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*Fantastical Conversations with the Other in the Self: Dorothy L. Sayers  
(1893-1957) and her Peter Wimsey as Animus*

**Characters are the life of literature: they  
are the objects of our curiosity and  
fascination, affection and dislike,  
admiration and condemnation [...].  
Through the power of identification,  
through sympathy and antipathy, they  
become part of how we conceive  
ourselves, a part of who we are.  
(Bennett and Royle 63)**

**I. Reading Sayers with C.G. Jung**

A starting point for this essay was being intrigued by the fascination Sayers's outrageously unrealistic detective hero, Lord Peter Wimsey has for educated, intelligent women who presumably should know better. Such a fascination has a cause and a role, and I wanted to see what that might be, rather than dismiss it out of hand.<sup>1</sup> Sayers was an intelligent and highly-educated woman; she considered her theological work, including the translation of Dante, to be her more important contribution to posterity; yet as so often happens, posterity, at least at present, has decided otherwise. This is not to denigrate the religious work, but only to acknowledge the continuing popularity of Sayers's detective

fiction, in particular the Wimsey novels. It is perhaps by their very frivolity that these novels may reveal more about their psychological underpinnings: as the strong, highly-trained intellect takes a bit of a rest, the fanciful activities of play and imagination allow another side to emerge, and this side is what still intrigues us today.

Sayers was an accomplished deviser of plots; one reason her detective fictions were and are popular is because they are good stories on this basic level. We turn the pages because we want to see what happens. But she always eschewed the mere making of “cross-word puzzles,” (Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, 76) and with few exceptions, her novels and short stories have much material that would be considered extraneous to a hard-core detective plot: they have often been called comedies of manners, and many have noted her avid attention to the topical news and ephemera of her day: at least two monographs have been written using Sayers’s fictions as material for historical studies of the inter-war era (Lewis; MacGregor and Lewis) . She tells of social history and politics: we hear of the difficulties in post-World-War-I Britain as veterans deal with shell-shock and those who had remained on the home front deal with the influx of invalids looking for their jobs back; we look on as the Third Reich is rising in Germany; we experience the birth of frantic consumer culture and fast cars through our insights into the advertising profession; we enjoy the last halcyon days of a dying aristocracy, if in a very tongue-in-cheek manner. Lastly, the novels are astonishingly erudite creations, considering their status as popular fiction: we learn through them the arcane rituals of Oxford University and of bell-ringing, of incunabula

collecting, wine-tasting and trials in the House of Lords; we are cited poetry of the last two millennia in a number of languages, ancient and modern.

Yet, charming as all these aspects of Sayers's novels are, they are not the reason for her sustained popularity.<sup>2</sup> Detective fans do still read her, but often decry the lack of focus on detection. Our nostalgic interest in rural bell-ringing and the inside politics of a London gentlemen's club of the 1930s would still be served by these novels, but that would hardly keep them perpetually in print. If they only served a more serious historical interest, they would likewise still only captivate a small audience. Clever, educated readers who enjoy the sophisticated sonnet-writing, Latin poetry-quoting characters punting on the Cherwell are not what keep Amazon.com in business.

I submit that what keeps Sayers's eleven Wimsey novels<sup>3</sup> in print is the marriage that occurs—finally!—in the last of them, *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937): by this I mean everything leading up to that marriage and following from it, from the birth of the two-dimensional character that was Wimsey in *Whose Body?*(1923), and through his further adventures in subsequent novels; through the creation of Harriet Vane as a sort of stick-figure who likewise takes some time to acquire depth and roundedness; to the sudden (and highly overdue) blossoming of these two characters and their romance in *Gaudy Night* (1935) and its consummation—quite literal—in the last completed Wimsey novel. The fictional union was a problematic one, and not universally liked when *Gaudy Night* was published (“Gaudy Night”, 80). Indeed, Sayers said herself the original intention was to use the romance plot when it appeared in the earlier novel *Strong Poison* in order to marry her famous Lordship off: she was getting fed up with a demanding readership, and

thought to give the more sentimental of them what they wanted before moving on to greener pastures. But she got hooked by her characters and dragged along behind them: they refused to do what she asked, and instead carried on their prim and stagnant affair for another five years until things finally hotted up for them.<sup>4</sup>

When fictional characters refuse to do as their author tells them, then something really interesting is happening. Sayers had struck some sort of pay-dirt: something here really meant something to her in a way that the previous fictions had not. Indeed, she charmingly thematises just this dilemma for the writer—in particular, the women writer—in *Gaudy Night*, as Harriet, too, deals for the first time with the urge to write something that really had meaning for her. This unexpected search for meaning culminates in a happy marriage, though this ending does not represent the bland, extra- or post-narrative “happily ever after” of petty romance fiction: the union is described in *Gaudy Night* as a precarious balance, and we see this precariousness in wobbly action in *Busman’s Honeymoon*. But it is a union of opposites, and there is a satisfied feeling of tensions at last being let go of, of a kind of stillness and contentment when Wimsey asks “*Placetne, magistra?*” [“Does it please you, mistress?”] Harriet answers “*Placet,*” [“It pleases me”] and the warden looks on in dismay as the be-gowned academics kiss shamelessly in public (*Gaudy Night*, 415).

It is this marriage of opposites I wish to look at in this paper. Jung would call it a *hieros gamos* or *conjunctio*: a sacred marriage; it is something bigger than the mere resolution of a plot difficulty in an entertaining fiction, containing as it does symbolical and mythical resonances.<sup>5</sup> These resonances

are what still speak to so many readers—male as well as female (Heilbrun, 326). In Wimsey, Dorothy L. Sayers creates at first a straw figure to carry her plot and sell her novels. As she more and more follows “as her whimsy takes her,”<sup>6</sup> he leads her to new depths in herself as a creative writer. In Jung, this imaginary figure in a woman’s psyche, as manifested in her waking and sleeping dreams and fantasies as well as in her unconscious reactions to lived experience, is called the “animus:” it is the spirit or intellect in a woman, a largely unconscious figure which mediates between her conscious and unconscious, unlocking her creativity. Or more precisely, it *can* be the means of this mediation if the woman is willing to engage with “him.” Classic forms of such engagement include what Jung calls “Active Imagination:” a usually private, conscious fantasising by means of writing, painting, or dancing in dialogue with one’s dream images. Of course, any creative person more or less does this when he or she creates.

