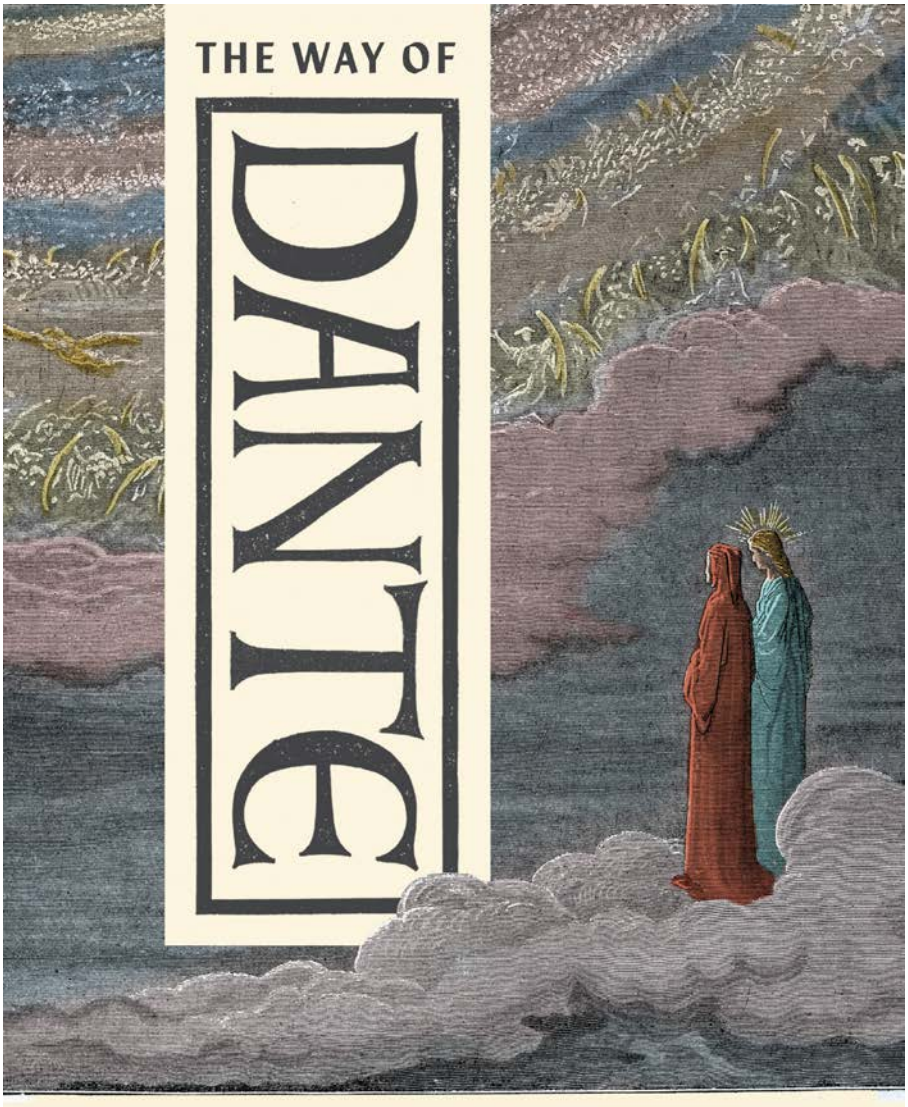

Going Through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven with
C. S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Charles Williams

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ivp | InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL
www.ivpress.com

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THREE PREHISTORIES

"The enjoyment of the *Divine Comedy* is a continuous process," T. S. Eliot declares in his 1929 monograph *Dante*. "If you get nothing out of it at first, you probably never will; but if from your first deciphering of it there comes now and then some direct shock of poetic intensity, nothing but laziness can deaden the desire for fuller and fuller knowledge."[1] That Eliot had uttered a fine sentiment, all three of my authors would surely have agreed. They each felt that "direct shock of poetic intensity" while reading the *Comedy*, and that experience indeed inspired in them "the desire for fuller and fuller knowledge" of the poem.

