

The Orthodoxology of Dorothy L. Sayers

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Within the four-course banquet of Dorothy L. Sayers letters, Barbara Reynolds, the masterful caterer, sneaks in a tantalizing appetizer that has been passed over by revellers at the Sayers feast. The juicy tidbit, appearing in a footnote, is a quotation from a 1944 letter sent to Father Herbert Kelly in which Sayers states,

I have just been reading Dr Jernov's *The Church of the Eastern Christians*, which was so attractive that I almost wanted to rush out and get converted to Orthodoxy immediately.

There seemed to be so many points on which the Eastern attitude to things connected, or at any rate complemented, the Western, and had a warmth and richness of charity and imagination which is lacking in the legalism and formality of the West. Why have we been so ignorant all this time about the Eastern Church? (*Ltrs* 3. 472, nt. 1)

Because Jernov (usually spelled Zernov) was Russian Orthodox, I will argue in this essay that Sayers, even as she asked this question, had long been an Eastern Orthodox Christian--of the Russian variety--without knowing it, that borscht was already part of her intellectual banquet. But first I must digress in order to explain how I arrived at this hyperbolic conclusion.¹

My interest in Russian Orthodoxy developed as I wrote my book, *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers*, the goal of which was to impress non-Christian scholars with Sayers' critical sophistication--not in spite of her Anglo-Catholic convictions but because of them. This was no easy task. When I sent Oxford University Press a

proposal arguing that Sayers needed to be taken more seriously by the academy at large, the press responded that it couldn't publish my book because Sayers wasn't taken seriously enough by the academy at large.

The problem, I think, is as follows. At the height of the so-called "Golden Age" of detective fiction, Dorothy L. Sayers garnered wealth and fame for her whimsical creation, Lord Peter Wimsey. However, somewhat like Lord Peter's relatives who regarded detective work as degrading to an Oxford-educated aristocrat, scholars of Sayers' day regarded detective fiction as demeaning for an Oxford-educated writer. Both Peter and his creator, in the eyes of their peers, had sullied themselves by their endeavors.

In 1936 it got worse. Sayers married off Lord Peter to a mystery-writing commoner and then set aside detective fiction to investigate a different kind of mystery: that of Anglo-Catholic Christianity. This new stage in her career alienated more people than before: Peter Wimsey fans were dismayed at the Lord's disappearance, and, in 1941, religious conservatives were horrified at Sayers' revisionist stagings of their Lord. Meanwhile, the modernist intelligentsia disdained Sayers' theological writings even more than her best-sellers.

In response to this marginalization by the Academy, my book argues that Sayers brilliantly challenged modernist paradigms at their very height, becoming a critical theorist ahead of her time. To substantiate the sophistication of her perspective, I parallel it to the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, who has been celebrated in our own day as among the greatest of the forward-thinking philosophers and literary critics of the twentieth century. However, unlike Sayers, whose outspoken advocacy of Christian dogma rendered in popular terms makes members of the academy uncomfortable, Bakhtin has been appropriated by scholars in many different fields--feminist theory, film, literary criticism, cultural studies, ethics--perhaps because his religious

assumptions were suppressed by Soviet totalitarianism. Born in Russia in 1895, two years after Sayers' birth, Bakhtin was exiled in 1929 for Christian activities. Having thus experienced the autocratic power of Communism--an ideological child of modernism--he became sensitive, like Sayers, to the limitations of modernist discourse. Furthermore, even though we do not have a detailed account of everything Bakhtin believed, his early pre-censored essays have led scholars to agree that his religious assumptions were embedded in Russian Orthodoxy.ⁱⁱ

It is highly unlikely that Sayers or Bakhtin heard of each other, let alone read each other's works. But I discovered that they both read Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), a Russian religious philosopher who was expelled from the Soviet Union seven years before Bakhtin.

