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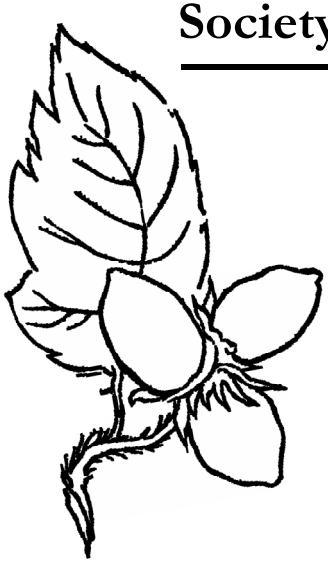
The Charles Williams Society



Newsletter

No. 111 Summer 2004

The Charles Williams Society

The Society was founded in 1975, thirty years after Charles Williams's sudden death at the end of the Second World War. It exists to celebrate Charles Williams and to provide a forum for the exchange of views and information about his life and work.

Members of the Society receive a quarterly newsletter and may attend the Society's meetings which are held three times a year. Facilities for members also include a postal lending library and a reference library housed at The Centre for Medieval Studies in Oxford.

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For information about the **Oxford** reading group please contact Brenda Boughton, tel: 01865 515589.

The Charles Williams Society

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From the Editor

At the time of writing I am looking forward to the Society Conference in a couple of weeks. It will, of course, be over by the time you read this issue and I therefore draw your attention to the October meeting, which is to be held, in Oxford, jointly with The George MacDonald Society. We shall be discussing Lilith in various guises and it would probably be as well to (re-)read MacDonald's *Lilith* and CW's *Descent into Hell* if you are planning to attend.

Following the obituary of George Every in CW # 109, I am pleased to be able to reprint chapter iv of his book *Poetry and Personal Responsibility* (SCM Press, 1949) in this issue.

I am told that we have received 36 responses to the questionnaire included in the last issue, so thank you to those members for their thoughts and comments. Discussing these should keep the council members busy at our next meeting, and a summary of our conclusions should appear in a future edition of CW (unless you've all decided that you don't like the Newsletter).

Edward Gauntlett

Society News & Notes

Joint All-Day Meeting with the George MacDonald Society

This promises to be a full and interesting day. We meet at 10.30 am for an 11 o'clock start. The formal part of the day will finish at 4 pm.

The four speakers, two from each Society, are:

Brian Horne – *Descent into Hell*

Kirstin Johnson – Rationality, A Shared Perspective

Adelheid Kegler – Lilith outside *Lilith*

Richard Sturch – Temptation

We look forward to this opportunity to meet with members of a sister Society, to learn more about George MacDonald and the relationship between his thought and that of Charles Williams. Further, Pusey house is a pleasant meeting place; do come if you can.

Publications

Thank you to Robert Beresford for drawing our attention to the publication by Penguin books of new editions of Barbara Reynolds's translations (with Introductions and notes) of Dante's *La Vita Nuova* and *Paradiso.*

Stephen Barber's paper on 'Metaphysical and Romantic in the Taliessin Poems' which he read to the Society in June 2002 has been published in the latest issue of "Seven: An Anglo-American Literary Review" Volume 20. "Seven" is published by the Marion E Wade Center, Wheaton College, Illinois, USA. The email address is wade@wheaton.edu.

The TLS of 2 April 2004 had a full page review of *The Detective Fiction Reviews of Charles Williams* and *All Hallow's Eve* by Grevel Lindop who, it was noted, is currently working on a full biography of CW.

Charles Williams Society Meetings

- **Saturday 30 October 2004**
  Joint meeting with the George MacDonald Society at Pusey House, St Giles, Oxford , starting at 10.30 am.. See Notes for details.
- Future meetings to be announced after the AGM / Society Conference. Details will appear in the next issue.

The Poetic Influence of Charles Williams

George Every

I am indebted and grateful to: Alice Hamilton, the owner of the late George Every's copyrights, Bernard Hamilton, his Executor, and SCM-Canterbury Press Ltd. for permission to reprint this chapter from George Every's book *Poetry and Personal Responsibility* originally published by SCM Press Ltd. in 1949. – Ed.

