

C.S. Lewis and Dorothy L. Sayers

By: Robert L. Withers

In 1954 Dorothy L. Sayers published, *Introductory Papers on Dante*. I am concluding my reading of this volume, as well as nearing the end of *Paradise*, the final volume of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. The edition I'm reading is translated by Dorothy L. Sayers, with the exception of the last section of *Paradise*; Sayers's death left that part incomplete and her friend and colleague Dr. Barbara Reynolds finished the task.

On November 14, 1954, Lewis wrote to Sayers:

Your Introductory Papers have given me a regular feast. They even enlarged my vocabulary...It is a lovely book...P.97 is you at your very best; and how good you can be!

It is a fairly long letter. Lewis shares his thoughts on various sections of the book, and takes gentle issue with one complete chapter. He and Sayers will have a friendly interchange on this chapter, titled *The Comedy of the Comedy*.

I love this letter from Lewis to Sayers for a few reasons. The first is that I love both Lewis and Sayers; they are two friends I've never met, though the fact is that I don't know that either one would find in me compatible friendship material; I'd more likely be the Village Idiot. Because they are two friends I take joy in their correspondence.

Lewis and Sayers admired Charles Williams; Lewis loved him; I don't know that Sayers knew him that well, but he was a major influence on her life for it was Williams that spurred Sayers on her quest to know and translate Dante. So when I read their correspondence I sense the backdrop of Charles Williams.

Lewis corresponded with Sayers as an equal. While Lewis wasn't attracted to Detective Stories, and therefore wasn't drawn to Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, he saw a first-class mind in Sayers and engaged her in the straightforward manner of discussion he was accustomed to within the Inklings. Had Lewis not respected Sayers and not held her in high regard I don't think the tenor of their correspondence would have had both the intellectual sharpness and playful humor that is evident. And this means that they can disagree and do it with respect. This means that critique is part of the relationship, just as with the Inklings. Critique is part of the adventure, part of the discovery, part of the friendship.

I am aware of only one time that one Inkleling took another Inkleling's critique personally and with pain; and that is when Tolkien criticized Lewis's Narnia stories. While it makes sense that there must have been other times of hurt in Inklings' relationships (it is said that Tolkien was hurt at the place Charles Williams took in Lewis's life, for Tolkien felt he was being supplanted), Tolkien's criticism is the only recorded instance of this that I am aware of – keeping in mind that I am no expert.

When Barbara Reynolds wrote her biography of Dorothy L. Sayers she titled it, *The Passionate Intellect*. Reading the correspondence of Lewis and Sayers gives me the joy of seeing two passionate intellects engaged in Jesus Christ.

