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The
**Charles
Williams**
Society



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Newsletter

No. 116 Autumn 2005

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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Reading groups

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



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From the Editor

In *Descent into Hell* Pauline Anstruther willingly bears the pain of her martyred ancestor John Struther as he waits, in another time-cycle, for the pyre. In CW's intertwining of times his martyrdom, whatever else it may have achieved, reached down the ages to play a part in the redemption of others. Politically motivated bombing in the name of some cause (including the extensive state versions) is an averse reflection of this: pain is created from nothing and imposed recklessly on others, with no redeeming features. There is no mutual exchange and (perhaps therefore) it doesn't work; all it does is enrage people and engage them in inflicting more suffering because there seems to be a lack of other options. Perhaps the ("civilized") world will end in 2012 after all.

Talking of endings. In my younger motorbike days I was a fan of one of the rock bands that played the pub circuit round London. There would be an impressive display of machines lined up outside the venue in Croydon where they were a regular and, for a while, very popular act. But something changed, the numbers dwindled and the hardcore fans in the bike gangs stopped turning up. On the last night I saw them (I admit it was raining, but even so) the four piece band on stage outnumbered the audience. They turned in a brilliant performance but clearly decided it was all over and so went their separate ways for good at the end of the set. People told me it was a shame the group split up - but they weren't there on that last night.

Edward Gauntlett

Society News & Notes

Tolkien

The Society was one of the participating societies at the conference at Aston University in August, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of J. R. R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings". Several papers explored the links between Tolkien and Charles Williams, including two by members of your Council. Richard Jeffrey compared their poetry (reading extracts with great verve and to loud applause), and Richard Sturch gave a commentary on Tolkien's verses about Williams, and what these revealed about the two men. The conference was in all a great success - and a small pile of membership applications was taken up in a few hours.

Overseas members: a request from the treasurer

From time to time I have cheques sent to me by our bank which they cannot pay in and credit to our account. These are from overseas members, and usu-

ally the problem is that they have a written a cheque in pounds sterling on their overseas bank and just sent it in. Unfortunately, this simple method does not work, and either we have to pay a hefty conversion charge or I have to send the cheque back and ask the member to arrange the payment from their end. Since all I get is the cheque I sometimes have difficulty in identifying who has sent it, as many people's signatures are not readily readable – I know mine isn't.

I should therefore be grateful if overseas members could make a point of asking their bank to transfer the right sum to us in sterling, using the following details:

HSBC Bank, Poultry and Princes St
London
Swift MIDLGB2141W
Favour Cafcash Ltd
IBAN GB48MIDL40053072138549

Quote charity name: Charles Williams Society, and account number 00008635 as reference.

Stephen Barber

Charles Williams Society Meetings

- ◆ **Saturday 8 October 2005**

Royal Foundation of St Katharine , 2 Butcher Row, London E14.

There is an extensive programme with the first talk due to begin at 11.00 am and we ask that members arrive in good time. The day will close after tea at 4.30 pm.

Proposed dates for next year:

- ◆ **Saturday 25 March 2006** (Oxford)

- ◆ **Saturday 14 October 2006** (London)

TEMPTATION
By Richard Sturch

This paper was read to the Society at the November 2004 meeting.

I have to begin with two excuses and two apologies. My first excuse for taking this subject is of course the fact that Lilith is traditionally associated with temptation, and Lilith has kept cropping up in this session. The second is that one of the two most celebrated temptations ever, that of our Lord in the wilderness, was handled by both Charles Williams and George MacDonald, the former in a 1942 radio play and the latter in an Unspoken Sermon. My first *apology* is to both Societies represented here, if I go over material very well known to them for the sake of the *other* Society; I can only say “bear with me, and remember the other lot may not know what is utterly familiar to you”. My second apology is to the MacDonald Society in particular. I am reasonably well up in MacDonald’s fantasy and his sermons, but not in his “straight” novels, nor in his poetry, and it may well be that there are striking illustrations of his attitude towards the idea of temptation to be found in these of which I am wholly ignorant. If so, I hope I shall be instructed and set right.