CHARLES WILLIAMS was born in London in September 1886, and died in Oxford in May 1945. His early poetry,[1] which began to appear before Mr. Eliot's, attracted no attention from any school of critics, conservative or advanced. Today critics are failing in their understanding of the younger poets because they are not aware of his later work. His influence operates less often directly, by echo and allusion, than indirectly, as a challenge to the creation of a personal idiom, a particular poetic language that involves a mythology. T. S. Eliot lifts the language around us to the level where it can be used, and so tempts us to imitate his transposition more or less exactly. He is the more perfect poet, but the perfection of his choice of words is apt to inhibit response to our own experience. Therefore his influence can reduce younger writers to silence and sterility. We need a style and standards that will allow for the Miltonic poet who writes his time to his own music, as well as the Shakespearean who makes music from the conversation of the streets. Charles Williams was a Miltonic poet; if his thought never found its perfect form in art, it was essentially poetic thinking, an act of myth-making. Where his myth is transcribed into allegory it loses the double-edge of ambiguity, as in some of the novels of Mr. C. S. Lewis, influenced by his matter and his manner. Where on the other hand the two streams meet, of Eliot's influence and his own, fresh myth-making activities become possible, in a style that is not simply derivative from either, but stands secure in its own right.

In his early poetry the language is familiar, even derivative. It is the collocations that are strange, as in the 'Hymn for St. Thomas Didymus', where a state of mind that we should call existential anguish is set to a cheery Chestertonian tune:

Yet no wise dare we falter
In one word, hear us so.
We stand before thine altar,
Denying that we know.

If thou shalt come in thunder,
And with all evil men
Whelm us thine anger under,
While we confess thee then.

Confess thou, ere thou sever
Us from thy household true,
Lord God, confess we never,
Knowing not, swore we knew.

This is difficult precisely because it looks so easy. The jaunty declamation, derived from Chesterton and Kipling, is out of tune with the subject.

The development of another, more complex and more personal idiom was compelled by the nature of the themes. It was delayed because Charles Williams was 'eccentric to contemporary writing',[2] as Anne Ridler has said. Until 1930 his sympathies were on the whole with the traditionalists and against the moderns. Admiring Milton, he rejected Eliot, until the arch-classicist and ultra-modern was revealed as an Anglo-Catholic lay theologian. In 1935—6 Eliot and he wrote plays in succession to one another for the same Canterbury festival, *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Thomas Cranmer*. From that time on their mutual influence grew. In the long run Williams influenced Eliot more, because his own 'effortless originality'[3] was less open to any influences than Eliot's negative capacity, his infinite receptiveness. The immediate effect of their first contact was to remove an inhibition against modernity which had kept Williams in a minor key, 'Better be modern than minor,' says Kenneth Mornington in *War in Heaven* (1930), emending

And that contextual meaning streams
Through all our manuscripts of dreams.

into

And that impotent contextual meaning stinks
In all our manuscripts, of no matter what coloured inks.[4]

Most of the poems in the sequence called *Taliessin through Logres* were written before 1936, though the book was not published until 1938. In contrast with earlier poems on the same themes printed with *Three Plays* in 1931, they include a good deal of matter that is anti-poetic by romantic standards. The verse is incantatory but elastic, as:

> He withers; he peers at the tide; he squeals.
> He warms himself by the fire and eats his food
> through a maiden's motionless mouth;
> in his mood he polishes his emerald, misty with tears for the poor.

But there is no movement, not even in the plays, towards a colloquial or conversational rhythm. On the contrary, the distance between verse and prose increases as a peculiar poetic language develops. The influence of Eliot is seen in repulsion as well as in attraction. In answer to the challenge thrown down by his attack on the Chinese wall, Milton's grand manner of verse, Charles Williams built a Chinese wall of his own to resist the decay of words. This wall in the end prevailed to modify Eliot's judgment where critical arguments failed. In one instance at least the imitation of Milton had been of use.