What is so important about Sayers’s Wimsey is that we have so few like him: the Western Tradition is full of men with their feminine *anima* figures: the creative muses, inspiring lovers and helpful mothers. But for a woman to publicly, so to speak, give birth to a *positive* animus figure is still newsworthy. It is for this reason that I wish to investigate Sayers in this light.

There are several assumptions being made in this essay: firstly, that though it is true that an author is not her characters, yet they are a part of her “mental furniture” and can therefore be said to be part of her psyche or psychological make-up. This does not mean psychoanalysing the author, but it does allow reference to the biography, which is relevant though perhaps not always of central interest and cannot be used to “explain” the literature.

Secondly, that reader response and reception is both an intellectual as well as emotional enterprise, occurring on conscious, subconscious and even unconscious levels. Things in art resonate within us and this is what gives them their relevance. They have relevance because they alter our own mental, emotional and psychic space (Dimock 1060-1071).

This essay begins with a brief overview of some Jungian terms and concepts before turning first to Sayers's biography and then to her novel, *Gaudy Night*. The essay then ends with a very brief reflection on the uses of Jung in light of some currently more accepted ways of discussing literature in academe. Many questions about gender, essentialism and performance, about identity and the Other, about the ethics of writing and of reading will be thrown up here, though space constraints mean it can only be indicated where such further discussions might lead.

## **II. Jung: Anima and Animus**

In his psychology, C.G. Jung posited the existence within every human psyche of certain recurring structures of thought-feeling that resembled instincts. In other words, we come equipped to confront certain kinds of situations and constellations in life. These in-born structures or primordial images he called the *archetypes*; they can never be observed directly, but only through their effects on the person. Some of these are experiences such as birth, death, separation, and motherhood; others may be better represented by humanoid figures: father, mother, wise old man, trickster, etc. Jung developed these ideas through his work with his patients, his own deep work on himself, and his deep and wide studies in world mythology. He felt this to be based on

empirical evidence—it is a phenomenology, not a theology. Jung does not ask who put these images there in the first place. He speaks of an in-born God-image, but never of God.

A believer in growth and development within an individual willing to engage with the unconscious, Jung thought that it was in particular the contrasexual figure in a person's dream fantasies that is able to provide the necessary link between conscious ego and this unknown, and therefore fearful, realm of the unconscious. Such a link fosters a certain fluidity and aliveness in the individual: not Freud's conquistadorial "where id was, there ego shall be!", this plan instead calls for a flexible interaction with that which is below, outside, and "other" to the ego. Such an engagement allows the best possible fulfilment of a person's truest nature, the way he or she is unique, different from the collective, if also always a part of it. This journey or process is what Jung termed the path of *individuation*. The whole psyche, he thought, naturally tended in this direction, although admittedly most people do not take up the challenge, for the comfort of the collective attitude is difficult to sacrifice. Those who do might be said to best access their own aliveness and creative potential.

Jung thought the contrasexual figure, the *animus* in women and the *anima* in men, could provide this link because it is something within the self which is most opposite to the ego. The psyche is filled with all sorts of figures: masculine, feminine, and animal, as well as the monstrous and the androgynous. Jungian James Hillman compares this menagerie to the pantheons of pagan religions (36-49). But if I am identified with my existence as a woman in my conscious life, then the masculine is what seems most



unlike me, but is nevertheless human. Thus, this is not quite the rejected, negated, and despised, i.e. Freud's *repressed* or his version of the unconscious, for that aspect manifests in Jung's psychology as the *shadow*, not the anima or animus. The animus or anima seems instead an entirely different worldview, something actually biologically distinct: and yet this is within me. Whereas the shadow is what could be "me" in conscious life if I had not rejected it, the animus (or anima in a man) is what could never become "me" or my ego, but which is extant within myself in a more or less unconscious way. As Polly Young-Eisendrath put it:

[T]he animus or anima is a complex of habitual actions, symbol, image and emotion organized around the core of Other or Not-I in regard to excluded aspects of gender identity. (*Hags and Heroes* 31)

Jung, being a man, wrote mostly about the anima, the feminine aspect in the male, though he did give a few indications about the animus.<sup>7</sup> He wrote in a time when gender norms seemed more natural and less constructed than they do to us today, but before critiquing the classical Jungian model, I shall present it in some detail. The focus on the anima will lead to the similar conclusions we can draw about the animus.

For Jung, the anima in the male represents the "soul" or some otherworldly and immortal quality of which he seems to have an innate sense. A man may have a positive or negative relationship to his feminine side, and he also may have a more or less conscious relationship to it (or "her"). It is by

becoming more conscious of the feminine within that the man can “individuate” when, rather than *projecting* these aspects onto real women in his life, he sees that they are active in his own psyche. Jung says:

So long as the anima is unconscious she is always projected, for everything unconscious is projected. The first bearer of the soul-image is always the mother; later it is borne by those women who arouse the man’s feelings, whether in a positive or negative sense. (“Animus and Anima” *Collected Works* vol.7, 197)

Furthermore, Jung claims:

No man is so entirely masculine that he has nothing feminine in him. The fact is, rather, that very masculine men have—carefully guarded and hidden—a very soft emotional life, often incorrectly described as “feminine.” A man counts it a virtue to repress his feminine traits as much as possible, just as a woman, at least until recently, considered it unbecoming to be “mannish.” (“Animus and Anima” 189)