Let us begin with the Temptation in the Wilderness, and with MacDonald’s Unspoken Sermon on it¹. He begins with a strong (and surely correct) insistence that our Lord could not possibly be tempted with evil, and that the devil did not try so to tempt Him. He was tempted with good; “with inferior forms of good, that is, pressing upon Him, while the higher forms of good held themselves aloof”. To take food is not evil; it is, on the contrary, good, and may even be a positive duty, “an awful duty” MacDonald calls it, when it can restore one to spiritual health as well as physical, render one “capable of hope as well as faith, of gladness as well as confidence”. And this was surely Christ’s case after His long fast. The catch was, of course – and here MacDonald comes close to con-

ventional (though still true) sermons on the Temptation – that this would mean using His power to take care of Himself, rather than to do the work of His Father and trust the Father to do the taking care. It would (here I am putting words into MacDonald’s mouth), far from adding hope to faith and gladness to confidence, have *denied* confidence and faith themselves. It would be a refusal to live by the word of God. “The word of God once understood, a man must live by the faith of what God is.”

In the second temptation (MacDonald follows the order in Matthew) the devil takes up this very theme of faith. We are meant to trust God? “If God is to be so trusted, try Him”. We are to live by His word? Then take Him at His word – “He will give his angels charge over thee”. Except that this too undermines and denies faith. “To put God to the question in any other way than by saying ‘What will you have me to do?’ is... either a forcing of God to act where He has created no need for action, or the making of a case where He shall seem to have forfeited His word if He does not act... Man’s first business is ‘What does God want me to do?’ not ‘What will God do if I do so and so?’” I have the impression that MacDonald was a little less interested in this temptation than in the other two, and perhaps a little unsure of its meaning. He saw it as rather similar to the first, though going deeper in so far as it follows on from the faith and trust which had taken our Lord through the first.

“The first [temptation]”, MacDonald continues, “was to help Himself in His need; the second, perhaps to assert the Father; the third to deliver His brethren. To deliver them, that is, after the fashion of men – from the outside... Not all the sovereignty of God... delegated to the Son, and administered by the wisdom of the Spirit... could have wrought the kingdom of heaven in one corner of our earth.” It could end the oppression and misery that comes on us from outside; it could not end that which arises from within. “I will not inquire whether such an enterprise could be accomplished without the worship of Satan. I will ask whether to know better and not do so well, is not a serving of Satan.” Once again, the temptation of the lesser good.

Williams’s approach² is quite different. Whereas MacDonald begins with the particular situation of Jesus, and applies His successive defeats of the devil’s

attacks to our own situations, our own temptations, Williams begins his play with a group of people in wartime, one of whom says “When the war is over I am determined to be comfortable”. But, they agree, belief and love, and even peace, do not go very well with comfort. (One recalls how King Cradlema’s voice “squeals with callous comfort”³). Only then is Jesus mentioned, as one who was offered a different kind of peace, three times tempted to take it. “Each temptation, when he refused it, became his enemy.”

Here Williams begins what I may perhaps call a kind of column effect. The three temptations are paralleled with the “three lords who condemned him”, Herod, Pilate and Caiaphas. Herod exemplifies physical comfort; Pilate, political comfort (“comfort of great fame” is the Evil One’s expression); and Caiaphas, “the comfort of true religion”. They offer these comforts to Judas who is, alarmingly, Everyman, and responds

“It is not, indeed
that I hate the man Jesus or am against reforms.
But we must wait God’s kingdom in a peaceable style
and a moderate goodwill; is not that a better way?”