This is an important clue to the kind of obscurity that baffles us at first in Williams's poetry. The obscurity of Eliot springs from a painful effort to communicate as much as possible to those who do not share his belief or his concern, to Sweeney and Mrs. Porter, the typist and her 'young man carbuncular', Aunt Violet and Uncle Gerald in *The Family Reunion.* Eliot has always wanted to find these people where they are and help them to 'understand more', 'to care and not to care. . . to sit still'. He is a master of understatement whose poetry is most difficult when he is trying to make contact with many states of mind at one moment, easiest— I do not mean best—when he is able to assume an understanding of his meaning, as in some part of *The Rock.* Charles Williams had little or nothing of this concern for communication. Indeed, in *A Myth of Shakespeare* (1928), he shows a curious incomprehension of the kind of poet who makes poetry out of the experience of other people whose eyes he sees in the street. He is driven to imagine a Shakespeare who himself tasted every kind of experience. Into such snares the Baconians fell.

His early poems were written for his wife, for a circle of friends and colleagues at Amen House, for students at the City Literary Institute and the Balham Commercial Institute, who derived their ideas of literature very largely from his lectures. I know from my own experience that however sensitive such an audience may be, its response is returned in the lecturer's own coin. All through his early and middle years Charles Williams had too free a hand to fashion his own images.

For this reason it seems to me important to study some of his typical images, sticking as closely as possible to the poetry. We may begin with the Accuser in *Judgment at Chelmsford* (1939), who is the Skeleton in *Thomas Cranmer* (1935—6), and in *Seed of Adam* (1936) the Third King, the core of the original apple in the Garden of Eden, with his mother Myrrh, the worm in the apple bearing death. The history of this image begins with Satan in *The Rite of the Passion* (1929), who is not simply the Satan of Milton and the orthodox tradition. Rather he belongs to the first and last chapters of the Book of Job, where Satan is an angel used to test souls:

> I am contradiction and entire dismay,
> The sharp divorce where all things are not given;
> I am the left-hand pillar of the way.

In *Cranmer* he introduces himself

> I the division, the derision, where
> the bones dance in the darkening air,
> I at the cross-ways the voice of the one way,

crying to Cranmer at the stake,

> Friend, let us say one more thing before the world—
> I for you, you for me, let us say all;
> if the Pope had bid you live, you would have served him.

And Cranmer replies: 'If the Pope had bid me live, I would have served him.' So he probes all our weakness, as in *Judgment at Chelmsford,* where he comes

> To exhibit to men their own desires
> their love, their hunger, their hold on hell,

and to charge the Church, that

> she refuses to understand her own gospel;
> she prefers always the second best.

The witches see him as the Prince of Darkness, but that is their illusion. He is the truth that they ignorantly worship, not understanding that rejection and destruction, as well as affirmation and creation, are instruments of the Supreme Wisdom, Power, and Love. In another light he can be seen as the angel of the negative way, whereby men and women ascend to the love of God by turning from all earthly things. He comes between the things themselves and our high dreams about them, teaching us to distinguish the sign from the thing signified, the way from the end, the beloved from love. In *Taliessin through Logres* he is the questing beast whom Palomides heard when he suddenly saw that Iseult was not perfect,

> division stretched between
> the queen's identity and the queen.
> Relation vanished, though beauty stayed;
> too long my dangerous eyes delayed
> at the shape on the board, but voice was mute;
> the queen's arm lay there destitute,
> empty of glory; and while the king
> tossed the Saracen lord a ring,
> and the queen's pleasure, smiling still,
> turned to Tristram's plausible skill,
> three lines in a golden distance shone,
> three points pricked golden and were gone.
> Tristram murmured by Iseult 's head.
> ……
> And aloof in the roof, beyond the feast,
> I heard the squeak of the questing beast,
> where it scratched itself in the blank between
> the queen's substance and the queen.

The beast is described in *Palomides before his Christening,* as 'the blatant agile beast',

> the scratching, biting, sliding, slithering thing,
> whisking about in unreachable crevasses and cracks.

Dinadan sums him up to Palomides,

> Sir, if ever in a blank between this and that
> The sky turns on you, and the path slides
> To the edge not the front of the eyes...