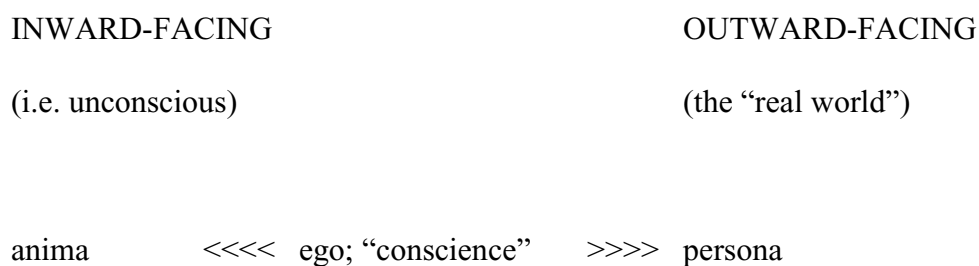
Here we see an interesting admission that it is the identification with one gender role and the repression of the other (i.e. socialization) that causes the problem: manly men repress what they consider to be feminine; they then project these traits unconsciously onto the women around them, perhaps even marrying women who represents all of their own worst so-called “feminine”

tendencies. It is important to stress at this point that Jung is talking here about an *unconscious* relationship between a man and his anima, one that is unfruitful and unsatisfactory; he is not describing how things must be for all time or in every man, by any means.

The outward face of the ego is the persona or mask (again, the *social* role). It is when this persona is too strongly believed in or adhered to that anima-possession occurs:

The persona, the ideal picture of the man as he should be, is inwardly compensated by feminine weakness, and as the individual outwardly plays the strong man, he becomes inwardly the woman, i.e., the anima, for it is the anima that reacts to the persona. (“Animus and Anima” 194-5)

This might be presented as a diagram:



The ego, together with what Jung reluctantly calls the “conscience,” hovers between the outer world of social, lived reality and the inward realm of dream and fantasy. “Conscience” here is not to be understood as the voice of

the moral collective, Freud's super-ego or anything like it: it is the inner voice that seemingly comes from nowhere; it manifests precisely in times when a person feels called *not* to go with the collective attitude but to defy it, inwardly or outwardly. It is ethical, not moral. (C.G. Jung, "A Psychological View of Conscience," *Collected Works* vol. 7, 437-55). What we can now see from the foregoing within Jung's thought is a strong tendency to value the inner and individual experience over the outwardly adaptive, for adapting too much to social roles (the persona or personae) causes illness, or at least inhibits real growth and spiritual or psychological development.

If the anima in the anima-possessed man is whiney and emotional, the animus in the possessed woman, according to Jung, is autocratic and opinionated. She spouts opinions which are unexamined and therefore not really her own; she feels she is always right and will brow-beat any opponents. If the man's inner figure, the anima, is the "soul," or a maternal Eros otherwise neglected in his psychic make-up, the woman's is the animus, or "spirit," i.e. the paternal Logos, a collective voice of opinion and so-called reason. But if related to, and therefore integrated, the animus has just the same potential to lend wholeness to the feminine psyche:

Just as the anima becomes, through integration, the Eros of consciousness, so the animus becomes a Logos; and in the same way that the anima gives relationship and relatedness to a man's consciousness, the animus gives to a woman's consciousness a capacity for reflection, deliberation and self-knowledge. ("The Syzygy" *Collected Works* vol. 9.2, 17)

Such an integration is represented by the *hieros gamos* or the *syzygy*: the union or conjunction of masculine and feminine in one psyche. Such a union—or perhaps it is better described as an opposition held in balance—is known throughout world mythology, whether in the happy endings in marriage of traditional fairy tales or in the (usually incestuous) god-goddess (or man-goddess) pairings of earth and sky or other natural phenomena or attributes. A commonly-known symbolic representation is the Chinese pairing of yin and yang. Indeed, Jung thought it was the Buddhist concept of the Middle Way that is so egregiously lacking in the imbalanced western minds so attached to their ego-ideals.<sup>8</sup>

There is a lot that one can baulk at in Jung's descriptions of the feminine psyche, and it is no wonder that he has not been immune to charges of misogyny. To describe a man's real nature as Logos (reason, rationality) and his inner voice romantically as his "soul" (anima), and conversely assume that a woman is by nature more interested in Eros (connection, love) and that her connection to her "spirit, intellect" (animus) is secondary, and one she needs to be wary of, makes many assumptions about the sexes which we generally do not make any longer. It also apparently assumes women have no soul, a well-worn prejudice, indeed. Of course, the problem is that Jung makes general or universal what were only the expectations of his age—or, to be fair, of ages and ages before him: we have been in the patriarchy since before records began—as indeed Jung himself pointed out in his work on mythology. Yet, paradoxically, it is just this "politically incorrect" concept of the animus

that may become a most useful tool in deconstructing the patriarchal voice within women.

Some modern Jungians and post-Jungians deal with this problem in Jung's thought by discovering animus and anima qualities in both men and women: animus is then illogical opinionatedness, etc. in either gender, and the moodiness or conversely soulfulness are anima qualities in people of both (or all) genders.<sup>9</sup> This policy has some benefits, but this leaves out the very important fact that we all (with vanishingly few exceptions) are born male or female, and grow up in societies, wherever we are, that link expectations to this biological division. Those expectations may vary, but not the fact of their existence. To ignore this separation of humans into two types—in literary analysis, to be sure, but perhaps more importantly, in psychotherapy—is to run the risk of falling into new types of claims of universalism. Surely, it is important to acknowledge that we are always already-gendered beings, if also always already socialized. Thus, perhaps seemingly paradoxically, feminist Jungians (such as Polly Young-Eisendrath, June Singer and Susan Rowland) have been more likely to maintain Jung's idea of the contrasexual aspect in the psyche: they find it gives them a vocabulary they can fruitfully use to describe sexual difference.