Sayers' thoughts turned to Berdyaev in Spring, for some reason. She first alluded to his emphasis on creativity in her address delivered on 4 May 1940, entitled "Creed or Chaos?" (*Creed* 47); in May the next year she recommended Berdyaev in two separate letters as "a damn sight closer to reality than the Human-Perfectibilitarians or the Scientific-Progressives," and as a "Christian leader" who can "interpret world events with depth and insight" (2. 256, 257). Almost exactly a year later (15 May 1942) she cited "the great Russian writer" for his discussion of "personal immortality" (*Ltrs* 2. 362); and five days short of a year after that (10 May 1943) she included him in a reading list for a skeptic, saying Berdyaev's *The Meaning of History* "is one of the world's really great books, and very exciting" (*Ltrs* 2. 406). This must be the book from which Sayer quotes at the start of her Introduction to the published version of *The Man Born to Be King* (1943), in order to emphasize that history "is above all a concrete and not an abstract reality" (she cites only Berdyaev's name; *Man* 1). Though Sayers does not recommend Berdyaev again for five years (at least in her published letters), she refers to him once again as "exciting," this time in May 1948 (*Ltrs* 3. 376).

On both the occasions when Sayers calls Berdyaev exciting, she explains that he is Russian Orthodox. Although her references to Berdyaev's religious tradition are offered in apology for his difficult style, Sayers was clearly aware that the exciting perspectives she recommended were from an Eastern, rather than Western, Christian. As we shall see, this is significant to our understanding of *The Mind of the Maker* (1941), in which Sayers quotes Berdyaev several times, most notably in the epigraph, where she quotes from *The Destiny of Man*. I therefore believe that Berdyaev either planted a seed of Russian Orthodoxy or watered an autochthonous interest in Sayers' soul.ⁱⁱⁱ Her "passionate intellect," however, did not recognize the growing bloom until she read Zernov's book in 1944. It may be no coincidence, then, that she wrote to Father Herbert Kelly about her consequent attraction to Eastern Orthodoxy; for Father Kelly was important in the development of *The Mind of the Maker*.

In 1937, after having read a recently-published version of Sayers' play *The Zeal of Thy House*, Father Kelly wrote an enthusiastic letter to the author, praising, among other things, the Trinitarian theology under-girding the Archangel Michael's closing speech. Though not included in the staged version of the play, Michael's statement describes the threefold "work of creation"--Creative Idea, Creative Energy, and Creative Power--summarizing with, "And these three are one, each equally in itself the whole work, whereof none can exist without other; and this is the image of the Trinity" (*Zeal* 103).

In reply to Father Kelly's enthusiasm for her trinitarian theory of creativity, Sayers briefly outlined how Michael's description related to the "creation" of a book: "(a) The Book as You Think it.... (b) The Book as You Write It.... (c) The Book as You and They Read It" (*Ltrs* 2.45). This outline, written in October 1937, became the seed idea for *The Mind of the Maker* published four years later. In another three years, Sayers was to write Father Kelly her effusive letter about

Zernov and Eastern Orthodoxy.

I am not suggesting that Sayers was conscious of Kelly's connection to both *The Mind of the Maker and Zernov*. The "coincidence" reminds me of the insight that Reynolds gives us in both her biography and volume two of the letters, where she shows how Sayers, when she met Maurice Roy Ridley in 1935 and proclaimed him "the perfect Peter Wimsey," did not remember that she had seen him once before (in 1913) and had subsequently written a friend about falling "head over ears in love with him on the spot" (*Ltrs* 1. 79). Just as Sayers thought she was seeing Ridley for the first time in 1935, unaware of earlier exposure, so she thought she was encountering Eastern Orthodoxy for the first time in 1944, unaware of earlier exposure, mediated, I am suggesting, through the Russian Orthodoxy of Berdyaev. In both instances she was tremendously excited by a "discovery" that was not new to her "subconscious."^{iv}

I would like to suggest several reasons why Zernov's book elicited such a powerful response in Sayers. Published in 1942, *The Church of the Eastern Christians* arose out of a project started in 1928 called "The Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius," the goal of which was to generate "Anglo-Orthodox" harmony (Zernov 91). In the brief book, Zernov discusses the history of the schism between the Eastern and the Western Church, as well as unsuccessful efforts to heal the rift. He outlines the various forms of Eastern Orthodoxy, but, being Russian Orthodox himself, his examples tilt toward that particular expression of the Eastern Church. When Zernov explains how distinctions between the East and the West become manifest in different styles of worship, he emphasizes, as much as possible, the commonalities between Anglicans and Eastern Orthodox Christians. This surely tantalized Sayers's own ecumenical yearnings. In 1941, well after having encountered Berdyaev, she expressed the desire "to formulate a 'Highest Common Factor of Consent'" among various kinds of Christians--both Eastern and Western. She explained

her goals to the editor of *The Catholic Herald*:

