

Women, Work and Wimsey

James Brabazon: *Dorothy L. Sayers*; Charles Scribner's Sons; New York.

by Keith Bower

"I like the Gargoyle best," Dorothy L. Sayers wrote in a poem from her mid-teens. She continues, "... while the parson, full of pride/Spouts at his weary flock inside/The Gargoyle, from his lofty seat/Spouts at the people in the street." The figure was prophetic, for, though she could never have known it at the time, Dorothy L. Sayers would someday find her vocation imitating that architectural fixture. A gargoyle serves a number of purposes, from the mundane to the metaphysical. According to Russell Kirk, who makes a hobby of such *innominati*, their foremost purpose is plumbing: they throw rain off the roofs so as to protect the stone walls from being streaked. They represent the demons excluded from the sacred precincts of the church. Most pertinently, they remind complacent passersby that evil does exist, and that it is grotesque.

Dorothy L. Sayers will be principally remembered for her masterly detective novels, but for her, that was not her true work. Nor was applying her considerable poetic talents to the composition of Guinness advertisements for Benson's, an agency where she once toiled. When Dorothy L. Sayers wrote about work, there was no temptation for her to overrate it, as some of the Distributist writings tend to; she was a realist. Work, for some, is the sweat of the brow ignominiously converted into bullion. But when in the proper relationship with its agent ("the work proclaims the worth of the workman"), work is a transcendent thing.

Work is considered the central point of Dorothy L. Sayers's life in James Brabazon's biographical portrait. "Creativity"

is a better term, sidestepping the morass of economic and sociological clichés with which our age tends to consider the subject. The demysticized perspective of work—in which it functions as part of the labor-capital-profit equation—was abominable to her. As Brabazon writes, Sayers "tarred capitalism and socialism with the same brush" on this account, and she was even willing to support the medieval Church in its hatred of usury, not just because of the biblical injunction but because in seeming to create something (interest) from nothing (money), man was mocking God's creativity.

Her best work of apologetics is an extended analogy entitled *The Mind of the Maker*. Throughout his biography, Brabazon points out how fittingly she assumed the tasks she took up, and this is a prime example. Dogmatic theology is a distant field for any layman, as difficult to popularize as campanology, which she rendered comprehensible to solve the Wimsey mystery of *The Nine Tailors*. In *The Mind of the Maker* Sayers used the creative process of art as a model and neatly transposed the three acts of intuition, energy and enthusiasm into the Trine Godhead, thus making it easy to see how three distinct faculties could emanate from one mind. Her analogy for Purgatory in her *Introductory Papers on Dante* is sweet and irrefutable. There is no evidence of her having sat in at the training sessions for F.J. Sheed's street-corner catechists, but her supreme talent was like theirs: the ability to communicate about realities ranging from the eternal to the evanescent.

It is a temptation of literary biographers to see their subject's life as an extension of one of their themes, and I cannot fault Brabazon for doing this; it is so compelling in this case. From *Gaudy Night* to her commissioned play for the Canterbury Festival, *Zeal to Thy House*, Sayers was struggling to come to grips with her life. She seemingly found an an-

swer with her theory of "the right job." Stemming from her analogy of the Trinity, it's the idea that one's dignity as a human comes from superseding the financial considerations of work, and putting one's energy at the service of intuition and talent instead. C.S. Lewis once argued with her that this theory was simply an excuse for doing what she fancied, with the addition of God's blessing.

One of Sayers's most delightful essays on Christianity is "The Other Six Deadly Sins," wherein she does a marvelous analysis of the state of Gluttony, Avarice, Wrath, Covetousness, Pride, Sloth and Lust (which had stolen center stage) in wartime England. The penultimate offense, Sloth, is considered briefly and principally as that mortal sin which keeps people from thinking clearly. No one could accuse Dorothy L. Sayers of having transgressed in this regard; a mere glance at her bibliography thwarts such a suspicion. Yet, she characterizes "whiffling activity of body" as a dissemblance often fabricated by Sloth to snare souls. Obviously, if it is possible to wrap the facts of anyone's life around the kernel of one masterful vice, this would not be the energumen in Dorothy L. Sayers's soul. Wrath perhaps, but not as long as she was so consistently ill-tempered at the proper evils of her day: pomposity, stupidity, intolerant tolerance (liberalism). And these last two she rightly categorized as sins of Slothfulness, the first against intellect and the second against the spirit.