If we focus on the distinction between Jung's concepts of *archetype* and *complex*, we may find a way out of this impasse. The archetypes are by definition unknowable, and we can guess about them only by reference to real manifestations in dreams, psychopathology, literature and mythology. An *archetype* may be said to constellate when it has a strongly felt significance to an individual or a group: in other words when someone or some people have a

*complex* related to the archetype. The focus on this actual constellation, the complex, by definition takes account of the particular time and place of its manifestation; moreover, it highlights the fact that the manifestation of the presumed archetype is constructed, not given. Following this train of thought, one might say that the “bad animus” or “animus possession” of a woman is something Jung and others very much did see in the (patriarchal) time and place they lived: *it is the voice of the patriarchy in women*. The difficulty women have faced in finding their “own voice” has long been noted by many and various feminist thinkers; here is an example of it. The loud and strident tones, which Jung confesses so annoy a man (in his opinion) are expressions of a woman’s attempt to be heard, and the impossibility to succeed when the language is always already loaded against her; she is “speaking man” because “speaking woman” has been made impossible (Singer 31). Perhaps it took till Virginia Woolf for a woman to consciously “speak woman” in a publicly effective way, and it took until Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, amongst others, to begin to theorise this adequately in the 1970s and 80s.

Thus, although Jung sometimes uses phraseology which may strike us as essentialist and prescriptive, in fact he acknowledges what Cixous calls “the other bisexuality” (884): (“I want all of me with all of him” [891]) in both men and women. He also shows that gender roles are *performed* more than they are given, though he may not go as far in this direction as Judith Butler later would. In fact, if opinionatedness is exaggeratedly deplored in women, Jung really admits that this is because she has, historically, had to suppress all development of the capacity to form logical opinions in order to fulfil her culture’s ideals of femininity. Moreover, even if some of Jung’s

thoughts about gender differences seem dated to us, they do stem precisely from the same time that Dorothy L. Sayers was writing her fiction (they died within four years of each other): she had to deal with just such prejudices and, like Jung, she breaks out of them. Now we shall turn to the novels see just how.

### **III. Dorothy Leigh Sayers:**

Dorothy L. Sayers was by all accounts “such a strange lady,” as one biography of her is even entitled.<sup>10</sup> She had been largely home-schooled as an only child growing up in a rural vicarage. Her parents and the elderly relations who lived with them supported her sometimes madcap fancies, dressing up and playing roles according to the child’s whimsy. Her intellectual side was also very much furthered: her father taught her Latin from a very young age, for example. Young Dorothy’s role-playing was very much transgender: Reynolds and Brabazon both include in their biographies a picture of her dressed up as Athos, the Musketeer who was long her hero, and another of her dressed and posed as H.P. Allen, her Bach Choir director in Oxford. As a teenager, she wrote letters that sound very much like *billets doux* to her cousin, Ivy. It is true that she was also very fond of flirting with men, but in her early years, this seems much more a matter of absurd pretence than any real attraction. Her oddness lasted a lifetime: Christine Colón says this in an article from 2012: “In a tribute to Dorothy L. Sayers written after her death C.S. Lewis thanked God not only for her ‘delight and instruction, for her militant loyalty as a friend, for courage and honesty’ but also ‘for the richly feminine qualities which showed through a port and manner superficially



masculine and even gleefully ogreish” (156). Many readers assume she was a lesbian or at least unmarried, both of which are untrue: apparently, something of this non-adherence to gender-roles comes though in the fictions. But Sayers did not mix only masculine and feminine qualities: she was also both the life of any party and a formidable intellect; she could both work extremely hard as well as exhibit intense loyalty to her friends; some of her writing was done together with others, yet she has a strong, identifiable authorial voice; as one of the first women at Oxford, she apparently spent more energy on the Bach Choir than her studies—and yet ended up with a First in French; she spent most of her life writing whimsical detective fictions, where she mixed topical references and colloquialisms with high literary style, but her real love was always the spiritual work she returned to in her later years. She is complex.

When she was in her early twenties, Sayers’s emotional life deepened. From the adolescent “pash” the young undergraduate still was able to feel for her choirmaster H.P. Allen came more intense feelings for two men: first for Eric Whelpton and later for John Cournos. The relationship with the latter was particularly painful for Sayers: she felt she had sacrificed much of what made her herself for him and he had walked away. Biographers all see certain parallels with Sayers’s fictional character Harriet Vane’s misguided self-sacrifice for the cad Philip Boyes in *Strong Poison*. On the rebound from Cournos, Sayers had a fling with a motorcyclist and gave birth to his child, whom she had raised secretly by her cousin Ivy, never admitting her relationship to him before she died. She eventually married a war veteran, Mac Fleming, but this was to prove yet another source of intense suffering for

Sayers: Mac was an invalid of the Great War and suffered from shell-shock. Their relationship was generally rocky.

Thus, born with an apparently strong, healthy personality, fostered well by doting parents, Dorothy maintained as an adult a formidable strength of character. Despite great emotional upheavals, she always—except with Cournos—kept her head. This has been interpreted as her strong sense of authenticity and refusal of sentimentality: that is, she considered it important never to pretend to feelings she did not have (Colón 157). Even what must have been an extremely painful time as she gave her infant son to her cousin to raise, and lied to her much-loved parents rather than hurt them (and although she would undoubtedly have gained their financial and moral support), Sayers remained “heroic”—dare I say “manly?” There are countless ways she refused always to play the expected feminine role: she made herself financially independent as soon as she could; she in fact supported her husband; she did not raise her own child.

This is not an attempt to reduce Sayers to a diagnosis, for she is a complex and unique phenomenon. One might, however, notice effect that the accumulation of stress and worry these long years of holding the fort—for her parents, for her unacknowledged child, for her invalid husband—must have had on her. In the sense that she was very outward-facing, dealing with these tribulations through work, money-making and public activities, Sayers might be considered to have dealt in a masculine fashion. She chose work over motherhood. I will not go as far as to call her “animus-possessed,” but I do wonder if the situation was imbalanced to an extent that it eventually needed righting.