Unsurprisingly, Sayers had her own, more colorful, way of putting it. "The trouble with Dante," she told her friend James Welch, the BBC's director of religious broadcasting, "is that, if one gets a taste for him, one is liable to become a Dante-addict." She playfully continued: "He acts like a drug—or rather, like an attack of rabies; the people who are bitten rush madly about biting all their friends. Beware of him. If you once come under the spell he will haunt your imagination, lay violent hands on your theology, intrude into your sermons, and seep through your most casual conversation like a dye."[2] I cite Sayers's description of Dante mania not only for its color; the date is also notable. She wrote these words in 1946, less

[1]T. S. Eliot, *Dante* (Faber & Faber, 1929), 16.
[2]Dorothy L. Sayers to James Welch, July 25, 1946, in *LDS*, 3:249.

than two years after she had come under Dante's spell at the age of fifty-one. As I will discuss below, there is every reason to believe she had made contact with Dante before, likely several times, but had not previously felt the "shock of poetic intensity." The enjoyment of the *Comedy*, Sayers's experience teaches us, may be a *dis*continuous process. Or perhaps the continuous part—the seeping of Dante into one's bloodstream—may begin only after multiple exposures. The reading life is rarely so neat as the stories we like to tell about it.

Therein lies the chief lesson of this chapter: Varied are the on-ramps, some longer and bumpier than others, to the way of Dante. The stories of how Sayers, Williams, and Lewis made Dante's acquaintance involve different timelines, contexts, and life stages, and those stories provide helpful framing for my trio's respective responses to Dante on display throughout this book. After examining the prehistories of their experiences with Dante before they met on the path in this chapter, I turn in the next to their convergence on the way.

SAYERS: THE LONG WAY

Reviewing Williams's *The Figure of Beatrice* shortly after the book's release in 1943, critic Desmond MacCarthy named Dante among the greats with whom "we become acquainted" without reading directly, "so numerous are the channels through which their spirit seeps into the minds of men."[3] To this Sayers would add—the minds of *women*, too. In her 1955 address "On Translating the *Divina Commedia*," Sayers recalled that in the last decades of the nineteenth century "all decently educated" middle- and upper-class Britons "could be counted on to take an intelligent interest in Dante, or at least not look perfectly blank at the mention of his name." Thus, most houses in the social world into which she was born held copies of the *Comedy* (in Italian or English translation), "very often handsomely illustrated"

[3]Quoted in Barbara Reynolds, *The Passionate Intellect: Dorothy L. Sayers' Encounter with Dante* (Kent State University Press, 1989), 18.

with the "refined" engravings of John Flaxman or the "theatrical" ones of Gustav Doré. Yet even at that point, Sayers informed her audience, the "cultural swing-over from Italian to German had begun, and by the date of my own schooldays it was complete." "We had all heard of Dante;" she continued, "but we read Goethe and Schiller."[4]

In her first report to Williams on her rapid march through *Comedy* (she had at that point just escaped *Inferno* and begun her ascent of *Purgatorio*) in mid-August 1944, Sayers hinted that she had made previous attempts to read the poem but hadn't taken to it.[5] One month later, having completed the epic, Sayers further revealed that her prior acquaintance with Dante had come "from quotations and allusions in books of general literature and religious essays and so on—the sort of thing one comes across in the course of reading at large about this and that." She had received by osmosis "some of the set pieces," such as the doomed lovers Paolo and Francesca from *Inferno* V (a subject popular among nineteenth-century artists), and catchphrases, including *Vergine madre, figlia del tuo figlio* ("Virgin mother, daughter of your Son" [*Paradiso* XXXIII.1]). She was aware of "the tortures and the demons, and the politics, and the boiled popes."[6] In other words, Sayers knew *some* Dante in the way many readers do—as a matter of general cultural literacy.