“Much” reply Caiaphas and Pilate; and Herod, the one of the three who really knows exactly what he is doing, *choosing* damnation rather than pretending it is faith or duty, adds “and the goodwill will after a time moderate still more.” The first two temptations (Williams is following the Lucan order “we may presumably use each [order] for edification without denying the other”, he wrote elsewhere) are not taken as deeply as in MacDonald, though the third certainly is. We are not shown how the temptations are to a lesser good, in the way we are in MacDonald. What is done instead is to extend them more widely. (The germ of this idea goes back to the early play “The Rite of the Passion”.) It isn’t just the three lords; the pattern of the Temptations is going to recur. When Christ rejects all three comforts, adding “I will send my own Comforter one day to my own”, the Evil One retorts

...have it or have it not
it is all the same to you. Sir, you shall!

O indeed, Sir, so you shall!
 A little new interval, a year or two,
 and I will try you with exemption from comfort indeed.
 Your drink vinegar, your bed cruel wood,
 your fame a criminal's – an obscene lost thing;
 and if then you mean to take comfort in God –
 no, even there you shall grow lost and obscene,
 seen by yourself as the sin worse than any...
 Disciples? – you! I will despoil your toil
 of all disciples! They shall set you on a soft seat
 high-riding and kingly, and cry *Hosanna* –
 all three comforts just there!
 and then you thrust down, and they
 opening a new day with *Crucify*.²

Consider, next, their use of the figure of Lilith. She appears (or at least her name, as a word, appears) at one point in the Bible (Isaiah 34:14), where she seems to be a kind of night-demon. But both MacDonald and Williams are aware of the later legends which made her the first wife of Adam and a figure of temptation. The Adam theme, however, does not come out really in Williams.

She gets a quick mention in *The Place of the Lion*⁴, where Damaris's stammering confession to Anthony "I've been... I've been..." is interrupted "The first-born of Lilith, who is illusion, and Samael the Accursed". This is not to be taken as a statement of fact! Though it is true that Damaris has been beset by a kind of illusion, she has hardly been deluding others.

Lilith as a temptress is very much more important. She has a long poem named after her in *Heroes and Kings*⁵, in which indeed "the Adam", as Williams liked to call him/them, appear, though not as her husband. (In fact, she is the mother of Iblis, Satan; I do not know whether this has any background in legend.) She tempts, not by offering comfort, but by illusion (as the reference in *The Place of the Lion* might suggest). The scene is laid in Solomon's palace at the time of the visit of the Queen of Sheba. (There are distinct parallels with the vision of Solomon in *Many Dimensions*.) Two suppliants ask for Solomon's help.

The first has repented of a sexual sin and received God's forgiveness, but is haunted every night by "a foul thing out of the Pit". Cannot Solomon, "commander of devils, cause hell's gates to lock"? The King cries out

"Deceiver of men,
Lilith, depart and trouble the world no more!
Then to his suppliant. 'Of two judgments one,
As thou hast prayed or hast not: thine the choice –
Freedom and peace and slumber, since the worlds
Obey me, and all the Jinn; but think that so
Thou, crying aloud for pardon, hast but sought
Thine own rest, thine own quietude – not God;
Or this thy visitation to the end
And to know thou willest naught but only God.
Choose.' The man answered slowly, veiling his face,
'Amen: I take refuge with God', and the king said
'The Lord thy God be with thee: go in peace.'"

Similarly, the second desires justice upon a friend who has betrayed and robbed him. The King cries "Deceiver of Adam, depart! O Mother of Iblis, trouble the man no more!" and offers "of two judgments, one, As thou hast loved or loved not": either the arrest of the thief and restoration of the stolen property,

"but therewith knowledge thou hast never loved;
or else no satisfaction till the end
but that thy past indeed was his and love's.
Choose.' And the man covered his face and sighed,
'Amen: I loved and love.' And the king said
'The Lord thy God be with thee: go in peace.'"

Lilith is a temptress through deception, seeking to deceive each suppliant into preferring immediate satisfaction to faith or love without realizing that is what they are doing. Solomon, on the contrary, offers clarity of vision and self-knowledge: and, as Williams says elsewhere, "Most men when at last they see their desire, Fall to repentance - all have that chance."⁶

Undoubtedly MacDonald's Lilith, in the book of that name, is also a deceiver, or wants to be one. She lies repeatedly to Vane; but after a time he ceases to believe her any longer. The trouble is, of course, that he goes on acting as if he *did* believe her. "I told you to do nothing anyone you distrusted asked you!" says Mr Raven.⁷ Vane replies "How was mortal to remember that?", but one feels that mortal might quite well have declined to do what Lilith asked even without having been warned in advance, once mortal had realized her untrustworthiness. And Vane is of course quite capable of folly even without Lilith to encourage it or failure of memory as an excuse – even when Mr Raven's warnings are ringing in his ears.

