

Critical Thinking Conference  
University of Texas—Arlington  
September 24, 1994

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Dorothy L. Sayers's "The Lost Tools of Learning"  
and the Art of Critical Thinking

Dorothy Leigh Sayers (1893-1957) was an English novelist, essayist, playwright, and medieval scholar whose popular reputation rests primarily on a series of highly successful detective novels and mysteries stories beginning with a work entitled *Whose Body?* (1923) and concluding with the novel *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937). On the average, she produced two novels a year for about fifteen years. Sayers received a degree in medieval literature from the University of Oxford in 1915, and was one of the first women to graduate from that university.<sup>1</sup> Sayers was also the only female member of a group of celebrated English writers known as "The Inklings" which included such notables as Charles Williams, J. R. R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, and perhaps most famously C. S. Lewis whose love affair with Joy Gresham Davidman has recently been depicted for us in the film *The Shadowlands* featuring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger. By nature and by preference Sayers was a scholar and expert on the Middle Ages, and her translations of Dante's *Inferno* (1949), *Purgatorio* (1955), and the *Divine Comedy* are some of the finest along with unexcelled notes illuminating the text of the poems.

Having been the daughter of an Anglican parson, at the outbreak of World War II, a marked religious development took place in her writing. At that time she produced

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<sup>1</sup> Sayers herself was an early feminist of sorts (though she had doubts about some aspects of the early forms of feminism) who expressed herself on the subject most poignantly in an essay entitled "Are Women Human?" delivered before a women's society in England in 1938. In this address she spoke these often quoted words: "A woman is just as much an ordinary human being as a man, with the same individual preferences, and with just as much right to the tastes and preferences of an individual." She spoke about work, the home, interests, clothing emphasizing the *human* aspect and priority in each area. She spoke with her trademark acerbic wit: "I am occasionally desired by congenial imbeciles and the editors of magazines to say something about the writing of detective fiction 'from the woman's point of view.' To such demands, one can only say, 'Go away and don't be silly. You might as well ask what is the female angle on an equilateral triangle.'"

works on the moral issues facing her country (*Begin Here*, 1941; *Creed or Chaos?* 1947), and also presented a series of well-received radio plays published under the title *The Man Born to be King* (1942). In *The Mind of the Maker* (1941) she is at her best as a lay apologist for the Christian faith, especially in her expositions of the doctrine of the Trinity. She made no secret of her personal commitment to Christianity, and she has had a lasting influence on Christian thinking in the English-speaking world.

Sayers always wrote with keen intelligence and with a pungent wit. The remarkable breadth of her work as a whole—fiction, criticism, religious drama, aesthetic theory, philosophy of education, theology, and the magnificent Dante translations that climaxed her achievements—all reflect the interests and depth of her mind. For Sayers, Dante’s constant admonition to his readers to ‘Look,’ found embodiment in her own work, and she faithfully practiced what she believed thorough scholarship and solid teaching ought to accomplish, namely to help sincere people see things they might otherwise miss, and to equip them with the ability to think for themselves. She got down to education specifics on how to accomplish this in her magnificent essay entitled “The Lost Tools of Learning,” written for and presented to students attending a vacation course in education at Oxford University in summer of 1947.<sup>1</sup> In this essay she set forth a proposal for a system of education based on the famous medieval liberal arts syllabus consisting of the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the quadrivium of arithmetic, astronomy, music, and geometry. While her proposal may seem utopian—especially in the lamentable educational environment of the 1990s—nevertheless her basic position remains not only provocative, but also valid and it is this: that while so-called literacy rates have risen, people’s understanding and discernment of what they read, hear, speak, and write has plummeted, leaving them a prey to the deceptions of

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in a posthumous volume of her essays entitled *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (London: Gollancz, 1963). More recently this essay has been republished in Rosamond K. Sprague, ed., *A Matter of Eternity: Selections from the Writings of Dorothy Sayers* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975).

language, and to the dictatorship of words. Political propoganda, false advertising, illogical news reporting, and the like render people susceptible to harmful persuasions since they are pitifully unable to separate fact from fiction, and fail miserably in the fine art of boloney detection. Furthermore, people are unable to approach new subjects and areas of study with the confidence and equipment needed to think and learn. In other words, people have lost the capacity to think critically and to learn, and consequently she set forth her proposals for an educational system designed specifically to recover the lost tools of learning in order to remedy this unfortunate situation (1947!). I have found Dorothy Sayers's essay not only personally enriching, but also to be of immense value and use in helping traditional and adult students recognize the place and purpose of liberal arts education, and in launching them on a quest to recover the lost tools of learning with a view to becoming a more competent thinker and learner. I would like to present the salient points of Sayers's essay that are relevant for our purposes today, and make a couple of suggestions for its use in your own study and teaching.