#### **IV. Peter Wimsey as Animus**

Into this turmoil, Peter Wimsey was born, a hero who literally rescued Sayers from obscurity and made her a success.<sup>11</sup> The author admits her lord is sheer wishful-thinking: she made Peter rich because she was so poor; she gave him luxuries she could only dream of. A figure of fantasy and plain fun, he also becomes a serious force for her to contend with, on all levels.

In the early novels, Peter is mostly intellect and fine sensibility, hidden at times under the flow of incessant, silly-ass chatter. In subsequent novels and stories we find he has more and more abilities —always superior or even elitist: he plays Bach and Scarlatti on the piano, can identify any wine by the merest sip (and even solves mysteries on this basis); he can drive a car recklessly fast without incident, jump into a tiny fountain from a great height whilst maintaining his disguise as Harlequin, and write a damned good ending to a sonnet; he can decipher any code, write excellent advertising copy, and play whatever role is needed in any sort of society. Sayers's early training co-writing Sexton Blake mysteries<sup>12</sup> is put here to good use: Wimsey is so wonderful that we cannot really take him seriously.

But it is because Peter Wimsey is so far beyond even one's very wildest dreams that Sayers (and we readers) can play with impunity: this is not really meant, it is all for fun. Sayers is no sentimental fool. It is this idealisation with humorous irony that makes Peter Wimsey work for Sayers, and for her readers: we can have our knight-in-shining-armour-cake and eat it too. We know he is not real, so we never need be disappointed. When a (heterosexual) woman dreams up such a man, she is fantasising about all the things she feels

or imagines are missing from her life: the knight in shining armour is what she imagines would round her life out to a happily complete wholeness. Yet to be able to imagine something is to have it already within oneself, and so easily assignable gender roles are already undermined. Sayers is not awaiting rescue by a man, but rather beginning to build up “masculine” inner resources.

Here is one description by Jung of a typical animus which seems relevant to a discussion of Peter Wimsey:

The men who are particularly suited to these projections [of animus-possessed women] are either walking replicas of God himself, who know all about everything, or else they are misunderstood word-addicts, with a vast and windy vocabulary at their command, who translate common or garden reality into the terminology of the sublime. (“Animus and Anima” *CW* vol. 7 207-8)

This is an excellent description of what Wimsey nearly became—but Sayers always had enough distance from her fabrication: Peter is a windbag, but only whenever he is disguising either his boredom or his detective activities. And he is a funny, self-ironic windbag, not a pompous one.

So far this free-play of fantasy is only make-believe, though, and not really fruitful. Emma Jung warns specifically about the dangers of the daydream (as opposed to Active Imagination): it is an escape from reality and not a way of dealing with it (E. Jung 21). Real coping strategies can come about for Sayers only when Peter makes two important steps: first, he needs to

develop a more rounded character, and second, he needs to use this greater skilfulness in human interaction in order to answer back to his author in his own voice. Till then, he is a sham and a caricature, if a highly amusing one.

### **V. Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane: A 1930s Syzygy in the Making**

In *Strong Poison* (1931), when Peter first meets Harriet (presumably in 1929), he is still pretty much the card-board cut-out of the English lord.<sup>13</sup> Though somewhat humanised by having a very likeable (and very hilarious) mother in this, the fifth Wimsey novel, and though he shows some of his weakness in his awkwardness in approaching Harriet, it is no wonder that Sayers could not bring herself to make Harriet say yes to Peter's proposals of marriage, as Peter still seems to expect as matter of right. He flippantly, if cleverly, repeatedly asks for her hand as they sit across each other in a prison visitors' room. The fact that she is threatened with hanging for murder if Peter fails to find evidence to exculpate her within a few short weeks has few or no emotional repercussions for the characters: they still lack the necessary depth.

This rejection is perhaps a first indication that the affair is taking on some importance for the author: her stand-in, if you will, Harriet, can no more pretend to have the "right" emotions than Sayers could in real life. After all the years of toying with this model hero, it turns out that the romantic daydream is not really going to be acceptable to Sayers, after all. What is fascinating is that the author originally invented Harriet in order to marry Peter off and get rid of him: she was getting weary of his tendency to "piffle." In this perhaps unguarded moment, her detective hero instead begins to take on depth, and even his piffle eventually becomes more deeply motivated, as

we shall soon see in the later novels. Once Sayers has introduced the feminine perspective on Wimsey—via-Harriet—into her novels, the plot definitely thickens, from a psychological point of view. It will become a fully-fledged woman's-eye view of the action in the later novelistic output—in *Gaudy Night*, *Busman's Honeymoon* and the manuscript *Thrones, Dominations*. In these later novels, the shift from an objective third-person narrative structure to one mediated by free indirect discourse (via Harriet's point of view) will further interiorise and colour the action, as well as the assessment of Peter.

But this takes time, for not much changes in Peter or Harriet in the next Harriet-and-Peter novel, *Have His Carcase* (1932). The protagonists dance round each other (literally—it takes place at a coastal watering hole) but fail to connect in any meaningful way. Sayers has them show more interest in what there is to drink than in talking about their feelings. Peter then gets a job in advertising (*Murder Must Advertise* 1933), and before this he was solving the bell-tower mystery in the Fens (*The Nine Tailors* 1934), with hardly a reference to the love of his life. When Harriet calls on him for help in the second mysterious case she finds herself in—a poison pen at Oxford rather than a murder case (*Gaudy Night* 1935)—it is some five or six years after they first met in *Strong Poison*.