These admissions to Williams help to explain Dante's presence in her writing prior to 1944. His first appearance in Sayers's oeuvre occurs in fact in her debut novel, the mystery *Whose Body?* (1922), in which her gentleman detective Lord Peter Wimsey is presented as a collector of early printed editions of Dante.[7] In *The Mind of the Maker*

[4]Dorothy L. Sayers, "On Translating the *Divina Commedia*," in *PSPS*, 93.

[5]Sayers explains that she had in her possession an edition in which the Italian faces an English crib on the opposite page and that, as Reynolds explains in a note, she "had previously dipped into this edition but had not had the resolve to persevere either with the Italian or the translation." Dorothy L. Sayers to Charles Williams, August 16-17, 1944, in *LDS*, 3:45-47.

[6]Sayers to Williams, August 16-17, 1944, in *LDS*, 3:76.

[7]The rare books in question likely caught her attention when they were displayed two years earlier during London's celebrations of the sixth centenary of Dante's death. For a detailed

(1941), to cite another Dante cameo, she quotes the *Comedy* in Italian to illustrate that unlike "mechanical inventions and scientific formula," new works of art do not necessarily supersede the old, juxtaposing Eliot's line "you who were with me in the ships at Mylae" from *The Waste Land* (1922) with Piccarda Donati's phrase in *Paradiso* III, *en la sua voluntade è nostra pace* ("and His will is our peace" [III.85]), one of Dante's best-known sound bites.[8] This was not a harsh burn on Eliot, mind you; he would have heartily agreed with Sayers's ensuing argument that "the later in date leaves the earlier achievement unconquered and unchanged." The comedy of the situation is that Eliot *had* read Dante thoroughly, while Sayers had not.[9]

With her characteristic good humor, Sayers could laugh at herself about this incongruence. In that first report to Williams on the *Comedy*, Sayers disclosed that the immediate stimulus to making a serious go at it was a moment of embarrassment. Having read Williams's *The Figure of Beatrice* (1943) and Lewis's *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942), and "re-read the greater portion" of *Paradise Lost* as a result of the latter, she "cheerfully remarked to a friend that Milton was a thunderingly great writer of religious epic, provided it did not occur to you to compare him with Dante." Her friend, however, confessed that she had never read Dante, and this disarmed Sayers: "I then became aware that I had never read Dante either, but only quoted bits of him and looked at Doré's illustrations to the *Inferno*. It then came to my mind that perhaps I had better read Dante, or else I might find myself condemned to toddle around for ever among the Hypocrites."[10]

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discussion of the event and the books that Sayers references, see Barbara Reynold's chapter "A Mind Prepared," in *Passionate Intellect*.

[8]Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (Methuen, 1941), 33.

[9]In fact, Sayers had very likely come across the words from *Paradiso* that she quotes here while reading Eliot, who cites them on several occasions in his creative and critical writing. In his *Dante* monograph, which she read in late 1947 or early 1948, he references them as "words which even those who know no Dante know" (*Dante*, 52).

[10]Sayers to Williams, August 16-17, 1944, in *LDS*, 3:45.

Admittedly, there's something suspicious about Sayers's claim that she wanted to avoid a punishment that shows up thousands of lines into a poem she hadn't yet read. But the embellishment, if it is one, speaks to her wish to impress Williams—whose insight into Dante she would never doubt—with a good story. And the tale of her expedition through the epic *was* a good story, Williams confirmed. At last, Eliot's "direct shock of poetic intensity" ran right through her, changing the course of her professional life.

WILLIAMS: DANTE'S FELLOW TRAVELER

Biographically speaking, Williams presents the opposite problem: When we look back to his earliest literary remains, he seems already to know all about Dante or at least Dante's way. In her 1955 lecture "Charles Williams: A Poet's Critic," Sayers informed her audience that Williams's "introduction to the *Commedia* took place, he told me, when he was hurriedly correcting the proofs of Cary's translation for the Oxford University Press, and his immediate reaction was: 'But this is true.'"[11] The letter that Sayers appears to be referencing—dated September 7, 1944—is a bit more ambiguous than she suggests, as Williams may not (at a distance of several decades) have been recollecting his very first encounter with the *Comedy* but rather an experience akin to the one Sayers had just reported in her letters in which he had "rushed" (his term) through the *Comedy*. In his early days at Oxford University Press (where he began to work in 1908), he explains in the letter, he and another editor "spent three days" reading the proofs in question. He goes on to say that he "must have known the *V.N.* [*Vita Nuova*] when I was first in love, and I thought then, as I've thought since, that it was wholly accurate."[12]