What I've usually tried to put before the general public is the body of what I feel able to call "Oecumenical Doctrine"--that is, the content of the Creeds, interpreted in a way that would be acceptable to Roman, Anglican, and (so far as I know anything about them) Greek-Orthodox Christians--leaving out those points on which those bodies differ. (*Ltrs* 2. 309)

By July of 1942, she was meeting with a panel of theologians in Oxford in order to develop an "Oecumenical Penguin": an accessible statement of interdenominational Christian doctrine that might be published, presumably, as a Penguin paperback. The negotiations fell apart, and Sayers later lamented, three years after having read Zernov, that no Eastern Orthodox theologian had been involved in the Oxford conversation. Nevertheless, Sayers still had hopes for the "Oecumenical Penguin" as late as 1947,^v and she probably read Zernov as part of her own education in multiple Christian traditions. Zernov evidently convinced her that the Eastern Church was a key to ecumenical success, for she tells one correspondent in 1948 that quarrels will mar the church "till it shall please God to restore the union of all Apostolic Christendom, and bring back the theological acumen and sensitive charity of the East to temper the legalism of the West" (*Ltrs* 3. 414).

The charity that Sayers savored in Eastern Orthodoxy--at least Zernov's account of it--applied to the issue of divorce. When Sayers' son informed her of the break up of his marriage, she wrote to him,

Sorry you and Jeanne have failed to make a go of it. If the thing is irreparable, I believe it is better to make a complete break and start again. Half-and-half separations are only a misery and a temptation, and I have never been able to accept that rigid view about divorce by which the Western church is (unlike the Eastern) hag-ridden. (*Ltrs* 3. 473)

In *The Church of the Eastern Christians*, Zernov explains that Eastern Orthodoxy considers

marriage as a sacred, unbreakable vow. However, it also recognizes that humans are marked by the Fall, and sin often sullies “the love and unity of the true Christian marriage” (Zernov 49). Therefore, the Eastern Church allows a special service to bless second marriages--even while asserting that first marriages are holier in the sight of God. Sayers, herself married to a divorced man, obviously welcomed this sense of grace in Eastern doctrine.

But Sayers also, as we have seen, appreciated the “many points on which the Eastern attitude to things connected, or at any rate complemented, the Western” (*Ltrs* 3. 472), “Western” referring, of course, to the Catholicism of her own Anglo-Catholic tradition. Both Churches, though committed to the saving grace of the resurrected Christ, do not emphasize “conversion” and “the personal relationship with Jesus” that are so essential to Evangelical Protestantism. Sayers herself did not have a conversion experience, as she states several times in her letters, and she was so wary of Evangelical pietism and religious emotion that she once advised Barbara Reynolds to avoid listening to “people like Billy Graham, because the sight and sound of so much naked emotion would most likely nauseate you” (*Ltrs* 4: 343).

Consonant with both Eastern and Western Orthodoxy, Sayers was also suspicious about the Biblicism of Evangelicals, telling one correspondent, “if anybody implored me ‘in every letter’ to read the Bible and quoted texts at me, I should feel an unregenerate urge to throw the sacred volume straight out of the window! ... The Pharisees, after all, read their Bibles from cover to cover, and were none the better for it” (*Ltrs* 3. 524-25). In contrast, Sayers would have resonated with the Russian Orthodox view of Scripture as described by George Florovsky: “Scripture in its very essence does not lay claim to self-sufficiency. We can say that Scripture is a God-inspired scheme or image (*eikon*) of truth, but not truth itself” (48). Sayers similarly asserted the Bible’s lack of self-sufficiency when she responded to someone who wanted her to “write a

book about the Scriptural sanction for the doctrine of the Trinity.” She challenged her correspondent,

[W]here is your Scriptural authority for the Scriptures themselves? On what texts do you rely for the make-up of the Canon as we have it? Where, for example, does the Lord say that there are to be those four Gospels and no more? or that the *Revelation of Peter* and *The Shepherd of Hermas* are not authoritative--though the first was read in churches as early as the second century, and the second was included in the *Codex Sinaiticus* as late as the fourth century? The doctrine of the Trinity was worked out and formulated in the Church--the same Church that is the authority for the Canon itself. (*Ltrs* 2. 367)

In Sayers’ mind, if the Biblical canon is contingent upon Church history, Christians should study, and work to maintain, the traditions of those who formulated the canon--as do Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians.

