

SPEAKING THROUGH GREY AREA: THE INTER  
WAR WRITINGS OF T.S. ELIOT  
AND DOROTHY L SAYERS

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## DEDICATION

To my mother and my teachers who brought me up in a world of books so that, as in the case of C.S. Lewis, “You can never get a cup of tea large enough or a book big enough to suit me.”

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this project is to investigate the relationship of 1930's British modernism and the popular return to classical western traditions. The project of modernism had many variants depending on the practitioner and a broader reach than the *avant-garde* realm we have placed it in to allow post-modernism to grow in linear success from modernism. During its time of composition, modernist work was being created in reaction to a period of radical uncertainty. The goal of this essay is not refutation of high modernism, or to idealize the dreaming spires of Oxford, but to bring the conversation between the two as it existed between them at the time. By examining key works of T.S. Eliot and Dorothy L. Sayers we can begin to see where these classical ideals occur and begin building an argument as to why in this era of turmoil perceived by scholars as defeatist, projects of hope and cyclic history flourished.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION: ASSUMPTIONS OF POST-MODERNITY

### AND THE ACADEMIC CANNON

In this sense it may be said that for the modern artist the past imitates the present far more than the present imitates the past. What we have to deal with here is a major cultural shift from the time-honored aesthetics of permanence, based on a belief in an unchanging and transcendent ideal of beauty, to an aesthetics of transitoriness and immanence, whose central values are change and novelty”

– Matei Calinescu, *The Five Faces of Modernity*

Our earliest criticism, under the influence of classical studies and of Italian critics, made very large assumptions about the nature and function of literature.

– T.S. Eliot *The Uses of Poetry and the Use Criticism*

This project investigates the relationship of British modernism and the popular return to classical western traditions, particularly those rooted in Christianity and medieval educational and mystic practices. The project of modernism had many variants depending on the practitioner and a broader reach than the *avant-garde* realm in which criticism has placed it in order for post-modernism to grow in linear success from modernism. During its time of composition, modernist work was being created in reaction to a period of radical uncertainty. In an attempt to recover from the trauma of World War I and the expected horrors of the oncoming war, authors of this generation scrambled through any form or subject available in order to find words for the unspeakable monstrosity that was now everyday life. Now that scholarship has cooled the mold of modernism, however, these nonconforming facets have largely been ignored.

Christianity, mysticism, and above all the hope of rebuilding society from the foundations found in the excellence of classic literature were also essential elements of many of the era's projects; neglect of these aspects often creates an image of modernism as a one-dimensional character in an overly determined drama.

The goal of this essay is not a refutation of high modernism, or an idealization of the dreaming spires of Oxford, from which the Christian and traditional ideals typically emanates, but to bring the conversation between the two as it existed at the time. In the examination of both the essays and the poetics of T.S. Eliot and Dorothy L. Sayers, we begin building an argument as to why classical ideals remerged during this time of turmoil. While Sayers and Eliot did reject the nineteenth century realism and the Edwardian world-view that accompanied it, they did not forget or deny the consequences that strict adherence to it had wrought. Furthermore, they established continuity with classics of the western cannon from the medieval and early modern era that had faced similar struggles with the dawning of a new era. Far from rejecting the literature that had come before, in an attempt to process both the final nail in the coffin of western tradition that was World War I and to struggle to process the idea of another war they attempted to develop a language capable of envisioning hope in modern life. These authors did not see the modern world with its thick fog of indeterminacy and resign themselves, but rather worked tirelessly through popular and literary fictions to assure themselves and their readers that recovery was possible, as it had been before, if the conversation of civilization returned itself to its humanistic roots.

Professor Lee Oser argues passionately that scholars in their haste to preserve its secularism have overlooked the ethics of modernism. However, Oser remains satisfied

with the idea that the chasm between secular modernists and Christian or spiritual modernists is a necessary divide. While it is certain that secularism and a distrust for Western Christian religion was a strong aspect of some forms of modernism, I do not read the works of modernist authors and their contemporaries and see such a clear division between the spiritual and the artistic. Rather there is an incredible investment in exploring the unfixed society, threatened by the loss of the foundations of western culture. Authors delved into the chasm left open by the trauma of World War I, the failures of colonialism and subsequent fall of the British Empire, and the loss of faith in religion, science, and the family and explored these dark depths with any means possible: drama, detective fiction, imagistic poetry, ethics lectures, and more. While it may be impossible to convincingly demonstrate that Christianity and classical western traditions fold into modernism without friction, an unbiased reading of the period's work shows us that it is an aspect that should not be ignored.

“Eliot the moralist and Eliot the artist could not even hold a conversation” (Oser 42). This statement summarizes the scholarly attitude towards the ethical writings of T.S. Eliot. The idea that Eliot was an amazing artist afflicted with a case of Christianity or latent Edwardianism that unfortunately reared its ugly head whenever he gave a lecture on or published works about Christianity, education, or politics is unfounded. Indeed, it seems in the desire to preserve the line of inheritance from romanticism to modernism to post-modernism, scholars are willing to convince themselves that someone as notoriously careful and assertive as Eliot could stay ignorant of this potential internal conflict. I intend to look at Eliot's poetry and his ethical writings as an existing ongoing conversation: an exhausting, probing, conversation that reached a fever pitch in the

interwar years as he officially converted to the Anglican church and published some of his most introspective works such as *Ash Wednesday* and *Burnt Norton*.

At the same moment that Eliot reaches a new level in his poetry and his criticism, Virginia Woolf is composing *Between the Acts*, James Joyce is writing *Finnegan's Wake*, and in the world of Oxford and Cambridge T.H. White is revolutionizing Arthuriana with *The Once and Future King* while C.S. Lewis is exploring science fiction and Christian allegories in his *Space Trilogy*. Bridging this gap between the high modernist camp (The Woolfs, Joyce, and Eliot) and Oxbridge (Lewis, Tolkien, Chesterton) is the hardworking detective novelist and lady of academe Dorothy L. Sayers. Sayers spent the latter part of the 1930s turning the popular genre of detective fiction on its head by combining psychological trauma with the drama of human affection and defying the expectation that a detective story needs a crime. Every critical camp that has attempted to adopt her has misused Dorothy L. Sayers. Christian evangelicals have ignored her constant questioning of organized religion and her strong rebuke of its unwillingness to progress or give humans dignity and freedom. Literary academia has ignored her plays and either used her as a footnote when citing her translations of Dante or *The Song of Roland*. At best they have been content to lump her in as a “Golden Age” detective fiction writer and ignore her influence over the genre and her innovations to the form. Feminism has long struggled with her complete lack of enthusiasm for its project and her strong assertion that a new, feminine centered creed would be just as false as a male one. Her absolute confidence in the human, rather than the masculine or the feminine, has made her witty and scolding rebukes of society go unappreciated by Women's Studies.

While Sayers' reasoning and conclusions often have their faults, her questions are beyond timely. It is her desire to question, to push, and to probe assumptions of both the academy and its skeptics that makes her an ideal pairing with Eliot. Indeed, their ethical writings seem tailor made for one another: both desire to reform education and Christian society through a return to classical idealism. It is only when we begin to look at Eliot's poetry as in conversation with his ethical writings, Sayers novels in conjunction with her lectures, and their dramatic writings in relation to each other that we can see this larger conversation in its proper context: a world of ambiguity that existed before scholarship had decided on the terminology it would use to define the very works that attempted to redefine the world that birthed it.

Matei Calinescu explores the concept of modernism in her expansive work *The Five Faces of Modernism*. "The crisis of religion gives birth to a religion of crisis, in which—as in Kierkegaard's extraordinarily anticipatory philosophy—all the unsolvable contradictions of the Judeo-Christian tradition are brought up simultaneously to unsettle ever single certainty and induce existential despair and anguish" (62). It often occurs that a revolution in literature precedes the literary tools that will come to define it. Authors and artists create and perhaps participate in the evolutionary process of explaining themselves, but it is certainly a process, changing by its very definition. Religion, ethics, and human relationships are of paramount presence in all the works mentioned above and more, but they are not spoken of through an indifferent, or hopeless lens alone. Through Sayers and Eliot we can view the ongoing conversations, debates, and practices used to imagine a world that could verbalize its current traumas and build a future using the bricks of the past, whether they be made of humanist, Christian, or literary clay.

Calinescu helps to contradict the binary of traditional Christian and modern secularism by asserting that though the *avant-garde* can be a part of modernism, it is not the entirety of modernism itself:

The antitraditionalism of modernism is often subtly traditional. That is why it is so difficult, from a European point of view, to conceive of authors like Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Thomas Mann, T.S. Eliot, or Ezra Pound as representatives of the *avant-garde*. ... It is true that modernity defined as a 'tradition against itself' rendered possible the *avant-garde*, but it is equally true that the latter's negative radicalism and systematic antiaestheticism leave no room for the artistic reconstruction of the world attempted by the great modernisms. ... think of the *avant-garde* as, among other things, a deliberate and self-conscious *parody of modernity* itself (140-1).

Eliot is not interested in parodying his work and until late in his life he refused even to notice the inherent humor in trying to speak to the unspeakable. Sayers, while far more humorous, is interested in parody as it serves to reveal the falsehoods in our societal structures, but she is unwilling to go as far as the *avant-garde* found it necessary to go in order to push capitalistic normativity to its brink. Sayers is far more likely to invest in kitsch than experimentation. Most importantly, however, is Calinescu's "tradition against itself" used to reconstruct the world. The modernists in their own moment are hoping to rebuild their culture, not bask in its brokenness. Similarly, they are using the building blocks of ancient society and attempting a new result. It is deeply ironic, then, that theorists have created a categories of classification that attempt to be neat and *avant-garde* simultaneously.

Essentially, modernism has now come to mean exactly what it never meant to mean and "the professor of modern literature is put in the ironic position of 'Arnoldizing' ideas and experiences that would have horrified Arnold. Is he not supposed to establish, within the context of the modern, validities, preferences, and, finally, hierarchies of

value” (Calinescu 92)? By placing modernism within the history of literature, we defy both its embrace of the culture of rupture and its attempt to build a radically different future from the ashes of yesterday. Critics like Eliot become the organizing Aristotle and authors like Sayers are boxed into antiquity with an eyeglass.

### **In Their Modern Times**

“One may either hullabaloo on the inevitable, and be called a bloodthirsty progressive; or one may try to gain time and be called a blood-thirsty reactionary. But when blood is their argument, all argument is apt to be--merely bloody”

– Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (317-8).

“If one, settling a pillow by her head,  
Should say: “That is not what I meant at all;  
That is not it, at all.  
Greatness is passing”

– T.S. Eliot, *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*

Louise Blakeney Williams’s *Modernism and the Ideology of History* succinctly reminds us of the climactic nature of the modernist lifetime: “In the period between 1901 and 1914 it had become almost entirely impossible for an intelligent observer to believe that Britain was a unified nation of god-fearing, morally upright gentlemen, who had created the greatest culture and civilization.” Even before the oncoming storm of World War I, the youth who would become modernists were struck with the “horrors of Imperialism, the difficulties of the Boer war, and the growing violence in Ireland made them realize that the ideal of British civility, and cultural and military superiority, had little foundation in reality” (Williams 208). To invest in a historical sense of this time period is to perceive an era when hell went from a metaphysical concept to an physical reality. To communicate something during this period was vital to the modernists, they

would rather live in the hell than accept the numbness of purgatory. The dominating attitude was not a sense of indifference or passivity, but of anxiety and determination. Pessimism was balanced by a hope that there was in fact a future different from the present, or perhaps closer to the ancient past that they looked upon with a respect they were unable to find for their immediate fathers. The modernist began to consider that perhaps the world did not only progress forward or not progress at all, but that human history could cycle. This possibility was positive because though it meant that the trauma was indeed real, it also meant that there was another day to come, however dearly bought. To write was a direct interaction, an immediate counter to chaos. There was still possibility for Eliot and his famous compatriots.

Modern poetry, Eliot's particular corner of the modernist universe, has been particularly misconceived. It was certainly invested in diligent work, but it was not exclusive. Eliot's own words on the subject are the precise opposite of the critical perception:

“And when I speak of modern poetry as being extremely critical, I mean that the contemporary poet, who is not merely a composer of graceful verses, is forced to ask himself such questions as ‘what is poetry for?’; not merely ‘what am I to say?’ but rather ‘how and to whom am I to say it?’” The poet's task has changed from, “how do I express the beauty of this tree or the horror of a dead body” but “why must I communicate this? Is it still worth communicating? What can I hope for through this poem?” “We have to communicate—if it is communication, for the word may beg the question- an experience which is not an experience in the ordinary sense, for it may only exist, formed out of many personal experiences, order in some way which may be very different from the way of valuation of practical life, in the expression of it” (*Criticism* 21).

Despite the common understanding that modernism was not invested in conversing with their audience, an idea that belongs far more to *avant-garde* forms or the later post-

modernism, Eliot's discussion of his audience implies a direct line of contact between the author's intentions and his audience's reception.

Apart from the variety of ways in which poets have used their arts, with greater or less success, with designs of instruction or persuasion, there is no doubt that a poet wishes to give pleasure, to entertain or divert people; and he should normally be glad to be able to feel that the entertainment or diversion is enjoyed by as large and various a number of people as possible" (*Criticism* 22).

Not *only* that the audience will have to work for an understanding of the poetry, which creates the image of indifferent snobbery on the part of the poet, but that the reader has the tools and the ability to understand these poems and it is only complacent culture that results in a limited audience. Perhaps this is simply a different form of snobbery, but the distinction is important. "When a poet deliberately restricts his public by his choice of style of writing or of subject-matter, this is a special situation demanding explanation and extenuation, but I doubt whether this ever happens" (*Criticism* 22). To Eliot, the point of a good poet was not to have a small audience and thus prove his worth by exclusivity, but that his poems would reach a large audience grappling with their reality and allow them to enter into the conversation of what it was to be a human through the vehicle of his poetry.

Eliot's *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* is a venue for him to further clarify not only what poetry is, but also what his ideals are. "Each age demands different things from poetry, though its demands are modified, from time to time, by what some new poet has given. So our criticism, from age to age, will reflect the things that the age demands; and the criticism of no one man and of no age can be expected to embrace the whole nature of poetry or exhaust all of its uses" (134). Eliot expects that his poetry will have an *effect on* as well as *reflect* his era. Due to Eliot's deliberate publication in

multiple genres and in the public sphere of politics and ethics, I argue that he believed his age demanded neither romantic idealism nor staunch support of the status quo, but a voice to their current anguish and a reminder that such anguish had been voiced before.

For Dorothy L. Sayers, writing at the same time as Eliot, the project is the same, but the motivation differs. For Sayers, a longtime Theatre practitioner, pleasing the audience did not exclude making them work so that they may be pleased for longer. As she said in her *Letters to a Diminished Church*, “For we are so made that we soon grow weary of ornament for sake of ornament, and even of beauty that makes no appeal to the heart or the understanding” (240). Coming at the modern age as an intellectual woman living with poverty, single motherhood, academic neglect, and her own thirst to prove herself, the fear was not only in the fall of stability, but what the next world would bring for those already abused by the last. Like Eliot she is rooted in the humanist tradition. More emphatically than Eliot, however, she is obsessed with the idea of the human and the formation of humanity. We will discuss later the social impact these two authors imagined and attempted, but for Sayers both her fascination and her fear were explicitly invested in how humans mystify and impact one another in the wake of the fall of the ideal of empire, the trauma of the First World War, and the scrambling of social groups for dominance.

