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The
**Charles
Williams**
Quarterly



No. 125

Winter 2007

www.charleswilliamssociety.org.uk

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.

Officers of the Society

President: The Most Reverend Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury

Chairman:

Dr Brian Horne
Flat 8, 65 Cadogan Gardens
London, SW3 2RA
020 7581 9917
brian.horne2@btinternet.com

Secretary:

Revd Dr Richard Sturch
35 Broomfield
Stacey Bushes
Milton Keynes MK12 6HA
01908 316779
charles wms soc@yahoo.co.uk

Treasurer:

Mr Stephen Barber
Greystones
Lawton Avenue, Carterton
Oxon OX18 3JY
01993 841219
ste-phenj.barber@btinternet.com

Librarian:

Dr Brian Horne
Flat 8, 65 Cadogan Gardens
London, SW3 2RA
020 7581 9917
brian.horne2@btinternet.com

Membership Secretary:

Revd Dr Richard Sturch
35 Broomfield
Stacey Bushes
Milton Keynes MK12 6HA
01908 316779
charles wms soc@yahoo.co.uk

CW Quarterly Editor:

Mr Edward Gauntlett
21 Downsway,
Whyteleafe
Surrey, CR3 0EW
020 8660 1402
Edward.Gauntlett@down21.freeuk.com

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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

I must apologise once again for the delay in producing this issue. However, the building work which caused the disruption has now stopped (though it is not, as is the way of builders, finished).

Our focus at present is on the forthcoming summer conference, which promises to be a very enjoyable event. Elsewhere in this issue you will find a note updating the details and listing the talks that have been agreed upon so far. There are still places left and it would be good for the society if we could sell the event out.

Also, of course, this will be a good and rare opportunity for meeting other members. To paraphrase Hank Wangford, there are no strangers at a CW conference, just friends we haven't met before. It is intended as an opportunity for exchange and sharing – a manifestation of coinherence perhaps. So if you have not booked but were thinking of attending I urge you to do so. For convenience a booking form has been included with this issue.

Edward Gauntlett.

Society News & Notes

New Members

The Society extends a warm welcome to the following new members:

The Revd Philip Jacobs
203 Chapman Street,
Canton,
MA 02021
USA

Lynn Underwood
(Professor of Biomedical Humanities,
Hiram College)
37 Forest Drive
Chagrin Falls
OH 44022
U.S.A.

Suzanne Bray

We have been informed that Suzanne, who is presently helping with our forthcoming conference, has been made Professor of English Literature, Religious Thought and Cultural Studies at Lille University. We offer our congratulations.

Oxford University C S Lewis Society Meetings

The details of two forthcoming lectures at the Oxford University C.S. Lewis Society have been passed to us:

Tuesday, 29 January, 8.15pm:

Timothy Pitt-Payne, 'Iris Murdoch, Charles Williams, and the Flight from the Enchanter'

Tuesday, 26 February, 8.15pm:

Revd Dr Gavin Ashenden, 'Charles Williams: Alchemy and Integration'

Meetings take place at Pusey House, St Giles, Oxford.

Directions to Pusey House, as well as further information about the talks, can be found on our website,
<http://lewisinxford.googlepages.com>.

Should any of your members wish to dine with a speaker before the meeting, they are welcome to contact Judith E. Toning (the Society Secretary) at oulewis@herald.ox.ac.uk.

Charles Williams Society Conferences

♦ **4 – 6 July 2008** (Friday to Sunday)

The Residential conference will be held at St. Hilda's College, Oxford upon the theme of **Charles Williams and his Contemporaries**. See updated details opposite.

♦ **18 October 2008** (Saturday)

Details to be decided , but the meeting will take place in London.

SUMMER CONFERENCE: 4 – 6 JULY 2008**CHARLES WILLIAMS AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES**

There are still places for the summer residential conference of the Society at St Hilda's College in Oxford.