She was proud by nature, but Pride was no harnessing factor in her life. She fought the good fight against it. Sayers's faithful marriage and submission to the self-important and self-centered Oswald Atherton Fleming exonerates her. If it is possible truly to "die to self" outside of a contemplative order, she came very close to doing it. Yet she was lusty—in her youth at least. The consequences of her lapse into *luxuria* were an illegitimate son, a lifetime of grief and self-conscious doubt. A dreadful hypocrisy consumed

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her: at first she had kept son John Anthony's parentage a secret in order to save face among her colleagues at Benson's Agency. Then, with the unexpected popularity of *Zeal to Thy House*, she became a sought-after advocate of traditional orthodox Anglicanism. Like the perpetual foundling in an Edwardian comedy, the child's discovery by the London papers must have been a grievous fear indeed. She did not want to scandalize her Church with her own Maria Monk saga. The secret was never revealed, even her closest friends never suspected the truth until after her death. No, she paid for her lust with an unimaginable Purgatory on earth.

One of the main reasons for her out-of-wedlock child was her dogmatism about sexuality. She would not tolerate contraceptives. Her long, frustrating relationship with the writer John Cornous resulted in a stalemate over her insistence that any relationship, in or out of marriage, must honor her desire to be a mother and—eventually, at least—a wife. The father of the child was the most unlikely acquaintance possible for her: a semiliterate, fairly handsome, shiftless mechanic. He introduced her to dancing and passion. It was straight out of Tennessee Williams. The upshot of the catastrophe was that she never danced again, and she locked up her feelings permanently after “crying every night for three years.” Her instincts had been right, but, as Brabazon comments, the shortage of men after World War I put many plain women like Dorothy in the same position.

The true sadness of Dorothy L. Sayers's life is revealed at the end of this tender biography. All of her years acting the gargoyle—aiding the Church from the outside, keeping its walls unstreaked by preserving the secret of her one folly—nonwithstanding, she failed at the end. She was not defeated, but dispirited before the one cardinal sin she most constantly warred against: Sloth. In her introduction to Dante's *Purgatory* for the Penguin series, her definition of Cornice

4: Sloth or Accidie (Acedia) reads: “The failure to love any good object in its proper measure, and, especially, to love God actively with all one has and is.” James Brabazon, her fellow worker in the theater, analyzes her life as the story of a woman struggling for purpose, finding it, reluctantly, in her role as one of the great modern apologists of the Church, only to learn that despite the intellect and scholarship she applied to explaining Christ's message, faith demanded something more than even her industriousness could provide.

She was churchwarden of St. Anne's House in Dean Street, Soho, and had devotedly worked to preserve a foothold of the Church in the rundown theater district she had loved so much as a young, starving Oxford graduate. Tirelessly, she had arranged lectures and discussions there with the greatest minds of the day—Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis, T.S. Eliot. She had grown up in a vicarage and knew parish politics, but with all her savvy she couldn't keep the House alive. A new breed of “apologist” was on the scene; they wanted to “take people from where they were,” to downplay the sort of concrete dogma that had once attracted Englishmen. There was a debate one night between Sayers and one of these brilliant Pelegians (as Dorothy might have called him), John Wren-Lewis. What she encountered was the next wave of the Latitudinarian movement. After having spent her life battling outright agnosticism, her defenses were down. It was Maundy Thursday, and, after the debate, which continued on into the vestry, Dorothy wrote Wren-Lewis a seventeen-page letter pouring out her soul, her doubts. She confessed that her strident concern for the “dogmatic pattern” was probably not enough, as we would now say, “to meet the needs of modern man.” She conceded that the Creeds, upon which her Faith predominantly hinged, were left unrevised by future generations solely because of the historical accident of the Great Schism after the Council of Nicea. “It may be that our particular type of in-

tellectual has had his day . . . I think it is very likely that the time has come that we ought to be superseded.” The new foe to her faith was not just another truculent heresy, but a new generation. And, combined with her long-standing doubts about her own spirituality, and the deaths of her husband and Charles Williams, she was an easy mark for Acedia, the sin of the flagging spirit. She died with the third part of Dante's *Commedia* unfinished.

What would her life have been like if she had let the world know about her son, if she had accepted what she felt to be irredeemable disgrace? Harriet Vane, who is as close to an autobiographical character as Sayers gets in her fiction, sheds some light on this. After having her reputation forever tainted in an affair made public by the death of her lover, Harriet is acquitted of the murder by Lord Peter in *Strong Poison* and is portrayed in two more novels painfully weighing the decision to accept Wimsey's proposal of marriage. The scandal only serves to increase the sales of Harriet's novels, which Dorothy must have contemplated in her own case. But with the utter defeat of her pride, Harriet Vane begins to realize in *Gaudy Night* that a higher calling awaits her. Wimsey has glimpsed some Beatrician vision in her and through his persistence she realizes the importance of this “death to self” which has animated Lord Peter, a dapper little Whig with a protruberant nose, to a state of grace.

