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The  
**Charles  
Williams**  
Quarterly



No. 118

Spring 2006

[www.geocities.com/charles\\_wms\\_soc](http://www.geocities.com/charles_wms_soc)

## 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 magazine and may attend the Society's meetings which are held twice 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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## Contents

Charles Williams Quarterly No. 118

Spring 2006

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Officers of the Society	2
Reading Groups	3
From the Editor	4
Society News & Notes	5
Council Meeting Report	6
Forthcoming Meetings	7
“We Had Nothing to Say to One Another” <i>Eric Rauscher</i>	8
On Tolkien and Williams <i>Richard Sturch</i>	15
Editorial Policy and Copyright	27

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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

This issue of the Quarterly has a Tolkien theme. Two papers arose from last year's Mythcon Tolkien conference. Inevitably they cover similar ground (and both end with the same poem) but it seemed to me to make sense to publish them together rather than spin them out over two issues in the interest of variety.

It would appear that the answer to the question of what Tolkien truly thought of Williams is that it depends when you asked him. In later life Tolkien seems to have turned against his old friends and, by implication, his younger self. I don't imagine that this was anything other than involuntary; as the years went by his memories changed. He changed. His view of what was true changed. That's OK. When P G Wodehouse was asked if he had any religious beliefs he replied: "It's frightfully hard to say." That's OK too: positively insightful actually. But of course in some instances it isn't OK at all. In Afghanistan today a man stands accused of apostasy from Islam and the penalty is death. In response GWB makes empty rhetoric about the universal right of everyone to freedom, leading from his own belief in a (Christian) God given mission to spread it.

Tolkien was pleased (at one stage) that Williams recognized *The Lord of the Rings*' "centre is not in strife and war and heroism ... but in freedom, peace, order and life and good liking." Perhaps. Perhaps we now need Socrates to try to tease out what is meant by "freedom" & "peace." Meanwhile Pilate might once more find useful employment asking "What is Truth?"

Edward Gauntlett

## Society News & Notes

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### Trollope Society Tour

The Trollope Society has arranged a tour of Ireland for this summer. We are doing an 11-day Dublin to Dublin tour (27th August until 7th September) taking in Cork, Galway, Carrick-on-Shannon and as many Trollope sites as we can, which relate to his novels and his life in Ireland - and a few more general Irish tourist locations. We have had an enthusiastic response from our members but, alas, we still have vacancies.

The complete details, including booking conditions, are on our web-site at [www.trollopesociety.org/irishtrip.htm](http://www.trollopesociety.org/irishtrip.htm). People can contact the Trollope Society on 0207-720-6789 or by email at [info@trolllopesociety.org](mailto:info@trolllopesociety.org)

Rosemary Culley  
Hon. Sec. Alliance of Literary Societies web page

[www.allianceofliterarysocieties.co.uk](http://www.allianceofliterarysocieties.co.uk)

### New Christian Year

I saw the Charles Williams society web page and I thought you might enjoy hearing about my blog reprint of Williams's *New Christian Year*. Oxford University Press (who originally published it) does not claim any copyright on the text and The Charles Williams Estate does not claim it either. The same goes for the lenten *devotional The Passion of The Christ* which I will also add to the blog in Lent. Both are collections of writings from throughout church history "chosen" by Charles Williams. They are not the writings of Williams himself, but they offer a glimpse into his thought on theology and the christian mystical tradition.

The blog format allows me to reprint each day's entry (one day at a time) and allows me to categorize the source authors with automatic indexing of all of their quotes. I hope to start adding resource pages for the source authors as well.

Here's the link:

<http://tomwills.typepad.com/thenewchristianyear/>

Tom Wills

The secretary reported that he would be attending the annual confer-

## COUNCIL MEETING REPORT

## The Council of the Charles Williams Society met on Saturday 21 January at 65 Cadogan Gardens, London SW3

ence of the Alliance of Literary Societies in May and, as well as representing our society, would be able to display the 'wares' of the society there. He informed the council that Nigel Bryant had accepted our invitation to be the principal speaker at our March meeting in Oxford. A separate mailing to members of the society about that meeting was to be organised. He had heard from Mr. Michael Paulus at Princeton Theological Seminary that he (Michael Paulus) was working on the letters of CW to the Kierkegaard translator, Walter Lowrie about the publication of Kierkegaard's works in English. Further, that he had heard from Regent College, Vancouver that a new audio course on CW was being offered there.

The treasurer's report was brief: the society was in good shape financially and the only major expenditure was the Quarterly.

There was some discussion of the two day conferences that were to be held in March (Oxford) and October (London). The Oxford conference would consist of the morning address by Nigel Bryant on the Holy Grail followed after lunch by readings of Arthurian poems introduced by Stephen Barber. The October conference would be given over to a consideration of the biographical work of CW and follow a similar pattern: the morning session consisting of an address by Brian Horne on CW as a biographer and the afternoon session readings of extracts from the biographies. At some point in that day the AGM would be held.

There was some discussion about a future residential conference. Next year, 2007, would probably not give us enough time to organise such a conference, so it was proposed that 2008 would be more suitable. A theme, speakers and a venue would have to be decided before the end of this year.