The conference will be opened by Grevel Lindop on the evening of Friday 4 July and end after lunch on Sunday 6 July. Among the topics being offered are papers on '*Dorothy L Sayers and Charles Williams*', '*Charles Williams as Publisher*', '*The Place of the Lion*', '*C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams and Poetry*', and '*Charles Williams and the Nuptial Mystery*'.

If time allows we hope also to use the occasion to honour three of the Society's most distinguished literary figures: Anne Ridler, John Heath-Stubbs and Stephen Medcalf – two of whom died within the last year.

There will also be a small exhibition of items from the Reference Library and, if permission can be obtained, Saturday evening will be given over to the playing of a recording of a programme on Charles Williams produced by Ruth Spalding for the BBC in 1961.

Those of our members who do not know well Oxford might not be aware of St Hilda's College. It was founded in 1893 as a College for women and is situated close to the centre of the city with beautiful views down to the river. It is opposite Magdalen College Choir School a few minutes walk from Magdalen Bridge.

Members wanting to make reservations for the conference are asked to do so as soon as possible as we need to supply the College with the number of those attending by the end of February.

Brian Horne

A comparison of the treatment of the Grail legend in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and Williams's Arthurian cycle.

Angelika Schneider

The first question is, of course, why compare two works as different as *The Idylls of the King* and Williams Arthurian cycle at all? Why compare two works that at first glance seem to share no more than a common source and a relatively small amount of common matter? Two works so diverse – in their treatment of the narrative, their poetic style, their approach to the subject and its meaning, indeed their whole approach to the writing of poetry – that there might seem no purpose to the exercise?

Charles Williams, the single word 'poet' on his gravestone notwithstanding, was above all a thinker, and believer, of great originality, in CSL's words, "a romantic theologian in the technical sense which he himself invented for those words, not one who is romantic about theology but one who is theological about romance." (1) His ideas, as Anne Ridler put it, "were always more important to him than the medium of expression". (2) And his writing was, according to DLS, "so individual as at a first encounter to disconcert, perplex or even antagonise those on whom it did not, on the contrary, break as a sudden light". (3) Though perhaps not a contemporary taste, no one denies the beauty of Tennyson's poetry. But in spite of the best efforts of those who knew and loved him, Charles Williams's work has remained something of a 'private taste'. The 'pre-eminent Victorian' was only and always a poet, for decades the poet laureate and a household word across this country, whose work lay at the bedside of myriads besides his queen. Williams has left us a detailed, if incomplete, study of the Arthurian legend, together with considerable commentary on his own poetic treatment of it, as well as various works of theology and criticism. Tennyson, on the contrary, had

nothing to say to the world at large not said in his poetry. Williams's Arthurian poetry is, at least at first reading, difficult and obscure; the underlying ideas, however, are clear and consistent. Tennyson's vivid pictures and the emotions they express are readily perceived by the reader; his underlying ideas, however, appear to arouse increasing controversy and diversity of interpretation as his once titanic – and later eclipsed – figure recedes into a more distant yet perhaps clearer historical perspective.

Yet both poets were concerned with the fundamental question of the nature of reality and of human beings and their interaction in society, both wrote from Christian viewpoints, and both chose the Matter of Britain to express their views – the ancient tale of the imposition of law and order amidst barbarian chaos, the establishment of a brilliant court among an uncivilized people, of valour in battle and devotion in love crowned by religious vision, and of the final downfall of the whole great enterprise. Both took Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* as the authoritative source of the legend, with a bit of the Mabinogion thrown in. Both treated the Arthurian legend as a myth of the success and the failure of human society, as well as of the life of the individual as he or she matures to understanding and responsibility. Both writers were masters of language, poets by vocation whose writing to some degree – in Tennyson's case to a great degree – epitomises the *Stilwille* of their time, both works are considered by many to be one of, if not *the* poet's greatest achievement. And, as Charles Williams himself said:

Criticism has done so much to illuminate the poets, and yet it seems
...still not sufficiently to relate the poets to the poets, to explain poetry by poetry. Yet in the end what other criterion have we?
Wordsworth's poetry is likely to explain Shakespeare's poetry much better than we can, because poetry is a thing sui generis. It explains itself by existing... Poetry is a good game – let us take it lightly. But it is also 'liberty and power' – let us take it seriously.
Ad maiorem poetarum gloriam.(4)

Alfred Lord Tennyson lived in a period of profound social, political and economic upheaval during which the western view of “man, the universe and everything” underwent profound changes. This was reflected in a widespread uncertainty and dissatisfaction with the spread of materialism – the Victorians’ frequently emphasized optimistic belief in social and economic progress and the often rigid moralism that most people associate with the Victorians must be understood as attempts to find some footing amidst the apparent dissolution of all traditional values.

Tennyson has been called the stupidest of English poets;(5) his thought has also been predicated as “wide-ranging, penetrating and profound”.(6) Although no one has called him a systematic thinker, the continued controversy over the value of his poetry concerns itself in the main with the thoughts expressed. Torn between a yearning to live in the rich and satisfying world of the imagination on one hand and a strong feeling of duty to participate in the betterment of humankind on the other, he was obsessed by the search for assurance that the world of the spirit and human aspirations reflect universal truth. The *Idylls of the King* seem to serve as a touch-stone for critical opinion of his success in resolving those conflicts – some critics are convinced that his mature work shows a unified concept of the nature of reality, others maintain that it reflects a continued, unresolved inner tension, still others see it as a monument to the fundamental ambiguity of human perception. According to some he affirms a continued faith in the ideal while others see him convinced of its ultimate failure.

There was an upsurge of new Tennyson studies in the sixties and seventies, a number of which concentrated particularly on the *Idylls of the King*. This paper was originally written in 1981. I have confined myself to the Grail theme primarily to limit the scope of the enquiry – and of course, because it plays an interesting, if very different, role in the works of each poet.

Structure

I will begin with a brief comparison of the Grail narrative as it is presented by each of the poets, showing what each takes from their common source, and then take an – equally abbreviated – look at the thematic structure of the two works,

before examining the poetic style and finally the ‘meaning’ of the Grail theme in the context of each man’s view of the world.

In their outward structure and the place of the Grail in the two works under consideration we find the most obvious difference between them: the matter of “The Holy Grail” is one episode among many knightly adventures, one of twelve Idylls (and the longest, with nearly 1000 lines, while the shortest has almost 500), and is referred to nowhere else in the work. The poems of the Arthurian, in contrast, as CW himself said, “do not so much tell a story or describe a process as express states or principles of experience. The names and incidents of Arthurian myth are taken as starting-points for investigation and statement on common and profound experience.” (7) While the Grail is an integral part of the founding and dissolution of Logres, no single poem (which are, in contrast to the Idylls, from less 40 to 435 lines in length), is devoted to it. The Grail is an image or theme interwoven through the work and central to the whole: Logres is founded for the achievement of the Grail, which is to be its culmination and to usher in the perfect society, the kingdom of God on earth. Both the Grail itself and Galahad, the High Prince born to achieve it, represent in Williams’s work the human capacity to know God. Directly or, more often indirectly in its thwarting – by the dolorous blow, by Lancelot’s love for the queen and the king’s self-love which begets his nemesis, Mordred – the Grail or its prince are alluded to in almost half the 31 poems of *Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*, although forming the subject of only four.

The Narrative

The adventures connected to the Grail quest in the Idylls are recounted by Percivale, whom the vision has impelled to enter a monastery, to his fellow-monk Ambrosius, a simple down-to-earth soul who asks Percivale what brought him to the monastic life. When told it was “the sweet vision of the Grail”(8) Ambrosius matter-of-factly asks, “What is it?/ The phantom of a cup that comes and goes?” Percivale replies that it is the chalice of the last supper, in which Joseph of Arimathea caught the blood of Christ and which he later carried to Glastonbury, and tells of his sister, a nun who by prayer and fasting brought about the vision “to heal the world of wickedness”(9) and so initiates the quest. The