It was to be seven years before Dorothy L. Sayers discovered Charles Williams's *Figure of Beatrice* and with it the exhilaration of locating the path out of her own dark wood of Sloth, but in *Gaudy Night* Lord Peter, in completing a poem started by Harriet, furnishes the proof that she intuited it all along:

Lay on thy whips, O Love, that we upright,
Poised on the perilous point, in no lax bed,
May sleep, as tension at the verberant core
Of music sleeps; for, if thou spare to smite,
Staggering, we stoop, stooping, fall dumb
and dead,

description of the ideal that has been chosen. Hoffman is content to inform his reader only that his is a liberal vision, the character of which is to be inferred from the vision of a good world that he subsequently describes. He simply assumes that the reader shares this vision, for he makes no effort to convince those who might hold another that the good viewed through his lenses is superior to the ideals offered by others.

One suspects that Hoffman would have a great deal of difficulty attempting to convince others of his vision of the good because he appears incapable of the serious discussion of ideas. He is quick to dismiss any assertions of opposing parties in international disputes as "ideology." His major avoidance of the serious discussion of conflicting ideas is his embrace, early in the text, of Max Weber's notion of an "ethics of responsibility," as opposed to an "ethics of ultimate ends." A realist would acknowledge that an "ethics of responsibility" is possible only if the ultimate goals have already been chosen. One can have a notion of "responsible" (that is, right) conduct only after one has decided what the proper standard of human conduct should be in the given situation. Until these standards have been chosen, or unless one assumes universal agreement to the most vaguely asserted "ideals," one is still lacking an idea of the substance under consideration. The true realist realizes that discussion under such conditions is simply wasted air.

Although a caricature of Hobbes was dismissed early in the text, Hobbes's real problem resurfaces throughout the book. As a founder of modern liberalism, Hobbes knew that the state of nature was not merely a fiction that could be wished away because people do not act consistently in a vicious manner. His influence endures because he expressed, more eloquently than anyone before or since, that, however ardently politicians aspire to establish a good society, their actions will always be governed in a critical sense by those who seek to reduce

human conduct to the beastly. A true ethics of responsibility would begin by recognizing the vicious character of certain "ideals" and conceding the responsibility of politicians to prevent their society from the pursuit of such vicious ends. For Hobbes, the worst fate that could befall man was the violent death that was a constant threat in the state of nature. The responsibility to protect the mere existence of life thus became the primary task of the Leviathan. Given Hoffman's recurrent assertions of the importance of preventing violence and pursuing peaceful change, one can only conclude that he does not understand the extent to which he remains under Hobbes's influence.

The leaders of the Soviet Union reject the Hobbesian view, believing that they have a historical responsibility to establish a socialist international order consistent with the principles of dialectical materialism. For them, life has value only as long as it promotes this "ideal." The role of the gulag in the Soviet Union and the sequence of events demonstrating the desire of the Soviets to impose a socialist order on other societies around the globe indicate the seriousness with which they pursue their vision. The American founders also rejected the Hob-

besian view. Although they recognized that the preservation of life is a precondition to any other achievements in this world, the signers of the Declaration of Independence would have sacrificed their lives, fortunes and sacred honor to preserve their status as a free people. For them, and for the system of government that they instituted, one cannot achieve happiness as a slave.

By rejecting an "ethic of ultimate ends" and eschewing the responsibility to decide whether either of these alternative ethical visions is preferable, Hoffman maintains his links with the relativism that now reigns in the American academy. His inability to choose, on principled grounds, between the vision of the American founders and the vision of the Soviet leaders reflects the paralysis resulting from that relativism. As an intellectual leader among current teachers of international politics, Hoffman is an architect of the strategy of capitulation that is a logical result of this intellectual paralysis. That paralysis is unlikely to be cured until our intellectual elite develops a capacity to discuss differences between disparate sets of ideas in a more serious manner. If nothing else, Hobbes's influence will outlast Hoffman's because he painted a more accurate picture of the results of such intellectual evasions. □

In the Mail

Science and the Quest for Meaning by Donald M. MacKay; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Grand Rapids, Michigan. MacKay argues that there is little reason for a dichotomy between science and faith in two lively lectures.

Christianity & Civilization edited by James B. Jordan; Geneva Divinity School; Tyler, Texas. This collection of essays is subtitled "The Failure of the American Baptist Culture," a topic that is thoroughly examined.

"The Peace Movement and the Soviet Union" by Vladimir Bukovsky; The Orwell Press; New York. Bukovsky shows how Lenin's statement, "As an ultimate objective peace simply means Communist world control," is being manifested in the world.