Now, finally, we are getting somewhere. By allowing Harriet Vane to have some real-life dilemmas (about love and work) and their concomitant emotions, Sayers gives Wimsey something to answer to. A dialogue ensues, as Harriet and Peter thrust and parry. By making the whole plot revolve around women's role in society, their ability to think and act and work, and their supposedly natural ability to nurture and love, of course Sayers gives her

heroine all the tools she can to work this question out in a personal way with Peter. It is not a simple question, and Sayers does not simplify it. Here the dancing between the protagonists is metaphorical: they are bound by love and hate, sexual attraction and the fear of the loss of their freedom. They both have these feelings, not just the woman. Peter, too, can get angry, frustrated and say stupid and unkind things. He finally wins the day when he gives Harriet back what took from her in *Strong Poison*, unwittingly and in all good faith: her life. He saved her from hanging in *Strong Poison*, thus encumbering her with feelings of gratitude which precluded love. Now he has to let her risk her life by baiting the increasingly violent college prankster. He is no longer allowed to play the rescuing knight to her damsel in distress. He gives his shining armour back to the stage props department for good.

In the guise of fiction writing, Sayers is more or less carrying out what Jung would call Active Imagination. In a therapeutic setting, the patient would be requested to engage with dream images—they might be from sleeping dreams or waking ones, but the process of Active Imagination itself remains both waking and directed, though this takes place on a twilight borderline between consciousness and unconsciousness. The difference from mere fantasising has to do with a kind of holding to the dream characters from this twilight realm: you let the dream figures speak, and answer back *as yourself*, not as some idealised persona you fancy you would like to be. You, *as yourself*, remain fully conscious as you speak; you let your conscious attention recede, however, in order to allow the dream figure to say *what it wants to*, not what the conscious “you” thinks is correct or desirable. It is letting the Other within have its say, and bringing consciousness and the

Unconscious into conversation with each other. You get some real surprises doing this! (C.G. Jung, “The Transcendent Function” *Collected Works*, vol. 8, 88-89).

Because Sayers is writing fiction, not undergoing analysis, she unsurprisingly does not do it quite by the book: the dialogue plays itself out between her animus and a fictional stand-in for herself, rather than Sayers speaking in her own voice. But it seems close enough to have worked, perhaps because Sayers allows Harriet to be a rather normal and even grumpy sort of person, and no paragon of feminine virtue or beauty. Harriet excels in honesty, intellect, self-knowledge and humour: all excellent criteria for embarking on a journey of individuation. Other critics have certainly noticed that Peter has become deeper, more flawed and more vulnerable in *Gaudy Night* than in earlier novels; my point is that he is more independent from his author, and can therefore tell her what she does not yet know about herself. Writing, says author Natalie Goldberg, is not in order to tell other people something they do not know; it is order to find out something for yourself. Nothing could be truer about *Gaudy Night* for Sayers.

What Peter tells Harriet, then, in what I am terming the character’s answering back to author, is that he does not want any supposedly feminine submissiveness from her and she should not feel called on to give it. It is Harriet, not Peter, who thinks this frightening poison pen must be one of the academic women gone mad though her “unnatural” profession: Peter sees right away it is someone at the other end of the spectrum—a defender of women’s role as mother and nurturer—that has to be the one attacking the women dons and students. Harriet and Peter discuss in this novel the role of



men and women, the struggle between the claims of the heart and those of the mind, and the place of one's work in life. It is Peter over and over again who calls Harriet back from exaggerated worries which she is in danger of absorbing from the supposedly common-sense consensus (perhaps it could be called the voice of the patriarchy?) It is a delicate balance, says Peter; moreover, he trusts her implicitly to lead her life very well without him (or anyone): he admires and respects her intellect, her strength and her moral integrity. Once he says he loves her "for her devastating talent for keeping to the point and speaking the truth" (302). He claims that there can, indeed, be "an alliance between the intellect and the flesh" (379): neither he nor she has to choose one over the other; they can both be and have both.

If the possessing, "bad animus" speaks with the voice of the patriarchy in a woman, a voice she may despise and yet ventriloquize, the integrated animus speaks back to her and makes her give an account of herself, just as "he" is being called to account: this is what Peter and Harriet are learning to do. In *Gaudy Night*, that bad animus voice is only slightly heard from within Harriet, when she begins to succumb to it when she doubts her and the female dons' status as professional women. It certainly is not in Peter, who tries so hard to do the right thing. Rather it is voiced with admirable abandon by the story's villain, innocent-looking Annie Wilson the scout (a college servant). Passive and docile in daily life, by night Annie becomes an animus-driven monster as she attacks the women scholars in the name of feminine virtues. As if created specially to illustrate Jung's idea of the irrational, opinionated animus-possessed woman, she spouts the received wisdom on women's roles: they should have children, support their men loyally, stay in the home and not

venture into the workplace; they have no business doing intellectual work or being independent earners. Annie speaks more vociferously than even the most conservative and scathing of men in Sayers's fictional Oxford. This is a stroke of genius on Sayers's part: it is the internalised masculine, patriarchal voice that is so harmful to women, not men *per se*.

Annie's introjection of the patriarchal voice is given graphic illustration at one point: one of her little pranks was to create a dummy out of bolsters and an academic gown, hang it in the chapel with a quotation from Virgil pinned to it deploring the monstrous harpies which eat out a man's soul. This was one clue which made it so hard for the women—Harriet Vane as well as the dons—to look beyond themselves when seeking the culprit. How would a scout know Latin hexameters? Peter Wimsey, however, putting all the clues together, discovers that Annie has the quotation from the suicide note of her husband: he was denounced by historian Miss de Vine for falsifying evidence in his thesis, and killed himself rather than face a ruined academic career. Revenge on Miss de Vine, in fact, is the motivation for the whole action of the campus trickster. When Peter mentions the quotation, Miss Hillyard, another don, exclaims, "When I first heard that I felt sure a man was behind all this" (395). Peter acknowledges a man probably did write it...but then he shows how it was cited by a woman who understood the gist of the quotation only; a woman who was ventriloquizing a language that was not her own (399).