source of her exstatic passion is “a fervent flame of human love,/which being rudely blunted, glanced and shot/ Only to holy things”(10). As one critic rather bluntly puts it, “the whole thing originated, Tennyson makes perfectly clear, in the frustrated sexual desires of a young woman who had been disappointed in love and gone into a nunnery.”(10) From a less cynical point of view, she serves both to provide a purely human origin for the quest and to emphasize its value as a spiritual goal for the visionary, contrasting with its destructiveness when sought as a talisman of chivalric worth. The nun spell-bound both Percivale and Galahad, and they carried the word back to the court, from which Arthur is absent. There Galahad sat in the Perilous Siege, of which Merlin had prophesied that whoever sits in it should lose himself, crying “If I lose myself I save myself!”(11) Whereupon a vision of a luminous cloud in a beam of light stirred the knights to a vow that they would ride twelvemonth and a day in search of the Grail. King Arthur, on his returning, deplores the vow, prophesying that few if any would achieve it or return and reminding them of the needs of the kingdom, but he admitted “Your vows are sacred, being made”(12). Percivale then recounts his own adventures and those of Bors and Galahad, whom he saw run across a marshy quagmire and then sail or fly far out to sea with the Grail hovering over him, finally disappearing into “the spiritual city and all her spires/ And gateways in a glory like one pearl”(13). Only a tenth of the knights returned from the quest and of these only Bors has actually succeeded in it, while Lancelot reached the castle of Carbonek, where the Grail is kept, but is finally prevented by unassailable heat from seeing it. The king in grief at his depleted Order lamented, “Spake I not too truly, O my knights?! Was I too dark a prophet when I said/ To those who went upon the Holy Quest,/ That most of them would follow wandering fires,/ Lost in the quagmire?”(14) Yet in the final words of the Idyll, he affirmed both the reality and the supreme value of the vision. With the Round Table nearly destroyed, the Idylls that follow delineate the dissolution of Arthur’s kingdom until, wounded beyond healing in the final battle, he is carried off to Avalon.

Williams’s *Arthuriad* has been likened to the brilliant, shattered fragments of a mirror reflecting a single great event, the founding and the downfall of Logres. The Grail is the image of redemption: it was to have brought about a new social order but is still, in spite of its failure, available to each individual. Taliessin sees it in a vision at the creation of Logres, “a point,/ deep beyond or deep within

Logres,/ as if it had swallowed all the summer stars/ ...tiny, dark-rose, self-glowing/ ...the entire point of the thrice co-inherent Trinity”(15). It is personified in Galahad, who is born of Lancelot, greatest of knights, through his sinful love of the queen, as he lies with the daughter of the Grail-keeper King Pellès, believing her to be Guinevere. Galahad and the Grail together come to Camelot in a solemn ritual during which “all had what food they chose”(16), but are later, as the kingdom disintegrates in internecine war, borne with Percivale and Bors, to Sarras, to the “land of the Trinity” together with the body of Percivale’s sister, Taliessen’s beloved, who, as in Malory, died of giving her blood to save another.

Thematic Structure

Both the Idylls and the *Arthuriad*, episodic or fragmented as they are, are bound into a unified work by overarching themes, some or all of which recur in each of the individual poems. One of these, the question of order, be it within the individual or in society, is – not surprisingly, considering the chosen subject – of deep concern to both poets. In both works Arthur’s kingdom is seen as the bringer of light and order into a world of chaos and fear. Order is imposed by armed force but its preservation is a matter of the character and action of each individual and therefore gives way to dissolution from within rather than to any threat from without. In both works the Grail is closely involved in the kingdom’s failure. In their treatment of the subject, however, there are clear differences between the two: order for Tennyson is lodged in the authority of the king and maintained through voluntary adherence to his rule. As this gives way, step by step, to inner chaos and uncertainty, outer chaos reasserts itself. In Williams’s work order is based on exchange, where all are equals, be they slave or king. From the juxtaposition “hierarchic, republican” beasts of heraldry at Arthur’s crowning(17) to “The Founding of the Company”, where, when Taliessin recoils from Dinadan’s greeting “Well encountered, lieutenant/ (they call you) of God’s new grace in the streets of Camelot”, the latter replies, “catch as catch can, but the higher caught in the lower/ and the lower in the higher”;(18) authority is seen to be lodged in every hand and hierarchy freely subject to change. (Is it a mere coincidence, I wonder, that these two repudiations of hierarchy in the traditional sense are balanced in the fourth poem of TTL and the fourth to last of RSS?)