Perhaps this is one of the great differences between the (human) temptations one reads of in MacDonald and in Williams. MacDonald's characters – not just Vane, but, for example, Anodos in *Phantastes* as well - seem tempted above all to folly – or perhaps one should say *by* folly. This is not just a matter of intellectual error. (Indeed, I can hardly imagine him being very excited about intellectual error as such; "If in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you", as he quoted to a Unitarian audience.⁸ *As such*, be it noted: "For him who is in earnest about the will of God, it is of endless consequence that he should think rightly of God. He cannot come close to Him, cannot truly know His will, while his notion of Him is in any point that of a false God."⁹) You could perhaps say it is a matter of foolish self-confidence, or, in other words, of pride, the refusal to submit to something or someone wiser than oneself. Lilith herself suffers from something like this. "She counted it slavery to be one with me", says Adam, "and bear children for Him who gave her being"¹⁰. It is the state of mind of one who "would cut his own stem from his root that he might call it his own and love it; who... regards his own dominion over himself – the rule of the greater by the less, inasmuch as the conscious self is less than the self - as a freedom infinitely larger than the range of God's being."¹¹ And it is in the name of this false freedom that Lilith at first refuses to turn from wickedness¹².

Perhaps related to this is the danger of simply not thinking about what you are doing. Thomas Wingfold, who has almost *drifted* into the priesthood, uses his uncle's sermons without considering that "worldly elements in the community" might have influenced his judgment in doing this, though, as Polwarth correctly

guesses, he “require[s] only to be set thinking of a matter to follow [his] conscience with regard to it”. Fergus Duff indulges in a simile which he has not thought out, and Donal Grant takes him to humiliating task for it; and of course this is an illustration of a basic weakness in his character, not just his literary taste. And the weakness is closely allied to folly. “Naturally capable, he had already made of himself rather a dull fellow”, and Donal, it is suggested is rebuking “not the madness but the silliness of the prophet”. Unfortunately, unlike Wingfold, he does not come through.¹³ It might be true to say that it is the world, rather than the flesh or the devil, that is the enemy MacDonald is fighting; his characters lack clarity about themselves because they accept the judgments of the world. The suppliants in Williams’s poem also lack clarity about themselves, but their failure arises from within (or from Lilith).

“Mrs Sammile”, the Lilith of *Descent into Hell*, is both like and unlike MacDonald’s version. MacDonald’s Lilith is still beautiful, but the beauty is going; and when she sees a vision of herself as the “splendent beauty” she was meant to be, she trembles and sinks on the floor helpless. In Williams, Mrs Sammile’s face “had been beautiful, rounded and precious with delight... only the cheeks were a little macabre in their withdrawal, and the eyes in their hint of holowness about them.”¹⁴ “Like a living death”, is Pauline’s reaction. Here is a resemblance. But Williams’s Lilith does not rely on folly. She is very like the Evil One in the play, with his talk of comfort. Pauline, at one point, mentions what she calls her bad dreams. “There are all sorts of ways of changing dreams” answers Mrs Sammile. “All tales of the brain. Why not tell yourself a comforting tale?... There are tales that can give you yourself completely and the world could never treat you so badly then that you wouldn’t neglect it.”