Brian Horne (Acting Secretary in the absence of Richard Sturch)

## **Charles Williams Society Meetings**

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

The proposed theme for this meeting is Charles Williams as a biographer. There will be readings from his historical biographies and we hope to have a paper on some aspect of these works. Details will be communicated to members once they have been finalized. This meeting will incorporate the AGM.

- ◆ Meeting dates for 2007 will be announced in due course.

“WE HAD NOTHING TO SAY TO ONE ANOTHER” –  
J. R. R. TOLKIEN AND CHARLES WILLIAMS, ANOTHER LOOK  
BY  
ERIC RAUSCHER

At a seminar on Lewis and Tolkien a while ago, the speaker made reference to the relationship between J. R. R. Tolkien and Charles Williams. The impression he left was that Tolkien did not like Williams much or, worse, disliked him. I had encountered this opinion from other people, and found it echoed in several scholarly studies. I decided to look into the causes of such beliefs. Having just finished reading the collection of wartime letters from Williams to his wife (*To Michal from Serge*), the impression I got was that the two men were on good terms. This caused me to review the published letters of both Williams and Tolkien, as well as secondary studies (biographies, etc.). It was then that I realized that the idea of Tolkien's dislike for Williams derived from Humphrey Carpenter. Let me state my respect and admiration for his work on the Inklings, but I must quibble with him on this point.

In Carpenter's biography of Tolkien in 1977 he introduces Williams by saying "Lewis had known and admired Williams for some time, but Tolkien had only met him once or twice. Now he came to develop a complex attitude to him." (*Tolkien*, p. 150) He goes on to quote Tolkien, "We liked one another and enjoyed talking (mostly in jest)." (*Tolkien*, p. 50) Then Carpenter writes "But he added: 'We had nothing to say to one another at deeper (or higher) levels.'" The impression is that Tolkien disliked Williams from the start. However, the "nothing to say" remark was made twenty years after the period of their acquaintance.

In Carpenter's next book on the Inklings (*The Inklings*, 1979), this view is stressed further; in fact he uses a bit of the quote from Tolkien's letter to title the chapter dealing with the relationship between Tolkien and Williams: "We Had

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Nothing to Say to One Another” (*Inklings*, p. 120). The very first sentence of this chapter suggests a dark relationship: “If Charles Williams thought that he could number Tolkien among his followers he was mistaken.” (*Inklings*, p. 120). Carpenter then asserts that “Williams was thrust upon him” (Tolkien) and that he “responded by becoming faintly jealous”. The rest of the chapter goes on to bolster this argument, once again making reference to letters that Tolkien wrote in the sixties. At one point Carpenter writes that “once in his old age he referred to Williams as a ‘witch doctor’.” Once again, the impression left is that the orthodox Roman Catholic dislikes the heterodox poet. The book goes on to explore the complex and intertwined lives of the Inklings of this period, but the shadow set in the mind colours any further references or stories.

Luckily we have source materials we can use to re-examine this view. *The Letters of C. S. Lewis* (1966), *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (1981), and *To Michal From Serge* (2002), all contain great quantities of information that can be used without having to make a pilgrimage to original sources.

As I mentioned previously, I had just finished reading the letters of Williams to his wife. The thought of attempting to change the incorrect view of Tolkien’s dislike for Williams occurred to me. Williams’s first mention of Tolkien is “. . . I delivered my first lecture – hardly two hours ago. Lewis & Tolkien came.” (*To Michal*, p. 42). Much has been made of the lectures that Williams gave at Oxford (which eventually led to his being awarded an honorary master’s degree), but the point here is that it was both Lewis’s and Tolkien’s manoeuvring that allowed Williams to lecture. But theirs was not only an academic relationship. “When he [Harvard] & Tolkien & the brothers Lewis & I had dinner at the George.” (*To Michal*, p. 158). As is well known, they were a very social group, meeting often for food and drink, and for literary criticism of works in progress. “I have read some of it to C.S.L. & Tolkien . . . who admire & approve.” (*To Michal*, p. 186). Later on we see evidences that these relationships only strengthened with time. In 1944 Williams writes “. . . if I could get a readership here . . . C. S. L. & Tolkien are only human, and are likely to take more trouble over a project which would enable them to see a good deal more of me than over anything which didn’t. And I think, in the future, they may take steps.” (*To Michal*, p. 189). This refers to the possibility that Lewis and Tolkien were attempting to gain a permanent place for

## Williams at Oxford.

Note that in each of these letters Williams mentioned both Lewis and Tolkien in terms of friendship, intellectual life and professional relationships. Also note in the last letter Williams's positive view of living in Oxford as opposed to "the City", his name for London. This reflects a change from his initial disappointment at the move to Oxford, a result of the war.