As her most famous creation, the detective Lord Peter Wimsey, once told the reluctant object of his affection, “You may say you won't interfere with another person's soul, but you do--merely by existing. The snag about it is the practical difficulty, so to speak, of not existing. I mean, here we all are, you know, and what are we to do about it” (Sayers *Gaudy Night*)? The reticence of Sayers' characters to wed is similar to Sayers'

reticence to embrace every new revolution and social movement that promised equality without recognizing humanity first:

Three hundred years ago it mattered comparatively little. But now that you have the age of national self- realization, the age of colonial expansion, the age of the barbarian invasions and the age of the decline and fall, all jammed cheek by jowl in time and space, all armed alike with poison-gas and going through the outward motions of an advanced civilization, principles have become more dangerous than passions. It's getting uncommonly easy to kill people in large numbers, and the first thing a principle does—if it is really a principle—is to kill somebody (Sayers *GN* 363).

Having survived one war and awaiting the beginning of a second, Sayers creates characters who, despite wealth or a sense of place, seem to have assurance only in the rug that has been pulled out from under their feet. Lord Peter in particular is the orphan child of the Edwardian era who wants little to do with his parents, but instead keeps poking round the attic of his grandparents in order to find something usable. Peter, as a man with no faith in his current society, is not a man without faith in the possibility of a society. He still believes there is a chance to learn. This element of optimism in her characters has caused Sayers to be overlooked in the canon, but in her time made Lord Peter the exemplar of the bridge between the old war and the possibility of a human one. Battling as he does with the antiquated ideals of English aristocracy and his memories of World War I, Peter is the shell-shocked detective. As Allison Freedman's article, "Dorothy L. Sayers and the Shell-Shocked Detective" explains, Sayers incorporates the puzzle and restoration of order that is expected of the detective and the knowledge that the repercussions for human interaction are never ceasing. Sayers creates a modern hero; a contradiction that, like most contradictions found in literature, embodies the problems of its time. "In Sayers's depiction, Lord Peter's moral ambiguity and inner turmoil are

undoubtedly heroic. She replaces a type of the shell-shocked soldier as professionally and morally impotent with the character of Lord Peter, who is both morally potent and vulnerable” (385).

Similarly to Sayers’ hesitant futurity, Eliot believes the idea of the future always exists but is not always a positive one. The layers of caveats in his work when discussing a future rooted in progress versus the simple fact that the future is what follows the present in his proposal for a renewed ethical society, *Christianity and Culture*, are astonishing. “We have been accustomed to regard ‘progress’ as always integral; and have yet to learn that it is only by an effort and a discipline, greater than society has yet seen the need of imposing upon itself, that material knowledge and power is gained without loss of spiritual knowledge and power” (49). Eliot is arguing for modernity rather than progress, or succession, not a linear and neat jump from one school of thought to the other, but rather a constant bleeding sacrifice to think for the sake of thinking.

This is why Eliot, and the unrecognized writers of the period like Sayers, use ancient texts. To learn is through great effort and discipline, and to remember a lesson learned has far more impact than the creation of a new one simply for the sake of its newness. You have not only the pain of learning it this time, but the cultural memory of the pain of the ideas original birth. Eliot addresses this struggle in his famous essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either

Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsman (29).

When a great poem occurs, Eliot contends later on in his life, you cannot say for sure why it is great, except to point out that it is such. He never doubted, however, that there was good poetry and bad poetry. What is surprising is where he looked for validation for the great poet:

“You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of æsthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it” (Eliot “Tradition” 28).

Standing on the shoulder of giants is not a full enough explanation for what Eliot was proposing and Sayers was practicing. Every line drawn on a page changes not only the reader who interprets it, but all lines that have been written before and all line that follow it. The universe was not over, it was continuing and expanding forward and backward through the present. The world was, despite the appearances of the British psyche, not over. As Eliot says of his time in “Ash Wednesday” “This is the time of tension between dying and birth / The place of solitude where three dreams cross / Between blue rocks” (92). The lines themselves rely upon biblical and classical Greek imagery while they describe the interwar years of pain and stagnation, pessimism and hope, madness and logic.

### **The Cyclic View of History**

Prior I: The pestilence in my time was much worse than now. Whole villages of empty houses. You could look outdoors and see Death walking in the morning, dew dampening the ragged hem of his black robe. Plain as I see you now.

Prior: You died of the plague.

Prior I: The spotty monster. Like you, alone.”

–Tony Kushner, *Angels in America, Part I*

“Tick, tick, tick, went the machine in the bushes.  
 ‘The Victorians,’ Mrs. Swithin mused. ‘I don’t believe,’ she said with her odd little smile,  
 ‘that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently.’  
 ‘You don’t believe in history,’ said William.”

— Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*

What results from the knowledge that your entire world has been destroyed through a series of follies is complete disillusionment. It would be easy to equate the modern sensibility with children on the verge of puberty who have realized that their divorcing parents are nothing more than human; this certainly explains the disillusionment of the bright young things in the ‘20’s and ‘30’s. For those past the age of puberty, however, the solution manifested itself not simply in modernist writings, but in what historians have called the cyclic view of history. In *Modernism and the Ideology of History*, Williams puts the creation of this concept into its context: “Progress had been awaited for too long and simply had not arrived. Cyclic views of history served far better at this time than progressive ones to provide a sense of optimism” (Williams 209). Rather than an image of history as having a beginning, middle, and end, modern authors posited that, simply put, what goes around comes around.

Stability, not stagnation, was thus a possibility that excluded the morbid conclusion that all human progress had earned them was new ways to kill each other. Progressive views were invested in change, modernist cyclic views in the solidity of repeating patterns and constant references. “Thus, while progressive views value change above all, or what the Ancient Greeks would call ‘becoming,’ cyclic views of history give preeminence to a fundamental stability underlying all change—‘being’” (Williams 13). Modern authors consider the possibility that a cyclic framework would be a new form of

chaos: a never-ending spiral of small triumphs and ruinous defeats. But they also considered, and in the case of Eliot and Sayers chose to believe, that it would eventually serve as a salve on the wounded nerves of thinkers and allow them to continue to live well and create no matter the present circumstances.

Unlike what Richardson's interpretation of "The Waste Land" advocated, which will be discussed in Chapter II, diving into chaos without a rope was no more advisable. "Cyclic views of history reflect this preference for stability because their structure makes the human past, like the cosmos in general, fundamentally changeless despite the appearance of change. ... Rather than struggles against one of the cosmic opposites, cyclic views balance both into unified whole that accepts and incorporates each" (Williams 13). Progress could be redeemed because it had abandoned all of the weighty possibilities that drove the modernists' precursors to enslave half of the world and psychologically destroy the other half. As time is continually on a loop, it is fallen and traumatized the very moment it is redeemed and virginal. And if the progressive cause changes to occur, such as the fall of humanity a second time through the trauma or worldwide war, then redemption would again come around. Opportunities passed tragically, but they also occurred again.

### **The Reason for Classical Allusions**

The new years walk, restoring  
 Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring  
 With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem  
 The time. Redeem  
 The unread vision in the higher dream  
 While jeweled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse

— T. S. Eliot, "Ash Wednesday"

Consider Eliot's traumatized era when reading his assertion to the lost culture of inter war Britain, "And, in times of emergency, it may do to use the words of others" (Eliot *Christianity* 5-6). Though there is no indication that Eliot's directives in "Criticism" or "Tradition" are for his generation only--indeed they seem like a discussion of more eternal elements—this directive spoken to the public rather than to poetic scholars certainly transcends any time restriction and applies to all cycles of history involving crisis. This one comforting line of compromise may reveal more about the modernist practices than much subsequent commentary holds. One of Calinescu's main themes in *The Five Faces of Modernity* is modernism's interaction with tradition and religion, rooted as it is in the idea of modernity born in the Renaissance.

"The moderns were supposed to imitate the ancients, then to emulate them until some of the moderns proclaimed themselves superior to the ancients... tradition remained the cornerstone of theology, although even there the modern critical spirit was responsible for renewed attempts to distinguished between apocryphal, distorted, or false and genuine traditions, and was behind the dramatically different and unorthodox *interpretations* given to otherwise widely accepted traditions of Christianity" (Calinescu 60).

Again, the push and pull between faith and critique, tradition and the individual, interpretation and creation, was the day to day of the modernist. Theirs was never a settled creed, but rather an ongoing process of creation and revision, proposal and rebuttal.

For Sayers, in particular, the modernists were simply more aware of the most human action in the world: creation. "We spend our lives putting matter together in new patterns and so 'creating' forms which were not there before. This is so intimate and universal a function of nature that we scarcely ever think about it" (Sayers *Mind* 28). In her opus on creation, *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers looks at patterns of speech and

traditional phrases, she finds further proof that humanity communicates through reference best, building upon older images to address our ability to truly create something new.

“We say that ‘He made the world out of nothing,’ but we cannot ourselves make anything out of nothing. We can only rearrange the unalterable and indestructible units of matter in the universe and build them up into new forms” (27). Creation had to be made out of the material we have at our disposal, thus Sayers’ investment in the literary canon and human history. She has faith that there are indestructible concepts within language that survive time that authors reuse because we cannot create entirely from nothing. This is not to say blatant, easy repetition will get us anywhere. Her investment in the modernist moment is the wealth of incredible work being formed out of the raw ingredients of languages and myths that had been stirred until they lost their flavor. “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” (*Mind* 120). The ingredients existed, but the creation made of these ancient elements is entirely new.

For Eliot, the practicality rested not in the frequency of our use of inherited texts, but of the work a poet must invest to go from copying to becoming part of the tradition: “you must obtain it by great labor” (“Tradition” 28). Greatness was caused by “a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (“Tradition” 28). This was how we as readers came to recognize that which we always knew, that which we had always known. When the detective is created

or Hamlet is born, it still echoes throughout history, the before and after are never stable, they are only increases in the tradition. Perhaps, then, modernist investment in the humanist realm is not antiquated, but a way of seeing over the chasm of world war. As the '30's drew to a close with the knowledge that struggle had come before and would likely come again, the knowledge that these upheavals and traumas were part of something larger; whether Christian or not, larger, cyclical, never ceasing also existed.

Sayers and Eliot, deeply invested in the humanist tradition, make a compelling argument for why a good creation will have a connection, and often a clear intentional connection, to the traditions that have formed previous eras. Sayers, in particular, was adamant about this necessity in the face of adverse opinion from Oxford scholars, weary of social upheaval and befuddled by a revolution that proposed to move them backwards. "It is, of course, open to anyone to point out that these great streams of power have been much diminished by pouring through my narrow channel" (*Mind* 120). Sayers recognizes that every great work does not need to be put through or squeezed into a novel like her *Gaudy Night*, but rather that "a reminiscent passage of this kind is *intended* to recall the reader all the associated passages, and so put him in touch with the sources of power behind and beyond the writer" (*Mind* 120). Sayers did not claim to be proposing a change, but merely recognizing that this had long been the pattern of great work and was becoming the pattern again.<sup>1</sup>

The traditional view is that each new work should be a fresh focus of power through which former streams of beauty, emotion, and perhaps carried to excess, by writers like T.S. Eliot, some of whose poems are a close web of quotations and

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<sup>1</sup> "The demand for 'originality' – with the implication that the reminiscence of other writers is a sin against originality and a defect in the work—is a recent one and would have seemed quite ludicrous to poets of the Augustan Age, or of Shakespeare's time" (*Mind* 120).

adaptations, chosen for their associative value; or like James Joyce, who makes great use of the associative value of sounds and syllables. The criterion is not, whether the associations are called up, but whether the spirits invoked by this kind of verbal incantation are charged with personal power by the magician who speeds them about their new business (*Mind* 120).

It is important to remember Sayers' final declaration in her defense, however, that the inheritance of tradition was not locked in its pages but rather involved a mystic element.

"The power- the Spirit- is thus a social power, working to bring all minds into its own unity, sometimes by similarity and at other times by contrast" (*Mind* 121). As we investigate how Sayers and Eliot enacted these beliefs about excellent work in their own writing and lectures, it is important to remember that they saw these as active texts. Their words were not supposed to lie still on a page, but reverberate through the time of authorship and the minds of their readers; proposals continuing to be refined and revived, but also enacted as history cycled ever on: "to be saved, not from danger and suffering, but in danger and suffering.... there can be no end to the manifestation of creative life. Whether the life makes its old body again, or an improved body, or a totally new body, it will and must create, since that is its true nature" (Sayers *Church* 14).

## CHAPTER 2

### THEIR WORDS IN THEIR WORLD

#### **Eliot's Reputation Precedes Him**

For it is not the "greatness," the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts.

– T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

T.S. Eliot certainly is considered one of the most influential and brilliant modernist and scholar that the western world has given literature. But he also has a dirty secret no one likes to talk about, and scholars avoid his latter works or select sparsely in order to use avoid it. Eliot converted midway through his life from agnostic Unitarianism to Anglican Christianity. His already well-researched knowledge of western religious tradition became cemented by his own pursuit of redemption through the church. While it was not remotely odd for a scholar and a thinker of the age to be a member of the church, it is certainly contrary to our ideas of modernism as secular and antagonistic to organized religious systems. Rather than wondering how the man who wrote "The Waste Land" could go to church every Sunday, the puzzle is ignored. If Eliot's Christianity is addressed, it is usually the way old church ladies would discuss a wayward youth. Eliot either simply evinces no connection between his poetry and his life, a psychological

problem fitting for his era, or he is seen as simply losing his prowess in his later years, a problem that suits a young genius. Neither of these is true in any sense of the word. No reader of poetry can seriously dismiss “Ash Wednesday”, Eliot’s oft-dubbed conversion poem, nor can a careful reader miss the direct connection between his social ethics, his poetry, and his drama.

Eliot’s early great criticism, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” has oft been used and anthologized, but not too often is it read fully in the context of his later essays that sought to build upon his original ideas. As Eliot reminds his audience in *The Use of Criticism*, “Tradition” was written “when I had taken over assistant-editorship of *The Egoist* on Richard Aldington’s being called up for military service” (Eliot *Criticism* Preface). He does not “repudiate” this essay by any means, but Eliot, prideful as he is painted, was not satisfied in his own genius on the first try and built significantly upon his earliest ideas. Modernist critics, by and large, are satisfied however to continue to make a meal out of Eliot’s reputation rather than read his works as constantly developing, always in progress throughout his lifetime. In a move that shows Eliot’s use of contradiction and ambiguity to explore each other, he puts aside his suspicion of progress to explore personal growth:

“But what a poem means is as much what it means to others as what it means to the author; and indeed, in the course of time a poet may become merely a reader in respect to his own works, forgetting his original meaning—or without forgetting, merely changing. So that, when Mr. Richards asserts that *The Waste Land* effects ‘a complete severance between poetry and *all* beliefs’ I am no better qualified to say No! than is any other reader. I will admit that I think that either Mr. Richards is wrong, or I do not understand his meaning” (*Criticism* 122).

By the mid-thirties, Eliot’s own reputation has surpassed his own understanding of his work. While giving a show of bowing graciously to interpretation, Eliot asserts his right

as a reader to disagree with the interpretation of a poem that just happens to be his creation. Even before the modernist canon became verified in criticism, Eliot had to speak above his own canonized self to be heard.

### **Sayers as the Perpetual Outsider**

"However loudly we may assert our own unworthiness, few of us are really offended by hearing the assertion contradicted by a disinterested party."

– Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*

When Dorothy L. Sayers died in 1957, C.S. Lewis wrote of her oeuvre and personality, "The variety of Dorothy Sayers's work makes it almost impossible to find anyone who can deal properly with it all" (Lewis 91). The scholar that was Dorothy Sayers was not easily contained within the categories of her time, nor in the not terribly different literary canon currently in use. Coupled with her "robust personality" (Lewis 92) was a severe dedication to her work. She was an excellent scholar, translating Dante and writing a history of Donne, a traveling lecturer, well reputed dramatist, and, most famously, a detective novelist. Clinging to the image of the lady author with false Austen like meekness, though, is the picture painted to those interested in Sayers of a jaded translator who paid the bills by writing cheap novels. Sadly, her biographers and those scholars looking to legitimate her neglected work often paint this one-dimensional picture as well. As Lewis further points out, however, "There is in reality no cleavage between the detective stories and her other works. In them, as in it, she is first and foremost the craftsman, the professional. She always saw herself as one who had learned a trade, and

respects it, and demands respect for it from others” (92). Indeed, in Sayers’ works there is an almost fanatical discussion of the ideal of work itself.