However, it is on this very issue of the Trinity that the Eastern and the Western Church differ. According to theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna, the trinitarian metaphysic of the West, as outlined by Augustine in *De Trinitate*, was situated upon the concept of one “substance” in three forms, thus presenting God as “something in and of itself.” In contrast, the trinitarian theology of the East emphasizes that “communion underlies being.” Hence “personhood,” like that of the trinitarian God, implies “someone toward another” (86). To the Russian Orthodox, as Ugolnik notes, “Human beings shed all pretense of autonomy when they are viewed as shaping each other in a kind of ‘co-being.’ Humans are, in effect, reciprocally defined by each other in a model that draws directly on the Trinity” (110).

Repeatedly stating in her 1937 letter to Father Kelly that she did not get her trinitarian ideas from Augustine (*Ltrs* 2. 44, 46, 49), Sayers seems to favor a Russian Orthodox view of

communitarian faith over autonomous spirituality. Zernov summarizes the distinction:

The best introduction to the difference between the two mentalities is provided by the interpretation of the word “body” as universally used by Christians in speaking of the Church. The West follows the Latin use of this word. *Corpus* means in Latin both an organic body and a legally established institution; whilst the East retains the Greek meaning of *Soma*, which can be applied only to living creatures. The Church for them is therefore a living community, but not an institution; it includes the whole cosmos, and the relation of all who belong to it is substantially that of members of the same organism. (53)

Sayers seems to echo Zernov in a 1946 letter, employing the word “corpus” negatively in order to argue for the whole cosmos as part of the Christian body:

The Church is not a corpus of teaching; it is a society of persons, the mystical Body of Christ, living by His life, in mutuality and exchange with Him and with one another, looking forward to the enjoyment of the unveiled presence of God to the restoration of the whole material creation, and to the resurrection of the glorious and holy flesh. (3. 277)

Disurbed by Western reticence about the glorious and holy flesh, Sayers surely valued Zernov’s description of Eastern Orthodoxy: “In the West body and spirit are clearly distinguished, and there is a tendency to set them in opposition to each other; in the Christian East they are treated as interdependent parts of the same creation” (39). This interdependence applies not only to the relation between body and spirit but also to the relationships among Christians within the larger *Soma* of Christ: “In the West the Christian acts, feels, and thinks as an individual In the East, a Christian thinks of himself first of all as a member of one big family of all Christian people” (Zernov 28).

Sayers would have liked this image of “one big family.” In her 1941 address to the Archbishop of York’s Conference at Malvern, she wishes that the Anglican church better demonstrated the “real community of feeling and interest” that can be seen in a family-like company of actors: “I recognize in the theatre all the stigmata of a real and living church” (Church 59, 60). Some of these stigmata she had illustrated two years earlier in a sonnet appended to the published version of *The Devil to Pay* (1939). Entitled “To the Interpreter HARCOURT WILLIAMS,” the poem honors the man who acted Faustus in this play, as well as William of Sens in *The Zeal of Thy House*. Sayers begins the sonnet with images of interdependence, eventually connecting them to relationships within theatre:

Sound without ear is but an airy stirring,
Light without eyes, but an obscure vibration,
Souls’ conference, solitude, and no conferring,
Till it by senses find interpretation;
Gold is not wealth but by the gift and taking,
Speech without mind is only passing vapour;
So is the play, save by the actor’s making,
No play, but dull, deaf, senseless ink and paper.

