

# A Vital Interplay: Heroism and Christian Conscience in the World War II Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers

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*Dorothy L. Sayers's poetry is often overlooked in the body of her writing. While referenced in surveys of Sayers's wartime writing, a fuller analysis reveals the importance of her poems as they embody a unique wrestling with the moral implications of World War II. Building on Barbara Reynolds's discussion of the heroic and Christian in Sayer's wartime writing, Warner analyzes the tension between these two values systems in Sayers's poems "The English War" and "Target Area." Exploring the friction between the nobility to fight and the cost of the conflict animates the stirring images of these poems and paints a fuller picture of the complex currents of Sayers's response to the war.*

DOROTHY L. SAYERS had gained popularity as a mystery writer in the 1930s, but as World War II loomed, her writing took a different course. Sayers herself describes the war as a metaphorical bomb, causing one to ask what they will believe (qtd. in Hone, 96). She harnessed the war's revealing power in her writing, penetrating with her pen in new forms the issues of the hurting world around her. Several scholars surveying Sayers's writing have touched on her treatment of the deep, moral implications of the war. Janice Brown, throughout *The Seven Deadly Sins in the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers*, sees these vivid moral themes pervading Sayers's entire writing career, continuing on long past her detective novels. Taking this one step further, Suzanne Bray in her chapter, "Resisting Theological Error as a Means of Political Salvation," addresses Sayers's World War Two poetry. Interpreting Sayers's poems as a resistance to humanism, Bray claims Sayers saw the cause of the war as a blind faith in humanity that overlooks the presence of original sin (88). These scholars see Sayers mobilizing the war in her writing to explore and test fundamental assumptions about human nature and ethical action.

Barbara Reynolds, biographer and friend of Sayers, similarly describes a consciousness of human sin running through Sayers's wartime writing, yet she perceives this awareness running alongside another perspective and preoccupying theme in Sayer's writing: the romantically heroic. Reynolds interprets Sayers's writing from this period through the lens of two separate, but interconnected strands of thought that weave their way through Sayers' approach to the war: the "Athos" and the "Christian." Athos is a character in *The Three Musketeers*, which Sayers deeply loved as a child. It represents all that is bold, courageous,

noble, resolute, and daring. It takes a romanticized view of war, one that stirs hearts to valorous action, emboldening a nation's spirit and giving it something to fight for. The Christian approach to the war comes from the orthodox Christian worldview Sayers held that recognizes the fallenness of all men and that all are in need of redemption.

Reynolds' contention that Sayers' writing interacts with both romanticized and sober perspectives of the war illuminates the contrast between two of her poems, "The English War" and "Target Area," one written at the start of the war and the other at its end. While both strands are always present in Sayers' writing, her poetry exemplifies the balance shifting by the end of the war to an emphasis on the "Christian" lens, tempering the "Athos." The interplay of these two strands on Sayers's poetry reveal how Sayers wrestled with the morality of war through her writing. When seen as embodying both a romantic and a conscientious perspective, Sayers's poetry, though often overlooked, provides a strong, poignant statement that we should view our personal responsibility when engaged in such a war through both the lens of the nobleness to fight and the cost of the conflict.

"The English War" published in September of 1940 typifies the strand of Sayer's heroic aspirations and ideals about the war that Reynolds describes. It is a charge to rediscover heroism in the necessity of a dire situation. Written for the anniversary of the declaration of war, it celebrates the conflict as awakening a noble, resolute spirit in the English people. It begins with radical boldness:

Praise God, now, for an English war—

The grey tide and the sullen coast,  
The menace of the of the urgent hour,

The single island, like a tower,  
 Ringed with an angry host (1-5).

Sayers' constructs a daring statement by choosing to praise God not only for its dire odds, but for the war itself. "Europe, like a prison door, clangs" in line 20, leaving a resounding, empty echo Sayers crafts by cutting off the word "shut," as England is left alone. Yet, in the poem she asserts that England's dangers beat out a heroism to fight and not a despair, using the metaphor of a sword forged on the anvil of fear in line 40. In "English War," Sayers looks at the panorama of the war around her in the same way she writes about Dunkirk in 1940. She writes, "There are few songs of victory, and no songs of unopposed victory...The most moving war-poems are made about valiant rear-guard actions...It has been our privilege to witness a stranger thing than ever poets sang..." (qtd. in Hone, 114). In expressing this romantically resolute "Athos" strand in "The English War," Sayers suggests that heroic belief was what was needed as England faced her own last stand.