A major theme in her novel *Gaudy Night* is that it is immoral to do a job you are not good at and find no pleasure in doing. At stake for Sayers and her characters is the right to pursue what she considers the human right, and human hope, to find their function. Tampered by this, is, however, the “rare virtue” of “detachment” (*Gaudy Night*) that distinguishes her two main characters and causes fellow characters to doubt their intentions. Peter and Harriet have carefully weighed the pros and cons of living to their ideals and have often paid dearly for pursuing them. To some character in the novels, Harriet and Peter can either be too cold or too internalized because they have not headed blindly into their future but chosen a difficult path with full knowledge of its trials. Sayers is both an idealist and cautionary about idealism. “She never sank the artist and entertainer in the evangelist” (Lewis 92). Invested as she was in finding an excellent existence in a world she found largely maddening, Sayers never allowed herself to relax on her job. She never abandoned her audience, nor did she pander to them. Sayers instead brought conflicts, ideals, and the classics to the foreground in her popular fiction and trusted her reader’s intelligence to consider them.

Sayers was fascinated by the English language’s constant reference back to the story of Christ, whether it was through allegory or metaphor, or our dependence on Trinitarian creation.<sup>2</sup> “[T]he fact is, that all language about everything is analogical; we think in a series of metaphors. We can explain nothing in terms of itself, but only in terms of other things” (*Mind* 23). Sayers saw this condition in the root of Christian theology

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<sup>2</sup> This aspect is elaborated upon in Chapter III: Christianity and High Modernism

and western tradition. We are driven to create in reference to other work the way Christ spoke in a series of referential parables. Trinitarian creation should be a powerful, precise, well-executed tool as it is in much of classic literature, not an excuse for bad literature. Because she saw the value in the essence of each project, be in work or the act of creation, she cannot accept the lackluster work being produced under the protecting hand of the church. Sayers is harsher on no one than she is on Christian authors of her time period, whom she thought were largely (excepting Chesterton, Tolkien, and Lewis) miserable practitioners of their art and getting by merely on their association to the church. “Bad art on this theme went hand in hand with bad theology. ‘Let me tell you, good Christian people, an honest writer would be ashamed to treat a nursery tale as you have treated the greatest drama in history: and this in virtue, not of his faith, but of his calling’” (Lewis 93, quoting Dorothy L. Sayers’ *The Man Born to Be King*). Indeed, when Sayers marries off Lord Peter, she does so because she feels that after her final novels, *Gaudy Night* and *Busman’s Honeymoon*, she has done all she can to evolve the detective genre and the characters.

“She had stopped working in that genre because she felt she had done all she could with it. And indeed, I gather, a full process of development had taken place. I have heard it said that Lord Peter is the only imaginary detective who ever grew up—grew from the Duke’s son, the fabulous amorist, the scholar swashbuckler, and connoisseur of wine, into the increasingly human character, not without quirks and flaws, who loves and marries, and is nursed by, Harriet Vane” (Lewis 91).

To continue in the genre after she had brought her detectives to their mature conclusion would be dishonest, and if there was to be any honor in the work of writing, it would be found by sticking to the needs of each text. Like Harriet and Peter, Sayers often made

herself unpopular by not following sentiment but rather holding fast to ideals, the love of the work itself and the desire to produce the best work possible, often at great cost. Her own convictions would not simply repeat in her works, but be explored further as each form and genre she explored allowed: “I know it is no accident that *Gaudy Night*, coming towards the end of a long development in detective fiction, should be a manifestation of precisely the same theme as the play *The Zeal of Thy House*, which followed it and was the first of a series of creature embodying a Christian theology” (*Mind* 207). Her theology was built of the exploration between form and content, language and creation, myth and a maker, reality and hope. “They are variations upon a hymn to the Master Maker; and now, after nearly twenty years, I can hear in *Whose Body?* the notes of that tune sounding unmistakably under the tripping melody of a very different descant” (*Mind* 207).

As Sayers began to publish on the possibilities that would exist after the road, she battled against the assumptions and weak education of her audience, but even she did not stoop to that prejudice attributed to high modernism of creating difficult work to alienate its audience. Rather, she leaned more heavily than ever before on the ideas of repetition, cycles of history, and returning mythology to show the eternal elements of work for the sake of the job, devotion for the sake of the spirit, education for the sake of the soul. Her reputation, though, never soared above lady scholar or, more recently fashionable, feminist detective novelist. Indeed, aside from the occasional misused quotation in an evangelical tract, her probing works into the relation of Christianity to creativity have largely gone unstudied and is rarely linked to her own writing. Sayers remains a

permanent outsider within her own tribe, marked by too many tags to fit into any box and is thus left on the shelf of her era, wasted.

### **Return to the Great Human Drama**

THOMAS: Humans cannot bear very much reality.

– T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*

“It is thus not surprising that man, becoming acutely aware of a conflict within himself, should look for a literary mode of expressing these new feelings. He feels his life to be not so much a battle against forces without as a battle between forces within him; and he begins to personify those forces and dramatize the conflict”

– Dorothy L. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*

Dorothy L. Sayers is invested in the performance Lord Peter puts on, whether it is that of a bumbling aristocrat, a bright young thing, or a strong lover. Sayers infuses her language with dynamic action and creates characters and plotlines that are deeply self-conscious of their own performative aspect. When Lord Peter changes at the drop of a hat, the tone of the novel changes with him. Sayers does not see personhood as a fixed state, but rather basks in the human ability to wear changeable masks. Her entrance into the world of literature as a child was through drama, and she belonged to many dramatic societies during her lifetime. *Busman's Honeymoon*, her final Lord Peter novel, originally premiered in 1936 as a play that she wrote alongside the novel *Gaudy Night*. She then adapted the play into her final Lord Peter novel in 1937, but the freedom the dramatic form offered her is still evident, and perhaps even carried further in the novel adaptation due to confidence gained through a successful run of the play. Peter and Harriet are deeply introspective and convey more through their described body language than they often do through language, which at times can be almost entirely borrowed quotes adapted for their needs. The two main characters speak the lines of those who came

before them and allow their bodies to give the words context. In fact, the only scene without a reference to a classical work is in the penultimate chapter/ scene when Peter finally loses the ability to act and Harriet is too scared for their marriage to perform, though the narrator offers quotes at the closing of this scene. We will see further on how Peter's post-traumatic nightmares and his various masks and Harriet's reticence to fall in love reflect Sayers' view of English society in her era, but for now it is simply important to note the performativity of her work across genres and her evident joy in returning to her native form: drama.

After *Busman's Honeymoon*, Sayers' fiction was written almost exclusively for the stage or radio. She became part of a resurgence of religious drama that arose in the post-World War I generation and dominated the British theatrical festivals during the coming war years. She produced eight plays within fifteen years, four of which were performed at the Canterbury Festival alongside T.S. Eliot's plays. Most significantly, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* premiered in 1935, one year before Sayers began featuring her work at the festival. Sayers refers to Eliot's play in her book *The Mind of the Maker* and Eliot uses Sayers' 1937 play *The Zeal of Thy House* in his later essays compiled in *The Uses of Poetry and the Uses of Criticism*. As members of the festival, Eliot and Sayers would have reviewed the work of the other and decided which plays would be featured each season. The Canterbury Festival became a place of overlap, where high church met modern problems and attempted to sort them out on stage. These problems, while perhaps reaching a climax in the post-World War I years, were not unique to this manifestation of the modern world. By using classical quotations and subjects from antiquity Sayers and Eliot brought the conversations together to give the

torn fabric of culture some fiber. With the oncoming storm of modernity, the medieval era searched through the recently discovered works of the ancients for answers to these questions: Are the great poems of the classical world compatible with Christianity? Did they ever face the converging of new worlds? Do our eras have anything in common? For modernists, the question is similar: can the classical and the Christian world be compatible with our life? Can we get anything from their eras, or is the distance in the gap between now and then too large?

### **T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral***

Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral* addresses these questions head on, sneakily asking the same questions of his own era. For Sayers the approach is a bit more direct. Whether she is depicting medieval situations or modern ones, her use of quotation and performance shows her opinion of stability: it doesn't exist the way we imagine, but cycles of history may be the only dependable aspect of society. The article, "England's Religious Drama" by George Kernodle, investigates the resurgence of religious drama and attempts to make a case for its worth as a scholarly field. While most of the argument is spent in a defensive tone, Kernodle does, perhaps unintentionally, connect the plays thematically with the modernist use of medieval work going on elsewhere.

"Its most significant playwrights have broken away from naturalism and have borrowed from Greek and medieval drama, from church ritual, from music and art traditions, or from methods suggested by the choral speech and mime movements so active in England, to mold a new drama that has fresh power of form, as well as vigor of content" (415-6).

It is obvious that these plays, though well constructed and passionate, are not entirely in flow with the work being produced elsewhere in their time. “If the religious plays seem more vital than the professional, West End London drama, they seem very restricted and narrow when compared with the plays of New York or Dublin” (Kernodle 425). The work of Dublin and New York of this period are still staged regularly, while Sayers’ and Eliot’s plays have by and large fallen by the wayside except for *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Busman’s Honeymoon*. Their other plays have gone largely unstaged due to their very specific intended audience, in the case of Sayers, or in the complexness of their required staging, in the case of Eliot. While Eliot’s plays remain in print and are still considered good, producers have not bet on them to draw an audience. In the case of Sayers, her plays were specifically designed for the Canterbury Festival or BBC radio productions and are either considered too religious or too intelligent for a mass audience. *Honeymoon* and *Cathedral* are preserved through their merit, yes, but also through their obvious ties to Sayers and Eliot’s more famous work in other genres. Eliot’s play is in poetic, classically Greek in form and treats the trauma of the modern condition apart from God and those interested in his poetry are likely to seek it out over his plays written in prose or partial prose. Sayers’ play is part of the fiscally successful Lord Peter canon and considered a meaty comedy for local and repertory companies looking for funny but not raunchy plays featuring good roles for women.

Tension between the artistic and the fiscally successful has long been an issue of concern amongst dramatic and literary scholars and there is not room to discuss the question fully here. However, the issues of these works, considered to be aesthetic and exploratory, were considered best served by dramatic form by their authors. Calinescu

reminds us, “Modernity has opened the path to the rebellious avant-gardes. At the same time, modernity turns against itself and, by regarding itself as *decadence*, dramatizes its own deep sense of crisis” (5). The tension between the high and low forms was not the only tension in existence at the time of composition; the very luxury of art, specifically the ironic luxury of staging a full production or going to view a productions, amidst the trauma of war and political upheaval often struck the authors at their core.

“This seeking for the traditional, the timeless, and this fear of contemporary social problems, seem a telling expression of England's spiritual state as each year brought a more disturbing international crisis. ... It is not surprising that the year of Munich, the October programs, and the invasion of Prague and Warsaw saw the greatest English interest in plays with a traditional religious theme” (Kernodle 425).

Kernodle seems to think it is retreat into security that caused religious drama's resurgence and to an extent he is correct. The growth of theatre in the years of World War is often attributed to this desire for comfort and security. But there is an element to the art that ritual and church bring back to drama that has somewhat been lost in drawing room comedies.

### **Dorothy L. Sayers' *Busman's Honeymoon* and *The Zeal of Thy House***

For Sayers, drama emphasized the “real, local, timely” effects of what she was writing. Sayers is insistent that her detective and her audience shall be on the same page

in *Busman's Honeymoon* and that they shall struggle through the awfulness of being in love and being fate's hangman together. But she was not interested in punishing her audience or playing to their desire for a "scene." She also may have felt the discomfort of watching too vulnerable a moment on stage. According to her introduction to the first printed edition of her play, she was interested in investigating the "fair play" rule of excellent detective writing and the "real time" rule of drama (*Honeymoon* 5) and though she found that her actors could invest great emotion in the scenes of Harriet and Peter's struggles, she included two scenes of trauma and recovery in the novel version that are nowhere to be found in the play. Both of these scenes, however, defy the real time aspect of theater Sayers was interested in exploring. Perhaps for Sayers, the late night revelations of a married couple were simply not in service of her play but better suited to her novel. Or, perhaps, the revealing nature of those moments cut too deeply for an already harrowed audience. Her characters usually perform vividly on the page and play a cat and mouse game of character masks, but in these final moments they can no longer hide. While Sayers does have moments where Harriet and Peter must face each other raw in the play, they are not as extended as in the novel. Through being actually performed Harriet and Peter were already masked and their unmasking did not need to be so emphatic as when it occurs in the novel because it is more obvious and almost literal on the stage. Oddly enough in drama, less is more.

In contrast, timeliness comes into account for Eliot in his latter drama, but for *Murder in the Cathedral* he was most interested in the benefits Kernodle enjoys: "Contact with church ritual and church music gives the drama an enormous fund of artistic material that it has lacked or neglected since the Middle Ages. Today with the

resources of the choral-speech movement and modern dance and mime movements, it has, as it has not had since the Greeks, actors trained for the dramatic chorus and an audience ready to appreciate it” (418-9). Without the limitations of medieval drama, Eliot brought the moving benefits of the art form and once again gave a solid foothold to form whilst questioning what it means to exist in his world.

### New Forms and Classical Texts

“...when the subject calls for it, when the words are waiting to be brought into the sun from the annex of history”

– Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*

“Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something  
Upon which to rejoice”

– T.S. Eliot, “Ash Wednesday”

“This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity”

– T.S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*

Though neither Eliot nor Sayers were quiet about their discomfort of their faith as practiced in their lifetime, they were very interested in the goldmine it provided for their work. Eliot, in fact, made a habit of paying homage to dead gods and using the gospels to create thick, referential metaphors that evoked the conflicts of his era. Matthew 21 and 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 4 appear in section III of “The Hollow Men”: “Lips that would kiss / Form prayers to broken stone”(79) which evoke the conflicting images of broken idols and foundation stones. Broken idols being the Edwardian faith in progress and the foundation stone still being embraceable despite the “stone images” “raised” above them (79). This intertwining of classical and biblical reference was an aspect of their own writing that

they pushed for in their critical works and visa versa. Creation was occurring on a loop, referring back and modifying that which had come before.

“The poet is not obliged, as it were, to destroy the material of a 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” (Sayers *Mind* 29).

An author’s job is to rearrange the stuff of the world he or she inherited and transform it to suit the needs of his own era with the knowledge this will happen time and time again as history cycles through itself. In addition to this cycle, however, is the more immediate binary of created and uncreated. “Or, to use the most familiar of all metaphors, ‘before’ light, there was neither light nor darkness until light has made the concept of darkness possible. Darkness cannot say: ‘I precede the coming light,’ but there is a sense in which light can say, ‘Darkness preceded me’” (Sayers *Mind* 101). Moving from theology and language to literature and history, Sayers shows her investment in the intertwinement and fluidity of these subjects. For her, art is the natural representation for the cycle of history. Art depends on self-reference as well as innovation, it is neither cemented sole in its own moment nor ignorant of the past. In the humanist world there is, instead of BC, BH: Before Hamlet.

“Shakespeare writes *Hamlet*. That act of creation enriches the world with a new category of Being, namely: *Hamlet*. But simultaneously it enriches the world with a new category of Not-Being, namely: Not Hamlet. Everything other than *Hamlet*, to the farthest bounds of the universe, acquires in addition to its former characteristics, the characteristics of being Not-Hamlet; the whole of the past immediately and automatically becomes Not-Hamlet” (*Mind* 101).

For Sayers, the great modern author is the author who can control the before and after with mastery of craft, inheriting the weight of previous images and the burden of their current accumulation.

