TRINITARIAN EDUCATION: MORE INSIGHTS FROM DOROTHY SAYERS

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If someone unfamiliar with Christian classical education asked you to identify a single source that concisely and clearly summarizes its constitutive elements, it is likely that Dorothy Sayers' essay "The Lost Tools of Learning" would be near the top of your list. It might even be the only item on your list. While some among you might be tempted to gainsay or amend portions of this essay, or to simply spell out its limitations, I suspect none of you would deny its widespread influence, to which can be attributed the writing of many books and the founding of many schools.

But my own initial reading of this essay, while helping me greatly to understand and embrace the tenets of classical education, left me with a nagging question that I was not sure how to answer: is classical education substantively and essentially Christian? And if so, how? Aside from noting the long-standing historical usage of the trivium by the Church, Sayers has little to say about this question in her essay. And not being as familiar with the writings of the Patristics and the Schoolmen as I perhaps ought to be (and as undoubtedly some of you are), I could offer no satisfactory answer to this question. But I recently came across another work by Sayers, which—although ostensibly about a completely different topic—can be interpreted in such a way so as to shed some light on this question. The work I am referring to is the book *The Mind of the Maker*. But before I discuss this interpretation, and because I ultimately want the two works to be considered alongside each other, I ought first to briefly summarize them. Let me begin with the "Lost Tools."

THE LOST TOOLS OF LEARNING

In this essay, Sayers, after lamenting a litany of various deformities and dangers into which our fallen Western education system has led us, goes on to describe the essence of classical education as a proposed remedy. Central to her prescription is the core of the classical syllabus known as the *trivium* (meaning the "three ways"): the tripartite progression of grammar, logic, and rhetoric that leads students to a mastery of language, that teaches students how to learn (and thus prepares them for life), that integrates all subjects (as we Moderns understand them), and—as Sayers goes

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to some length to illustrate—that corresponds to the natural developmental stages in children.

These developmental stages and the respective implications they hold for education may be briefly summarized as follows. The youngest of school children are endowed with a great capacity for memorization, and are fascinated and astonished with the newness and strangeness of the world, and should thus be introduced to our culture's vast storehouses of stories, facts, and personalities (from whatever subject) to both whet and satiate this appetite. As children approach middle-school age, however, they change, and are more likely to engage the world in a less passively receptive, more contrarian or combative fashion—to challenge and question and spar with ideas, with their teachers, their parents, and with each other. As Sayers argues, children at this stage should be taught formal logic to both shape and play to this natural tendency. The materials accumulated during the grammar stage can now serve as "grist for the mill" to exercise and further develop the newly acquired logic skills. At the onset of adolescence, students change once again, and begin to seek a unique voice and mode of expression to enable them to engage with and leave their mark on the world. Students at this age should be taught rhetoric, which can integrate facts and formal logic into a form of expression that should be wise, persuasive, and articulate. These are the "lost tools" in a nutshell.

THE MIND OF THE MAKER

On the other hand, *The Mind of the Maker* is a reflexive, exploratory study in Trinitarian theology in which Sayers describes how the creation and reception of a work of fiction dimly but truly images our Three-Personed God. To show this correspondence, Sayers depicts the genesis and life of a novel (the form of fiction writing with which she was most familiar) as having a Trinitarian structure consisting of three clauses: *Idea, Activity,* and *Power*. First, the novel begins with the receipt of the *Idea* for the story—complete in itself and received, as it were, *ex nihilo*, without conscious effort or preparation on the part of the author. Second, the Activity of the work involves bringing the *Idea* of the story into space and time by embodying and clothing it in words via the writing process: imagining, drafting, revising, editing. Sayers argues that the *Activity* always and necessarily proceeds with reference to the *Idea*—otherwise the writer's intuition regarding the rightness or wrongness of a particular word, phrase, sentence, character, and so on, would be illusory. Third, the *Power* of the written story transmits the *Idea* through the *Activity* to impart the significance, meaning, and beauty of the story to the reader. Without the Power, the Idea remains sterile and opaque to the reader, even though he understands all the words on the page.

