most insidious dangers. Lewis states:

I am afraid that some vainglorious writers may be encouraged to forget that they are called "creative" only by a metaphor – that an unbridgeable gulf yawns between the human activity of recombining elements from a pre-existing world and the Divine activity of first inventing, and then endowing with substantial existence, the elements themselves. All the "creative" artists of the human race cannot so much as summon up the phantasm of a single new primary colour or a single new dimension.¹⁰

Lewis takes particular issue with Sayers's assertion that "between the mind of the maker and the Mind of his Maker" there is "a difference, not of category, but only of quality or degree."¹¹ "On my view," Lewis says, "there is a greater, far greater, difference between the two than between playing with a doll and suckling a child."¹²

So how should we understand this serious disagreement between two Christian authors who shared many, if not most, other views in common? What made their views of the creative imagination and the artist as creator diverge so widely? Lewis's disagreement seems to arise from his theological views and cultural perspectives, some of which he

8 Richard L. Harp, "The Mind of the Maker: The Theological Aesthetic of Dorothy Sayers and its Application to Poetry," in *As Her Whimsey Took Her: Critical Essays on the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers*, ed. Margaret P. Hannay (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1979), 176.

9 C. S. Lewis, review of *The Mind of the Maker*, *Theology*, 43 (October 1941): 248-49.

10 Lewis, 248.

11 Lewis, 249.

12 Lewis, 249.

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states in his address "Christianity and Literature."¹³ Lewis begins by noting that he finds a "disquieting contrast" between the ideas used in modern criticism and ideas found in the New Testament.¹⁴ The key words in modern criticism, according to Lewis, are "Creative" with its opposite "derivative." Therefore, according to the modern mindset, great authors are innovators and pioneers while bad authors "bunch in schools and follow models."¹⁵ While admitting that the New Testament says nothing about literature, Lewis suggests that what it says about other subjects can be applied to formulate a Christian view of literature.¹⁶ Lewis notes passages like "we are of Christ and Christ is of God," imagery which emphasizes ideas of imitation, reflection, and assimilation. St. Paul, for example, tells the Corinthians to imitate him as he imitates Christ and that a Christian is to Christ as a mirror is to an object (II Cor. 3:18). Since in the New Testament the art of life is the art of imitation, can we, Lewis asks, believe that literature, which must derive from real life, is to aim at being "creative, original, spontaneous"?¹⁷ Lewis continues:

"Originality" in the New Testament is quite plainly the prerogative of God alone; even with the triune being of God it seems to be confined to the Father. . . . Applying this principle to literature . . . we should get as the basis of all critical theory the maxim that an author should never conceive himself as bringing into existence beauty or wisdom which did not exist before, but simply and solely as trying to embody in terms of his own art some reflection of eternal Beauty and Wisdom.¹⁸

In "Christianity and Literature," it is easy to hear echoes of Lewis's critique of Sayers's argument in *The Mind of the Maker*, especially in his assertion that the author cannot bring into existence beauty or wisdom which did not exist before, or, in Sayers's terms, the human author cannot "create something out of nothing." Lewis seems to identify this concept of art as imitative as the fundamental difference between the Christian and the unbeliever in their approach to literature. He gives us further insight into the roots of his perspective when he states that "the unbeliever is more apt to make a kind of religion out of aesthetic experience while the Christian knows from the outset that

13 C. S. Lewis, "Christianity and Literature," in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI, 1980), 1-11.

14 Lewis, "Christianity and Literature," 3.

15 Lewis, 3.

16 Lewis, 4.

17 Lewis, 6.

18 Lewis, 7.

the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world."¹⁹

But Sayers was a Christian, too, sharing Lewis's Anglican faith. What led her to adopt such a dangerously different view of the creative imagination and, in Lewis's opinion, to elevate the role of the creative artist out of its proper sphere? I suggest the major difference lies in Sayers's incarnational theology, which led her to choose a different word than Lewis when describing the activity of the creative artist. While Lewis chose the word "imitate," Sayers chose the word "image." Sayers's clearest exploration of the word and her theology occurs in her address "Toward a Christian Esthetic."²⁰ This address, much like Lewis's "Christianity and Literature" address, proposes a Christian philosophy of the arts in general and of literature in particular.