As she contemplates the opposing pulls of life: to be in the literary fast lane in London as a popular author or in the quiet studiousness of Oxford, Harriet begins a sonnet, which she is unable to complete. Peter finds the sonnet—also clearly about their relationship—in her notes about the case, and

finishes it for her. This is on the one hand just another example of his magisterial powers (for which he later apologises), but Peter is also signposting the way to a real piece of wisdom: it is a case of the animus as psychopompos, the “soul’s guide” Jung claimed it to be. To Harriet’s conceit of life as a spinning top, Peter replies: lay on the whips!—or else we die (327). Life is not repose; as Peter says elsewhere, it is a balance of contending forces rather than a death-like stasis (274). The intellectual, active, working woman can also be the woman in love; she no longer has to defend a one-sided attitude for fear of being consumed by the opposite: the loving, nurturing, self-sacrificing role. Peter as the ideal of masculinity is also now humanised; no longer diving manfully into shallow fountains from great heights or striding dramatically into the House of Lords to save his brother’s skin at the last moment, Peter is a little worn out and vulnerable by now. In fact, another whole strand in *Gaudy Night* is the gradual wearing down of Peter’s own defences: he learns as much from Harriet in this novel as vice versa, though there is not the space to discuss this thoroughly here. As one disappointed reader pointed out, he has lost his “elfin charm”—he is no longer what Jung would call a *puer aeternus* (“Gaudy Night” 80). In the biographical sketch Sayers has Peter’s Uncle Paul Delagardie write about his nephew, even the earlier heroic attitude is explained and justified: Peter was always just compensating for an early broken heart and then the shell shock.<sup>14</sup> These excuses were always there: Peter has nightmares about the war even in the first novel, *Whose Body?*, but now they become more believable, and more integral to him as a character. Now, having met in Harriet a woman equally aware of the dangers of emotional blackmail and wounding, and equally

defensive against them, he can relax and be less of the manly man himself. In Jung's terms, they are following their own consciences.

Thus, the rapprochement between Peter and Harriet occurs when she can see that even he, the perfect male, does not require one-sidedness from her; likewise, Peter more and more must reveal his own vulnerability and softness, for example when he acknowledges his in-bred imperious attitude and when he lets Harriet see places where he feels weak and unsure. There is no longer a question of manly-men or womanly-women here. Or, to bring things back to the level of the author's psyche, Sayers can now imagine her lord as something more likeable. Within her own psyche it is no longer necessary for the genders to divide so absolutely.

Since this is a piece of fiction by a woman, I can read Peter as a woman's animus: for Sayers, as far as I can make out, the animus was never really projected "out there" at some masculine figure in her physical environment, for she was always pretty self-assured and independent, except perhaps in the Cournos period. But now the archetype is also not being projected inwardly, so to speak, onto an unrealistic fantasy figure, a *puer* or a rescuing knight. What she depicts in the Wimsey novels, in particular *Gaudy Night* and *Busman's Honeymoon*, is the integration of an active, so-called "masculine" principle in a humanised, more realistic form than fantasy or romance fiction manages to do. As a pendant, then, to the quotation above of the verbose animus Jung thought was a typical manifestation, and which can be said to describe an aspect of Peter Wimsey, I add here a comment by Jill Paton Walsh at the end of the novel she finished from Sayers's manuscript:

Peter Wimsey had not left her when she ceased to write about him; in 1937<sup>15</sup> she described him as a permanent resident in the house of her mind, and she said she found herself bringing all her actions and opinions to the bar of his silent criticism. (366)

This might be read as a textbook case of the integrated animus; Sayers could have done no better under the tutelage of the great Swiss psychotherapist himself. Sayers herself maintained of “the Peter-Harriet combination” (“Gaudy Night” 93) that “[t]hey are the two moods of the artistic spirit, separated and shown as dominant in two distinct personalities (“Gaudy Night” 92).

*Busman’s Honeymoon*, which appeared first as a co-written play and then a novel, was Sayers’s last Wimsey fiction, other than a few more short stories and the unfinished novel manuscript *Thrones, Dominations*. There have been many speculations about why the Wimsey novels stopped: that Sayers was tired of them; that she did not know what to do with a married hero; that the war intervened; that the interwar period died and Wimsey, child of that era, had to die, too; that her interest in the religious plays and Dante translation took over and she never looked back. Who knows why a particular strand of creative activity dries up? What is clear is that after completing this “project” by allowing the consummation of the love affair between her two characters, Sayers could—in any case, did—move on to new, even more meaningful work. Perhaps she had done what she needed to do with Peter Wimsey; now she could let him go. What she does in her novels, once Harriet

Vane comes onto the scene, is work through the problem of how an intellectual, independent, self-sufficient woman could enter an intimate relationship with a man; conversely, and perhaps even more interestingly, how the perfectly eligible male could be supposed to opt for such a termagant or virago. It is very much to her credit that she managed to do this to the satisfaction of most (though not all) of her readers! This is in fact quite astonishing: had anyone had managed such a feat before now? Jung talks about the second half of life leading towards preparation for death: Sayers's religious plays and translations can certainly be seen as just such a turning from the energetic activities she allows her fast-driving hero to something altogether more inward-looking and spiritual.

## **VI. Why Jung?**

One might well ask why it is important to read Sayers in the light of Jungian psychology. I have already mentioned above the dearth in the literary tradition of tales of women's "heroic journeys" towards psychological wholeness: Jung posits a history of human culture that sees a growing level of consciousness through the millennia, during which men have gained their "souls"/"animas" by becoming more conscious, but what has happened to women in the meantime? Barbara Hannah singles out the Brontë sisters as tentative explorers in this field. In a very different context, Virginia Woolf, too, spoke eloquently about the lack of a tradition of women's writing. An acknowledged tradition was important for Woolf as a woman seeking to create herself as an author within the literary canon. For Hannah, the issue was not so much a question of the "great tradition", but of women's

psychological health: precedents for the balancing of masculine and feminine forces within the psyche were sorely lacking for women analysands. Sayers satisfies on both accounts.