[11]Dorothy L. Sayers, "Charles Williams: A Poet's Critic," in *PSPS*, 73.
[12]Charles Williams to Dorothy L. Sayers, September 7, 1944, DSP, folder 116.

Nonetheless, Sayers captured an essential truth about Williams in that remembrance: that he viewed Dante as independent verification of what he had experienced. In a 1953 letter to Barbara Reynolds, Sayers offered further insights:

> The great power of Charles Williams is that for him *time*, in a sense, did not exist. If truth is eternal, it is true then and now—in 14th-century Florence or in 20th-century Wimbledon. He had that in common with the medievals, to whom Ancient Rome and Bethlehem were as near as Paris or Bologna. He insists to [Dante translator] J. D. Sinclair, in a correspondence I have seen, that what critics *will* not allow or understand is that "the thing does happen." He is talking of the "Beatrician experience."[13]

Later chapters will have much to say about the mechanics of Beatrician experiences. At present, it is enough to observe that such experiences involve glimpsing the eternal through the medium of the beloved—romantic love as a gateway to the divine. Sayers's important insight for us now is that Williams did not so much as step onto Dante's path as meet Dante on the path he was already traveling. In the 1955 address, she rightly pointed out that for Williams "the solidarity of human society lay visibly extended, not only in space, but also in time." Accordingly, Williams "came to Dante prepared to hail him across the negligible gap of six centuries as a fellow-poet, a fellow-lover, and a fellow-Christian."[14] On the matter of love, Williams did not historicize.

A case in point is Williams's first book, *The Silver Stair* (1912), a sequence of eighty-four love sonnets.[15] Critics have suggested

[13]Dorothy L. Sayers to Barbara Reynolds, April 9, 1953, in *LDS*, 4:91, italics original.

[14]Sayers, "Charles Williams: A Poet's Critic," 72.

[15]In a 1926 lecture, Williams would summarize *The Silver Stair* as follows: Its first part introduces a "young man thoroughly discontented with the world who suddenly and for the first time falls in love"; the second shows him "discontented with the ordinary result of love. He feels it in a way that urges him *away* from marriage as much as towards it; because he feels *love*. Love as a being not as a name"; the third is "a kind of ode in praise of Love as God and Man; of Its passion in the world, wherein the prostitutes of the street carry

multiple influences, such as W. B. Yeats, from whose *The Shadowy Waters* Williams took the book's epigraph, and Victorian poet Coventry Patmore, who had likened God's fierce love for the soul to the human lover's desire for the beloved.[16] The book also exhibits conspicuous debts to Dante Gabriel Rossetti ("More like Rossetti than anyone else," declared Sir Walter Raleigh, professor of English literature at Oxford), particularly his collection of translations *The Early Italian Poets: From Ciullo D'Alcomo to Dante Alighieri* (1861). Rossetti offered Williams models of the Italian sonnet, the form used throughout *The Silver Stair*, and how the language of courtly love might mix with modern English. Rossetti's practice of adding descriptive titles to the translated poems—such as "He solicits his Lady's Pity"—Williams likewise imitated (e.g., "He appoints time and place for meeting his lady").