This is the experience that we call in *cliché,* 'the earth opening under our feet'. It can be, and often is, a descent into hell; but it is also a way to rejecting idols and ideals that must be rejected if we are to move forward upon the way. Charles Williams never concealed the horror of evil, and of the final nothingness, the complete denial and destruction, that he called P'o-l'u; but at the same time he always insisted on its ultimate impotence. At the end of *The House of the Octopus* (1945), when all the Christians but one have been killed, and the empire of P'o-l'u is in complete control of their island, the Flame is in complete control of the pattern of the future. In the Flame the Accuser and the City, conscience and the Holy Ghost, are all one.

The image of the City means more than the visible or the invisible Church. It is also the empire and the republic, the ordered community of civilisation, and the tradition and discipline of art and letters. In the two Amen House masques, written for private theatricals in 1927 and 1929, it is the Oxford Press, in its sense of spiritual responsibility, of regular rule, of a great tradition to be handed down. Sir Humphrey Milford is Caesar. In *Taliessin* on the other hand the primary image is the Byzantine empire, seen in London. At some time between 1927 and 1929 Byzantium seems to have replaced Rome as an image of order in Charles Williams's mind.[5] I do not think that a special knowledge of Byzantine history is of much use to the reader of the poems as poems. (For some time indeed I found it an obstacle.) But it is useful to remember that in the Byzantine empire the state was in the church and the church in the state, and the tradition of learning and iconographic design in both. An error in doctrine or ritual, even in ecclesiastical art, might easily produce a political revolution.[6] The Emperor was an image of God, but also head of his body the empire, the representative man. It is misleading to transpose myth into allegory, as Mr. C. S. Lewis has done in an article on

Taliessin in *The Oxford Magazine*[7] where he says, 'The Emperor has made nothing but good . . . The Emperor symbolises God.' Here and there such a treatment may be justified, but even in such a line as 'These were the shapes only the Emperor knew', more is intended than 'only God knows'. The symbol is nearer to *Christos Pantokrator* in the dome of a Byzantine basilica, the whole of humanity taken up into God.

To Charles Williams it was a fundamental Christian doctrine that all the members of Christ's body suffer together, and that each of them can suffer for another. We bear each other's burdens, carry each other's parcels; we can receive the full impact of fear, regret, remorse, even sin, not only for those we know and love, but for others who have passed long ago into another state of being, and for the unborn who are yet to be. We may do this wittingly or unwittingly, but we cannot avoid the implication of all our lives in one another's life,

> 'dying each other's life, living each other's death.'

To accept exchange is to be in the City, in the empire and in the Emperor, who is Christ.

Another image in *Taliessin through Logres* is Broceliande, a forest or a sea, outside the limits of the Empire, 'a place of making and of all the figures concerned with making', the home of Nimue, 'the great mother and lady . . . all the vast processes of the universe imaged in a single figure'.[8] It is 'the whole *matter* of the *form* of Byzantium',[9] 'a fathomless, bottomless pool', the world of *Finnegan's Wake* and the poetry of Dylan Thomas, the collective unconscious of C. G. Jung. Merlin emerges thence with his magic arts. 'Dante and D. H. Lawrence, Boehme and Hitler, Lady Julian and the Surrealists, had all been there. It is a place of immense dangers and immense possibilities.'[10]

From one point of view it is Eden, the garden of the innocents.

> ….there no strife
> is except growth from the roots,
> no reaction but repose; vigours of joy drive up; rich-ringed moments
> thick in their trunks thrive, young-leaved their voices.[11]

'Beyond a part of Broceliande' is Carbonek, the castle of the Hallows, where is the Holy Grail and the spear that pierced the side of Christ. Through the sea beyond is the way to Sarras, 'the spiritual place', 'the land of the Trinity', but also a way to P'o-l'u, the antithesis of Byzantium, where in the Antipodean seas

> Phosphorescent on the stagnant level
> a headless figure walks in a crimson cope,
> volcanic dust blown under the moon.
>
> A brainless form, as of the Emperor…[12].

Broceliande may even be a way back from P'o-l'u:

> Those in the Antipodes (not formal Hell) even feel Broceliande; they become aware of other moments besides the P'o-l'u one. . . And the distance from the Antipodes is no greater, in Grace, than from . . . Camelot.[13]

The romantic vision is one way back to the conviction of sin.