Tax-Based Incomes Policies: A Cure for Inflation? by Jack Carr, William Scarth and Robert Schuettinger; the Fraser Institute; Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. An insightful analysis of the causes and cures of inflation written in nontechnical language.

Four American Indian Literary Masters by Alan R. Velie; University of Oklahoma Press; Norman, Oklahoma. An introduction to four outstanding contemporary Indian writers—N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko and Gerald Vizenor.

And, dying so, sleep our sweet sleep no more.

Dorothy L. Sayers once wrote that "The first life of any celebrity is nowadays accepted as an interim document," and James Brabazon's biography of her is certainly that. It was written to straighten the record before the "chaff-chewing" experts descended upon her. The biography is an honest, though obviously incomplete account, appearing, with the

author's apologies, before Dorothy had wished one to be written. Her forebodings in this matter were primarily to spare her son and her Church, and to wait until "grief and passion have died down, until emotion can be remembered in tranquility." She needn't have worried about any damage to the Faith, and her son certainly may be proud of his ancestry. This personal and compelling account of her life and work would assuage all her doubts.

Wishing Away Hobbes

Stanley Hoffman: *Duties Beyond Borders: On the Limits and Possibilities of Ethical International Politics*; Syracuse University Press; Syracuse, New York.

by Edward J. Lynch

The study of ethics addresses questions about the ways in which people can live together well. It looks to the exemplars of human conduct and holds out these models as guides for lesser mortals. The conclusion of ethical study is the establishment of principles of right conduct, or, the definition of the good.

The study of international politics commonly addresses other aspects of human behavior. It draws its exemplars from the abyss of human attitudes and usually seeks suitable means of avoiding the worst deeds within the capacity of mankind. Because students of international relations haven't often accurately predicted the depths to which some of their fellow men will sink, their writing tends to involve *post-hoc* descriptions of the forms of conduct that we might like to avoid in the future. Those who write expositions of "the ethics of international politics" must, at some point, deal with the divergent tendencies inherent in their subject. As much as they might prefer to avoid the task, the authors of

the best books attempting to synthesize the studies of ethics and international relations eventually realize that they must come to terms with that prophet of ultimate gloom, Thomas Hobbes. Better than any other thinker, Hobbes described in lurid detail the *summum malum*, that is, the greatest evil of human conduct. He depicted that condition as a state of nature, a war of each against all, where human life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.

Stanley Hoffman has served as a professor of international relations for many years, and he acknowledges the need to confront Hobbes as he commences this series of lectures on the ethics of the international order. Early on, Hoffman assures his reader, "Not at all times are states in a situation of war of all against all," and, "Nor is survival the only goal of states." Having said as much, the author dismisses the sage of Malmesbury and proceeds to preach his own standards of order in the current world.

Professors commonly employ the alibi that they are theorizing as an excuse to abandon the leavening of responsibility that is the focus of serious study. Hoffman repeatedly asserts that he is a "realist" and therefore recognizes the limits of day-to-day politics, constituencies and ideologies that prevent the achievement of his "ideal" world. Nevertheless, he has labeled his discourse a quest for the possibilities of ethical international politics. As a result, his vision of

an ethical world permeates the text.

Hoffman's vision begins with the assertion, "The purpose of moral action in international affairs ought to be to diminish the strain of the antinomies that weigh on the statesman and on the citizen. . . . A morality of self-restraint entails simply taking into account the existence of the moral claims of others." Stated in this fashion, one suspects that what follows will include some guidelines about what constitutes a valid moral claim, that is, a discussion of the ends of politics. But instead of a philosophic discussion of the responsibilities of real politics, the text soon degenerates into vacuous postulating. The author eschews any discussion of the ends toward which moral politics ought to be directed. Hoffman informs his reader that "no philosophy of history provides us once and for all with a tool kit or a destination," and he adds, "At present there are incompatible codes of legitimacy. . . . The only common code . . . is national egoism." In effect, his very premises deny the possibility of philosophy, of a reasoned discussion by which one can decide which code of legitimacy is more valid than others, since it provides higher standards for human conduct and a serious purpose for human existence within an international order. Instead, Hoffman offers empty slogans. We are told that the Israelis should be guaranteed claims to a state in the Middle East, while we should concede the legitimate claims of the Arabs who surround them. He passes over the matter of reconciling these competing claims, i.e. the fact that many of these Arabs believe that their legitimate rights cannot be honored as long as Israel exists. He also assures his reader that hard-and-fast principles are very difficult because the conditions of international politics are so frequently ambiguous. His example of ambiguity is the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the very event that even Jimmy Carter found a clarifying influence on his understanding of the character of Soviet conduct.

A serious ethical study provides some groundwork to guide one toward the

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