As Rossetti's subtitle indicates, at the center of the collection is Dante, his *Vita Nuova* being its longest work. *Vita Nuova* was Dante's first book, a chain of love poems—plus commentary—that chronicles Dante's initial encounters with Beatrice, the growth of his love, and the temptations (ultimately overcome!) to look elsewhere after her death. Dante's characterizations of Beatrice are suffused with theological language, so much so that some passages later caught the Inquisition's eye (such as, for example, when the poet speaks of her as "the destroyer of all evil and queen of all good" and "my beatitude").[17]

Its cross, and the abominable stories of the smoking-room and the snigger buzz like flies about Its wounded Head . . . —of its Resurrection, and Its final communication of Itself to Its elect." Charles Williams, "Me," CW MS-144, pp. 5-6, Charles Williams Papers, Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

[16]For information on Patmore's influences, the circumstances of the book's publication, and its major themes, see Grevel Lindop's chapter on *The Silver Stair* in his biography *Charles Williams: The Third Inkling* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 27-39.

[17]Cleric anxieties about that language amused Williams, who mentions it in *FB*. For an accessible survey, see Joseph Luzzi's chapter "*Comedìa Proibita*," in *Dante's Divine Comedy: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2024), 37-58.

Three decades later, in *The Figure of Beatrice*, Williams argued that Dante only gradually realized in *Vita Nuova* that the Lord Love of his allegory—the personification of Eros—could be identified with God.[18] In *The Silver Stair*, Williams makes the connection immediately, signaling that he wasn't simply developing an idea he found in Dante but taking heart from Dante's example (just as Sayers perceived). The two-part prologue distils the message thus:

> His ambush in a pebble's heart, His fleet
> Passage in light and shadow of leaves, O soul,
> Hast thou escaped; wilt thou deny thy clay
> If thereupon He stablish [*sic*] His control
> In mortal eyes that snare it, mortal feet
> That tread the windings of salvation's way?[19]

On view here is the earliest expression in print of what in time Williams would refer to as his "romantic theology," in which the beloved presents a pregnant "image" of God that draws the soul to its source (what Sayers above called the "Beatrician experience"). As these lines suggest, Williams also recognized that God may seek to "ambush" our souls through natural imagery—the pebble, the leaves' light show—making the "snare" of romantic love only one of many divine plots to set us on "salvation's way."

Like so many of Williams's works, *The Silver Stair* is permeated with curious locutions (including *deifical*, *lupanar*, and *littly*) and features some odd plot twists (and none odder than the fact that the lover ultimately renounces marriage). Yet such oddities should not distract us from the book's evidence that from the first Williams's writing career was bound up with Dante—his *fellow* love poet.

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[18] *FB*, 76: "I do not press that Love should here be taken as allegorically equal to Christ; I am inclined to think that this develops in the *New Life* but is certainly not there at the beginning."

[19] Charles Williams, *The Silver Stair* (Herbert and Daniel, 1912), vi.

LEWIS: PARADISE FOUND

Lewis took a different track. In this case, early contact with Dante is easily located. Already in 1917, we find the teenage Lewis informing his father that he had read the first two hundred lines of *Inferno* in Italian "with much success."[20] A year and a half later, while convalescing from his injuries in the Great War, Lewis took up Dante again—now *Purgatorio*—though this time allowing himself to use an edition featuring an English crib opposite the Italian. "So 'ave the mighty fallen," he joked with his friend Arthur Greeves.[21]

Of *Paradiso*, the first trace in Lewis's papers appears in a letter to Greeves composed in the first days of 1930. Lewis reports on a four-day visit to Owen Barfield, during which they spent the mornings reading Aristotle's *Ethics* and (after a postprandial walk) read *Paradiso* "for the rest of the day" (the reading and conversation being so good that the two friends stayed up until 4 a.m. at one point). I have already quoted a snippet from his awestruck description of *Paradiso* in the introduction. Now we should hear it in full:

> [*Paradiso*] has really opened a new world to me. I don't know whether it is really different from *Inferno* (B. [Barfield] says it's as different as chalk from cheese—heaven from hell, would be more appropriate!)—or whether I was specially receptive, but it certainly seemed to me that I had never seen at all what Dante was like before. Unfortunately, the impression is one so unlike anything else that I can hardly describe it for your benefit—a sort of mixture of intense, even crabbed, complexity of language and thought with (what seems impossible) *at the very same time* a feeling of spacious gliding movement, like a slow dance, or like flying. It is like the stars—endless mathematical subtility of orb, cycle, epicycle and ecliptic, unthinkable & unpicturable, & yet at the same time the freedom and liquidity of empty space and the

[20]C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves, February 8, 1917, in *CLCSL*, 1:275.
[21]C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves, October 6, 1918, in *CLCSL*, 1:403.