The collection of Lewis's letters covers a lengthy period of time and contains a lower percentage of references to either Tolkien or Williams. The most telling letter contains "I had a pleasant evening of Thursday with Williams, Tolkien and Wrenn, during which Wrenn expressed almost seriously a strong wish to burn Williams, or at least maintained that conversation with Williams had enabled him to understand how inquisitors had felt it right to burn people . . ." (*CSL* p. 169). Many interesting things can be gleaned from this short passage. First, for Lewis it was a "pleasant evening". I would think that an evening conversation that included someone's desire to burn another at the stake would not typify "pleasant". Second, it is Wrenn, not Tolkien, who wishes to strike the match for the witch doctor. An occurrence that happens again and again in Lewis's letters is his reference to Williams regarding theological or spiritual topics in letters to others, for example, his letter to his brother on Williams' lecture "on Comus but really on chastity" (*CSL*, p. 177), or to Sister Penelope, "Truth is more effective through any lies rather than our own. Chas. Williams in Taliesin is good on this". (*CSL*, p. 198.) As a last example, after Williams's death, Lewis writes, "It is part of C. Williams' doctrine, isn't it? – that no one can paddle his own canoe but everyone can paddle someone else's . . ." (*CSL*, p. 198). Although these references to Williams's theology do not touch directly on Williams and Tolkien's relationship, they will prove relevant later.

I next turn to a source that should be considered most reliable for shedding light on Tolkien's view of Williams: Tolkien's own letters. "I hope to see C. S. L. and Charles W. tomorrow morning and read my next chapter." (*Letters*, p. 72). "I read my second chapter . . . to Lewis and Williams on Wed. morning, it was approved." (*Letters*, p. 179). "I completed my fourth new chapter ('Faramir') which rec'd fullest approbation from C. S. L. and C. W. on Monday morning." (*Letters*, p. 74). "I worked very hard at my chapter -- . . . I was rewarded this morning, as both

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C. S. L. and C. W. thought it an admirable performance.” (*Letters*, p. 179).

This series of four excerpts points out two things: – first, that Tolkien places Lewis and Williams on equal terms, desiring and receiving praise from both, and second, that he must have spent considerable time doing it. Time spent together was also more than just time in literary criticism. “. . . found the Bird and Baby closed; but was hailed in a voice that carried across the torrent of vehicles that was once St. Giles, and discovered the two Lewises and C. Williams, high and very dry on the other side. Eventually we got 4 pints of passable ale at the King’s Arms . . .” (*Letters*, p. 92).

This round of four pints should be taken to be a social occasion of four friends as opposed to a more structured meeting such as “I actually went out to an ‘Inklings’ on Thursday night . . . both Lewises were there, and C. Williams’ and beside some pleasant talk, such as I have not enjoyed for moons, . . . I did not start home till midnight, and walked with C. W. . . .” (*Letters*, p. 92-93).

A pattern is apparent of three friends exchanging ideas, writings and time spent in enjoyable social engagement, hardly an image of passing acquaintance. To stress the cohesive quality that this little group shared, Tolkien writes towards the end of the war that “the Inklings have already agreed that their victory celebration, if they are spared to have one, will be to take a whole inn in the country for at least a week, and spend it entirely in beer and talk . . .” (*Letters*, p. 94). Unfortunately, Tolkien’s words “spared to have one” were prophetic, for Williams died May 15, 1945, just days after May 8, VE Day. The planned celebration did happen, but few turned up and it must have had a sombre tone, not the enjoyable time of beer and talk.

But what of Tolkien’s relationship with Williams individually? Can the two of them be separated out of the Inklings? I think the answer is yes. “On Tuesday at noon I looked in at the Bird and B. with C. Williams. There to my surprise I found Jack and Warnie already ensconced.” (*Letters*, p. 95). The important thing here is that Tolkien and Williams were together and surprised to find the brothers there, i.e. they had not meant to meet them there but had meant to spend time with each other, presumably in beer and talk.

Not only did Tolkien crave the praise and support he received in regards to *The Lord of the Rings*, but he writes, “C. Williams who is reading it all says the great thing is that its centre is not in strife and war and heroism (though they are understood and depicted) but in freedom, peace, order and life and good liking.” (*Letters*, p. 105). Two things are evident here. First Williams was reading “it all”. This means that Tolkien gave Williams a copy of his manuscript to read, which he did, and second, that Williams’ perceptions of the core values of the book exceeded those of many modern critics who attack the book as a glorification of war.

Finally, in looking at the letters actually written during Williams’ life, the last is the most telling: “. . . in the (far too brief) years since I first met him I had grown to admire and love your husband deeply, and I am more grieved than I can express.” (*Letters*, p. 97). This is contained in the letter Tolkien wrote to Michal the day that Williams died. Either Tolkien is merely giving the widow platitudes, or, as I believe, these are heart-felt comments regarding a person he counted as a friend.

Tolkien’s most famous essay “On Fairy Stories” was published in a collection of essays edited by Lewis shortly after Williams’ death, entitled *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*.

Moving ahead in time in Tolkien’s letters we begin to see a change. “I knew Charles Williams well in his last few years . . . but I think we both found the other’s mind . . . as impenetrable when cast into ‘literature’ as we found the other’s presence and conversation delightful.” (*Letters*, p. 209). In some of Tolkien’s later letters he is responding to questions about the Inklings. Here he acknowledges friendship with Williams, but distances himself literarily (although as we saw in a previous letter, Williams correctly read Tolkien’s intentions for the meaning of *The Lord of the Rings*).