Either for either made; light, eye; sense, spirit;
Ear, sound; gift, gold; play, actor; speech and knowing,
Become themselves by what themselves inherit
From their sole heirs, receiving and bestowing;
Thus, then, do thou, taking what thou dost give,

Live in these lines, by whom alone they live. (*Poetry* 119)

As Sayers well knew, a play can be created only through the interdependence of equally committed people, a communal enterprise wherein a trinity of writer, actors and director learn from and support each other, all receiving and bestowing in order to embody the most effective drama.

The same, of course, holds true when “the dogma is the drama,” to use Sayers’ famous phrase. In a 1942 talk delivered to the North London Presbyterian Fellowship of Youth, Sayers explained that the Sacrament of Communion is “never *wholly* individual. Each communicant makes and partakes of the sacrifice in the name of the *whole* Church” (Worship 42). Significantly, when this statement was published by *VII* in 1995, Colin Buchanan, a bishop in the Anglican Church, commented in the next issue of *VII* that Sayers’ perspective was not properly Anglican. Perhaps he felt this way because Sayers had developed a view of worship that was more Eastern than Western. Note Ugolnik’s explanation of Russian Orthodox liturgy: “‘I am not here to save myself alone,’ says the worshiper in the liturgy. ‘In allowing God to save me, I cooperate with God in saving others’” (134). This cooperation is highly dramatic in Russian liturgy, with worshipers standing and moving around the sanctuary for the entire service, some sprawling on the floor with arms out-stretched in obeisance to God, others kissing icons, all chanting three times the “thrice-holy hymn”: “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us” (Ugolnik 77). Zernov, in fact, explicitly aligns Eastern Orthodox worship with drama, paralleling it with Greek tragedy:

The Priest represents symbolically our Saviour; the deacon, assisted by the choir, like the Greek chorus, comments on his actions; whilst the congregation, like the devout participants of religious festivals in ancient Greece, identify

themselves with the life of the hero. (36)

Sayers similarly conceived of Christianity in dramatic terms. Not only did she write drama about dogma, asserting that Christian dogma was inherently dramatic, she believed that dogma itself “tends to issue in a ritual drama,” and that “The central drama of Christian worship is the rite of the Mass” (Sacred 24). For her, Mass “is the reenacting upon the stage of the world of the great drama of the Passion--a drama acted in His name by priest and people” (Worship 43). Note Zernov’s similar diction:

The Eastern service takes the form of a corporate dramatic action by which the whole life of Christ is re-enacted by the congregation. The priest, the deacon, and the laity all have their distinct parts to play, and each of these orders of the Church is essential for the proper presentation of this divine drama. The service itself is divided into three ‘acts’, each of which corresponds to a period of the life of Christ (35-6).

For the Russian Orthodox, each player in this divine drama becomes an icon of Christ.

This, of course, leads to the biggest impediment Westerners encounter when they seek to embrace Russian Orthodoxy: the veneration of icons. Zernov may have helped Sayers shake off the shudder Westerners often experience when they witness what looks like idolatry. Russians see, rather than an idol, “an emblem of Incarnation” when they view an icon (Ugolnik 45). Just as God took shape for believers in the form of Christ’s flesh, so the sacred takes shape for Russian believers in the form of Christ and his saints painted on wood. Icons thus participate in the sacred reality to which they refer. Zernov uses the following illustration to make the idea accessible to Westerners:

A piece of rough marble and the statue made from it, though materially identical, are not the same thing; the creative genius of man makes the stone into the vehicle

of a new spiritual power capable of profoundly influencing other persons. If so much can be done by an artist, the prayer of the Church, the action of divine grace, the response of a Saint, can affect the matter even more profoundly and transform an ikon into a source of help and inspiration for those Christians who come into contact with it. (61)

This “sanctification of materiality,” as Ugolnik calls it (45), is consonant with the “Affirmation of Images” that Sayers so loved in Dante (and which is lucidly recounted by Reynolds in *The Passionate Intellect*). For the Russian Orthodox, humans themselves become images affirmed by God. As Ugolnik notes, “Humans ‘image forth’ their Creator, and in that process they become icons of Christ, conveyors of the ‘sacred image’” (78).