She returns to the attack later on, just after Pauline has learnt the possibility of exchange, the “doctrine of substituted love”. Peter Stanhope has undertaken to bear her fear for her, and told her “You must give your burden up to someone else, and you must carry someone else’s burden”¹⁵. Mrs Sammile’s offer is rather different. “Take care of yourself. Think of yourself; be careful of yourself... I could tell you tales that would shut everyone but yourself out. Wouldn’t you like to be happy?” Pauline is very nearly convinced. “She felt a vague thrill of promised delight. Against it her release that day began already to seem provisional and

weak.” But Lilith overreaches herself when she adds “You’ll never have to do anything for others any more”. That rings false; “false because of the habit of [Pauline’s] past and because of Stanhope’s promise”. And her own. “Never have to do anything – and she had been promising herself that she would carry someone else’s parcel as hers had been carried... The serene light of substitution shone, beyond her understanding but not beyond her deed... She flung the gate shut, and snatched her hands away.” Incidentally, in the end, all Lily Sammile is offering is dust.¹⁶

I don’t think we meet with anything like this in MacDonald. It would be ridiculous to try and evaluate the two men morally, but it seems to me that MacDonald was a more *innocent* sort of person than Williams. Perhaps this ties in with their approaches to the temptations of our Lord; where Williams thinks of temptations that come to us all, MacDonald thinks of those specifically which might have pressed hardest on Christ – temptations, as we saw, to the inferior good. (Of course, Williams too knew of the danger of the inferior good; but he does not apply it to the case of our Lord.) “There is a bewilderment”, says MacDonald in a novel, “about the very nature of evil which only he who made us capable of evil that we might be good, can comprehend.”¹⁷ Naturally, he knows there is evil in the world, and evil people. But he seems to be less interested in how they become evil. The bad, or flawed, people whom I have met in his books (and, as I said, there are many whom I haven’t) seem to have their badness or their flaws already. (That is true of both Thomas Wingfold and Fergus Duff, whom I mentioned earlier.) What is far more important to MacDonald is how people may, if I may so put it, be tempted back into goodness. Can Vane or Anodos come out of their folly? Can spoilt girls like Rosamond and Agnes in *The Lost Princess* emerge from their self-centredness? And how?

Of course, Williams too was concerned about repentance and recovery. When Anthony teases Damaris with the name of Lilith, it is in a chapter called (accurately) “The Conversion of Damaris Tighe”. *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* and *The House of the Octopus* are largely about Cranmer’s and Antony’s salvation. (That’s a different Antony, by the way, a missionary!) But the preceding darkness is made very real, whether one escapes from it, like Antony or Pauline, or succumbs, like Wentworth. (in Williams, be it noted, it is possible to

succumb. It is not easy to do so permanently; even the murderer and diabolist Gregory Persimmons in *War in Heaven* is redeemed, and salvation reaches beyond death itself (“*Taliessin on the Death of Virgil*”). But it can be done; whereas in *Lilith* even the great Shadow is eventually to come to Adam’s house.)

In MacDonald, temptation works through shallowness; that is true even of the Temptation in the Wilderness, with shallower goods offered instead of the greater and holier ones. In Williams, it works more through the possibility of inward selfishness. No doubt the ordinary temptations we meet with are often less subtle and less sinister, more banal (though not necessarily less dangerous). But for all that, MacDonald and Williams were dealing with realities, and impressively.

References:

- 1 *Creation in Christ* (Wheaton, 1976), pp. 271-8; all quotations are from this abridgement (by Rolland Hein) of the *Unspoken Sermons*.
- 2 *The Three Temptations* (in *Collected Plays* (OUP, 1963)), pp. 377-401.
- 3 *The Calling of Arthur*, in *Taliessin through Logres* (OUP, 1938), line 13.
- 4 *The Place of the Lion* (London, 1933), chapter 11, p. 135.
- 5 *Heroes and Kings* (London, 1930).
- 6 *Judgement at Chelmsford* (in *Collected Plays*), p.90.
- 7 *Lilith*, chapter 28 (p. 315 of the double volume *Phantastes/Lilith*, London, 1962).
- 8 *Philippians* 3:15; the sermon was printed in *A Dish of Orts* (London, 1893), but I do not have the exact reference.
- 9 *Creation in Christ*, p. 292.
- 10 *Lilith*, chapter 29 (p.322).