In order to show the potential for rediscovering heroism, Sayers evokes the past. Throughout "The English War," she glorifies past heroism, showing that the same heroism can be taken up by men in the present, concluding: "Send us, O God, the will and power / To do as we have done before; / The men that ride the sea and air / Are the same men their fathers were" (41-45). Her connection to chivalric defenders of old echoes earlier writing. In *Peredur*, an Arthurian poem she wrote in 1912, a young boy hears whispers about his father and brothers and feels a stirring in his heart over the word "knight," causing him to exclaim: "Some heritage within me lies asleep, / Some heritage of my sire" (121-122). Holding this in the back of her imagination, Sayers as a scholar of Medieval romance saw that heroism needed to be reborn in her own day and age. In "The English War," she connects the British people to age-old adventurers fighting against historic enemies, the sole, remaining defense. Reclaiming the valor of the past is now the responsibility of the present. In "The English War," Sayers puts into action what she wrote to Sir Richard Maconachie of the government's propaganda office in July 1940: "Tell us, if you like, that we are gods, heroes, buccaneers, bulwarks of liberty, trustees of the nation...for men become what they themselves believe themselves to be" (qtd. in Hone, 115). With this in mind, Sayers recasts the war through the stirring lens of the heroic in "The English War."

Conforming to a chivalric ideal, "The English War" portrays the fight as a just cause that motivates necessary acts of heroism. The responsibility rests on the character of

the English people to be the sole defenders of a worthy cause. Peace will never be found through the "dreams" of those "who never feel...The kisses of the curtsying guns / Slaving their streets with steel" (54-55). Rather, there is a "noise that breaks our sleep" and a call to the deep—to real action and adventurous risks (28). Similarly, in a sermon Sayers has the character, Mr. Venables, deliver in the "The Whimsey Papers," she writes that the interwar period was "not peace at all but only an armed truce with evil...the time for peace had gone by" (Brown, 251, 252). The diction of "The English War" reflects this understanding: the English must fight against a "tyrant" to keep the seas and skies from being violated, Europe is looking to England for liberty, and "flying death" and "guns slaving streets" threaten their homes (57-60, 14-15, and 52-55). Her concept of heroism it renders is one of moral right, fighting against those who, as Sayers writes, "honestly believe wrong to be right" (qtd. in Colon, 175). Sayers's article, "Is This He That Should Come?," suggests, as Janice Brown writes, "that the war may not be incompatible with the Christian idea of peace... [Jesus] refused to tolerate hypocrisy and injustice in order to maintain a superficial form of peace" (251). Furthermore, in a letter, Sayers writes of a naivety in "supposing we could abolish wars simply by disproving of them" (qtd. in Bray, 90). In this way, her definition of peace was not the mere absence of conflict, but the total setting of things aright, aligning with the chivalric ideal of a noble fight.

However, there is also a Christian sense of personal conscience in "The English War": a need for decency and the presence of "sly jackals round our table, / Cringing for blood-stained scraps" (47, 49), referring to those who set harsh reparations on Germany after the First World War (Bray 91). In identifying the need for perpetual "vigilance" (56), "The English War" demonstrates a belief in the presence of sin that Suzanne Bray points to. However, its tone and content follows more the heroic ideal of the war and Britain's place in it—the English will enact justice and bring peace. In lines like "But, if another tyrant rise, / Then we shall fight again" (59-60) and "And men who love us not, yet look / To us for liberty" (lines 14-15), the English are enacting the right. The poem acknowledges their flaws, but the wording bursts with optimism that they have the opportunity and are there to set things aright.

Spurring on a heroic perception of the war, "The English War" casts a brave, visionary hope in the midst of the dire situation it portrays. To do so, the poem diffuses the anxiety of the time with humor in the beginning epigraph: "What other race on earth, well aware of its danger, isolated to fight, would utter a great sigh of relief

that all had abandoned it, and say to itself: ‘Well, thank goodness for that; now we know where we are?’” Such English humor transitions to a vision for bold heroism that similarly releases the nation from the fear and tension of the war into a call for greater sacrifice, expecting to attain ultimate peace. As she writes in *Begin Here*, her essay on reconstruction after the war, written at its start, “Nobody can wish to minimize the evil wrought by war... but we must not so exaggerate the power of evil as to fall into lethargy and despair” (1). “The English War” displays that Sayers, despite living through the first World War, held belief that a war could potentially shape the character of the current age into something better and spur a greater and truer English identity. It shows optimism for the character the war would produce. In this way, “The English War” mirrors Sayers’s views in *Begin Here*, also written in 1940, where she writes: “War is not a final catastrophe. Like every historical event, war is not an end, but a beginning” (qtd. in Hone, 101). The overall tone of “The English War” is a gutsy daring hope in reviving heroism in contrast to trepidation or horror, expecting it to be the birth of a new beginning for England and her people.