While it is important to understand the perception of these authors, it is pressing to comprehend how they interact with the genres that gave them their fame and also trapped them into their resultant stereotypes: she a chaste lady author turned peddler and he a genius who caved to the baser needs of religion. Both of these authors illuminated their forms by challenging the expectations of their audience without losing them. In order to understand how Eliot and Sayers' usage of ancient texts is unique and powerful, we must examine how they viewed the functions of genre.

In the case of Eliot, the first and most obvious to discuss is the poetic form. A battlefield of ink has been sacrificed to T.S. Eliot's critical writing on poetry. Eliot became famous for his own essay on the struggles of inherited dead works and a poet's duty to those he is compared to. Duty is significant because Eliot considered the job of the poet to be a serious one, charged with responsibilities somewhere between a cultural priest and a perpetual heretic; there was no moment of sheer comfort while dealing in the dark art of poetry and its masters. Indeed he reminds his fellow poets in the beginning of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that their road will be arduous. "It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation" (33). "The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all"

(33) but rather recollections experienced not in tranquility as formerly asserted, but in the absence of tranquility through the strenuous labor of creation. The poet molds from ancient clay, which it is smooth in certain places and hard in others depending on how it has been formed before the poet inherits it. Words and belief are after all, for Eliot, “Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion (“The Hollow Men” 77) and awaiting the author to form them into poetry.

When Eliot revises “Tradition” in his *Criticism* he does so by contending, “Let me start with the supposition that we do not know what poetry is, or what it does or ought to do, or of what use it is; and try to find out, in examining the relation of poetry and criticism, what the use of both of them is” (*Criticism* 5) and then goes on, academically, to take a stab at knowing. Or rather, he makes his unknowing the point of knowing: “The experience of poetry, like any other experience, is only partially translatable into words” (Eliot *Criticism* 8). In a beautiful contradiction, it is precisely why the poet must work so hard to hone his craft, because the poet nor their audience will ever understand it; they will simply know it when they read it.

Words, after speech, reach  
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
 Can words or music reach  
 The stillness (“Burnt Norton” 19).

“Burnt Norton” links Eliot’s poetry to Sayers’ theory of creation most clearly. Note for the moment the investment in a recognition of the pattern reaching the audience, perhaps penetrating the stillness, perhaps not. I claimed earlier that Eliot was not ignorant of his audience’s needs; that he desired to communicate something to others. But he also refused to have poetry itself defined by this desire: ‘Communication’ will not explain

poetry. ...Any theory which relates poetry very closely to a religious or a social scheme of things aims, probably, to *explain* poetry of *binding* poetry by legislation” (*Criticism* 131). Restriction was not Eliot’s aim, but a powerful form made more powerful by having been pulled and kneaded until it had expanded or contracted to the shape of his moment in the tradition.

Moving from what critics have retroactively termed high modernism to low, it would serve us well to examine Sayers’ most famous literary form: detective fiction. The modernist obsession with detective fiction is at times downright amusing when contrasted to the strict image we have inherited of their dire, pessimistic view of the world. In Britain, it was not composed by what we now call the high modernists, but those associated with the storied halls of Oxford and Cambridge were rather adept at innovating and perpetuating the genre. Par exemplar, G.K. Chesterton’s “Father Brown” series was a favorite of both Eliot’s and Sayers and remains popular today. Eliot, who by and large preferred Sherlock Holmes, used Sayers’ earlier novels to exemplify the older form of detective genres he called puzzlers, which are without a murder. It is only recently becoming compelling to scholars to explore why the golden age of detective fiction was in full swing in the era of Virginia Woolf’s most brilliant discontented masterpieces. Exploring this timely matter reveals more than the usual answer: that people find it assuring in times of stress to have a question answered and a villain labeled and caught. For Sayers and Eliot, the fundamental elements of great literature are found within the detective story. By pushing the genre out of its comfort zone (whether by creating a detective novel without a mystery or a verse play taking place in medieval

England) and still retaining its shape so that the audience recognizes it, the actual agenda of these inter war writers begins to shine through.

If there is a BH, there is certainly a BD, before the detective as we know him is born. Functioning as a prop for society but eternally removed from it, the detective is the perfect pained mirror to show society its tarnished face and then wipe it clean. Michael Holquist's article, "Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction" never truly challenges the assumption that the golden age of detective fiction and modernism had little overlap, but he does investigate their similar roots. In exploring Edgar Allen Poe's possible motivations for creating a character such as Dupin, Holquist arrives at a dramatically modernist and yet simple answer: the world was chaos. "But it is in the very depths to which he experienced, and was able to capture in words, the chaos of the world, that we must search for the key to the ordered, ultra-rational world of the detective story (141). For those on this side of the chasm of war, however, there was no longer a safe place within the detective story where reason always ruled. In the everyday of post-war society, raving artists simply had the assurances that the world really was as mad as they had always known it to be. The irrational and the painful seeped into the world of the detective and gave birth to many subgenres. For Sayers, however, it was less of a seeping and more of a floodgate as Lord Peter Wimsey investigates the bodies of veterans and falls in love with a New Woman.

"The detective, the instrument of pure logic, able to triumph because he alone in a world of credulous men, holds to the Scholastic principle of *adequate rei et intellectus*, the adequation of mind to things, the belief that the mind, given enough time, can understand everything. There are no mysteries; there is only incorrect reasoning"

(Holquist 141). The basic detective principle that all crime mysteries can be solved if properly examined by someone who is meant to do the job is upheld fiercely in Sayers, but she also turns the assurance on its head, using the brilliant detective to show that though crimes can be solved, the problem of humanity cannot be so easily dealt with. We can solve every crime, but we will still go to war. We can put criminals behind bars, but then we are left with their starving children. We can save the love of our lives from being unjustly hanged, but we cannot bridge the gap of power inequality created by the action and the histories of our genders. Peter reasons and wiles his way out of every dangerous and trying situation, except for the ones we all encounter by virtue of being in a society together.

Consider Sayers's fallen hero: "Sayers ends not with the unmasking of the villain, the confession, the trial, or any of the other familiar conventions of detective fiction, but with the emotional state of the detective himself, humanized through his flaws" (Freedman 383). Peter is, to paraphrase Lewis, all grown up and doubting reality. When Sayers has grown a real detective, when she feels she has contributed to her chosen field, is when Peter learns to explore his doubt rather than flee from it, to exist in a world of nightmares, and to do his job well while never having faith in its supposed inherent virtue. Freedman, fascinated with Lord Peter's mental war wounds, ignores the creation of Harriet, an equally disturbed trauma victim and author struggling between the work that is easily profitable and the work that is good.

For both Harriet and her creator, the works (profitable and good) are detective fiction, and Sayers' commitment to a genre that, despite having many respected fans, was

not considered respectable, can be seen in her analysis of repeated narrative in her treatise on writing, *The Mind of the Maker*:

“The desire to solve a living problem by a definitive and sterile conclusion is natural enough: it is part of the material will to death. It is bred in the bones of the most enlightened and ‘progressive’ of mankind, who hate it when they see it in others, not realizing that what appears to them to be a detestable stranger is in fact their own face in a mirror” (209).

Sayers is tapping into the larger narrative of humanity, the desire we have to race toward our own end and our abhorrence of anything that forces us to do so, the contradiction of death that resides at our very core. Detective narrative answers this problem, until the first Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane novel, *Strong Poison*. Upon the two characters meeting Lord Peter’s performance crumbles and Harriet’s performance is created. Peter has recognized his own face in the mirror and sets about facing it for the next three books until he becomes a human, while Harriet, having gotten deeply into trouble for her humanity, represents the distrust of the open ending with even less trust for the tidy one. Having complicated her characters, thus complicating the types they represent and the genre they uphold, Sayers undergoes a revision of her genre that resolves with remorse over the solved case and tentative belief not in the virtue of your fellow man, but of their possibility. The solemn words Peter speaks to his wife, “Don’t give up on me” (*Honeymoon* 400) are met with a gesture. Despite the endless logos of the Word, ultimately it proves insufficient.



## CHAPTER 3

### CHRISTIANITY AND HIGH MODERNISM

#### Not So Strange Bedfellows

As Virginia Woolf's letter shows, there is good reason for the perception that modernism would not tolerate Christianity. Woolf's attitude in her letter is, however, on one end of the poles that dominated thought during these exhausting years of inquiry. If there was a contest for defining the work being created during the World War years, the *avant-garde* and the secular certainly have won. But that does not accurately represent what was happening on the ground at the time, nor does a purely secularist view divorced from the spiritual aspects of modernism sufficiently explore the work even of Woolf herself. Calinescu's research again provides context:

“At first sight, nothing seems farther removed from religion than the idea of modernity. Is not ‘modern man’ an unbeliever and a ‘free thinker’ *par excellence*? The association between modernity and a secular view of the world has become almost automatic. But as soon as we try to set modernity in an historical perspective, we realize that this association is not only relatively recent but also of minor significance when compared to the relationship between modernity and Christianity” (59).

“Although the idea of modernity has come to be associated almost automatically with secularism, its main constitutive element is simply a sense of *unrepeatable time*, and this element is by no means incompatible with such a religious Weltanschauung as the one implied by the Judeo-Christian eschatological view of history. That is why, while conspicuously absent from the world of pagan antiquity, the idea of modernity was born during the Christian Middle Ages. ... the hypothesis of modernity's medieval origin is confirmed linguistically. It was

during the Middle Ages that the word *modernus*, an adjective and a noun, was coined from the adverb, *modo* (meaning recently, just now)... *Modernus*

signified, according to *Theasurus Linguae Latinae*, “*qui nunc, nostro tempore est, novellus, praesentaneus*” (13).

It is the medieval root of the words that would come to represent a variety of progressive social ideals, rebellious, antisocial art forms, and a complete break of the past that actually tie it most acutely to the period it in which originated in. The medieval world was a place of cultures, religions, and assumptions clashing with bloody violence and deep repercussions. The assurance of the western world was challenged at every corner and resulted in a time of artist proliferation in the late medieval and early modern period, the Renaissance. Also similar to the modern period, the medieval world rediscovered the writings of the ancient world and attempted to rebuild a fractured society using the principles that had preceded it and been lost through constant redefinition. The ethics, and specifically Christian ethics, of Sayers and Eliot proposed that substantial material exists in the early modern period for repairing and reshaping their world.

Sayers’ fascination with medieval architecture and the trinity are connected through the use of space and epiphany in both her drama and her detective novels. She expresses it in *The Mind of the Maker*: God is creation, Christ is word, Holy Spirit is action and they create the Trinity of creation that all artists are a part of. Crystal Downing’s book on theatrical manifestations in Sayers’ work, *Writing Performances*, summarizes, “Believing in the ontological absolute of Trinitarian Love, Sayers was not traumatized by the epistemological ambiguities that mark human performances” (159). One reason, then, for Sayers performativity is that the act of creation is itself an act of

Trinity and thus both shifting and permanent, like a cyclic history of liberal humanistic ideologies.

### **The Love of the Thing: Social Reform through Educational Reform**

“But if it ever occurs to people to value the honor of the mind equally with the honor the body, we shall get a social revolution of quite an unparallel sort—and very different from the kind that is being made at the moment.”

– Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*

Why educational reform should be so important to two very different authors in the modernist era, let alone two culturally Christian authors, is a question that must be addressed. Sayers and Eliot wrote a great deal on the topic of the educational system, individual responsibility toward education, and the role of the church in education. Between Sayers and Eliot they have over nine essays on the subject and it occurs frequently in their discussion of culture. Indeed, *Gaudy Night* can be seen not only as a romance novel, a detective novel, and a modernist novel, it can also been seen as an exploration of everything that is wrong with education and why we should still care about it anyway. Why should an era so unstable worry about education? Are these two authors hoping to create stability through a stronger educational system? Yes, in part they are. Eliot claims, in *Christianity and Culture* “what I have said about the negative character of our political philosophy should suggest a parallel criticism of our education, not as it is found in practice here or there, but in the assumptions about the nature and purpose of education which tend to affect practice throughout the country” (29). Eliot and Sayers are not arbitrarily crying, “think of the children!” They are simply aware that something has

gone wrong previously, and if it is to be repaired or examined, better trained minds must be allowed to come into existence. With Christian holistic ideals, they see the state of education as a stopgap in foolhardy decisions that lead to the nihilism of both World War I and negative art.

By returning to the education of the classics, both Sayers and Eliot hope to create sharper minds, minds prepared to meet the challenge of analyzing a world that is constantly shifting. Similarly, by reforming the building blocks of education in British society the two authors strive to assert humanist principles and certain Christian doctrines in order to create students who will then measure and balance all other philosophies against their own and evolve them as necessary. Simultaneously they hope to relieve over-taxed teachers who must exist within a contradiction, much like our previously mentioned professors of modernism: never tell students of an absolute truth but also never allow them to surrender to the ambiguity gradually eating away at the idea of hope. Sayers' and Eliot's educational reform, then, seeks to assert humanist philosophy without returning students to the unreliable linear that blots out all that doesn't coincide with its neat narrative of steady progression.

Adam Schwartz's investigation of modernists with a Christian bent, "Swords of Honor: The Revival of Orthodox Christianity in Twentieth-Century Britain," begins to poke holes into the binaries of secular versus Christian when reading the essays of Christian authors in context of the many social theories vying for dominance in their era. "As their judgments of industrialism suggest, many were sympathetic to Marxist criticisms of capitalism, and they respected Communism for being teleological, but (unlike many of their secularist peers) they felt it offered an inadequate diagnosis and

prescription for modern the revival of orthodox Christianity ill” (19-20). Eliot himself answers this discomfort as he justifies looking backward in his essay within the book of the same title, “Christianity and Culture”:

“We have been accustomed to regard ‘progress’ as always integral; and have yet to learn that it is only by an effort and a discipline, greater than society has yet seen the need of imposing upon itself, that material knowledge and power is gained without loss of spiritual knowledge and power. The struggle to recover the sense of relation to nature and to God, the recognition that even the most primitive feelings should be part of our heritage, seems to be the explanation and justification of the life of D.H. Lawrence, and the excuse for his aberrations (Eliot *Christianity* 49).

The ideal for Eliot, then, was not progress or unified succession, and certainly not futurity for futurity’s sake, but a measured and hard won recreation of a culture. There was a desire for a reunification, but not an exact copy of the old. Eliot may have been stodgy at times, but I am hard pressed to imagine he would desire a return to the days of medieval Christianity in practice. But the aspects he wishes to regain are careful consideration, conversation, and awareness of consequences. Eliot must admit the good with the bad, but both his and Sayers desire to return to classical education is deeply tied with their belief that these are still good bases, even if the constructs previously created from them were unsatisfactory.

Eliot summarized his Christian ethics in the term positive liberalism. He considered blind progress to be negative liberalism and to be a destructive or, worse, paralyzing system of living. Positive liberalism embodied his vision of the future of humanism that has learned its lesson from Victorian and Edwardian follies. Lee Oser contends, “To read Eliot sympathetically is to bear in mind the potentially fruitful tension, which he explores, between high classical culture and modern democratic

culture, between aristocratic ideals and the best goals of Christian Education” (Oser 48). Humanism and idealism had the potential to serve as a meeting place in the aggressive conversation of ideals in Eliot and Sayers’ era. The age of creeds had showed itself wanting and to simply take on a new creed would, as Lord Peter says in *Gaudy Night* “apt to be—merely bloody” and still produce nothing more than another lost generation (Sayers 318). Eliot and Sayers instead proposed an educational system that embraced the classical texts and contemplation of beliefs, but also the mystical elements that skirted the edges of these works and a life of intelligence

“In a negative liberal society you have no agreement as to their being any body of knowledge which any education person should have acquired at any particular stage: the idea of wisdom disappears, and you get sporadic and unrelated experimentation. A nation’s system of education is much more important than its system of government; only a proper system of education can unify the active and the contemplative life, action and speculation, politics, and the arts” (Eliot *Christianity* 33).