11 This passage is cited from the *Unspoken Sermon* on “Freedom” in C. S. Lewis’s anthology, p.85. I couldn’t find it in Hein’s abridgment.

12 *Lilith*, chapter 39, pp. 370-1.

13 *Sir Gibbie* (London, no date in my copy), chapter 50, pp.319 ff. I do not have a reference for the quotation from *Thomas Wingfold, Curate*.

14 *Descent into Hell* (London, 1937), p. 59.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

17 *Ibid.*, p.194.

18 *Sir Gibbie*, chapter 41, p. 258.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir,

Does anyone know whether Williams ever expressed an indebtedness to George Eliot? I ask this because of a startling similarity I have found between a passage in one of her novels and two passages in Williams.

I was reading George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, when I came across this; Stephen Guest has noticed Maggie Tulliver's arm:

'Who has not felt the beauty of a woman's arm? The unspeakable suggestions of tenderness that lie in the dimpled elbow, and all the varied gently-lessening curves, down to the delicate wrist, with its tiniest, almost imperceptible nicks in the firm softness. A woman's arm touched the soul of a great sculptor two thousand years ago so that he wrought an image of it for the Parthenon which moves us still as it clasps lovingly the time-worn marble of a headless trunk. Maggie's was such an arm as that – and it had the warm tints of life.' (Book 6, Chapter 10 'The Spell seems Broken')

Note the hint of the divine, achieved by a comparison of Maggie's arm with Phidias's statue of the goddess Athene. For all that she was a freethinker George Eliot clearly understood the way in which the loved person carries, or seems to carry, a sense of being unfallen, even divine. Williams does something very similar in *Shadows of Ecstasy*, when Philip notices Rosamond's arm:

'Well, after all, Rosamond was only human; she couldn't be absolutely perfect. And then as she stretched out her arm again he cried out that she was perfect, she was more than perfect; the movement of her arm was something frightfully important, and now it was gone. He had seen the verge of a great conclusion of mortal things and then it had vanished. Over that white curve he had looked into incredible space; abysses of intelligence lay beyond it.' (Chapter 4 'The Majesty of the King')

In both cases the beloved's arm which gives a moment of visionary experience with a divine aura playing about it.

Williams returned to this image in *Taliessin through Logres*, when Palomides sees Iseult's arm:

I saw the hand of the queen Iseult;
down her arm a ruddy bolt
fired the tinder of my brain
to measure the shape of man again. ('The Coming of Palomides')

And the queen's arm becomes 'a rigid bar of golden flame' in Palomides's reflection and analysis of what has happened. These are examples of the Beatrician experience, which Williams expounds and analyzes so memorably in *The Figure of Beatrice*. And there is a related reflection in *Witchcraft*: 'one will be with a lover and the hand will become a different and terrifying thing . . . a phenomenon, being wholly itself, is laden with universal meaning' (77-8).

In her second book on Williams, Alice Mary Hadfield gives a long list of the writers Williams read as part of his editorial work at the Oxford University Press (*Exploration*, 77). George Eliot does not appear in this list, but in fact the Press reissued her novels in the 1920s in the World's Classics series, and he might have read them then, if he had not done so before. The only discussion of her work that I can recall comes in the Preface to his anthology, *A Book of Victorian Narrative Verse* (1930), in which he sees her as embodying nobility, and briefly mentions three of her novels, of which *The Mill on the Floss* is one.

Of course the book is hardly an obscure one. Moreover, Williams was capable of alighting on the image of a woman's arm as being revelatory for himself. But it would be nice to know whether he expressed any more specific indebtedness. Does anyone know?

Stephen Barber

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:

- ◆ Submissions should be sent to the Editor, preferably on floppy disc; otherwise by email attachment to: Edward.Gauntlett@down21.freeuk.com.
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ The Editor reserves the right to decide whether to publish a submission. Usually the main article in any issue will be a paper previously read before the Society; in most cases such papers will be published as received, with little or no editorial input. Other submissions may be edited.

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