Sayers begins her address claiming that "The church as a body has never made up her mind about the arts."²¹ Sayers deplores this fact and suggests the idea of art as Creation is the one important contribution Christianity has made to aesthetics. Noting that the Greeks saw art as a kind of *techne* and that they did not have a word for creation in their theology or view of history, Sayers suggests that Christian theology gives us the word "image," which is better than "copy," "imitation," or "representation."²² In Sayers's view, what the artist does in creating is to image forth. In Christian theology, the Son, who is the express image, is not a copy, or imitation, or representation of the Father, nor yet inferior or subsequent to the Father in any way. In other words, the unimaginable and the image are one and the same.²³ Just as the Son and Father are one, so the poet himself did not know what his experience was until he created the poem, which revealed his own experience to himself. Sayers states: "What the poet does for himself he can also do for us. When he has imaged forth his experience, he can incarnate it, so to speak, in a material body – words, music, painting – the thing we know as a work of art."²⁴

But to return to Lewis's critical view of originality in favor of imitation: is what the artist images forth really new? Sayers states: "The recognition of the truth we get in the artist's work comes to us as

19 Lewis, 10.

20 Dorothy L. Sayers, "Toward a Christian Esthetic," in *The Whimsical Christian: 18 Essays by Dorothy L. Sayers*, ed. William Griffin (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 73-91.

21 Sayers, "Toward a Christian Esthetic," 74.

22 Sayers, 84.

23 Sayers, 84.

24 Sayers, 86-87.

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a revelation of new truth. It is new, startling, and perhaps shattering, and yet it comes to us with a sense of familiarity. We did not know it before, but the moment the poet has shown it to us, we know that somehow or other, we had always really known it.”²⁵ So for Sayers, what is original about the artist’s imaging forth is her experience; yet in another way, she seems to be saying it is not entirely new because it strikes a familiar chord in the heart of the reader, thus the power that comes through the literary experience and the interaction of text, author, and reader. Near the end of her address, Sayers almost seems to be responding to Lewis’s concern in “Christianity and Literature” that art will become a substitute for religion:

Art is not He – we must not substitute art for God; yet this also is He for it is one of His images and therefore reveals His nature. Here we see in a mirror darkly – we behold only the images; elsewhere we shall see face to face, in the place where image and reality are one.²⁶

Peter Schakel, in his study of Lewis and imagination, notes that in his preconversion years, Lewis held a high, Coleridgean view of poetic and romantic imagination, but that after his conversion he scaled back his high view, coming to regard the imagination as a lower faculty, able to reflect spiritual values, but not actually *spiritual* itself.²⁷ Imagination for Lewis became not the source of truth but the source of meaning. In what has become an oft-repeated phrase, Lewis stated: “Reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning.”²⁸ While Lewis’s reading of the New Testament and his opposition to the theory of genius led him to adopt this lower or modest view of the artist as creator, Sayers’s view of the Trinity and her incarnational theology led her to adopt a high view of the creative artist whose creation in the image of God makes him a creator able to image forth new and startling truths. Whereas Lewis’s theology caused him to emphasize the gulf between God and man when it comes to creativity, Sayers’s theology caused her to stress what God and man shared in common. For her, “between the mind of the maker and the Mind of his Maker” there is “a difference, not of category, but only of quality or degree.”

25 Sayers, 87.

26 Sayers, 91.

27 Peter J. Schakel, *Imagination and the Arts in C. S. Lewis* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 10.

28 C. S. Lewis, “Bluspels and Flalansferes,” in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 265.