Eliot and Sayers “claimed that recognition of life’s supernatural element was necessary for a genuine humanism and vital art” (Schwartz 14) but to even begin to recognize a mystic element in the ancient or canonical texts they desired to remind succeeding generations of, those generations would first needed to learn how to learn.

### **The Ideology of Good Work for Work’s Sake**

As politics, art, and education are all in a holistic mass for Sayers and Eliot, so too is the everyday occupation of the British subject. The job of every person is to receive a good education, and then what? If the modernist world was considering repairing itself, then surely the post-university subject should go on implementing their classical

education. Sayers was most maddened by both feminism and misogyny alike when it came to the subject of occupation. She made it clear in her lecture “Are Women Human, that her ideal rests on the individual’s relation to the job, not to their social category. “Once lay down the rule that job comes first and you throw that job open to every individual, man or woman, fat or thin, tall or short, ugly or beautiful, who is able to do a job better than the rest of the world” (34). This, of course, involves an idealism of work that at times can border on the fanatical or classist, but at its core represents the ideal of using the good found in society to invest in hope and penetrate the chasm of chaos left by the First World War.

Sayers, far more than Eliot, is aware of the part that the High Church of England has played in allowing weak education and a negative idea of work to go unchecked: “the Church will tolerate, or permit a pious intention to excuse work so ugly, so pretentious, so tawdry and twaddling, so insincere and insipid, so *bad* as to shock and horrify any decent draftsman” (*Church* 139). She imagines a drastically different society, still staunchly capitalistic, but socialist in its idealism of good work: “but as a way of life in which the nature of man should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfill itself to the glory of God. That it should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of work itself” (*Church* 125). This is the manifestation of Christianity in the every day for Sayers. These are the foundational ideals she wishes to use when imagining a world that can cry *distinguo* through the uncertainty of modern life.

Though this desire for doing a job for the love of the work comes across more clearly in their fictional writings, it manifests itself in all aspects of their critical and public work as well. Even in the critical analysis of Eliot, published in attempt to refine

his claims made to his most famous essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot shows his feet are firmly planted in the camp of less productivity and more quality. “If people only wrote when they had something to say, and never merely because they wanted to write a book, or because they occupied a position such that the writing of books was expected of them, the mass of criticism would not be wholly out of proportion to the small number of critical books worth reading” (*Criticism* 11). As Sayers has Harriet claim in *Gaudy Night* “I know what you're thinking - that anybody with proper sensitive feelings would rather scrub floors for a living. But I should scrub floors very badly, and I write detective stories rather well. I don't see why proper feelings should prevent me from doing my proper job" (31). It isn't about the kind of work you do, but the best each individual human can produce. The world is still measured in individual bodies and minds for Sayers and Eliot, rather than cold numbers that numb the mind to any possible solution. It is through this these humanistic reforms of education and the work, rooted in Medieval Christianity and, we shall see below, Literature, that Eliot and Sayers allow their fictional characters to represent the torn psyche of Britain and the possibility for both learning the lessons that rupture brought, and re-making the world even inside that rupture.

### **Sayers' Classical Educational Reform**

*The Lost Tools of Learning* is a brief laymen's look at the problems of modern education. Indeed, neither Sayers nor Eliot were full professors though they did serve as

author in residence or guest lecturers at various universities over the span of their careers. But the daily job of nurturing young minds was not theirs. For both authors, however, the media and their brief encounters with the modern student provided both hope and despair over the state of the educational system. Though Sayers repeatedly reminds her reader of her amateur status as an educator, having received various kinds of education herself and having studied education closely in order to aid her political fight for women's education, she was well versed in the high and low points of the British Educational elementary, college and universities systems.

*The Lost Tools of Learning* was delivered first as a lecture at Oxford in 1947 in answer to a request from Sayers' alma mater to answer some of the critiques of education she had posed in her earlier writing, such as *Gaudy Night* and *Letters to a Diminished Church*. She contends that "The combined folly of a civilization that has forgotten its own roots is forcing them [teachers and students] to shore up the tottering weight of an educational structure that is built upon sand" (*Tools* 335). This sand is the sand of shifting principles, numerous subjects with no base to compare them to, undefined words, and an ability to learn or think critically outside the structure of the classroom, "we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think: they learn everything, except the art of learning" (*Tools* 77). Sayers' proposal for this is to return to the medieval method of educating students in the building blocks before educating them in special fields. She is not apposed to the breadth of subjects now available, nor does she fall for the glamour of, as Eliot contends: "knowing the name of everything and having the knowledge of nothing" (*Christianity* 70).

“Scorn in plenty has been poured out upon the medieval passion for hair splitting; but when we look at the shameless abuse men, in print and on the platform, of controversial expressions with shifting and ambiguous connotations, we may feel it in our hearts to wish that ever reader and hearer had been so defensively armored by his education as to be able to cry: *Distinguo*” (*Tools* 133).

What would an education that could cause students to cry out for clear distinction look like? Based on the medieval education, though not medieval topics, Sayers proposes to build an individually strong foundation so that the cultural foundation may grow. She sees education happening in a set of stages dominated by two broad periods: the Medieval Trivium and Quadrivium.

The Trivium occurs from the earliest of ages when students learn their alphabet until they are sixteen. It is a period of developing the critical skills necessary to analyze the world around you through logic and dialectical flexibility that broadens out in the early teen years into studying broader topics through rhetoric. The final pre-University stage, the Medieval Quadrivium, is undergone at the age of sixteen or the student can choose to begin to learn a nonacademic trade and spend two years as an apprentice. The Quadrivium is a period of intense study on a select few subjects that the student is passionate about. Because they have a solid foundation in reasoning and rhetoric and a broad base of sciences the student is free to begin studying what drives him or her most and will lead to a job in which her or she works, not for the sake of paycheck, but for the good of the work itself. This idealism may never be achievable, but Sayers’ understanding of her society’s current conundrums was certainly realistic: “For we let our young men and women go out unarmed, in a day when armor was never so necessary... I am concerned only with the proper training of the mind to encounter and deal with the formidable mass of undigested problems presented to it by the modern

world” (*Tools* 133). The world was in no condition to suffer fools who cannot distinguish between ancient and old, indistinct and absolutes, and there was no hope of rebuilding society in any direction, positive or negative, if its people were unaware what materials were available.

### **Eliot’s Educational Reform Rooted in Christian Tradition**

Sightless, unless  
The eyes reappear  
As the perpetual star  
Multifoliate rose  
Of death’s twilight kingdom  
The hope only  
Of empty men.

– T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*

“We need to know how to see the world as the Christian Fathers saw it; and the purpose of reascending to origins is that we should be able to return, with greater spiritual knowledge, to our own situation. We need to recover the sense of religious fear, so that it may be overcome by religious hope”

– T. S. Eliot “Christianity and Culture”

Eliot provides the modern reader with much discomfort when he claims, “In a Christian Society education must be religious” (*Christianity* 30) but he relieves our fears somewhat when he amends “not in the sense that it will be administered by ecclesiastics, still less in the sense that it will exercise pressure, or attempt to instruct everyone in theology, but in the sense that its aims will be directed by a Christian philosophy of life” (*Christianity* 30). Of course, Eliot must now spend the remainder of his book not only explaining what the Christian philosophy of life is but why it is to be used for the purposes of education. It is particularly difficult for a modern (though perhaps not a modernist) American audience to conceive of religious education as a positive thing. Certainly, in our own cultural moment the American Evangelical movement is making

itself few friends and seems to have little to do with the goals of a solid education of genuine inquiry. We must remember, however, that Eliot is writing to a British, largely Anglican, audience at a time when the desire for stability was palpable. He is also writing at the beginning of education as a subject unto itself. Though Dickens may have desired that orphans have an opportunity to improve their lot through schooling, the idea of what education for all would mean and what it must look like in order to build a better society, a society that may not engage in such bloodbaths as those that had just taken place in France, was a relatively new subject. We must approach it then with as fresh a mind as possible and attempt to distance ourselves from the current situation to the problems Eliot is attempting to resolve.

Eliot still saw England as culturally Christian, though he did not contend that it was spiritually healthy, or that each of its members should necessarily follow the Christian path to spiritual health (*Christianity* 10). Rather, he saw the Christian roots of society as good ones and desire to transplant them into fresh soil. The current garden had become spoiled. “It is my contention that we have today a culture which is mainly negative, but which so far as it is positive, is still Christian” (*Christianity* 10). What Eliot is after, then, is a positive Christianity, interested in the capabilities of the human and deeply aware of its own limits.

Eliot was certainly aware of the alternative structures and above all desired that his culture “do something” about the negative, reluctant inaction that dominated politics and the educational system in the 1930s. In an eerie moment prophesy, Eliot predicts what will happen if some change is not made to the way of life currently persisting in England:

“We might, of course, merely sink into an apathetic decline: without faith, and therefore without faith in ourselves; without a philosophy of life, either Christian or pagan; and without art... without respect for the needs of the individual soul; the Puritanism of hygienic morality in the interest of efficiency; uniformity of opinion through propaganda, and art only encouraged when it flatters the official doctrine of the time... That prospect involves, at least, discipline, inconvenience and discomfort: but here as hereafter the alternative to hell is purgatory” (*Christianity* 18-9).

Certainly, Beckett’s post-modernism at least could be described as purgatory. To a mind like Eliot’s hell was preferable to Purgatory because it was not a state of suspended animation. Indeed, the return to extremism and puritanical revolution in recent years unhappily has a sufficient rebuttal from the learned as we have been suspended in speculation for generations. This is Eliot’s greatest fear as he outlines a proposal for an educational system that would aid his society.

To avoid remaining, “empty men” who remain “[s]ightless” in the “twilight kingdom” (*The Hollow Men* 79), Eliot pushes his idea past the negative liberal society in favor of a positive humanist one. A Christian education will offer salvation, even if the structures of Christianity itself have failed to do so “only a proper system of education can unify the active and the contemplative life, action and speculation, politics, and the arts” (*Christianity* 33). This Christian education follows a similar organization that Sayers has outlined above. The emphasis is on words, the words of history and the power of language, so that students are highly critical and pushed to explore either creating their own words to pulsate through the void or the job of creating objects and experiments that will serve to counter and challenge the ideals of the words. This dominance of words, though provided with a check, is at the heart of the Christian, positive liberalistic society that is based on a book and a holy figure, supposedly the physical manifestation of holy

language. Individual progress, improvement, and wisdom must be attained before the culture can dream of such ideals again.

## CHAPTER 4

### ELIOT: THE PRIEST OF POETRY

“No honest poet can ever feel quite sure of the permanent value of what he has written: he may have wasted his time and messed up his life for nothing”

– Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism*

In his experiment in social ethics, *Christianity and Culture*, T.S. Eliot makes a hopeful gesture that engulfs his poetry: “We need to know how to see the world as the Christian Fathers saw it; and the purpose of re-ascending to origins is that we should be able to return, with greater spiritual knowledge, to our own situation. We need to recover the sense of religious fear, so that it may be overcome by religious hope” (50). This, of course, still rings somewhat antithetical in our idea of secular modernism and naturally disturbs our post-modern disgust with progression. But for Eliot, the key is in the action of this passage. He has yet to give up on humanity. For both his ethics and his poetry, there is a sense of hope and possibility within the world if only we would take the classical elements and use them to a new purpose. Eliot sees an opportunity in the gap where some of his generation sees only the chasm itself. In *Letters to a Christian Church*, Sayers speaks to the creativity at the root of the Christian tradition, the force that produced such powerful fictions: “for each word is itself a separate unity and a separate creative act” (38) because, as she explains in further on, each word becomes “a way of life in which

the nature of man should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfill itself to the glory of God. That it should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of work itself” (125). Within the mess caused by this tradition there is the possibility of the paradoxical Trinitarian art, the good poetry that will come from positive liberalism in the future.

As *British Writers of the Thirties*, Valentine Cunningham’s expansive book on the literature of the inter-war years, reminds us, “classic Christianity doesn’t evade, but reinforces a sense of earthly irresolution and restlessness. The poet of ‘Ash Wednesday’ is thrust back into the ‘transitory’ process, turning and returning, climbing, wavering, conscious of life as protracted exile from heaven’s solutions.” (Cunningham 413). The power of Eliot’s writing is that he does not remain stuck in the possibility of this any more than he remains focused on the chasm of doubt. He writes through such murky spaces to beyond the principle; his work is movement not stagnation.

Reading the cyclical *Four Quartets*, composed by Eliot over a period of time between 1935 and 1940 and published together in 1943, is a revealing exercise in criticism put into practice. Eliot examines four physical places and thus four ideas of what it means to exist in his current world through these rigorous poems. By rigorous I mean not only that they are tightly composed in Eliot’s coiling, referential best, but that they are also unrelenting in their pursuit of expressing the evolution of an idea as seen in a moment of place. Eliot, who at the time of writing the first poem “Burnt Norton” was also composing *Murder in the Cathedral*, makes a theatrical use of space and time in the poem, allowing them to have their say and thus build a useful tension between reality and his ideals.

The opening lines of “Burnt Norton” seem to enforce the stereotype of the defeated modernist. What might have been is past, lost, irretrievable.

Time present and time past  
 Are both perhaps present in time future  
 And time future contained in time past.  
 If all time is eternally present  
 All time is unredeemable.  
 What might have been is an abstraction  
 Remaining a perpetual possibility  
 Only in a world of speculation.

This moment of the poem is Eliot’s acceptance of the past’s failure to reach its possibility and to instead become the unredeemable mess of the World War I. Eliot has a vested interest in expressing the loss, the stagnation, the madness and frustration born out of a loss of order. But that he proposes the building blocks for another order does not undo this, rather it heralds an acceptance of this irredeemably. Eliot does not wear the cloak of mourning forever.

Burnt Norton continues:

The release from action and suffering, release from the inner  
 And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded  
 By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,  
*Erhebung* without motion, concentration  
 Without elimination, both a new world  
 And the old made explicit, understood  
 In the completion of its partial ecstasy,  
 The resolution of its partial horror.  
 Yet the enchainment of past and future  
 Woven in the weakness of the changing body,  
 Protects mankind from heaven and damnation  
 Which flesh cannot endure (19).

Perhaps this sounds lifeless: An uprising without motion, a change without the blood except for the blood spilt by the poet on his paper ideals, but the poem does not stop there. Woven within the core of the changing body (moving at a particle, syntactical

level) there is the holding of the ideal and it is held through our weakness. Through our folly comes our salvation: the cycle will continue. The cycle meaning a return, a repetition with a bit different every time, but with the Christian tradition there is the chance to get it right. The cycle does not mean a downward spiral: but a comfort that the horror has come before and thus our chance has come again. Without this chance there is indeed no hope.

For Cunningham, “Burnt Norton” represents the cyclical view of history that means the mother church is there to return to when the modernist world becomes too scary:

There, as in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, metaphor and actuality converged. In those poems Eliot’s literal journeys, to the Cotswold house Burnt Norton.... become analogies of the spiritual quest. Going back home, to the childhood memory, the village one’s ancestors came from, the place where one’s political forebears were located, stands for the theological journal, the regression from modernity and from ‘progress,’ back towards the safe sources of memory, revelation, conservative attitudes, the world of Mother Church and Father God.... it applied more or less to Lewis and Tolkien, Charles Williams and T.S. Eliot, Evelyn Waugh and Roy Campbell (410-11).

While Cunningham is right to find the disgust for progress in these authors, the implied reason is incorrect. The progress with no direction, the progress of forward motion with no thought, the belief that progress will eventually sort the mess out is the idea the authors are rebelling against. Progress as a solution is an idea of their father’s and grandfather’s generation, not a modernist element they cannot process. Rather, Eliot has hope that a positive liberalism is still possible, but not simply for the sake of itself. The last temptation of the modern world will come in the form of progression without ideals to steer its tracks and awareness to gage its effect:

The Word in the desert  
 Is most attacked by voices of temptation,  
 The crying shadow in the funeral dance,  
 The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera (21).