After defining her terms, Sayers shows the correspondence between the *Idea*, *Activity*, and *Power* of a novel and the Persons of the Trinity. Not surprisingly, Sayers likens the *Idea* of the story to the Father—Unbegotten Creator, Timeless, beholding the end and the beginning of the creation at once; the *Activity* of writing to the Son—the Word and Image of God, Incarnate in space and time, by Whom all things were created and in Whom all things cohere; and the *Power* of the story to the Holy Spirit—the Meaning and Radiance of the love and reciprocal glorification that is continually exchanged between the Father and the Son. But beyond this simple one-for-one correspondence between Persons and clauses, Sayers also notes the indivisibility and the unity of *Idea*, *Activity*, and *Power*: "And these three are one, each equally in itself the whole work, whereof none can exist without [the] other: and

this is the image of the Trinity."[1]

Furthermore, Sayers refines and extends her framework by claiming that a work of fiction either succeeds or fails to the degree that it images a true trinitarian structure, which it would do by rendering proportional and ordinate glory to each of the three clauses/Persons. If the work is not a true image, she argues, it must deviate from it by one or more conscious or unconscious errors—errors that are analogous to various historical Christian heresies—by either over-emphasizing or denying the glory that is due to one or more of the three clauses/Persons. For example, Sayers, with her characteristic incision and wit, criticizes "son-ridden" writers who give too much emphasis to the *Activity* of writing: they are the writers "in whom the immense ingenuity and sensuous loveliness of manner is developed out of all proportion to the tenuity of the ruling idea; their ghosts enjoy a kind of false Pentecost, thrilling and moving the senses but producing no genuine rebirth of the spirit . . . [in their poetry, especially, the] power of unconscious persuasion is lost and the reader's response is diverted by a conscious ecstasy of enigma-hunting, like a pig rooting for truffles."[2] While the scope of Sayers' book is broader than what I have briefly outlined here, this will suffice for our present purposes.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Having now briefly outlined these two works by Dorothy Sayers, I propose that by generalizing from the trinitarian framework described above, the "Lost Tools" and *Mind of the Maker* can be read in complementary conjunction as a more complete exposition of Christian classical education, the latter clarifying and lending additional power and significance to the former. How is this so? In short, classical education is more than just a *trivium*: it is also an image of the Trinity. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote that an image must always derive from something greater than itself, and must represent in some way the greatness from which it derives.[3] By this measure, Dorothy Sayers demonstrated in *Mind of the Maker* how a work of fiction is an image of the Trinity. I want to follow her lead and consider how the *trivium*, like a work of fiction, is also an image of the Trinity. How might this work? Let's consider the three clauses, ways, and Persons together.

Sayers' first clause in a work of fiction is the *Idea*, which corresponds to the Grammar stage of the trivium, and both of these correspond to and derive from the Father. Like their Divine Referent, these two images of the Father deal with origins and beginnings and the naming of things. To make it clearer: what the *Idea* stage of a novel accomplishes in an author, with regard to a specific story, the Grammar stage accomplishes in a young child, with regard to the whole realm of creation. Both comprise a Father-inspired pedagogy of "let there be light." The *Idea* and the Grammar, as images, both reflect the Father, and partake of his glory in a subordinate and derivative way. And so on with the other stages.

The second clause of Sayers' work of fiction is the *Activity*, which corresponds to the Logic of the *trivium*, and both of these correspond to and derive from the Son. Like their Divine Referent, these two images of the Son deal with incarnation and revelation: of making the unseen seen—both to the eye and to the heart. To make it clearer: what the *Activity* stage of a novel accomplishes through an author by embodying the Idea of a story into an ordered and intelligible parade of characters, events, and revelations, the Logic stage accomplishes in a student by bringing the jumble and mass of accumulated facts and figures into order so that right relations among them may be achieved and error may be avoided. Both comprise a Son-inspired pedagogy of "and He saw that it was good."

Finally, the third clause of Sayers' work of fiction is the *Power*, which corresponds to the Rhetoric of the *trivium*, and both of these correspond to and derive from

the Holy Spirit. These two images deal with amplifying and glorifying the right relation between story and text, remembering and thinking, observation and analysis, even as the Holy Spirit amplifies and glorifies the loving relation between Father and Son. To make it clearer: what the *Power* of a work of fiction accomplishes through the kinship and affinity between a tale and its written embodiment to produce the meaning and impact of the written work in the reader, the Rhetoric stage of the *trivium* accomplishes in a student by integrating and enveloping truth and goodness within beauty, such that the hearer is moved and compelled to participate in or partake of that which is beautified. This comprises a Holy Spirit-inspired pedagogy of "be fruitful and multiply," or even of "go ye therefore into all the earth."