Logres, the kingdom of Arthur, is a theme or province of the Empire. The originality in Williams's conception of the Arthurian story lay in his idea that the king and the kingdom existed for the Grail, which was to be a prelude and a sign of the second coming of Christ. The coming was to be prepared by an interaction between Broceliande and the Empire, Carbonek and Byzantium. The catastrophe that intervened was the Dolorous Blow. The reader may remember that in Malory's *Mort d'Arthur*[14] this was the wound given to King Pellam, the Keeper of the Hallows, by Balin, who struck him with the Sacred Spear that pierced the side of Christ, in a scuffle that resulted from Balm's attack upon Garlon, the Invisible Knight who was Pellam's brother. 'It is this turning of the sacred mysteries to the immediate security of the self that is the catastrophic thing,' wrote Williams, who proposed to connect the blow with Balin's 'ignorance of the true nature of the Invisible Knight'. In the Knight he saw another figure of the Accuser and the Flame, 'a certain similitude to the . . . Holy Ghost, as It exercises Its operations in the world'. In 'the ever-bleeding wound of the Keeper' the Holy

Ghost is wounded. So Charles Williams wished to unite the story of the Blow with other stories of the quest, where a 'great good' was lost or missed because Gawaine or Perceval failed to ask the meaning of the Hallows, 'What serves the Grail?' Had they asked they would have known the Knight's true nature, and the blow would never have been given that shattered three kingdoms in ruins.

Unhappily we know this conception only through a long note found by Mr. C. S. Lewis at the end of *The Figure of Arthur,*[15] where Williams, after tracing the development of the Arthurian legend from the sixth century until about 1230, proceeds to outline his own proposals for its revision. The poems describing Garlon, the unasked question, and the Dolorous Blow were never written, at least never completed. Of Garlon we know something through the Accuser, the Skeleton, and the Flame. Of the Blow we know that it is an image of the Fall. Another image of the Fall is to be found in *The Vision of the Empire,* where

> The Adam climbed the tree: the boughs
> rustled, withered, behind them; they saw
> the secluded vision of battle in the law;
> they found the terror in the Emperor's house.
>
> The tree about them died undying,
> the good lusted against the good,
> the Acts in conflict envenomed the blood,
> on the twisted tree hung their body wrying.
>
> Joints cramped; a double entity
> spewed and struggled, good against good;
> they saw the mind of the Emperor as they could,
> his imagination of the wars of identity.

They desired, and were allowed 'to experience good as evil'. We may conceive that in something like the same way Balin, Lancelot, and Mordred were to experience the Holy Ghost as the dark god, the crucifixion as an evil, through their own desire to know as gods.

Of the three lords of the Quest, who all in some sense achieved the Grail, Galahad represents the union of romantic love with the way of renunciation. *The Son of Lancelot* tells the story of his birth, conceived in a magical sleep where Lance-

lot's hypnotised eyes mistook Princess Helayne, the virgin daughter of the Keeper of the Hallows, for Guenevere, Arthur's queen. But in comparison with the older versions it is Bors who grows in stature. 'Bors is in the chapel at Sarras as well as Galahad and Percivale. This is what relates the Achievement to every man.' For Bors is a married knight; two poems celebrate his love for his wife Elaine. The Grail will return to earth 'when Galahad is effectually in Bors as Bors is implicitly in Galahad', but this part of the tale

> cannot be told until the clause of the Lord's Prayer is fulfilled
> and the kingdom of heaven is come upon earth, perhaps not
> until there is a new heaven and a new earth.[16]

The poems about Bors, *The Fish of Broceliande* and *On the King's Coins,* point forward to such a transfiguration of the natural life of the family in what Williams would have called an 'arch-natural' pattern, as we find suggested in poems by Anne Ridler, *For a Child Expected,* and *For a Christening.*[17]

The influence of Charles Williams upon younger writers first began to be apparent in the Penguin *Anthology of Religious Verse* (1942), where Norman Nicholson included, besides extracts from *Cranmer, The Vision of the Empire* and two much earlier poems. Some of the poems in *The Region of the Summer Stars* appeared in *Poetry (London).* In *Taliessin Reborn*[18] Anne Ridler attempted to define the quality of this poetry,

> in its coarse, flexible mesh
> Rich with a strange juxtaposition of colours,
> Here and there snarled or gaudy, but still strong-fibred,
> With common words in a strange dye, with knots of metaphysic—
> This is the mesh that drew the loud myth so close
> (The manuals coupled, the echo instantaneous).
> This at last compelled the slow sea-coming
> And loosed upon England the invisible virtues.