I believe it was this intense belief in the “sanctification of materiality”--as endorsed by the Incarnation--which led Sayers to a trinitarian view of creativity. And this is where she parallels her Russian Orthodox contemporary Mikhail Bakhtin, both of whom probably read Berdyaev’s *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (1916). In the early 1920s, Bakhtin wrote *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*, aligning the Author with God and the Author’s created text, or “Hero,” with human creatures. Those familiar with *The Mind of the Maker* will immediately see a parallel with Sayers, who made the alignment much more explicit than Bakhtin.^{vi} For her, the material form of a work of art, like the body of Jesus, is the “Energy” or “Activity” that proceeds from the “Idea” of the Creator-Author, generating “Power,” as does the Holy Spirit, through the response of the beholder-reader. Similar to how she first formulated it in her 1937 letter to Father Kelly, Idea corresponds to a “Book-as-Thought,” Energy to a “Book-as-Written,” and Power to the “Book-as-Read” (*Mind* 122). However, it would do disservice to the complexity of Sayers’ thought to limit her trinitarian aesthetic to such bald terms, for

elsewhere in *The Mind of the Maker* she establishes that Idea, Energy, and Power are interdependent, operating like the Russian Orthodox view of the Godhead: “The Idea, that is, cannot be said to precede the Energy in time, because (so far as that act of creation is concerned) it is the Energy that creates the time-process.... The writer cannot even be conscious of his Idea except by the working of the Energy which formulates it to himself. (*Mind* 40-41). Bakhtin makes a very similar point in *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*: “An author creates, but he sees his own creating only in the object to which he is giving form, that is, he sees only the emerging product of creation and not the inner, psychologically determinate, process of creation” (6). To regard thought as preceding language is to reflect an Arian view of creation, wherein God created the Son. For both Bakhtin and Sayers, the Energy of the Hero is begotten, not made.

With the Incarnation as the basis of their aesthetic, Sayers and Bakhtin regard creativity in humanizing, rather than objectifying, terms. Bakhtin states, “spatial form is not *sensu stricto* the form of a work as an object, but the form of a hero and his world” which is in “relationship” with the Author-Creator (*Author* 89). While, for Bakhtin, the “hero” refers to the product of any creative act, as does the “Energy” in Sayers’ triad, the actual hero of Sayers’ detective fiction might nevertheless--if somewhat whimsically--illustrate Bakhtin’s paradigm.

In her earliest letters which allude to Lord Peter Wimsey, Sayers’ hero seems to be “living his own life,” as Bakhtin puts it. When she writes in 1936 “How I Came to Invent the Character of Lord Peter,” Sayers refers to him as an independent “hero” rather than a literary invention: “My impression is that I was thinking about writing a detective story, and that he walked in, complete with spats, and applied in an airy don’t care-if-I-get-it way for the job of hero” (qtd. in Brabazon 120). She thus mirrors Bakhtin’s sense that “It is this extra-aesthetic reality of the hero that will

enter as a shaped reality into the work produced” (*Author* 199).

The independence of the Hero from the Author reflects the independence God has granted human creation. The Idea of the Author, according to Sayers, “does not desire that the creature’s identity should be merged in his own, nor that his miraculous power should be invoked to wrest the creature from its proper nature” (*Mind* 132). Liapunov’s translation of Bakhtin employs the same word “merge” as a warning against unbalanced authorial activity: “Where the author merges with the hero, the form we get is, indeed, no more than pure expression in the sense of ‘expressive’ aesthetics, i.e., it is the result of the self-activity of the hero in relation to whom we failed to find an exterior position” (*Author* 84).

Both Sayers and Bakhtin therefore regard the author’s relation to the hero as echoing the theological paradox of free will and determinism. For Sayers, the author is

conscious of the same paradoxical need--namely, the complete independence of the creature, combined with its willing co-operation in his purpose in conformity with the law of its nature. In this insistent need he sees the image of the perfect relation of Creator and creature, and perfect reconciliation of divine predestination with free created will. (*Mind* 138)

Bakhtin makes a very similar statement in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*:

this independence and freedom of a character is precisely what is incorporated into the author’s design. This design, as it were, predestines the character for freedom (a relative freedom, of course), and incorporates him as such into the strict and carefully calculated plan of the whole. (13)

Believing Creator God to be inherently relational, both Sayers and Bakhtin see the act of human creativity to be inherently relational as well, allowing for the determinism of the Author to be

inflected by the free will of the Hero.