In a letter to his son Michael, dated 1 Nov 1967, Tolkien writes, “Not that one should forget the wise words of Charles Williams . . .” (*Letters*, p. 329). When discussing topics of faith or religion, Williams is referred to, just as C. S. Lewis refers to Williams on topics of theology.

Then a sudden change happens. Lewis dies, and Tolkien responds to his son

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Michael shortly after the death and mentions that he has been separated from Lewis for ten years and goes on to say “We were separated first by the sudden apparition of Charles Williams, and then by his [Lewis’s] marriage, of which he never even told me . . .” “Williams’ influence actually only appeared with his [Williams’s] death: *That Hideous Strength* . . . I think spoiled it.” (*Letters*, p. 341).

In another response to the Inklings’ relationship, Tolkien writes, “Yes, C. S. L. was my closest friend from about 1927 to 1940 . . . In fact we saw less and less of one another after he came under the dominant influence of Charles Williams.” (*Letters*, p. 349). Note that he says the end of his friendship with Lewis was in 1940, corresponding to the arrival of Williams in Oxford, but this is obviously not the case when thinking back over the previous letters. That period for the Inklings was perhaps their most fruitful and enjoyable time together until Williams’ death.

Finally, in response to a letter from Dick Plot in 1965, Tolkien shades the relationship further with these comments: “His [Lewis’s] own mythology (incipient and never fully realized) was quite different. It was at any rate broken to bits before it became coherent by contrast with C. Williams and his ‘Arthurian’ stuff . . . But then I was and remain wholly unsympathetic to Williams’ mind. I knew Charles Williams only as a friend of C. S. L. . . . We liked one another and enjoyed talking . . . but we had nothing to say to one another at deeper (or higher) levels. I doubt if he had read anything of mine available; I had read or heard a good deal of his work, but found it wholly alien, and sometimes distasteful, occasionally ridiculous.” (*Letters*, p. 361-362). Note the digs at Lewis and the semi-falsehood of “I doubt he had read anything of mine”. Note also that it is in this very late letter that the phrase “we had nothing to say to one another” appears, fully twenty years after Williams’ death.

So in conclusion two things can be stated. First, when looking at letters written by the men during the time that they knew one another, one gets the sense that they both enjoyed each other’s company. They read and critiqued each other’s work and had many social engagements together. Second, that the source of the idea that Tolkien disliked Williams is only found in letters written twenty years after Williams died. Tolkien at that point was remembering things quite differ-

ently. It is unfortunate that Carpenter chose to introduce the relationship between the two men with the later letters of Tolkien. Thankfully, Carpenter did include in “The Inklings” a poem written by Tolkien in honour of Williams while he (Williams) was still alive. As far as I know, a similar paeon to Lewis doesn’t exist. Most of the poem deals with Williams’ Arthuriad, but the last stanza, which I shall use to conclude this paper, reads:

When your fag is wagging and spectacles are twinkling,  
when tea is brewing or the glasses tinkling,  
then of your meaning often I’ve an inkling,  
your virtues and your wisdom glimpse. Your laugh  
in my heart echoes, when with you I quaff  
the pint that goes down quicker than a half,  
because you’re near. So, heed me not! I swear  
when you with tattered papers take the chair  
and read (for hours maybe), I would be there.  
And ever when in state you sit again  
and to your car imperial give rein,  
I’ll trundle, grumbling, squeaking, in the train  
of the great rolling wheels of Charles’ Wain.

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ON TOLKIEN, AND WILLIAMS,  
AND TOLKIEN ON WILLIAMS  
BY

RICHARD STURCH

C. S. Lewis says somewhere (I haven't been able to trace the passage, and quote from memory) that it would be good to be able to understand one friend through another – say, Ronald as seen through Charles's eyes and Charles through Ronald's. We all, I think, know which Ronald and which Charles he had in mind! And we have, of course, one clue to the latter understanding – Tolkien's verses on Williams, printed in the late Humphrey Carpenter's book on the Inklings(1). Some of Tolkien's later ideas about Williams (and on other matters) seem to show a kind of un-mellowing with time, but just after Williams's death he could write of his 'love and admiration' for his friend, and I do not propose to deal with any later changes; what follows is in a way a kind of commentary on the verses.

After a brief comment on the novels and their prose style ("not easily it flows;/ too often are its lights held up in brackets" – first comment true enough, second perhaps influenced too much by the splendid pun) Tolkien turns to Dante; *The Figure of Beatrice* (2) appeared in 1943, about the time the verses were written. His comment here is very interesting.

"Heavenly footsteps, too, can Williams trace  
and after Dante, plunging, soaring, race  
up to the threshold of Eternal Grace.  
The limits of all fallen men, maybe,  
(or mine alone, perhaps) explain why he  
seems best to understand of all the three  
Inferno's dark involved geography".