In another poem for her husband in Orkney she explained the effects of *Taliessin* upon her image of that *ultima Thule:*

> A dark north
> That yet glares with open eyes

All summer; an island that, however you tell me
Of cornfields, low cliffs, a paper-strewn shore,
Still is a rock for me,
Half hidden, steep in a snarling sea;
Still is the distant savage island
Of Lot's time, an island encrusted with names
Like barnacles—Morgause in a kind of shroud,
Lamorack murdered, Gawaine, Mordred,
Whose deeds and relationships, hard to remember,
Express our sin, our suffering, our self-knowledge.
Orkney: peat and storms; the overthrow of good—
And its resurrection, also hard to remember:
But that happened elsewhere.

In better poems, especially *Ringshall Summer,* she makes her own mythology from her immediate surroundings. In *The Phoenix Answered,*

Sitting in this garden you cannot escape symbols,
Take them how you will.

What Charles Williams did with the long lines in ledgers, as well as with his reading, she can do with the sights and sounds of the nursery,

Here the extraordinary fact of Being, which we see
Stripped and simple as the speechless stranger on my knee.

This is metaphysical poetry, not mere description:

cursive in form like those
Baroque babies that float in Venetian skies,
You express a plain fact in an elaborate pose.

She has achieved a symbolism that can communicate to every young mother, troubled with the tensions of married life in a world in turmoil. Only a few of her poems are primarily descriptive, for instance the sketches at the end of *The Nine Bright Shiners*.

More of Norman Nicholson's poems are primarily topographical, but it is a mistake to imagine that he is only, or even mainly, a regional poet. Many of the smaller poems about places in his first volume, *Five Rivers* (1944), employ the

same method that appears on a larger scale in the longer mythological poems, *The Garden of the Innocent, The Bow in the Clouds, The Land under the Ice,* and *The Anatomy of Desire.* Of these only *The Garden* is as successful as *Egremont,* where

> in the hollows the men store
> Rich as rubies, the red ore;
> And rocks and bones are broken both
> When the stone spine is theft from earth.
> The crime defiles like a red mud
> The ore, the sandstone, and the blood.

in *Rockface* (1948)

> The river of flesh flows white and smooth
> Under the crags, under the swill of willows,
> Where dreams hang like spider-webs milled with rain,
> The river of flesh flows sweetly down the bed of the bone:
> But oh do not cry to the lonely sky
> Asking why blood should be water and heart a stone—.
> The river herself has formed the stone,
> Tenderly breaking the rock through centuries of pain,
> Rolling it like an egg in the nest of her womb.
> The stone beats with the slow pulse of the seasons;
> The heart of the stone is warm as wood.
> The river of flesh flows gently from head to foot,
> And light ripples on the waves, the nippled eddies,
> The golden water-weeds of hair...

Here and in the title poem, where

> The rock face, temple, mouth and all,
> Peers bleakly at me from this dry-stone wall,

geography and geology are an anatomy of the human spirit. On the other hand, in *The Holy Mountain*[19] the earthly paradise, a state of perfection, has the flora and fauna of the English Lakes:

> The kestrel, there, shall eat haws like the throstle,

> The owl, like the goldfinch shall feed on the thistle,
> The stoat shall eat grass like the hare.
> In the becks the pike shall play with the trout,
> The stickleback shall swim between the heron's feet.

W. H. Auden, an older poet, has written in *The Age of Anxiety* of

> that state of prehistoric happiness which, by human beings, can only be imagined in terms of a landscape bearing a symbolic resemblance to the human body.[20]

He was probably thinking, not only of *Finnegan's Wake,* which he echoes in the poems that follow, but of the map of Europe and western Asia at the beginning of *Taliessin through Logres*.[21] He is too entirely a public poet, too intent on interpreting the distresses of our own generation, to make use of the incantations in the poetry of Charles Williams. But in a note to his *New Year Letter* he has acknowledged his debt to the ideas in *The Descent of the Dove. The Age of Anxiety* more obviously derives from *All Hallows' Eve*.