> triumphant certainty of movement. I should describe it as feeling more *important* than any poetry I have ever read.[22]

He confessed that he wasn't sure that his friend would like it, however, given how thoroughly Catholic it was (Greeves had been raised among the low church Plymouth Brethren and, after much wandering, ended up a Quaker): "It is seldom homely: perhaps not *holy* in our sense—it is too Catholic for that: and of course its blend of complexity and beauty is very like Catholic theology—wheel within wheel, but wheels of glory, and the One radiated through the Many."[23] We will return to the profound critical insights contained in this passage in chapter six (when *Paradiso* specifically is under examination). For present purposes, the importance of these words lies in their testimony to Lewis's new receptivity to Dante and, in turn, his sense that his previous readings had missed the mark badly. The scales had fallen from Lewis's eyes.

Three decades later, in *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis insisted, "In good reading there ought to be no 'problem of belief,'" and he cited as examples Dante and Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius (who portrays the universe as "a meaningless dance of atoms").[24] He read both, he recalls, "when (by and large) I agreed with Lucretius. I have read them since I came (by and large) to agree with Dante. I cannot find that this has much altered my experience, or at all altered my evaluation, of either." He argues, in turn, that a "true lover of literature" should imitate "an honest examiner" who gives "highest marks" to the best performance regardless of whether the examiner agrees with the writer's views.[25] Yet Lewis's experience in 1930 suggests that "agreeing"—

[22]C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves, January 13, 1930, in *CLCSL*, 1:857, italics original.
[23]Lewis to Greeves, January 13, 1930, in *CLCSL*, 1:857, italics original.
[24]C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1961), 86; Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Geoffrey Bles, 1955), 164.
[25]Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*, 86.

or at least moving toward agreement—with Dante *did* alter his experience of the *Comedy*.

The eye-opening sessions with Barfield sit right in the middle of the great revolution in Lewis's spiritual life recounted in the last chapters of *Surprised by Joy* (1955). There Lewis narrates two conversions—first to theism in the Trinity term (or spring) of 1929, which was accompanied by a return to church attendance, and then to Christian orthodoxy in September 1931. Biographers have raised questions about Lewis's chronology, and not without cause.[26] Thankfully, we don't need to iron out all the wrinkles here. My point is simply that the tenor of Lewis's enraptured account of *Paradiso* squares with *Surprised by Joy*'s picture of him in early 1930 as one increasingly alive to spiritual matters, including the claims of texts he'd previously read for pleasure or study. The autobiographer characterizes the shift by portraying himself as a fox "dislodged from the Hegelian Wood" of his old philosophical beliefs being pursued by a "pack" of hounds, including Plato, George Herbert, George MacDonald, J. R. R. Tolkien, Barfield, and, yes, Dante.[27]

But no remark is more telling than his instructions to Greeves—shared at the end of January 1930—concerning the reading of *Paradiso*, Lewis's enthusiasm having piqued Greeves's interest. *Paradiso* can't be consumed, he told his friend, "in long stretches (with one's feet on the fender) for the general atmosphere and conduct of the story," that is, as one might read a novel.[28] Instead, one should "read a small daily portion, in rather a liturgical manner, letting the *images* and the purely intellectual conceptions sink well into the mind" (italics in original). Lucretius never received this treatment.

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[26]For more on the challenges of matching the events of Lewis's "inner world" narrated in *Surprised by Joy* "with the events of the world outside," see Alister McGrath's treatment of the date of Lewis's conversion in *C. S. Lewis: A Life* (Tyndale House, 2013).

[27]Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 212.

[28]C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves, January 30, 1930, in *CLCSL*, 1:876.