A further plea for the importance of Jung when discussing literature has to do with the power his psychology has for addressing the matter of our lived experience as multiple and not unified, and as both separate from the Other as well as able to acknowledge the absolute Other within. Jung has largely fallen out of favour in modern literary theory, although his popularity continues unabated with many practitioners of psychotherapy and counselling as well as in popular psychology. A wider public find archetypal theory convincing and relevant, but academia is not so welcoming. We prefer the harder-nosed Freud and his acolytes, or the more politically-focused fields of post-colonialism, feminism and Marxism. We are, rightly, wary of claims of universalism. Jung does need some rehabilitating to align his thought with modern ideas on gender performance and identity.<sup>16</sup> I only note here that I think this rehabilitative work is minor, and will be fruitful and worthwhile. I have already indicated that I see some commonality between Jung's idea of the animus and anima with Cixous's concept of "the other bisexuality." More might be done to create a dialogue between Jungian and Butlerian performance, for example, as well as with Irigaray and others; or rather to contribute to the dialogue started by Young-Eisendrath and continued by Susan Rowland, Frances Gray, and others.

On the idea of the Other, Jung's idea of the internal pantheon is especially intriguing: growing out of Freud's concept of the Unconscious, this internal Other (or Others) has/have enormous potential for thinking about our

human interrelationships. Spivak tells us we can never understand the subaltern, who is so Other to ourselves, Homi Bhabha encourages us to meet in the middle ground of the Third Space, and Levinas exhorts us to listen to the ethical demand of the “Face” of the Other. What if Jung is right: it is by acknowledging that all these others are potentially within that we can ever hope to approach the other? This is neither essentialism nor metaphysics, the two most common criticisms levelled at Jung: rather, these ideas have a lot in common with the Buddhist idea of “no self,” which in turn might bring us back to the western concept of Derrida’s Deconstruction.

Thus, to conclude this discussion of the late Wimsey novels and their two protagonists: this was not an attempt to psychoanalyse Dorothy L. Sayers, but rather a discussion her work in terms of the concepts current in Jungian analytical psychology, showing how these concepts may be said to work in the texts themselves, and how they presumably also work in the author as well as in the receptive reader. It has been assumed here that an archetypal breakthrough occurs in these works, and that this breakthrough is what makes the novels speak to many readers still today. This, then, has been a phenomenological, Jungian approach.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Ean Begg, to whom I owe the idea for this essay.

<sup>2</sup> See Heilbrun for an interesting account of Sayers’s composition of the novels as well as her continued popularity.



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<sup>3</sup> In addition, an unfinished manuscript was completed by Jill Paton Walsh and published as *Thrones, Dominations* in 1998.

<sup>4</sup> “I could not marry Peter off to the young woman he had (in the conventional Perseus manner) rescued from death and infamy, because I could find no form of words in which she could accept him without loss of self-respect” (“Gaudy Night” 79). This essay by Sayers on the writing of *Gaudy Night*, and therefore of all the Wimsey novels, is a great resource for how Sayers saw her interactions with her fantastical creations, and forms a basis for my essay. Against the author’s claims of everything being consciously composed, I focus on some probably unconscious aspects as well.

<sup>5</sup> Patterson sees the Wimsey novels as an account of a shamanistic journey, with Wimsey alternatively descending into the (maternal) earth and figuratively climbing the Cosmic Tree. She speaks of a sacred marriage with the earth, and hints at it in the coming together of Peter and Harriet. In her book on women detective writers, Susan Rowland says Harriet and Peter have to find “the other within” (75) and that “together they represent a psychic re-formulation of Englishness” (76).

<sup>6</sup> The Wimsey family motto. Sayers was quite consciously playful and self-ironic in her narrative creations.

<sup>7</sup> Emma Jung, Barbara Hannah and Marie Louise von Franz did write descriptions of the animus, although they remained arguably too enthralled to Jung’s model. It took a new generation of (post)-Jungians to develop the ideas from a feminist perspective: see below.

<sup>8</sup> Jung also found this unifying of opposites in the European tradition of Alchemy.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Zinkin cites James Hillman, Edward Whitmont and Andrew Samuels as refuting the contrasexual nature of the anima/animus complex (116-17).

<sup>10</sup> The following biographical material comes largely from the works of Barbara Reynolds, James Brabazon and Janet Hitchman.

<sup>11</sup> Brabazon also makes the point the Peter Wimsey was born just at the right moment to “save the situation” for Sayers (2): *Whose Body?* was written when she was out of work and after Coursons had left her. The subsequent events (childbirth, marriage to Mac) occur as Wimsey develops a character.

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<sup>12</sup> Sexton Blake was a popular detective character in numerous mysteries written by many authors from shortly before the turn of the nineteenth century. Peter Wimsey “walked in, complete with spats” as a minor character an attempt at the genre by Sayers (Brabazon 122-23).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Kuhn McGregor and Ethan Lewis in their *Conundrums for the Long Week-End* provide one speculative model amongst several about the dates of the action of the Wimsey novels. Suffice to say that the action precedes publication only by a year or two at most, and in the case of *Gaudy Night*, action and publication are contemporaneous. For the purposes of this paper, it is only important to know that Peter defends Harriet (*Strong Poison*) in about 1929 and they resolve their differences only in 1935 (*Gaudy Night*), to marry shortly thereafter (*Busman’s Honeymoon*).

<sup>14</sup> This “biography” was written in 1935 for the end of *Gaudy Night*, and is also, like the setting of the novel, dated 1935.

<sup>15</sup> Namely in “Gaudy Night” 93.

<sup>16</sup> As many Jungian themselves agree, being a Jungian does not mean being an orthodox believer. Somewhere Jung is reported to have said, “Thank God I’m Jung and not a Jungian!”: he himself did not stay still, and did not wish those he had influence to do so (see Singer, 21).

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