As far as *quantity* is concerned, it is worth noting that in *The Figure of Beatrice* Williams spends 38 pages on the *Inferno*, 45 on the *Purgatorio*, and 43 on the *Paradiso*; but of course quantity is not everything. Tolkien's remark is about what Williams seemed to him to understand best, not what he spent most time and paper on. It is true that most readers, commentators, and writers - most "fallen men", perhaps - find the *Inferno* easier to read, or understand, or even write. (The very word "Inferno" has become part of the English language; there is no likelihood that "Purgatorio" or "Paradiso" will do so. And when Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle set out to rewrite Dante for modern times, it is significant that they only did the *Inferno*.) As Lewis noted, you can trace the "dark involved geography" of evil by looking into your own heart and what might happen if you let yourself go; but to do the same with purgation or glory requires effort. And the effort must be towards something greater than our present selves, not something less than they.

But this leads me on to think about the general approach to evil in Tolkien and Williams. It is tempting to say that Tolkien concentrates more on the evil done in and to the world, Williams more on the evil done in and to the individual soul. Williams went through very dark periods in his life, and was well aware of darkness within himself and within the good. There is a splendid but terrible passage in *The Descent of the Dove* where he writes of the way in which the mediaeval Church turned to persecution and torture:

"One might think that the phrase of Lord Acton (that 'it cannot really be held that in Rome sixteen centuries after Christ men did not know that murder was wrong') might be held to apply; it cannot be that men did not think such methods doubtfully holy. It was not so. Deep, deeper than we believe, lie the roots of sin; it is in the good that they exist; it is in the good that they thrive and send up sap and produce the black fruits of hell. The peacock fans of holy and austere popes drove the ashes of burning men over Christendom." (3) And it was not just mediaevals of whom this was true, but also of Williams himself. "There are wells of hate in one which are terrifying, and wells of suspicion and even of malice." (4)

Tolkien, by contrast, is much more aware of the evil *done by* people, as op-

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posed to that which *lies within* them. Both men lost friends in the First World War, but only Tolkien served in it and saw its horrors at first hand. Moreover, Tolkien loved landscape and countryside (his sense of place, to my mind, produces some of the best parts of *The Lord of the Rings*, like the passage of Frodo and his companions through Ithilien). And he saw and mourned the ruining of landscape by human insensitivity and greed. Williams was a townsman; and moreover, his imagination was powerful, but it was not visual. Of course, he was aware of the misery in the world, and in his great essay on the Cross gives vehement expression to it. "It is not tolerable (to us) that the Creator should deliberately maintain and sustain His created universe in a state of infinite distress... No doubt it is possible to Him." (5) Nor do I suggest that Tolkien overlooked the possibilities within the human (or even Elvish) heart. There is above all in his tales a constantly recurring realization of the dangers of the first of all the Deadly Sins, pride; it destroys Fëanor, and Saruman, and Denethor, and Thingol. and Ar-Pharazôn... Neither man was blind to the forms evil can take. But I do think we can see a real difference in the kinds of evil that meant most to each of them.

Again, there was a *pessimistic* strain to each of them. J. D. Douglas, in *The Twentieth-Century Dictionary of Christian Biography*, describes Tolkien as "an emotional man inclined to pessimism" (adding, on of course Tolkien's own authority, "who liked coloured waistcoats"). (6) This may seem an odd thing to say of one who invented the word "eucatastrophe", but I think I can see what Douglas means. You can see it, perhaps, in Tolkien's handling of repentance. This would naturally be expected to be an important idea for a Christian; and repentance does play a part in Tolkien's stories. But it is nearly always unsuccessful. Maedhros repented of the abandonment of Dior's sons to starve in the forest; but he could not find them. Tar-Palantir's repentance was "too late to appease the anger of the Valar with the insolence of his fathers, of which the greater part of his people did not repent". (7) His daughter Tar-Míriel, similarly, strove too late to ascend the steep ways of the Meneltarma. Boromir repents successfully, but is killed almost at once; we are given no chance to see what he might have made of his life thereafter. Saruman and Denethor are offered the chance to repent, and refuse it. Gollum comes close to it, and is put off by sheer bad luck – but Tolkien was clear that even if Sam hadn't accused him of sneaking, he would have fallen back into evil. Even Sauron at one point "abjured all his evil deeds. And some

hold that this was not at first falsely done, but that Sauron in truth repented"; (8) but he too fell back into evil.

Williams was far more hopeful about repentance – even the Satanist murderer Gregory (in *War in Heaven*) gives himself up, and the Accuser in *Judgment at Chelmsford* claims that

“Most men, when at last they see their desire  
fall to repentance; all have that chance.” (9)

A few years ago I should have taken as another example of Tolkien's pessimism his handling of the other Wizards – other than Saruman and Gandalf, that is. In a 1954 passage in *Unfinished Tales* he says “of all the Istari, one only remained faithful... For Radagast, the fourth, became enamoured of the many beasts and birds that dwelt in Middle-earth, and forsook Elves and Men”. (10) (This is patently unfair to Radagast, not a bad fellow as wizards go, who lent his aid to the watch on Sauron, and played a small but crucial – and completely faithful – part in the Great Years. But it illustrates Tolkien's pessimism.) In 1954 he was uncertain about the Blue Wizards, but in a letter of 1958 he says of them “I fear that they failed, as Saruman did, though doubtless in different ways; and I suspect they were founders or beginners of secret cults and ‘magic’ traditions”. (11) However, in *The Peoples of Middle-Earth* they get a happier ending; they “must have had great influence on the history of the Second Age and Third Age in weakening and disarraying the forces of [the] East”. For once, Tolkien allowed himself to cheer up! (12)