Eliot's generation must engage in the battle Christ fought in the wilderness once upon a time: embrace the power at your fingertips and place a salve on the problems of your weeping world, or put their faith in the words that came before, "it is written" (Luke 4:4) and work amongst the muck for the potential future the words contain.

Eliot uses the words of the character he was constructing of the time, Thomas Beckett, to express the cycle that held human kind:

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind  
 Cannot bear very much reality.  
 Time past and time future  
 What might have been and what has been  
 Point to one end, which is always present (21).

But it is in the 1925 "The Hollow Men" and the 1930 "Ash-Wednesday", sometimes referred to as his conversion poem, that Eliot's push for movement past possibility begins. He calls for aid from the ancients, mystical and literary, so that they may bring forth the essential building blocks for a real progress. The recurring lines "For Thine is the Kingdom" (80) and "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper (80) are the power of the poem and the tension that guided Eliot's tightrope act of ambition. Here is the beauty, not the failing. The conflict here is resolvable in Eliot's own theory if not in the mind of the modernist critic.

The brokenness of his current situation is Eliot's verse in Ash Wednesday:  
 Because these wings are no longer wings to fly / But merely vans to beat the air (83).  
 And yet the yearning for recover is his refrain: Teach us to care and not to care Teach us

to sit still (83). You do not reach for your teacher if you have given up, but rather Eliot pleads for the ancient wisdom to rescue him as a medieval mystic once cried for the Holy Spirit:

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood  
Teach us to care and not to care  
Teach us to sit still

...

And let my cry come unto Thee (92-3) [ellipses are Eliot's]

So that he may go on, but not go forward endlessly, but with a destination of some future goodness in mind. Not falsehood necessitates that there is a truth still, however buried beneath years of obscurity and misuse. "Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something / Upon which to rejoice" (83). This positivism with a clause of hesitance is the path for Eliot. Like the Lady of Ash Wednesday, who recalls the Lady of the Garden, of Hesperides, of the Revelation, of Milton's *Paradise*, he must exist in a world where "word" is "futile" in order to get to "After this our exile" which is his beginning. This cycle, though explained through the words of the Judeo- Christian and Western tradition, is the cycle of beauty for ashes, of the phoenix rising from the destruction of a faulty body, of the dream that from the wreckage of a world smeared with the blood of war, a new day can still come. He is taking on the office of priest, but a priest of poetry, not Catholicism. Eliot finds the Christian imagery applicable because it embodies the story of word made reality, of a new world order arising out of a pointless and bloody ordeal. A hope for the newly educated masses out of the madness of a few. Eliot cries "O Jerusalem" in "Ash Wednesday" to echo Luke 13's lament not because he has surrendered to the chasm of loss, but because he recognizes the world that follows "a

forsaken house” (ESV Luke 13:35) that must restore the order found in the language of the ancients even if they diverge from the ancient’s path.

## CHAPTER 5

## SIGH NO MORE: SAYERS LOVERS AS THE TORN PSYCHE OF BRITAIN

“Serve god, love me, and mend.”

—William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*

“Let's have one other gaudy night: call to me  
All my sad captains; fill our bowls once more  
Let's mock the midnight bell.”

William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*

For a modernist to believe in love seems, to borrow Woolf's earlier language, “obscene.” As if the indulgence of romance is somehow filthy, you dirty yourself with feelings of the *bourgeoisie* and the sentimental. The fact that many modernists were themselves in loving relationships often doesn't impact our impression of the *avant-garde* as somehow cold and puritanically individualist. For fictional characters to fall in love and live happily ever after rings too loudly of the failed fairy tale that was western society: love, if it did exist, did not fit into that mold any longer. It is not that love ceased to exist or humans stopped entering into bonds, but that the resolution of such bonds were no longer as simple. Skeptical unions are to be expected, but how can any sense of happiness come without faith in its success? This is the question that Dorothy L. Sayers answers with Harriet's words in *Busman's Honeymoon*, “We'll fight it out like gentleman” and have “Love with honor” (309). She must spend the remainder of the novel showing how difficult it is for these ideals to exist in a relationship between two intelligent and experienced individuals. Why would she do this? Because Harriet and

Peter represent certain aspects of life the way Eliot's poetry is the creative manifestation of his ethics. Marriage means faith in the possibility of healing, though Sayers' knows the healing will be a painful process.

### **The Dangers of Ideals and the Strains of Reality**

In addition to being dramatic in essence and misappropriated by criticisms, Sayers is an idealist. As with every aspect of her person, this word requires clarity. Lee Edwards undertakes this task in her article "Love and Work: Fantasies of Resolution" where she both pessimistically dismisses the possibility of such a resolution and admires Sayers proposal for actualizing ideals.

"Sayers, like Plato, judges reality in terms of the ideal. The standards in both cases are practical, as well as ethical. Like Plato's, Sayers' ideal universe assumes that everyone works and than an individual must first discover the job that he or she can best perform and then perform that job in the best way possible, subordinating personal (or interpersonal) claims to the impersonal standards of performance" (35).

Sayers idealism is not untested, sheltered idealism. Her own biography testifies to a woman who set her teeth against the worst the world has to offer The idealism rests is in the potential that humans and human ideas offer, but, like Eliot, she sees this idealism as being bought with blood. In the midst of the havoc being wreaked due to a clash of ideals at her fictional Oxford College in *Gaudy Night*, Sayers has Lord Peter reassure the scholars and the skeptical Harriet that idealism comes at a price, no matter the ideal.

"Like you and every member of this Common Room, I admit the principle and the consequences must follow... she could not prevent other people from suffering for her principles. That seems to be what principles are for, somehow... I don't

claim, you know,' he added with something of his familiar diffidence, 'to be a Christian or anything of that kind. But there's one thing in the Bible that seems to me to be a mere statement of brutal fact—I mean, about brining not peace but a sword" (Sayers *GN* 489).

It is this "brutal fact" that prevents Peter from doing his "proper job", his good work for good work's sake, because the consequences that follow from discovering the truth are rarely kind. This awareness of the reality that follows the pursuit of ideals is the exact block between Harriet accepting Peter's marriage proposals. Sayers, and subsequently her characters, have ideals, but they are not the ideals of innocents.

Further, in *Gaudy Night*, Harriet and Peter seem to act out the conflict of ideals and actuality. Harriet is not only investing a series of vandalisms at her alma mater, but she is currently working on yet another detective novel (Sayers' few scholars claim Harriet is as a stand in for the author herself, a too simple solution to the problem of Sayers work) and seeks Peter's oft-harsh advice:

'You would have to abandon the jigsaw kind of story and write a book about human beings for a change.'

'I'm afraid to try that, Peter. It might go too near the bone.... It would hurt like hell.

'What does it matter if it hurts like hell, so long as it makes a good book' (333)?

Peter wins the argument, because for Sayers excellence in your job, whether that job is it a relationship, scrubbing floors, or a novel, trumps all personal discomfort. Sayers struggled with her admiration of socialism in her *Letters to a Diminished Church* for this reason: if people could actually do the things outlined in socialism it would indeed solve the problems facing the modern world, but like a good modernist she had no such indiscriminate faith in the human character. But still holding to faith in the potential of the human character, she proposes instead a revision of the protestant work ethic and

Plato's social stations: not loving the glory of any job, but doing glorious work in the job you are best suited to. But of course, as previously discussed, the world does not desire for people to find their bliss in their work, but to get work done and to believe in this ideal has led Peter to catch murderers, who are then hanged, and Harriet to risk her independence for something that may not exist: love within marriage.

In *Letter to a Diminished Church*, Sayers quotes Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* as she discusses the many bloody endeavors of the Church:

That road is paved with good intentions strongly and obstinately pursued until they have become self-sufficing ends in themselves and deified.

‘Sin grows with doing good ...

Servant of God has chance of greater sin

And sorrow, than the man who serves a king.

For those who serve the greater cause may make the cause serve them,

Still doing right’ (106).

This warning is then followed by her discussion of Greek *hubris* and Christian Pride:

both sins, one perhaps more feared in the mythology of the Greeks than of the Anglicans.

There is *hubris* in fighting for ideals because it implies that you know the truth, the

answer sometimes despite evidence to the contrary. It also takes pride to deny contrary

ideals because you are the largest, which was the most recent sin of the Edwardian world

Sayers had just witnessed fall like the modern day colonial Rome it was. As Eliot worked

out his real world observations and his hopes in his poetry, so too does Sayers examine

both sides of the argument. Rather than tightly pressurized poetry, Sayers has a tightly

pressed relationship that serves as a democracy-like experiment in the possibility of

ideals. Acting on the metaphysical ideal of love when the scars of experience and the fear

inherent in an unstable modern life tell you how foolhardy you are can seem to be Icarus

like *hubris*. But to refuse the risk is to produce lesser work, in Sayers words, or remain

stagnant, in the words of Eliot. The world will keep turning, and for Sayers, it is essential to explore the possible ideals that could guide its arc.

### **Lord Peter Wimsey as Exhausted British Ideals**

Peter's intellect pulled him one way and his nerves another, till I began to be afraid they would pull him to pieces. At the end of every case we had the old nightmares and shell shock again.

– Dorothy L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*

“Take him away!” said Fentiman, “take him away. He’s been dead two days! So are you! So am I! We’re all dead and we never noticed it!” Only the younger men felt no sense of outrage; they knew too much.”

– Dorothy L Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*

One of the most interesting aspects of Sayers’ detective novels is the narrative’s indifference to the main character, Lord Peter Wimsey. He is certainly no golden god, no venerable genius, and he is often seen to walk around making an ass of himself. Though such asinine behavior often helps him to solve the case, Sayers has no qualms about making him the fool simply for the sake of foolishness. He is human, more everyman than miracle man. There is an aspect of P.G. Wodehouse’s Bertie Wooster, often dramatized by Lord Peter in order to disarm a suspect that rests at his core and is made explicit by the genius of his manservant and fellow WWI veteran Bunter. Unlike the easily loveable scamp Bertie, however, the psychologically wounded Peter has little qualms about admitting Bunter is the better man of the duo and truly in charge of Peter’s well being. Lord Peter has little belief in the system that has caused him to be a Lord since birth or, by that title, entrusted him with a battalion of men untrained as he was for the bloody demands of the battlefield. While Sayers allows her readers to feel respect

due to those that have the decency to feel embarrassed about themselves, she still asks Lord Peter to prove his worth with every case. Peter, and all he represents, is as much under investigation as the crimes he stumbles upon.

When we meet Harriet Vane, on trial for the murder of her former lover, Peter is put under the microscope by an additional set of critical eyes. Peter may be able to bear the critical gaze of mass readership, but he truly begins to whittle himself into painful shape with the sharp eye of one perceptive gaze. Harriet does the readers job, watching and occasionally assisting Peter through four cases (her own in *Strong Poison*, the seaside murder she stumbles across in *Have His Carcass*, the Oxford vandalism and psycho drama that unites them in *Gaudy Night* and the case that tests their marriage in *Busman's Honeymoon*) until he has no Wooster like shield to hide behind. The indifference fades as these books progress. We must either feel for Peter and appreciate his trial by fire life, or dislike him and lay the book down. Harriet must make this decision as well in *Gaudy Night*. In *Busman's Honeymoon*, however, Peter must finally make the decision about himself. He has considered himself a secondary character in his own personal narrative, Harriet and Bunter serving as the heroes. He has resolved himself to solve the case and serve as the hangman, but he has refused to give up his guilt, doubt, and thirst for answers. In the novel *Busman's Honeymoon* he asks Harriet, "If there *is* a God or a judgement—what next? What have we done?" and she responds, ever the reasonable presence, "I don't know. But I don't suppose anything we could do would prejudice the defense." To which Peter must cede, but still voice his discomfort with having proven a man guilty of murder and not truly knowing his fate, "I suppose not. I wish we knew more about it" (401). Peter's life is not separate from the lives of others, the decisions he

makes have broad reaching consequences as his positions of Lord Peter, Major Wimsey, and detective. The latter is the only role he has actively chosen, and with the satisfaction of finding his work also comes the reminder of the pain in the former two positions.

Assuming, and this is in fact an assumption, that writers mean something when they make decisions about a character's background—especially a character developed over time across a series of novels—then we perceive that Lord Peter's background and subsequent choice of occupation are logically tied. Indeed, as Sayers progresses the character she makes it clear that Peter has difficulty being “the hangman” once the puzzle is resolved. It is this aspect of the detective's job, usually left out of novels of the period, that causes his shell shock, post-traumatic stress, to resurface. Sayers did not immediately introduce this aspect of Lord Peter to her readers; it developed and was gradually revealed over this time as he, in the words of C.S. Lewis, “grew up” (91) under the tutelage of his man Bunter and his love Harriet. In short, Sayers did not have to have to make him a psychologically struggling war veteran, but she did. She did not even have to make him conscious of the fact that proving a man guilty of murder and sending him to the gallows was similar to sending his troops into the trenches of France, but she did. She also did not have to make his trauma occur in night terrors after a case closes, but it is apparent in five out of the nine novels that night terrors do occur and violently. We are then forced to ask, remembering always that we are assuming a reason behind such steadily made choices, why a man who suffers from this particular illness and who's symptoms are triggered by grave decisions, would choose such a strenuous hobby.

We can flatter Peter, and thus Sayers, by claiming it is because he has an intelligent mind or because he wants to do his duty, but I do not think there is such a

simple answer. Is Peter enacting his human right to do things that are unhealthy for him, to behave in an insane way? Keeping in mind the colloquial definition of insanity, doing something repeatedly and hoping for a different outcome, people do in fact do insane things all the time. The close reader of Peter's disturbed moments, however, is aware that Peter is not surprised when his night terrors return. He marches into a case fully aware that though his considerable intelligence, influence and wit will likely catch the culprit, he himself shall pay a price for this justice. Again, why would a man do this? And why would a very careful author have her man do this? Just as Peter cannot separate his past from his present, neither can Sayers separate her fictional work and her public work. Her life is not evenly divided into non-fiction and fiction categories like a bookshop. Allison Freeman engages this question from a very specific angle in her article, "Dorothy L. Sayers and the Shell Shocked Detective":

But her choice to portray Lord Peter as a victim of shell shock not only made him more sympathetic as a character but also allowed Sayers to address the repercussions of and individual responsibility that the sudden visibility of mental illness in the person of the shell-shocked soldier had occasioned (373).

Being a character in a novel, Peter's own illness becomes the representation of Britain's illness. Just as the return of the soldier had caused Great Britain to blush at its *hubris*, watching the fictional Peter live with night terrors causes us to consider the reality we inhabit.

The questions the war raises about character, responsibility, and moral culpability recur in the peacetime pursuit of justice, which, as Sayers presents it, is a morally ambiguous realm. The solution of the crime is bittersweet, since it implicates the detective in the violence that he ostensibly opposes. In the medical literature of shell shock, metaphors and strategies of detection served to minimize the effect of trauma on the soldier and society; by contrast, Sayers's shell-shocked detective emphasizes that shell shock is a persistent wound, a reminder not only of Lord Peter's malaise but also of the legacy of war in English society (Freeman 374-5).

Peter returns to the scene of his own crime. His primal scene, of watching his men die, of being buried alive, of ordering people to their deaths for no reason, is played out in the novels under the watchful eye of the reader. It is not simply then that the astute reader might deduce, “Don’t you know, I believe we’re doing the very same thing in our political/ ethical/ religious affairs!” but perhaps a grander and yet elementary desire to consider what this primal reenactment might look like on a personal level.

Britain’s *hubris* ate at the classical elements like an unstaunched wound until the World War broke out like an unstoppable hemorrhage, and Peter stands not only as a witness to this but as someone with a persistent wound and all the potential and architectural elements that Britain itself possessed. Sayers as a scholar tended to look at things on a larger scale; her fiction is where she took problems on to a finer point. Peter relives his personal savagery. He cycles through the same horror and though things are eventually improved with Harriet in his life, the cycle does not change. Rather there is a counter to its brutality: a witnessing that offers shelter from being the sole perceiver, if not from the force, of the violence.