In contrast to “The English War”’s portrayal of the war as heroic, renewing a stalwart nobleness and a hopeful, chivalric ideal of a just motivation to fight, “Target Area”, written at the end of the war, is a poignant expression of a Christian conscience amidst the war. It humanizes the war and its cost, sees the other side with compassion, and takes responsibility for it, acknowledging personal, human sin. Written in 1944, it reflects a deeper immersion in and an understanding of the suffering of the war, revealing a Christian awareness of personal guilt shared by all. Ann Loades comments in “Dorothy L. Sayers: War and Redemption” that, in writing “Target Area”, “imagination gave her eyes to see what mere awareness of the facts would not” (66). By this time, the tides had changed from defense to attack. “Target Area” takes this attack to a personal scale—the bombs are delivered specifically to a single, old woman (Bray, 93). “Did we strike you...?” the poem asks (101). Its images of her possible death are stark: “tossing the soul out through rent ribs or merciful splitting of the skull?” (102-103). As Sayers writes in a letter to Helmut Kuhn in May of 1944:

We have a sort of top compartment of consciousness in which we keep the feelings of exaltation and revenge and the awful thrill of large-scale destruction; and we are very careful to hang there only caricatures of objectionable storm-troopers and Gestapo agents and what I call “bogey-Germans;” we avoid going down

into the basement where we keep the blood and terror and the real people (victims of air raids), because it wouldn’t do right now” (qtd. in Bray, 95).

Sayers counteracts these tendencies in her poem. Through her imaginative working of the images of poetry, Sayers challenges the views of those around her and opens their eyes to see the human consequence behind a simple news report.

While “The English War” treats the theme of justice at a distance, “Target Area” brings it penetratingly near, humanizing the war. Sayers narrates the poem in free verse, remembering her old piano teacher now living in Germany who is in the target area of the bombing. The poem begins with images that cast Fraulein Fehmer as a real person before it relates that Fraulein Fehmer agrees with the Nazi party. It internalizes a sense of human dignity, describing Fraulein Fehmer’s features as made by “the hand of the potter,” portraying this woman as God’s own creation (Bray, 93). Similar to the way she describes Fraulein Fehmer, Sayers reflects in *Begin Here*, her vision for society after the war, on how the “realization broke in upon my infant mind that every other person in the world was an I to himself...how many bitter wrongs have been inflicted on men and women because all of us have taken it for granted and not acted upon that assumption” (qtd. in Colon, 178). She confronts this self-centeredness that causes us to forget the worth of other lives through writing “Target Area.” Furthermore, in *Begin Here*, she relates, “I want to make it quite clear that when I say “Man,” I mean, not a generalized man. I mean you. I mean me. I mean your grocer, Mr. Brown, and my charwomen Mrs. Smith” (qtd. in Colon, 177). “Target Area” is not a charge to fight against a tyrant as in “The English War,” but a recognition of “the despair of the middle classes” (73) in Germany, echoing through images of a grey shawl, who are on the other side and beneath the bombs. Battered by years of the war, Sayers’s tone is quieter and less rhythmic and confident. There is not valor, but heartbreak. In long sentences of free verse, she processes her questions. “Target Area” is not a declaration, but a conversation creating intimacy with the subject. In so doing, she humanizes the war.

Little details in the poem add weight to develop a strong human pathos, awaking the reader to the suffering of war. These details bring Fraulein Fehmer to life: the furniture of the room where Fraulein Fehmer lived, her gray shawl, the details of her face. Sayers’s diction startles with incongruous metaphors and even understatement and thus casts things initially taken for granted in a new, harsh light. Phrases and images recur throughout to develop meaning.

The “jingle of private harmony” in a practice room creating “jangling discord with the private harmonies of its neighbors” (15-16) becomes the “discord of private harmonies” which “must be resolved in the deafening cataract of calamity” of the war (124-125). The exchange of messages in writing and music is contrasted to the bombs “taking messages” in the closing epigraph. Her details imprint strong images and realizations of the trauma of the war.

In so doing, Sayers as narrator does not keep the war at arm’s length from her life. She links herself to these travesties of war in “Target Area” and assumes personal responsibility, aware that she is responsible for the messages sent. Like “English War”’s beginning that sets its tone for noble, stalwart optimism, “Target Area” begins with an epigraph that emphasizes “OUR bombers.” Her country and the common people she rallied to the fight in “English War” are now the ones dropping bombs. There is a great shift: here they are characterized, not as swashbuckling heroic defenders, but as the “grim young men in blue uniforms, / professionally laconic, charting over the inter-com, / the soundings of the channel of death” (1-2). At the end of the poem, Sayers writes, “I have filled the bombs, loaded the bomb-racks, built the planes...” (144) and, by the closing refrain, Sayers substitutes “Chopin and the old School Hall,” Fraulein Fehmer’s old students, for those dropping the bombs. “Target Area” calls Sayers herself, and thus the English people, to take personal responsibility for each act of the war.