Williams, I get the impression, *felt* pessimism as a personal mood all right, but intellectually denied its validity. Lionel Rackstraw, in *War in Heaven*, is certainly speaking for Williams in many places, even if he is rather more morbid, almost paranoiac about it. And Prester John tells him that there can be “a happy ruin and a fortunate despair. These things are not evil in themselves, and I think that you fear them overmuch.” “I bring the desire of all men, and what will you ask of me?” he says a few lines later. “‘Annihilation’, Lionel answered. ‘I have not asked for life, and I should be content now to know that soon I should not be. Do you suppose that I desire the heaven they talk of?’ ‘Death you shall have at least,’ the other said. ‘But God only gives, and He has only Himself to give.... [t]

he door that opens on annihilation opens only on the annihilation which is God.” (13) Similarly, in the (second) sonnet sequence *On the Sanctissimum*, Williams could depict God as saying

“I am Annihilation; I am Peace...  
 Many strong heroes ride upon my quest,  
 But also ye who have no heart for strife  
 Know, on my darkness breaks no farther day.”

Mrs Hadfield, in her first book on Williams (14), gave one chapter the title “The Knowledge of Darkness”, and “Windows of Night” was the title Williams chose for the last (and best) book of his earlier-style poetry. In the most terrifying poem of that collection, “Domesticity”, the ordinary things of life – “bathing or lighting a fire or going downstairs” are imbued with horror:

“And when we set match to the fire, the small flames scorch  
 Something other than wood: what inaudible cry  
 Rends my dumb spirit! ‘twas thus they put the torch  
 To Joan’s fire or Du Moulay’s, - thus? no, with this.  
 This has lit Ridley’s candle, here Smithfield pours  
 A red glare outward: my silent lips shout with the mob  
 Where to-day in the West a screaming negro endures  
 The last pains of death, and my food is cooked at his fire.” (15)

Once again, it is darkness within that drives Williams’s pessimism, darkness without that drives Tolkien’s. C. S. Lewis said of Williams “Scepticism and pessimism were the expression of his feelings. High above them, overarching them like a sky, were the things he believed, and they were wholly optimistic.” (16) We may well be reminded of the passage in the *Lord of the Rings* where Sam realizes that “in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach” (17). But note that the truth Sam realizes is something external to him (though of course it affects him!); what Lewis says about Williams is about the inner workings of his mind and soul.

The next point that Tolkien takes up in his verses is the whole apparatus of Williams’s later, Arthurian poetry. Tolkien invented a *Legendarium* to provide a

background for his languages and stories; Williams invented a symbolism to express his beliefs about God and human life. Williams liked and appreciated the former (so far as it had got during his lifetime); Tolkien did not like the latter at all. Maybe he felt it was getting too close to allegory (a form he claimed to dislike - which must have made writing *Leaf by Niggle* a painful process). There are two elements in what Tolkien calls the “gynecomorphical terrain” of the Arthurian poems. One is the imposition of the shape of a human body on the map of Europe; the other is the symbolism which Williams saw in the body, and hence was itself imposed onto the map. The former is undoubtedly artificial, and in a way close to allegory. It is not immediately obvious that there is any connection between (say) hands and Italy. When Williams writes of

“hands of incantation changed to hands of adoration,  
 the quintuple psalm, the pointing of Lateran:  
 active and passive in a single mystery,  
 a single sudden flash of identity,  
 the heart-breaking manual acts of the Pope” (18)

he could have written it much the same (except for “Lateran”) if the Pope’s seat had been in Avignon rather than in Rome. Tolkien complained that

“I instead  
 dull-eyed, can only see a watershed,  
 a plain, an island, or a mountain-chain”.

Quite so. Williams is in effect allegorizing his map of Europe – allegorizing it not in the sense of writing an allegory on the lines of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (or *Regress!*) but in the sense of reading a meaning into something which was not originally there, as some of the Fathers did with the Bible. But the symbolism of human hands was not (for him) a meaning to be read into them; it was there. Hands building bridges (of course with a hint of the papal title “*Pontifex*”), hands of clerks writing in Byzantium, hands scratching the soil to plant seeds, hands nailing and nailed to the Cross – all these are alluded to in the Italian section of the poem “The Vision of Empire”, and the list would be greatly extended if we turned to *The Greater Trumps* (19). This *kind* of symbolism constantly recurs in Williams’s writings. In *The Figure of Beatrice* he quotes Coleridge to the effect that a symbol should (a) exist in itself, (b) derive from something greater than itself, and (c) represent in itself that greatness from which it derives (20). He

might equally well have quoted George MacDonald: “Having perceived that the highest expression of which the truth admits, lies in the symbolism of nature and the human customs that result from human necessities, [one] prosecutes thought about truth so embedded by dealing with the symbols themselves after logical forms” (21). Only I think Williams would have held that many different symbols can point in the same direction, and many different aspects of the same symbol exist and be explored side by side. And perhaps he would have altered MacDonald’s “logical” forms to “poetical”. Not only can you study an image in the hope of learning something about that which it symbolizes, you can also apply the poetical imagination to it and explore its ramifications. Perhaps the two are not really different; but I think Williams would have preferred to think of it as an activity of the poet rather than the logician.