Freedman continues her argument, “For him, shell shock is a wound that cannot be cured, and the restoration of normativity is neither a possible nor desirable goal, since the self he forms after and through illness is more complex, thoughtful, and empathetic than his former self (373). Lord Peter Wimsey is the modern Britain: broken and living with that brokenness, not yet dead. Sayers deliberately pairs this broken yet striving character with the hesitant to marry Harriet, who I will examine as the tainted possibility of Britain later in this chapter. Sayers is not crafting a perfect allegory, but conducting an

exploration of the possible hope in staying tied to the elements of English society or making a clean break of it and surrendering to the chasm of uncertainty. The penultimate scene in the novel version of *Busman's Honeymoon* is revealing:

“It’s damnable for you too. I’m sorry. I’d forgotten. That sounds idiot. But I’ve always been alone.’

‘Yes, of course. I’m like that, too. I like to crawl away and hide in a corner.’

‘Well,’ he said, with a transitory gleam of himself, ‘you’re my corner and I’ve come to hide’

‘Yes, my dearest.’

(*And the trumpets sounded for her on the other side*)” (400).

Sayers quotes from *Pilgrim's Progress*, the Second Part, where Christian the Pilgrim finally comes home, while several families remain on earth to support the Church in her time of need. As before, Sayers quotes here not due to a lack of being able to create her own words, but because these specific words offer her a stone for the road leading to some kind of better future. Though *Pilgrim's Progress* is a fraught text in the Christian tradition, its structure of repeated folly and continual striving reveals why Sayers choose the passage for this moment. These are not the awesome trumpets of Revelation or the victorious noise of Joshua, but the trumpet that calls to us ever from a distance and causes us to go ever onward. These are the trumpets of desire. Harriet and Peter operate together not as lovesick adolescents, but as two individuals who have heard the trumpet calls and can witness the others' march. As moderns, the world's structure is indeterminate, but as individuals they have become aware of the cycle of history and their jobs in this small moment within it. Peter does not ask to be excused from his job as hangman, nor Harriet from her job as critic, but they hide in each other's corner and enjoy their Freudian moments of bliss that occur in the same cycle as the explosions.

### **Harriet Vane as Jaded Britain**

This healing love language of quotations and delicate balance of their jobs as individuals and as a married couple did not easily arise. Like all manifestations of ideals, it is bought with pain. The marriage, indeed the friendship, of Harriet and Peter is hard won and according to Sayers diary and letters, difficult to write. Sayers has Peter meet Harriet while she awaits a verdict on a murder charge six years before she agrees to marry him. When Peter begins his pursuit of Harriet he has begun to see the horrors within himself in reference to the larger scale, but his journey has many mile to go before it rests in her arms. Harriet, however, is in far worse shape. It is through Harriet that Sayers explores the problem of having a past, of knowing and still attempting to build something out of tarnished goods. Not only is she on trial for murder, but also she has been publicly dismissed for living with the victim in sin. Harriet leaves the victim before his death, significantly, because his ideals were revealed to have been false when he asked her to marry him after persuading her that marriage was a corrupt institution. It is this faith in the worth of ideals themselves that convinces Peter she is innocent. He then begins both proving her innocence in the murder and confessing his love for her immediately. Six years later, Peter has grown up and Harriet has sufficiently licked her wounds to consider their partnership in terms of romance.

The primary block in their relationship is Harriet's regrettable feeling of gratitude to Peter for saving her life. However romantic knight errants are in fairy tales, they have

no place in Sayers world of critical thinkers. Such a debt is not possible to repay, nor can you live healthily in the shadow of it. There is, essentially, too much history.

“I can’t forget it... Peter can’t forget it... If Peter wasn’t a fool he’d chuck it... He must see how hopeless it all is... Does he really suppose I could ever marry him for the pleasure of seeing him suffer agonies?... Can’t he see that the only thing for me to do is to keep out of it all?... ... Somebody’s potty, anyhow... that seems to be what happens to one if one keeps out of the way of love and marriage and all the rest of the muddle... Well if Peter fancies I’m going to ‘accept the protection of his name’ and be grateful, he’s damn well mistaken... ... Well, let him get hell, it’s his lookout... It’s a pity he saved me from being hanged—he probably wishes by now he’d left me alone... I suppose any decently grateful person would give him what he wants... But it wouldn’t be much gratitude to make him miserable... We should be both perfectly miserable, because neither of us could ever forget... ‘When I am from him I am dead till I be with him’... No, it won’t do to feel like that... won’t get mixed up with that kind of thing... I’ll stay here... where people go queer in their heads... Oh, God, what have I done, that I should be such a misery to myself and other people? Nothing more than a thousand other women” (*Gaudy* 359).

Dorothy L. Sayers rarely indulges in the internal monologue, but when she does it is a compact, hardworking exercise in the conflicts of human relationships. The above examines not only Harriet’s feelings of guilt and frustration, but also a generation’s sense of regret. It is only the thought of “a thousand other women” that steadies Harriet and reminds her of the job at hand. She steadies her nerves with work. She is practical and determined. But she is not being honest. She is doing someone else’s job and ignoring her own writing. Peter is the detective, the hangman. Harriet is the recorder of human undoing. But her regret has created a barrier to her possibility. Harriet is Britain fighting against itself with nothing to show for it. Peter reminds her:

“‘Isn’t it a fact that, having more or less made up your mind about a spot of celibacy, you are eagerly peopling the cloister with bogies. If you want to do without personal relationships, then do without them. Don’t stampede yourself into them by imagining that you’ve got to have them or qualify for a Freudian casebook.’

‘We’re not talking about me and my feelings. We’re talking about this beastly case in College.’

‘But you can’t keep your feelings out of the case. Its no use saying vaguely that sex is at the bottom of all these phenomena—that’s about as helpful as saying that human nature is at the bottom of them. Sex isn’t a separate thing functioning away all by itself. It’s usually found attached to a person of some sort.’

‘That’s rather obvious.’

‘Well, let’s have a look at the obvious’” (*Gaudy* 323).

It is the sharp return to looking at the case, the obvious, that Peter and Harriet discover their ability to achieve their balance within madness, as I will discuss below. What is most fascinating about this passage, though, is the reluctance and desire to yield to the temptation of Peter’s intellect even more than his body. He contains multitudes, and Harriet is unsure if she wishes to entangle herself. She is damaged both in terms of psychology and reputation, but she understands how to cope with such an existence. Bleakness has become her everyday, and to live in the world offered by the ideals of the ancients, the ideals of Peter, seems incredible.

Happily, Sayers investment in ideals does not cause her to disguise the pain of this risk. This story is not of the fairy tale sort. Skeptical, experienced Britain is forging a union with the useful remnants of its broken, ancient self and the fear of failure is only outweighed by the searing pain of yoking yourself to another. The novel’s language of desire is particularly brutal: to fall in love is commonly referred to as “shattering” or to “go up like straw” and Peter’s physicality and “ancient right” as an aristocrat is described as a “weapon.” Miss Vane, a mirror to Harriet’s self who has chosen the reasonable path of the separate, the individual, the hardened, reminds Harriet that though Peter will not use weapons “against you” that the union is incredibly dangerous because, being so well suited, they can “hurt one another so dreadfully.” Her only hope for the couple is that

they will force their autonomy on each other, “leading to “a very delicate balance” (*Gaudy* 491-2). Harriet remarks, “To subdue one's self to one's own ends might be dangerous, but to subdue one's self to other people's ends was dust and ashes. Yet there were those, still more unhappy, who envied even the ashy saltiness of those dead sea apples” (*Gaudy* 93). It is not blind fidelity and or wide-eyed loyalty Sayers is designing for her two characters, but the watchful, well-informed eye she asks the Church to gaze upon its arts.

Harriet watches as her worst fears are confirm when an uneducated woman attempts to destroy the sanctuary of the college for destroying her husband's career. She has been driven to madness by focusing so fiercely on a single idea: her husband's unquestionable goodness. She then realizes that Peter has always warned her of this. “He's always right. He said it was dangerous to care for anybody. He said love was a brute and a devil. You're honest Peter, aren't you. Damned honest” (*Gaudy* 446). Harriet is denied a sugarcoated relationship; she must go through the pain. Peter is denied his masks and must whittle down the excess, the unhealthy parts of himself till only the useful building blocks of the man remain. They must then approach each join each other, which is itself an ideal, in harsh reality.

Peter's only moments of seemingly superhuman character are the moments when he denies Harriet and himself the traditional foundation stone of the husband and wife relationship: sacrifice.

I have nothing much in the way of religion, or even morality, but I do recognize a code of behavior of sorts. I do know that the worst sin--perhaps the only sin--passion can commit, is to be joyless. It must lie down with laughter or make its bed in hell—there is no middle way.... Don't misunderstand me. I have bought it, often—but, never by forced sale or at 'stupendous sacrifice'... Don't for God's

sake, ever think you owe me anything. If I can't have the real thing, I can make do with the imitation. But I will not have surrenders or crucifixions" (*Gaudy* 452-3).

Sayers is writing about two conflicted figures, but she is not interested in dramatic scenes. The morality is not of chastity, religious observance, or thoughtless tradition, but of wholeness. As the Trinity causes art to be created from all sides and the fully educated human can understand the modern world, so too must any relationship that exists in her Platonic form encompass all and then build from what is useful. When Peter offers to run away from a case to spare Harriet seeing him as the hangman, she refuses:

'Peter, you're mad. Never dare to suggest such a thing. Whatever marriage is, it isn't that.'

'Isn't what, Harriet?'

'Letting your affection corrupt your judgment. What kind of life could we have if I knew that you had become less than yourself by marrying me?'

'He turned away again, and when he spoke, it was in a queerly shaken tone... He was silent for a moment, leaning back against the chimneybreast. Then he said, with a lightness that betrayed him: 'Harriet, you have no sense of dramatic values. Do you mean to say we are to play out our domestic comedy without the great bedroom scene?'

'Certainly. We'll have nothing so vulgar'" (*Busman's* 308).

Dead bodies are fine, but the person must remain whole in a society whose guise has been ripped off. Harriet plays to the stereotype of a Lord's wife: the stiff upper lip and sophistication during trials, but as a lower class woman she is actually appealing to the ideal rather than to the reality: We shall not rip each other apart. She admits the principle is a mad one, but by like all madness must be worked out as a delicate balance between the idea and the reality. They are fighting for, as Sayers called it earlier, the integrity of the mind because they have lost the integrity of the world already. Harriet, specifically, has come full cycle: from jaded practicality to living as a mystic with your ideal and your experiences to guide you.

### **The Hangman's Hands and the Precarious Balance**

I have not made a large enough point of the love language practiced by Harriet and Peter. From the moment of their meeting, all of literature, philosophy, and history are pillaged to supply their words in conversation, be it causal or exhaustingly emotional. Early in both the book and the play *Busman's Honeymoon*, Peter and Harriet attempt to explain their relationship with little result. Sayers channels the dramatic dialogue of Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward to evoke the imagery of the witty, warring couples who stood as examples of modern marriage's impossibility. Harriet and Peter are fully aware of their own ridiculousness, of the sheer impossibility of their relationship according to their times. Peter considers their dynamic as being "Like champagne. Almost like being in love. But I don't think it could be that, do you? ... I thought not. Because after all, we are married. Or aren't we? One can't be married *and* in love. Not with the same person, I mean. It isn't done" (289). Harriet teases him as the wife in a Coward play should, reminding him of his position and the dire circumstances of their world and current murder investigation, but Peter holds fast, "That's just it. I want the luxury of a hopeless passion" (290). To be in love is to indulge, not to procreate or survive. And like all luxuries in the World Wars era, it had to be rationed and protected. Sayers give her lovers this protection in the form of a love language based upon quoting the literature of the greats. It is all too clear her lovers have both graduated with firsts from Oxford. This is deliberate: Peter and Harriet are not Peter and Harriet, but two jagged halves of Britain's

psyche forming a union and they must use their education as a basis for communication through and defense against the bleakness that surrounds them.

As Peter and Harriet continue the domestic scene described above, Peter begins dramatic calisthenics to express himself. Movement without roots fails, however, leaving Sayers an opening to explain her use of referential language:

‘Think of it—laugh at it—a well-fed, well-groomed, well-off Englishman of forty-five in a boiled shirt and an eyeglass going down on his knees to his wife—to his own wife, which makes it so much funnier—and saying to her—and saying— ’  
 ‘Tell me, Peter.’  
 ‘I can’t I daren’t’ (293).

Peter daren’t attempt to cross the bridge of unspeakable, as at the end of *Gaudy Night* when Harriet cannot find the words to accept his marriage proposal and thus must refer to the Latin used in the Oxford graduation ceremony, “Placetne, magistra?” “Placet” (501). The ancient words and their heavy connotations give a sense of solidness when the oft-used phrase “I love you” or the flimsy ritual of marriage cannot bear the weight of a doubtful world. Classic and traditional quotes contain the essential elements of pain and pleasure that constitute language. This is a language of strength and fullness, a language thought to be as lost as the bodies of young men in France.

The discussion of language in *Busman’s Honeymoon* continues after Peter demurs,

She lifted his head between her hands, and what she saw in his face stopped her heart.  
 ‘Oh, my dear, don’t... Not all that.... It’s terrifying to be so happy.’  
 ‘Ah, no, it’s not,’ he said quickly, taking courage from her fear.  
 ‘All other things to their destruction draw,  
 Only our love hath no decay ;  
 This no to-morrow hath, nor yesterday ;

*Running it never runs from us away,  
But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day.'*  
 'Peter—'  
 He shook his head, vexed at his own impotence.  
 'How can *I* find words? Poets have taken them all, and let me with nothing to say  
 or do'  
 'Except to teach me for the first time what they meant.'  
 He found that hard to believe" (293).

The quotation is from John Donne's "The Anniversaries", significantly it is one of the few poems composed after his conversion. Donne too faced a strange new world of death, uncertainty, and doubt and rather than wallowing in purgatory braved hell to continue creating. Sayers' use of borrowed language affirms her ethical and faith stance: poetry has given us the necessary tools; it is now time to create what they meant. It is difficult to believe, for Peter and for her readers, but the cycle of history will continue and it is possible to shape its design.

This brings us back to both our question of the chapter: how can something as mystical and idealistic as a love marriage persist in the modernist mind, and the larger question of living hopefully in the modern world. In the most minutia of communication, Peter and Harriet use the tools Sayers claims provide a productive future beyond the absorbing uncertainty. Allison Freedman's investigation of Peter's psyche continues through his busman's honeymoon with Harriet. The novel and the play by that title take place directly after the wedding of Peter and Harriet and "is a strikingly demystified account of a honeymoon and tentative beginnings of a marriage, moments of panic and awkwardness, a dissonant attempt to fit two separate lives together" (382). As Sayers did not allow Peter and Harriet to hide their aspects from one another in *Gaudy Night*, truly it can be said that in *Busman's Honeymoon* here there be monsters of the modernist kind.

“The couple’s first night in bed together is interrupted by Peter Wimsey’s nightmares of war” (Freedman 382) and the nightmares of war are the essence of what both drives Peter onward and the evidence of the madness that blindly following the ideals Britain led the country:

There was something I had forgotten—to do or tell somebody—but I couldn’t stop, because of the chain... Our mouths were full of sand, and there were flies and things... We were in dark blue uniforms, and we had to go on... When I looked down, I saw the bones of my own feet, and they were black, because we’d been hanged in chains a long time ago and were beginning to come to pieces... And it was all my fault, because I’d forgotten—whatever it was.... Oh, it was only the old responsibility-dream, and a mild one at that. The funny thing is that I know there is something I’ve forgotten (*Busman’s* 327).