Sidney Keyes, on the other hand, found the incantations more arresting than the ideas. He and his friend John Heath-Stubbs discovered the poetry of Charles Williams while they were at Oxford together in 1940—2. For some reason neither of them realised that Williams himself was in Oxford until Keyes had sailed on the voyage that led almost immediately to his early death in the battle for Tunis in May 1943. Although Keyes wrote in a letter to Richard Church in January that year[22] that 'Eliot, Charles Williams, Graves (to some extent), my great friend John Heath-Stubbs… . and a few others, very few' were 'the only living writers whom I can accept entirely', he seems to have been rather fascinated by the orchestration than impressed with the meaning of *Taliessin through Logres.* On the other hand, the Skeleton in *Cranmer* appealed strongly to his sense of the macabre. It haunts the background of many of the poems in *The Iron Laurel* (1942). Themes from *Witchcraft* and *The Descent of the Dove,* the interpretation of church history that Williams published in 1940, appear in *Gilles de Retz*, *John the Baptist,* and *Simon Magus.* The use of imagery from *Taliessin* in *The Grail* is the more impressive because it was written on his last leave, and after *The Wilder-*

ness, the most mature product of his precocious genius (he was not twenty-one when he died). *The Grail* seems to be his last surviving poem,

> The great cup tumbled, ringing like a bell
> Thrown down upon the iron~guarded stair
> When the cloud took Him; and its iron voice
> Challenged the King's dead majesty to fear..
>
> But the dead girl, the flower-crowned, alone
> Walks without fear the bannered streets of heaven;
> Lies nightly in the hollow of His hand—
> The cradle of your fear her fort and haven.
>
> She alone
> Knew from her birth the mystic Avalon.

The dead girl is 'Blanchefleur, the sister of Perceval, who died giving her blood for a sick lady'.[23] The poem implies some understanding of the mystery of exchange, in spite of the spirit of necromancy, 'a great cold passion to destroy the earth', that pervades so much of Sidney Keyes's poetry. The Skeleton appears in another late poem, *Four Postures of Death,* and there is something of the geography of P'o-L'u in *A Letter from Tartary* ('The Tartar wind' is another symbol in *The Wilderness).* It was the negative side of Williams that gripped Keyes, who was a witness to an absent God. 'God has left us like a girl', he wrote at the end of *The Glass Tower in Galway.* When he thought of Christ,

> bladed centuries are drawn between us,
> The room is ready, but the guest is dead.

Yeats influenced him much, and Rilke more than I, not knowing German, can understand, but Eliot and Williams were native poets and therefore nearer to his own baffling experience:

> All I know is that everything in a vague sort of way means something else, and I want desperately to find out *what*.[24]

In this he spoke for his generation: 'I am not a man but a voice. My only justification is my power of speaking clearly.' Many have found in his poetry an under-

standing of the young that they find nowhere else. It has what Eliot, speaking of Blake, once called 'the unpleasantness of great poetry'.

John Heath-Stubbs is more obviously indebted to Williams for the thought and much of the imagery of such poems as *Edward the Confessor* in *Beauty and the Beast* (1943), and *Tannhäuser's End,* in *Poetry Quarterly* for the autumn of 1947. But his music is always his own

> For a strange Star has fallen, to blossom from a tomb,
> And infinite Godhead circumscribed, hangs helpless at the breast.[25]

In a long poem on Alexandria (in the *Poetry Review* for October 1948) he has given us a mythistorical geography on an altogether larger scale than Norman Nicholson's local history. He pictures Alexander the Great

> Receiving the submission of the Ocean,
> Whose fish-tailed monstrous gods as heralds blew
> Their twisted shells, summoning the tribes of legend:
> The satyrs, centaurs, and rough aegipans;
> The white-flanked queen of the swift Amazons;
> With dog-faced and intelligent
> Baboon-men out of Abyssinia.