It is interesting to look at Williams’s use of Byzantium as an image and Tolkien’s reaction. It looks almost as if this brings together both the topics I’ve been raising so far, their attitudes to evil and their attitudes to symbolism; but it brings in more as well. Williams, of course, uses Byzantium as an image of ordered glory and beauty. Tolkien’s first reaction is a little odd:

Byzantium, New Rome! I love her less  
 Than Rome the Old. For War, I must confess,  
 Eagles to me no more than Ravens bless,  
 No more than Fylfot, or Chrysanthemum  
 Blown to a blood-red Sun.

Odd for two reasons. Firstly, why did Tolkien apparently associate Byzantium (I mean, the historical Eastern Roman Empire) with war? Except for Justinian’s attempt to recover the lost parts of the Empire in the West, Byzantium’s wars were normally defensive. Old Rome, on the other hand, was notoriously expansionist. The Temple of Janus, you may remember, was only open in times of war; and when Augustus triumphantly closed it, it was for only the third time in the city’s history! In between, Old Rome had gobbled up the whole Mediterranean. (22) Secondly, did he think *Williams’s* version of Byzantium was warlike? Practically the only reference to war in connection with Byzantium in Williams’s poetry is one passage in *The Son of Lancelot* (23) (and there it is to recover Caucasia from the Manichees; we are close to allegory). Elsewhere we find that

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The Empire, in the peace of the Emperor  
 expected perfection; it awaited the Second Coming. (24)

However, this is not the heart of Tolkien's attack on Byzantium. Rather it is what follows:

To me she only seems one greater hive,  
 Rotting within while outwardly alive,  
 Where power corrupts and where the venal thrive;  
 Where, leeches on the veins of government,  
 Officials suck men's blood, till all is spent.

I suspect that Tolkien has an idealized picture of Byzantium – or whatever the evil opposite of “idealized” is - just as Williams did. Only – and here perhaps his pessimism comes in – it takes and exaggerates what was bad in Byzantium, not what was good. Corruption and taxation are unhappily rather common – they flourished in Old Rome. I remember one lecturer on Roman history in my undergraduate days describing the Roman governance of Egypt as “a perfected instrument of fiscal oppression”. Lewis and Reinhold note that “not infrequently, propertied liturgists [that is, men obliged to pay for municipal activities] – like penniless peasants – resorted to flight from home and to other measures of desperation in an attempt to escape from their crushing fiscal burdens” (25). However, let's get back to Tolkien on Byzantium. I suspect that we have here the influence of the element of anarchism in Tolkien. Order to Williams was a delight and a beauty; to Tolkien, something barely tolerable. It is Saruman who appeals to it – “the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order”. The very fact (in so far as it was a fact) that Byzantium aimed at a *rigid* society was objectionable, and if you add the additional fact (in so far as it was a fact) that corruption and heavy taxation were common, New Rome becomes a symbol of all he disliked. Though, to be fair, he did compare Gondor to “a kind of proud, venerable, but increasingly impotent Byzantium” (26) – perhaps because of its slow diminishing, like the Byzantine Empire, in the face of constant attacks from the East.

Williams, you could say, was more interested in the Byzantine *ideal*. Let me quote the late Bishop Stephen Neill here. “Life spread itself before the people as a series of ordinary happenings, punctuated by immensely solemn divine

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events which were carried out with the splendour of perfected ritual, and in which the whole people were involved... the sanctification of human splendour by the effulgence of the divine glory... Individual emperors might be weak, depraved, insignificant. But all this could never take away the sacred nimbus, the sense of the divine by which the throne of Constantine was surrounded.” (27) Williams, I think, was aware of that nimbus in a way that Tolkien (for all his celebration of kingship) never was. None of Williams’ completed later poems deal directly with the Emperor (one fragmentary, unpublished one did), but some of the early ones do:

“In the gate of Saint Sophia, amid patriarchs and popes,  
I saw the Emperor sitting, and the smoke of earthly hopes  
went up to him as incense, and the tapers shone around  
as prayers before the Emperor, sitting aureoled and crowned.  
As God sits in the pictures that the monks on parchment draw,  
in pavilions over Sinai, giving Israel the law,  
or thrusting seas in order and firmaments in place,  
and the little devils hiding from the terror of his face.” (28)

But Tolkien, it would appear, was only able to see the order and hierarchy in which Williams delighted as a symbol  
of Rule that strangles and of Laws that kill,  
of Man that says his Pride is Heaven’s will.