Of course what Peter has forgotten is the clue to solve the mystery, but as his dream reveals, his actions have harsh consequences. Examining consequences is how Sayers lightly explains writing another book after *Gaudy Night* in her dedication of *Busman’s Honeymoon*:

“It has been said, by myself and others, that a love interest is only an intrusion upon a detective story. But to the characters involved, the detective- interest might well seem an irritating intrusion upon their love-story. This book deals with such a situation. It also provides some sort of answer to many kindly inquiries as to how Lord Peter and his Harriet solved their matrimonial problem” (i).

That is Sayers primary interest in *Busman’s Honeymoon*: the consequences of ideal. How can this possibly work? What happens after wedding, after the detective solves the case? She discusses it in *Gaudy Night* and she examines the Church’s blindness in *Letters to a Diminished Church*, but it is in *Honeymoon* that she forces her audience, and herself, to see that the thing through.

He spread out his hands as though challenging her to look at them. It seemed strange that they should be the same hands that only last night... Their smooth strength fascinated her. License my roving hands and let them go before, behind, between—His hands, so curiously gentle and experienced... With what sort of

experience? ‘These hangman’s hands,’ he said, watching her. ‘You knew that, though, didn’t you’ (308)?

Harriet does know it, and she refuses an easy out. Theirs is a revolution of standing the test of time and rebuilding from the ashes, not of forgetting.

When Harriet watches Peter in his ancestral home she realizes, with both anxiety and amusement, “I have married England” (*Honeymoon* 420). Peter has lived in a world of ghosts; his ancestors and his fellow soldiers follow him wherever he goes. Harriet’s union with him balances this memory with her own memories of betrayal and the consequences of blind ideals. They make their way forward together, then, not only aware of the potency of their joint history, but of the possibility that it could all go wrong again. Sayers’ lovers do not spare themselves, but they also do not deny themselves. As Harriet’s former Dean writes in the opening letters of *Busman’s Honeymoon*: “There was something rather splendid about the way those two claimed on another, as though nothing and nobody else mattered or even existed; he was the only bridegroom I have ever seen who looked as though he knew exactly what he was doing and meant to do it” (11). They are building from this moment onward, fully aware of how precarious their balance is and how much struggle it shall take to maintain.

But this hard won, delicate balance was created long before this moment. Harriet attempted to write a sonnet about solitary existence midway through *Gaudy Night* and, in Beatrice and Benedick like fashion, Peter completes it by turning it from a “beautiful, big, peaceful humming top” to “a whip-top, and sleeping, as it were, upon compulsion” (361). The way forward, Sayers claims for her characters and her culture, is not to retreat inwardly and defy outward communication, nor to embrace chaos for chaos’s sake, but to

face their world with the knowledge of history at their backs and an ideal to guide their way forward. Harriet analyses the poem, summarizing Peter's desire and their eventual path in marriage: "He did not want to forget, or to be quiet, or to be spared things, or to stay put. All he wanted was some kind of central stability, and he was apparently ready to take anything that came along, so long as it stimulated him to keep that precarious balance" (361).

Sayers quotes Eliot's *The Hollow Man* in Busman's Honeymoon in an epigraph that begins the chapter where Peter awakes from a war nightmare to capture the bleakness of where he has been:

"Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow"

No longer can they hover in the uncertainty, they must whirl into the future with the knowledge that they live in, as Peter quotes from Browning's *In a Balcony* in both the play and the novel version of *Honeymoon*, "the center of the labyrinth! Men have died / Trying to find this place, which we have found" (288). Men have died, but they needn't have died in what modernity termed in vain. There was still a chance to build, to create, to communicate with another human, but it would take a hard won knowledge and, according to Sayers and Eliot, a brutal kind of bravery that could still invest in ideals.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION: PATCHED UP BRITAIN AND IT'S BLEEDING WRITERS

“And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"  
Time to turn back and descend the stair”

– T.S. Eliot, *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*

The fatal metaphor of progress, which means leaving things behind us, has utterly obscured the real idea of growth, which is leaving things inside us.

–G.K. Chesterton, “The Romance of Rhyme”

Having taken a brief moment in Eliot’s career, we look at the longer compilation his work and ask is he really changing from the perfect modernist to an outlandish conservative? Or is the line, especially during the post-war years of mass change and confusion, not so clear and distinct as we have retroactively viewed it to be? If we suppose, then, that there has been an error of over eager categorization, than an entire world opens up for us to explore: What if Sayers work can contribute to the modernist cannon? What does that mean for the remainder of the Oxford-Cambridge oriented authors? What does this mean for our desires for modernism to embody the crisp origins of the post-modern, *avant-garde* school? And, on the opposite side of the coin, what if T.S. Eliot’s later work is not a massive change, but rather in alignment with his “Waste Land” of despair and cyclic history? What if the forms of popular essay, detective fiction, or drama are the perfect vehicle for modernists to work out their pessimism, fears, and tentative hopes? The goal of this project was to see how far these tentative questions can

be pushed in the detailed, interwar, 1930's writings of T.S. Eliot and Dorothy L Sayers, who have been the cult favorite, the canonical hero, and the outcast at various points in their long careers.

Looking at the moment when scholarship first started to define high and low modernism, we can see the seeds of confusion and blindness regarding moments of hope in modernist writing. Clement Greenberg's famous 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" both defines the *avant-garde*'s importance to culture and, due to the heady youth and *hubris* of the essay, reveals the prejudices that have shaped modernist criticism. The essay also, however, states the artistic and scholarly mood of the 1930's: "It becomes difficult to assume anything. All the verities involved by religion, authority, tradition, styles, are thrown into question, and the writer or artist is no longer able to estimate the response of his audience to the symbols and references with which he works" (2). This early article of Greenberg's is based upon the idea of progress and a linear history, one that depends on "historical criticism" to show that society has now reached an impasse and can descend further into commercialism or "preserve whatever living culture we have right now" (10). Greenberg is a cultural separatist: his solution to the murkiness of post-First World War culture is to establish a system of high and low culture (despite the socialism he aspired to). The "philistinism" of Hitler and the mass production of capitalism are his targets, but Greenberg inadvertently blocks all non-conforming literature, art, and acts from the sun of scholarship. His sweeping statement "the net result [of non *avant-garde* art] is always to the detriment of true culture in any case" (6)

entirely ignores much of the great imitational<sup>3</sup> art being created by Sayers, Eliot, and others, directly under the nose of the abstract movement. Rather than developing a hierarchy, Sayers and Eliot endeavored to create a culture of the phoenix, of recreation.

Looking at our current field of criticism, some seventy years after Clement Greenberg first attempted to define his movement against all other arts, the attitude towards mixed and positive literature of the World Wars era continues to be largely negligible. Aside from footnoting her translations and digging through her biography, Sayers literature has been vastly ignored and only Allison Freedman's article has successfully placed Sayers detective fiction in critical reference to her era. In the case of Eliot, very little criticism has been put forth that deals with moments of faith or expectation in his work, preferring to focus on his precursors to post-modernism and his beautiful descriptions of the pain in modern life.

“The reshaping of our view modernism resulting from recent poetry makes it more difficult to speak of a more or less unified poetic modernisms or, as often happened in the past, of Eliot *and* Pound in the same breath, The principle of conflict from which postmodernism was supposed to have issued in the 1950's has now been pushed back to the core of the modernist tradition itself” (Calinescu 299).

While Calinescu is lamenting the lack of unity in discussing modernism, I actually wish to celebrate and encourage it. The time of modernism's composition was not unified, and the work reflects this. The works I have discussed here reflect that the hope of unity was not abandoned. This was not a unity of conformity or of the kind of unity we have now found ourselves with, a unity of apathy and defeat, but a unity of striving. The moment

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<sup>3</sup> “And so he [the artist] turns out to be imitating, not God—and here I use ‘imitate’ in its Aristotelian sense—but the disciplines and processes of art and literature in themselves. This is the genius of the ‘abstract’” (3). In the case of Eliot's tradition and Sayers' creation, imitation of the discipline of art and literature imitates God as we saw in Chapter II and are thus very close to Aristotle's sense of imitation, though not Greenberg's.

you conceptualism something, you fix it. You can't capture change or the dynamic movement of a cultural moment without ceasing its action. This is the issue with theory: you often kill the movement by defining it.

We have forgotten the origins of modernism because we have defined it by our own times. It is the age-old story of writing history from the perspective of the winner: we know the ending, so we have forgotten the middle.

“His [the modern artist] own awareness of the present, seized in its immediacy and irresistible transitoriness, appears as his main source of inspiration and creativity. In this sense it may be said that for the modern artist the past imitates the present far more than the present imitates the past. What we have to deal with here is a major cultural shift from the time-honored aesthetics of permanence, based on a belief in an unchanging and transcendent ideal of beauty, to an aesthetics of transitoriness and immanence, whose central values are change and novelty” (Calinescu 3).

I take issue with the all-encompassing nature of the statement by Calinescu. To be sure, modernists, and those beginning to expect and confront the modern world from the medieval era onward, did realize that permanence was a far more relative idea that perhaps the ancients had thought, but their relativism was expansive rather than limiting. The past and the present imitate each other fruitfully, creating the possibility of a future after the destruction of World War I.

Scholarship's embarrassed struggle with Eliot's embracing of the Anglican High Church religion and the Oxbridge writers of the modernist era have left not only a gap within the field of modernist criticism but an example of confused prejudices that add little to our understanding of the period's texts. The few critics who have considered Eliot and “The Christian Right” (a term that has no place in 1930's England, but buy which is meant the Oxbridge scholars) together have either created an image of prudish aristocrats

who attempt to separate themselves from the masses or a portrait of useless popularists who ignored the beautiful revolution taking place around them. Valentine Cunningham's book *British Writers of the Thirties* leaves much to be desired in her summary of these authors: "The solution to the mass-audience problem sought by Rightist like Eliot and Lewis was retreat into tradition and the cultural citadel of the educated and tasteful few" (296). That the majority of Eliot's essays are arguments for educational reform so that the "cultural citadel" would be available to all members of society seems to have escaped the results of Cunningham's expansive survey. Additionally, the anger voiced by Eliot and other writers about media and popular art<sup>4</sup> was not against mass media's consumption or existence, but that it was being passively ingested without, to paraphrase the words of Dorothy L. Sayers, the critical tools necessary for a complete existence in modern life.

On the other side of the unhelpful argument are scholars like Adam Schwartz, who succinctly voices in "Swords of Honor: The Revival of Orthodox Christianity in Twentieth- Century Britain" the misreading of Eliot and the Oxbridge authors entirely fictitious war of ideals:

For example, although (with the exceptions of Waugh and Eliot) these authors tended to adopt populist stances in defense of the common sense and common things of common people against the scorn and schemes of secularist fellow intellectuals, few shared Chesterton's wholehearted, almost mystical faith in the common people and popular culture. Instead, several (such as Lewis, Sayers, Jones, and Muggeridge) concurrently expressed grave reservations about democracy's potentially leveling effects on culture, the rise of mass society, and

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<sup>4</sup> "British critics were worried by the media's cultivation of 'the standardized' and the 'cheap response', by the way audiences were encouraged into mindless passivity. 'It is a question, wrote T.S. Eliot (in *C*, October 1927), 'of what happens to the minds of the thousands of people who feast their eyes every night, when in a peculiarly passive state, under the hypnotic influence of continuous music, upon film the great majority of which have been confected in the studios of the Hollywood type'" (Cunningham 282).

the potentially pernicious influence of media like tabloid journalism, advertisements, and, later, television (22).

In the traditional critical milieu there is only room for those who remain disgusted by the low, common man, or those that embrace the common man and are fools. Eliot and Sayers' work in particular challenges this through their individual talents to mine the useful aspects from tradition and use them to create a language capable of speaking to modern life, whether highly educated authors or "the common man" speak it.

Speaking the words of the ancients to give voice to the present, Sayers and Eliot created a literature of possibility that was neither blind to the horrors of the past nor bound to wallowing in them indeterminably. This is the cyclic view of history: the knowledge that the world continues and we have encountered both the height of existence and the pain of existence before and will do so again. We do not exist in a downward spiral or a defeated stasis. Eliot and Sayers affirm the cyclical view of history that tunnels through immediate trauma and proposes a world capable of holistic, not exclusive or domineering, existence.

As Gilles Deleuze would say after the next World War, the repetition of human culture is painful, but it is also the solution to our anxiety of what makes excellent art or human worth: "If repetition makes us ill, it also heals us; if it enchains and destroys, it also frees us, testifying in both cases to its 'demonic' power. All cure is a voyage to the bottom of repetition (19). Tradition, rather than being ignored or rewritten, has for Eliot and Sayers, an element of the mystical that the medieval workers of faith once found. They do not idolize tradition itself, but instead take what it has to offer and acknowledge the failings of the rest. Unlike progress, which forgets the past the moment it ceases to be

useful and marches ever onward in blind trajectory, their cycle admits that blood has been spilled and will be spilled again, but that it needn't be spilt out of ignorance.

For Sayers and Eliot, history is certainly irreversible, there is no going back, but past and present are not only comparable but it is necessary to compare them. Tradition is not about imitating those that come before you, but as a poet must know where they come from, so too must a society know itself in order to properly patch its wounds. The historian Williams explains in his *Modernism and the Ideology of History*:

By rejecting theories of progress, the early British literary Modernists abandoned a number of ideas that formed the basis of those theories. What is common to all progressive notions of history is the belief that significant change takes place over time. When Tennyson declared, 'all truth is change' he revealed the basis of his theory of progress. Equally important, progressive change is cumulative; chronologically later periods incorporate the changes (either good or bad) of earlier periods and thus are fundamentally different (either bad or worse). Because change is cumulative, therefore, chronology or the sequence of time provides value in history. Upwards progress hold that 'whatever is later in time is prior in value' ; decadence assumes the reverse—that which is earlier in time is more important. Thus, the place of an occurrence or idea in absolute time is crucial in these views of history. Moreover, because events in the past and present are essentially incomparable. As a result history is fundamentally irreversible. Later time periods are so different from earlier ones that there is no possibility of ever returning to the past" (11).

As Harriet and Peter came together, old England and skeptical British youth, by being fully aware of the precariousness of their balance, the modernism of these two is invested in building a bridge over the chasm of World War I by acknowledging how society got there and the work that goes into such a creation. As Sayers wrote in *Letters to a Diminished Church*, "to be saved, not from danger and suffering, but in danger and suffering.... there can be no end to the manifestation of creative life. Whether the life makes its old body again, or an improved body, or a totally new body, it will and must

create, since that is its true nature” (14). Theirs is a modernism of creation in the midst of doubt and confusion. In a grey world, where faith has been destroyed and western culture’s pillars were built upon sand, Eliot and Sayers reached back to the ancients for decisive and hard bought art.

“A Christian society only becomes acceptable after you have fairly examined the alternatives. We might, of course, merely sink into an apathetic decline: without faith, and therefore without faith in ourselves; without a philosophy of life, either Christian or pagan; and without art... without respect for the needs of the individual soul; the Puritanism of hygienic morality in the interest of efficiency; uniformity of opinion through propaganda, and art only encouraged when it flatters the official doctrine of the time... That prospect involves, at least, discipline, inconvenience and discomfort: but here as hereafter the alternative to hell is purgatory” (Eliot *Christianity* 18-9).

Eliot’s mind, like Sherlock Holmes, seems to have rebelled at the very idea of stagnation. The malaise and accepted indifference that would later follow modernism would appall him far more than the appropriation of his work. Eliot and Sayers did not write to simply pour more words into the void of language, desire, and despair, but would rather live passionately in hell than accept purgatory. As Lord Peter tells the uncertain Harriet, “I do know that the worst sin--perhaps the only sin--passion can commit, is to be joyless” (*Gaudy Night* 453). The depression of Prufrock is not an ideal, but a moment of loss in a greater arc of existence. Phoenix’s do not rise from the ashes of their own destruction and cycle through the gambit of existence, healing and hurting, from murk and uncertainty, but from the experience fire and blood.

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