Sayers's essay begins with what we might call some disquieting concerns and questions about the inability of literate people to think, speak, and write well, concerns and questions which are more poignant today than in the late 1940s when she wrote. I quote *in extensio* so that we may feel the power of the problem that she felt compelled to address. She writes:

- Recognizing that in earlier (Tudor) times, students left school for the university at a very young age, she asks, "Are we altogether comfortable about that artificial prolongation of intellectual childhood and adolescence [a concept worth exploring] into the years of physical maturity which is so marked in our day?"
- Has it ever struck you as odd, or unfortunate, that today [1947], when the proportion of literacy throughout Western Europe is higher than it has ever been, people should have become susceptible to the influence of

advertisement and mass propoganda to an extent hitherto unheard of and unimagined? Do you put this down to the mere mechanical fact that the press and radio and so on have made propaganda much easier to distribute over a wide area? Or do you sometimes have an uneasy suspicion that the product of modern educational methods is less good than he or she might be at disentangling fact from opinion and the proven from the plausible?

- Have you ever, in listening to a debate among adult and presumably responsible people, been fretted by the extraordinary inability of the average debater to speak to the question, or to meet and refute the arguments of speakers on the other side?
- Or have you ever pondered upon the extremely high incidence of irrelevant matter which crops up at committee meetings, and upon the very great rarity of persons capable of acting as chairmen of committees? And when you think about this, and think that most of our public affairs are settled by debates and committees, have you ever felt a certain sinking of the heart?
- Have you ever followed a discussion in the newspapers or elsewhere and noticed how frequently writers fail to define the terms they use? Or how often, if one man does define his terms, another will assume in his reply that he was using the terms in precisely the opposite sense to that in which he has already defined them?
- Have you ever been faintly troubled by the amount of slipshod syntax going about? And if so, are you troubled because it is inelegant or because it may lead to dangerous misunderstanding?
- Do you ever find that young people, when they have left school, not only forget most of what they have learned, but forget also, or betray the fact that they have never learned how to tackle a new subject for themselves?

- Are you often bothered by coming across grown-up men and women who seem unable to distinguish between a book that is sound, scholarly, and properly documented, and one that is to any trained eye, very conspicuously none of these things? [Are you bothered by grown-up men and women] who cannot handle a library catalog? [Are you bothered by grown-up men and women] who, when faced with a book of reference, betray a curious inability to extract from the passages relevant to the particular question that interests them?
- Do you often come across people for whom, all their lives, a “subject” remains a “subject,” divided by watertight bulkheads from all other “subjects,” so that they experience very great difficulty in making an immediate connection . . . between such spheres of knowledge as philosophy and economics, or chemistry and art?

All these disquieting concerns and questions that Sayers places before us are designed to cause us to reflect upon the multitudes of people about whom she is speaking, multitudes who have lost, or more likely, never even gained, the tools of learning. She expects us, I think, not only to recognize this deplorable state of affairs, but also to respond to it with a feeling of utter horror and terror is quite likely, especially when we realize that the stability and security of a free society depends so significantly on an educated populace capable of thinking critically and clearly! As a matter of fact, a bit later on in the essay, Sayers sounds the alarm, and speaks directly of her deep concern about the contemporary generation of intellectually *unprepared* young people who are essentially defenseless against the ideologies of the day. She propounds her concern in these urgent words.

For we let our young men and women go out unarmed in a day when armor was never so necessary. By teaching them to read, we have left them at the mercy of the printed word. By the invention of the film and radio, we have made certain

that no aversion to reading shall secure them from the incessant battery of words, words, words. They do not know what they mean; they do not know how to ward them off or blunt their edge or fling them back; *they are a prey to words in their emotions instead of being masters of them in their intellects.* We who were scandalized in 1940 when men were sent to fight armored tanks with rifles, are not scandalized when young men and women are sent into the world to fight mass propaganda with a smattering of “subjects”; and when whole classes and whole nations have been hypnotized by the arts of the spellbinder, we have the impudence to be astonished.

Certainly if this is an accurate description of the state of affairs in the late 1940s, then *a fortiori*, it must surely be even more true today. How many more ideologies are being bantered about today! How much more potent are our high tech communications systems which are deployed to advance these messages! How much more has the educational system declined since Sayers’s day! How much greater concern we should have today!

Sayers continues the argument of her essay by proceeding to make her primary point in the light of the dismal situation she has described. She writes: “Is not the great defect of our education today that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils ‘subjects,’ we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think? They learn everything except the art of learning.” Elsewhere she states it quite bluntly: “We have lost the tools of learning—the axe and the wedge, the hammer and the saw, the chisel and the plane—that were so adaptable to all tasks.” What, then, is to be done?

