

Sayers as Practitioner of Language: Work, Creativity, and Education

“[Education at Oxford] ended, I say, there, leaving me, after close on the twenty years’ teaching, unable to read a single Latin author with ease or fluency, unable to write a line of Latin without gross error, unfamiliar with the style and scope of any Latin author, except as I had taken refuge in English translations, and stammering of speech because by this time all three pronunciations were equally alien and uncertain. And this was a thing that never ought to have happened to me, because I was born with the gift of tongues.

“I call this a very lamentable history. Yet there are two things I feel bound to say with all the emphasis I can command. First: if you set aside Classical specialists and the products of those public schools which still cling to the great tradition, I, mute and inglorious as I am, and having forgotten nearly all I ever learned, still know more Latin than most young people with whom I come in contact. Secondly: that if I were asked what, of all the things I was ever taught, has been of the greatest practical use to me, I should have to answer: the Latin Grammar.”

--“The Teaching of Latin: A New Approach” (1952)

“Let us face the facts. A word or a phrase is not, and cannot be, an instrument of precision. Language is sometimes called “organic” – but that again is a metaphor. Let us say that it is one of those instruments which are altered by the mere act of using them. Infinitesimally, it may be, but none the less surely altered. The whole sea changes level for a stone. By every cut you make with a knife, the edge is ever so little thickened and blunted. Every time you sharpen the edge to restore it, the entire bulk of the knife is by ever so little diminished. Every time you boil a kettle on the gas there is a trifling deposit of fur within trifling burning away of metal from without. And so, every time you use a word, however prudently, however precisely, in the mere act of using it you alter its content. You may enlarge or diminish, ennoble or debase, convert or pervert that content, but modify it one way or another you surely will. . . . Every word is an *event*. It is a sensitive point in history, containing in itself the whole of its own past and the seeds of its whole future.”—“Poetry, Language, and Ambiguity” (1954)

Dorothy L. Sayers’s father, an Anglican cleric, began to teach her Latin at an early age. She was educated by her parents and by tutors until fifteen, then she was enrolled at Godolphin Boarding School in Wiltshire, where she excelled as a student, though she had to withdraw early due to illness. Sayers went on to attend Somerville College, the first women’s college at Oxford, and she would earn a First in Modern Languages, though it would not be until 1920 that the college was allowed to grant degrees, which Sayers was awarded at that time. Despite (or perhaps because of) her ability to read French, German, and Italian fluently, Sayers judged her training in Latin as ultimately deficient, and yet still better than no training at all. She saw her education in Latin not only as formative for later language acquisition, but also as preparatory for the structure of language.

There are connections to be made between Sayers’s views of language, quality in work, and creativity, as well as with the doctrine of the Trinity (in particular the categories of experience, expression, and recognition). At the center of her thought, whether it is economic, artistic, or pedagogical, there is a basic recognition that language represents an essential aspect of human freedom and of the mystery of the human person. We cannot treat most human rationality as easily reducible to a positivistic set of procedures and definitions because the singular nature of history, literature, and theology is to address particular events in time and space. All attempts to understand anything of human complexity require analogical language because each is a new experience, a unique occurrence.

Yet as Sayers points out, not only is Christianity committed to affirming the particular changes in history brought about by an increased (or decreased) awareness of Christian truth, that truth is built upon the Eternal. Arguably, her commitment to Christian dogma and her experience as a public writer shaped her ideals for work, art, and education. All of these seek to do justice to the complexities of humans made in the image of God, who are able to learn and make that which is new yet which embodies the everlasting.

“Why Work?” (1942)

1. What does Sayers hold to be the trouble with economic consumption in general and agricultural misuse of resources in particular?
2. How does she think war is related to consumption?
3. What would a new attitude towards work produce in terms of product and producer?
4. What does she hold a Christian understanding of work to entail?
5. What impact would this understanding have on quality?
6. Why should all work be seen as having a potential sacred service to God?
7. How does Sayers seek to address the issue of public consumption and the community?
8. Do you find her proposals workable in the modern economy? [pun intended]

“Towards a Christian Aesthetic” (1944)

1. Why does Sayers stress a distinction between the work of art (with its detailed technique) and an aesthetic (i.e. a philosophy of art and beauty)?
2. What limitations does Sayers find in the Platonic aesthetic?
3. Yet why does she also think there are things to take seriously in Plato (and Aristotle)?
4. What does Christian theology understand more perfectly about the creative process of the artist and the work of art?
5. How does Sayers distinguish the event and the experience of art?
6. Why does she think that the audience must have a recognition that leads to self-understanding?
7. Why does escapist art or excessive sensory appeals undercut this need for self-understanding?
8. What do you find convincing or not convincing about Sayers’s position on art?

“The Lost Tools of Learning” (1947)

1. Upon what grounds does Sayers urge an adaptation of the medieval *trivium*?
2. What problems does she hope to address in students’ use of language and reasoning?
3. What is defective about the current stress on early introduction of subjects in elementary education?
4. What age range and curriculum does Sayers propose for the Grammar/Poll-Pert stage and why?
5. Likewise, what age range and curriculum does she propose for the Pert/Logic stage and why?
6. Why does she suggest that the Poetic/Rhetoric stage is a bit harder to pin down?
7. Why does she see pedagogical reform as a civilizational issue?
8. Why do you think this essay from the 1940s has become the Magna Carta of the classical school and classical homeschool movements?