I would like to close with a final parallel between Sayers and Bakhtin that I only discovered while doing research for this essay: both of them loved cats! Sayers' letters are graced with affectionate references to and cute drawings of her feline friends, and sometimes she even assessed the worthiness of authors based on whether they liked cats (several times to C. S. Lewis, who also loved cats).^{vii} I'm quite sure both Lewis and Bakhtin would have delighted in the analogy Sayers employed in "Creative Mind" to mock the modernist idea that science can get closer to the truth than religion:

The desperate attempts of scientists to reduce language to a kind of algebraic formula in which the same symbol has always the same meaning resemble the process of trying to force a large and obstreperous cat into a small basket. As fast as you tuck in the head, the tail comes out; when you have at length confined the hind legs, the forepaws come out and scratch; and when, after a painful struggle, you shut down the lid, the dismal wailings of the imprisoned animal suggest that some essential dignity in the creature has been violated and a wrong done to it nature. (93)

Sayers recognized that language, like a cat, directs the thought processes of those who attempt to control it for their purposes. Therefore, anything created out of language will also, like the cat, have a mind of its own. This, of course, ties into Sayers' trinitarian aesthetic: just as the fully human Jesus, not being a mere "tool" of Creator God, had a mind of his own, so the "Activity" or "Hero" of a literary work, as expressed in language, has a mind of its own. And, once again, we see Sayers' theory harmonizing with that of Bakhtin, who regarded "the work of art as a living artistic event ... and not as something that has been ... reduced to the bare empirical givenness of a verbal whole" (*Author* 189).

Or perhaps a better way to illustrate Bakhtin's sensibilities is to invoke a practice of the peasantry to which he subscribed. Russian Orthodox peasants would not allow dogs to occupy a space containing icons, but cats they saw as "spiritual and hence acceptable in the presence of an icon" (Ugolnik 162). Though Zernov mentions nothing of cats in *The Church of the Eastern Christians*, I like to think that when Bakhtin and Sayers finally met in heaven, they found that they had more in common than a trinitarian aesthetic reflective of their Incarnated Lord. I enjoy imagining that, just as the young Sayers helped initiate a Mutual Admiration Society among her friends at Somerville College, she has organized, with the help of Bakhtin, a Mutual Veneration Society, which includes Dante, a consummate artist in both their eyes, as well as C. S. Lewis, who argued in *The Problem of Pain* that our cats will be with us in heaven. It is there, I am sure, that Sayers, greeting Dr. Zernov with joy, finally saw fulfilled the Oecumenical Penguin.

Endnotes

ⁱ A briefer form of this essay was presented at the Fourth Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C. S. Lewis and Friends, held March 2004 at Taylor University. The copy that was printed in the “Proceedings” of the conference did not have the benefit of quotations from Zernov. It is unclear whether Sayers used a “J” for his name, or whether Reynolds mistook Dorothy’s handwritten “Z” for a “J”--which would be easy to do. The edition of the book that I read for this essay spells the name “Zernov” and I shall follow that precedent.

ⁱⁱ See Ugolnik 158-73 and Emerson.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sayers explicitly attributes her sense of the *Imago Dei*--the image of God manifest in humans--to Berdyaev’s *The Destiny of Man*, which provides an epigraph for the fifth chapter of *Mind of the Maker*.

^{iv} Reynolds states that Ridley’s “appearance had contributed in [Sayers’] *subconscious* to that of Lord Peter Wimsey” (*Ltrs* 1: 346, nt. 2, emphasis mine). See also Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* (55-57).

^v Giles Watson quotes a letter from 1947 in which Sayers states, “The ‘Oecumenical Penguin’ is not dead, but sleepeth” (27). Watson’s essay, published in *VII*, provides a helpful overview of Sayers’ ecumenical efforts.

^{vi} The remainder of this essay, until the final two paragraphs, is based on passages taken from my book, *Writing Performances*.

^{vii} See Don King’s discussion about Sayers’ cat poems (33-37).