Whether this may be true of some efforts at a Christian commonwealth, like Cromwell’s military dictatorship in Britain or even the community set up by the Pilgrim Fathers in Massachusetts, others can say better than I. Williams did not try to use such societies symbolically. Perhaps he would have felt that they were based on the Way of the Negation of Images – a lawful and honourable Way, with many great masters in the history of the Church, but obviously not one that can readily be used as an Image itself.

“Man that says his Pride is Heaven’s will” was hardly true even of the historical Byzantium. The Emperor did not impose his own ideas about Heaven’s will on the Empire; rather, he was one of the ideas that (it was believed) *Heaven* had imposed on it. Williams, I think, saw this – it is related, perhaps, to the line

in “The Crowning of Arthur”

the king made for the kingdom, or the kingdom made for the king? (29).

Related, not identical; Cromwell, shall we say, did not suppose his Commonwealth existed to serve him. What he did suppose was that, being naturally in the right, he had the right to make the Commonwealth serve his (right) ideas. Neill suggests that the greatest of the Eastern Emperors, Justinian, fell into this sort of trap, thinking that “by the special wisdom granted from on high, he would receive the correct answer to all theological, as to all legal, problems” (30). Maybe so. But of course Williams’s Emperor is a symbol, the historical reality worked on by the human imagination. So indeed are Arthur and Taliessin; while with other characters like Galahad, Lancelot and Bors the “reality” is not historical but literary. Tolkien evidently thought of himself as opposed to such symbolism; but I suspect that his own idea of Byzantium is itself a symbol, a reality worked on by his own imagination.

However, as the verses say. “A truce to that!”; in the end, criticism yields to friendship. No better way to end (in the sad absence of a poem by Williams on Tolkien) what started with the idea of seeing how one friend looked to another than with Tolkien’s closing – and to me rather moving – lines:

When your fag is wagging and spectacles are twinkling,  
 When tea is brewing or the glasses tinkling  
 Then of your meaning often I’ve an inkling,  
 Your virtues and your wisdom glimpse. Your laugh  
 In my heart echoes, when with you I quaff  
 The pint that goes down quicker than a half,  
 Because you’re near. So, heed me not! I swear  
 When you with tattered papers take the chair  
 And read (for hours maybe), I would be there.  
 And ever when in state you sit again  
 And to your car imperial give rein,  
 I’ll trundle, grumbling, squeaking in the train  
 Of the great rolling wheels of Charles’ Wain.

Notes

- (1) H. Carpenter, *The Inklings* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1978) pp. 123-6.
- (2) Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice* (London, Faber & Faber, 1943).
- (3) *Id.*, *The Descent of the Dove* (London, Faber & Faber, 1939), p. 108.
- (4) Quoted by R. King in the introduction to Charles Williams, *To Michal from Serge* (Kent State UP, 2002), p. 7.
- (5) Charles Williams, *The Image of the City* (ed. Anne Ridler) (OUP, 1958), p. 131.
- (6) J. D. Douglas (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Dictionary of Christian Biography* (Carlisle, Paternoster, 1995), p. 389.
- (7) J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1977), p. 269.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p. 285.
- (9) Charles Williams, *Collected Plays* (OUP, 1963), p. 90.
- (10) J. R. R. Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales* (London, 1980), p. 390.
- (11) *Id.*, *Letters* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 280.
- (12) *The Peoples of Middle-Earth* (London, Harper Collins, 1996), p. 385.
- (13) Charles Williams, *War in Heaven* (London, Faber & Faber, 1947), pp. 250-1.
- (14) A. M. Hadfield, *An Introduction to Charles Williams* (London, 1959)
- (15) Charles Williams, *Windows of Night* (OUP, 1924) p. 23.
- (16) C. S. Lewis (ed.) *Essays presented to Charles Williams* (OUP, 1947), p. xiii.
- (17) J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Book VI, chapter 2 (“The Land of Shadow”); there is no point in giving a page reference!
- (18) *Id.*, *The Arthurian Poems of Charles Williams*, (ed. D. L. Dodds) (London, Boydell, 1991) p. 27.
- (19) *Id.*, *The Greater Trumps* (London, Faber & Faber, 1954), pp. 192 f.
- (20) *The Figure of Beatrice*, p. 7.
- (21) George MacDonald, *On the Miracles of our Lord* (London, Longmans, 1891) pp. 153-4.
- (22) To be fair, Tolkien elsewhere says he hated the Roman Empire! (*Letters*, p. 89).

(23) *The Arthurian Poems*, p. 69.

(24) *Ibid.*, p.100 (“Prelude” to *The Region of the Summer Stars*).

(25) N. Lewis and M. Reinhold (eds.) *Roman Civilization: Sourcebook II – The Empire* (NY, Harper & Row, 1955) p. 70.

(26) *Letters*, p. 158.

(27) S. C. Neill, *The Christian Society* (London, Nisbet, 1952) p.87.

(28) *The Arthurian Poems*, p.171 (“Taliessin’s Song of Byzantium”). Cf. also “Taliessin’s Song of Logres”, p. 169.

(29) *Ibid.*, p. 36.

(30) *Op.cit.*, p. 89.

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