The greater part of the poem is taken up with the spiritual battle in Alexander's city between Hellenistic paganism, identified with the wisdom of Buddha, easily accepted by 'all the wise men, the philosophers of Alexandria'; and

> a violent gospel
> Telling of Christ's anger in Jerusalem,
> That city which should have no holy stone
> Left on another. And he told
> Of a Tree which was not of illumination,
> But the centre of darkness over all the earth;
> Of a Saviour ascending there
> To win the terrible resurrection of the flesh.

It is not surprising that in *Poetry (London)* and in *Time and Tide* he has written excellent critical appreciations of the poetry of Charles Williams. In the first of

these[26] he writes:

> We are perhaps wrong to expect, as it were, painting in the round from such a poet. He believed, as many thinkers and poets (including Paul Valery) have believed, that there is a close analogy between poetic truth and that of pure mathematics. . . The characters and scenes of the Taliessin poems have a mathematical or emblematical quality, rather than an organic one. Or we might draw an analogy with Byzantine mosaic, and compare the whole body of the poems to some vast cathedral, such as St. Sophia in Constantinople. At first our eyes are bewildered by the ranks upon ranks of stiff and apparently forbidding figures —saints and angels, virgins, martyrs, emperors and soldiers. Then gradually, we become conscious of the significance of the whole design, and overpowered by the splendour of gold and porphyry, and inlaid glass.

This quality of brocade, of a rich tapestry, is evident in his own poetry, especially in such poems as *Epithalamion for the Marriage at Cana of Galilee.*[27] We need patience before we can perceive 'how greatly it is all planned'. The plan of the *Taliessin* poems was alas never completed. They remain a torso, like *The Figure of Arthur.* but they have produced a new kind of poetic mythology.

Notes

[1] *The Silver Stair* was published in 1913, *Poems of Conformity* in 1917, *Divorce* in 1920, *Windows of Night* in 1923.

[2] In her preface to *Seed of Adam and other plays,* Oxford (1948), p. viii.

[3] Anne Ridler, bc. cit., p. v.

[4] P. 96 (second edition, 1947).

[5] This may have to do with Robert Byron's *Byzantine Achievement* (1929).

[6] Cf. the author's *Byzantine Patriarchate,* 1947, chapter i.

[7] 14th March 1946.

[8] *The Figure of Arthur,* in *Arthurian Torso,* edited with additional matter by C. S. Lewis (1948), p. 82.

[9] A note by Williams cited by Lewis, ibid., p. 99.

[10] Lewis, ibid., p. 101.

[11] *The Departure of Merlin,* in *Taliessin.*

[12] *The Vision of the Empire,*

[13] A note in a letter to C. S. Lewis, cited in *Arthurian Torso,* p. 173,

[14] Book ii, chapters 14—6.

[15] *Arthurian Torso,* pp. 79—90.

[16] *Arthurian Torso,* p. 84.

[17] *The Nine Bright Shiners* (1943), pp. 46-.50.

[18] ibid., pp. 28-~30.

[19] In *Five Rivers.*

[20] P. *55,* before 'The Seven Stages'.

[21] 'Superimposed on this is a drawing of the figure of a naked girl with the head in Logres (Britain), the breast and shoulders in Gaul, the left elbow in Spain, the right above the Black Sea, the hands in Rome, the hips in Caucasia, and the thighs in Arabia.' Nicholson's note in the *Anthology of Religious Verse.*

[22] Cited by Michael Meyer in his preface to *Collected Poems* (1945),p. xvii.

[23] ibid., p. 124 (note).

[24] P. xiii (letter).

[25] *The Divided Ways* (1947), p. 53, poem on *The Nativity.*

[26] *Poetry (London),* Vol. III, No. 11,

[27] This and other poems will appear in *The Swarming of the Bees.*

Editorial Policy

The Charles Williams Society's Newsletter and Web site have two functions. Firstly, to publish material about the life and work of Charles Williams. Secondly, to publish details of the activities of the Society.

Contributions to the Newsletter are welcome. If you wish to submit a contribution, please take note of the following:

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- Submissions on paper should be typed double spaced and single-sided.
- All quotations should be clearly referenced, and a list of sources included.
- Submissions of just a few hundred words may be hand written.
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