Sayers makes this daring proposal for the restructuring of education based on the model of the medieval syllabus. She says that it does not matter for whom it was originally designed, but that what matters is the light it throws upon what the men of the Middle Ages believed was the object and the right order of the educative process.

It worked like this. The syllabus was divided into two parts: the Trivium and the Quadrivium. The second part, the Quadrivium, consisted of “subjects”—arithmetic, astronomy, music, geometry. But the most important feature of the syllabus was the composition of the Trivium—grammar, dialectic or logic, and rhetoric—which preceded the Quadrivium and was the preliminary discipline. Sayers presents the genius of this arrangement in these simple words: “The whole of the Trivium was in fact intended to teach the pupil the proper use of the tools of learning before he began to apply them to subjects at all.” So, she continues to explain how the syllabus worked.

First, he learned a language: not just how to order a meal in a foreign language, but the structure of language—any language—and hence language itself—what it was, how it was put together and how it worked. Secondly, he learned how to use language: how to define his terms and make accurate statements, how to construct an argument and how to detect fallacies in argument (his own arguments and other people’s). Dialectic, that is to say, embraced logic and disputation.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, he learned to express himself in language: how to say what he had to say elegantly and persuasively. Any tendency to express himself windily or to use his eloquence so as to make the worse appear the better reason would no doubt be restrained by his previous training in dialectic.

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<sup>1</sup> Sayer sadly notes that the subject of logic is where the 20th century curriculum shows such a sharp divergence from the medieval syllabus. In short, the study of logic has fallen into disrepute in the modern world, and she says that its neglect is the root cause of nearly all those disquieting questions which she noted in the modern intellectual situation. She offers two reasons why logic is demeaned. First is because we have fallen into a habit of supposing that we are conditioned almost entirely by the intuitive and the unconscious. She adds that the best way to ensure the supremacy of the intuitive, the irrational, and the unconscious elements in our make up is to continue to neglect the study of logic. A second reason why logic is spurned is the mistaken belief that logic itself is based on universal assumptions that are either unprovable or tautological. But as she counters, logic is simply the art of arguing correctly. If A, then B. The method is not invalidated by the hypothetical character of A. And as she concludes, the practical utility of formal logic lies not so much in the establishment of positive conclusions as in the prompt detection and exposure of invalid inference.

As Sayers points out, though bits and pieces of the medieval tradition still linger in modern educational practices and procedures, there is still a great difference between the two conceptions which she explains in this manner.

Taken by and large, the great difference of emphasis between the two conceptions holds good: modern education concentrates on teaching subjects, leaving the method of thinking, arguing, and expressing one's conclusions to be picked up by the student as he goes along; medieval education concentrated first on forging and learning to handle the tools of learning, using whatever subject came handy as a piece of material on which to doodle until the use of the tool became sound.

This was the essence of her program. As she puts it, "I am concerned only with the proper training of the mind to encounter and deal with the formidable mass of undigested problems presented to it by the modern world. For the tools of learning are the same in any and every subject; and the person who knows how to use them will, at any age, get the mastery of a new subject in half the time and with a quarter of the effort expended by the person who has not the tools at his command. . . . To have learned and remembered the art of learning makes the approach to every subject an open door." For Sayers, indeed, this is the very purpose of education: to teach men how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction or education fails to do this is spent in vain. So what Sayers does in the rest of her essay is to sketch out a syllabus—a modern Trivium with modifications suited for the 20th century the details of which you may read for yourself.

I have found that this profound treatise has a powerful impact on students. It makes them think about several things. For one, they realize the place and importance of the general studies or liberal arts curriculum that is designed to equip them with the tools of learning, studies which before they had neglected and in some cases despised. Second, they recognize that they either have lost, or never have gained for themselves



the tools of learning. Hence, they see such studies in a new light, and are encouraged to pursue them with new vigor and purpose that unlocks all their other subjects. Third, they recognize how important it is to become a clear and critical thinker, to be able to sift and sort all the information to which they are exposed, to be able to distinguish fact from fiction, and to keep themselves from being duped and led astray.

Obviously I highly recommend Sayers's essay. Read through it thoughtfully yourself several times, and let its message critique your own educational experience and training. Have your students read and study it as well. Use it to challenge them to become critical thinkers, and to develop the tools of learning. Tell them that it is never too late. Finally, I suggest that you share this essay with colleagues and encourage them to read it, study it, and employ it in a variety of educational settings. Its ideas are potent enough to make a real and lasting difference.