With this challenge, however, Sayers never denies the justice of the fight: “Neither of us can stop what is happening now, / nor would if we could” (123-124). “The first to cry ‘Halt!’ utters a cry of defeat, / and makes a breach in the dam, through which the water / floods over the house-tops” (126-128). Sayers asks if Chopin’s piece kindles compassion for Poland, but contrasts the melody to the crashing, cacophonous anger of England as the agent: “Did the old, heartbreaking melody cry to you / Poland’s agony through the crashing anger of England?” (99-100). Contrasting this to the righteous anger forging a sword in “The English War,” here the speaker asks what the anger of England is accomplishing in its cacophony. “Target Area” emphasizes that even the “just” side must be convicted of blood. As the poem concludes, “all men stand convicted of blood / in the High Court, the judge with the accused” (130–131,144). Similarly, Sayers expounds on this sentiment in her broadcast, “The Man of Men,” that humankind is “not really free to do, in his own strength, the good he chooses” (qtd. in Bray, 91). The Christian view of the inherent sin nature of humans will always be present. As “Target Area” concludes,

“The solidarity of mankind is a solidarity in guilt, / and all our virtues stand in need of forgiveness, being deadly” (144). Showing through poetic images the human solidarity between Sayers and Fraulein Fehmer, Sayers tempers the heroic by showing that even fighting for justice has the potential to perpetrate injustice: humans are not capable of attaining justice on their own. Displaying the Christian strand of Sayers’s thought about the war, “Target Area” shows that is not merely the enemy, but the English themselves who are in need of mercy and forgiveness.

While both poems reflect a sense of conscience and justice in fighting, the emphasis of Sayers’s views subtly shift between the writing of the two poems as she wrestles with the tension Reynolds articulates. Her writing softens from the suffering of the war into a more blatant understanding that help must come from outside, beyond human ability. The “Athos” spirit is checked by understanding that “virtues are in need of forgiveness” as well. This shift of emphasis permeates her 1945 play “The Just Vengeance,” which culminates her wartime writing. Barbara Reynold writes that in a personal conversation Sayers described it as her masterpiece. Sayers writes in the play’s introduction that it is about “man’s insufficiency and God’s redemption act, set against the backdrop of the current crisis” (qtd. in Brown, 280). Furthermore, she mirrors the concerns of “Target Area” in the main character’s complaint and confusion:

“...We try to do right  
And someone is hurt—very likely the wrong person:  
And if we do wrong, or even if we do nothing,  
It comes to the same end. We drop a bomb  
And condemn a thousand people to sudden death,  
The guiltless along with the guilty. Or if we refuse  
To drop the bomb, and condemn a thousand people  
To lingering death in a concentration camp...  
We have no choice between killing and not killing”  
(qtd. in Bray, 95).

Here is the conundrum that leads to the atoning crucifixion of Christ. For Sayers, the war revealed the desperate need for that atonement. The image of Eve, crying over both Cain and Abel and calling for “A kind of mercy that is not unjust, / A not unmerciful justice” (qtd. in Loads, 45), perfectly summarizes Sayers’s concerns as she seeks to balance both the justice that calls to fight and the justice defiled in fighting. Seeing the heroic and Christian strains of thought develop in Sayers’s poetry, their interplaying pieces meld into this cry for a just mercy and a merciful justice.

While the call to heroism in “The English War,” the “noise that breaks our sleep” (28), can help recover the spirit and identity of her nation, it cannot exist removed

from the personal reality of human sin. The comparison of these strands of thought in Sayers's poems reveals, on the one hand, a dynamic interplay between the courage to fight and a vision of things worth fighting for, and on the other, the empathy for an enemy and the consideration of one's own fallenness. In exploring these strands, Sayers invites us not into despair, but into an understanding of our own incapacity to balance them ourselves, revealing what she calls a drama of Christian doctrine enfolding around us—"this terrifying drama in which God is the victim and the hero" ("Greatest Drama" 5). Through her writing, she makes the drama of doctrine come to life to transpierce the drama of World War II to its core. The poetry of "The English War" and "Target Area" beckon with a haunting invitation to explore the tension and interplay between heroism and Christian conscience.

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