Furthermore, as with their Divine Referents, the three ways of the *trivium* must not be disintegrated. Viewed in this way, education will either succeed or fail to the degree that right and ordinate relations among the three ways are preserved. Failures of integration produce educational heresy, of which history readily provides many examples.

And may also these historical heresies of education be described and accounted for within this trinitarian framework of education? I believe they can. These educational heresies can arguably be reduced to two heads. The first educational heresy in the modern West arises from the objectivist, materialist impulse that comes to us from the likes of Bacon, Laplace, Descartes, Darwin, and Marx, and has produced the scientific and technological revolutions and the educational methods informed by them that effectively deny all knowledge that does not lead to man's mastery over nature. In Aristotelian terms, this education fixates on material and efficient causes but denies formal and teleological ones. It is all matter and no meaning, all technique and no telos, and thus it gives inordinate emphasis to the *Activity* or the Son while simultaneously denying both *Idea* and *Power*, Father and Spirit, origin and meaning. It is a Cat-in-the-Hat pedagogy that favors utility and mastery over both truth and beauty, and while it may at times delight or impress, it cannot nourish or impart wisdom. Within the works of our beloved Inklings, we see this error embodied in the likes of Uncle Andrew in the Magician's Nephew, in the National Institute for Coordinated Experiments in That Hideous Strength, as well as in Sauron and Saruman in The Lord of the Rings.

The second educational heresy arises from the subjectivist, post-modernist impulse that comes to us through the writings of Nietzsche (who wrote of the will to power) and Sigmund Freud (who wrote of primary narcissm), and which has been descried and further elaborated by Alasdair MacIntyre (who wrote of emotivism), and Phillip Rieff (who wrote of therapism). It is the education of John Dewey's constructivism, Gaius and Titius's *Green Book* and of "art for art's sake" that puts the locus of meaning and authority within the individual self, and thus denies both the Father and the Son, the *Idea* and the *Activity*. It is a pedagogy of free self-expression without discipline, tradition, or purpose. It is the wholesale rejection of all authority: of inherited craft, form, practice, and meaning. C. S. Lewis rightly and prophetically warned us of the dangers in this form of education in *The Abolition of Man*.

There are certainly other conceivable heresies within this framework, but enumerating them all is not my purpose in this paper (I'm sure Screwtape could tell you if you asked him). Rather, my purpose has been to attempt to provide a more substantive answer to the question of how classical education is Christian. To me the historical, affiliative argument (i.e., Christians have always used some form of classical education, therefore classical education is Christian) is wholly unsatisfactory. I believe the Trinitarian argument is better in that it provides a more complete basis for classical education: not only does the *trivium* provide a practically beneficial set of tools to both children and teachers alike, it also

points beyond itself to bear witness to its origins in God Himself. Furthermore, classical educators often speak of things in terms of truth, goodness, and beauty. The "Lost Tools" essay advocates for classical education on the basis of only its truth and goodness. Sayers claims that the *trivium* is true (i.e., that it possesses some correspondence with reality) on the grounds that it honors the developmental progression of all children. Sayers claims that the *trivium* is good on the grounds that it makes men free by helping them avoid the errors by which they can become enslaved or subject to deception, tyranny, or propaganda. But we can now say the *trivium* is beautiful, and is Christian, in that it also bears the radiance, integrity, and proportion of the Trinity from which it derives and to which it refers.

In closing, I don't know that Dorothy Sayers would agree with my usage of her ideas, and I don't claim that any of this is new. For all I know, the things I have mentioned above are precisely the sorts of insights the Early Church Fathers saw in the *trivium* that caused them to adopt it in the first place. But for those of us for whom the answer to this historical question is beyond our ken or ambition, I hope this brief essay will suffice for the more modest purpose for which it was intended.

NOTES:

1. Sayers, Dorothy. L. (1994 / 1941). *The Mind of the Maker.* New York: Continuum Books, p. 28.

2. Ibid., p. 122

3. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1853). "The Statesman's Manual." *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. New York: Harper & Brothers.