In addition to this unifying theme common to both poems, there are several peculiar to each. The theme of substitution, the highest form of exchange and one of the key themes in all Williams' works, is of course equally relevant to an understanding of the Grail, symbolic as it is of the supreme substitution in the blood of Christ, and is taken up in Dindrane/Blanchefleur's death and in the substitution of the Grail princess Helayne for Guinevere, and that of the nun, who raises Galahad, for Helayne. A further central theme which links many of the poems is that of the role of the poet, who best understands the function of images to communicate the essential unity of all levels of existence, as well as that of romantic love.

In the *Idylls of the King*, all three of the themes interwoven with the entire work are fused in The Holy Grail, showing clearly its centrality to the whole work. The themes of the relationship of reality to illusion and the question of identity are both as closely involved with the story of the Grail as is that of order. The reality of the various experiences narrated by Percivale is repeatedly subject to doubt, even as they are recounted. The knights depart on the quest in hopes that they will find themselves, be granted a supernatural affirmation of their own identity, and yet each – save Galahad, who “loses himself” – encounters only a reflection of his own inadequacy, superficiality, uncertainty, remorse, or (in the case of Bors, who only undertook the quest out of simple loyalty to Lancelot) remains so unassuming that he is unwilling even to tell the king of his own adventures. Finally, the entire quest, a search both for proof of the reality of the Unseen and for a supernatural affirmation of one's own identity, is questioned, affirmed and denied in the oft-apostrophied “spiritually central lines” of the entire work, where King Arthur – as remembered by Percivale – speaks to his few returning knights: the king's first duty is to his kingdom, but, this done,

“Let visions of the night or of the day
 come, as they will; and many a time they come,
 Until this earth he walks on seems not earth,
 This light that strikes his eyeball is not light,
 This air that smites his forehead is not air
 But vision – yea his very hand and foot –
 In moments when he feels he cannot die,
 And knows himself no vision to himself,

Nor the hight God a vision, nor that one
Who rose again: ye have seen what ye have seen.”

And Percivale adds,

“So spake the King: I knew not all he meant.”(19)

An additional structuring element is to be found in both works in recurring images, which I will discuss in connection with the poets’ style, to which I now turn.

Style

An examination of the metre and sound, the diction, syntax and imagery of both poets will be found to reveal extremes of contrast as well as, perhaps unexpected, similarities. Obvious at a glance is the great difference in versification, especially between the uniform, smooth iambic pentameter of Tennyson’s verse throughout the Idylls and the mixture of varied lengths, metres and rhyme schemes particularly prevalent in *Taliessin Through Logres*, with its internal and end rhymes, its broken-up lines and conspicuous juxtapositions. The difference between the two is far less marked, however, in the *Region of the Summer Stars*, where longer poems with five stresses to a line are the rule, there are no end rhymes and the effects of internal rhyme and syntax are far less marked than in those of *Taliessin Through Logres*, but here too the whole tone and ‘feel’ of the verse remains completely different: in the briefest of terms, Tennyson’s poetry speaks immediately to the senses, and thence to the emotions, Williams’s to the mind and thence to thought, almost if that were possible beyond both sense and mind.

Both poets had a facility with language at their disposal that enabled them to create impressions at will. Tennyson has been praised and blamed for the ‘lushness’ of his verse – Charles Williams said that it ‘oozed’.(20) One could reply that his in contrast clashes and jerks, and we could spend the rest of the day entertainingly citing passages that particularly epitomize the style of the two poets and comparing their impact. I will confine myself here to two quite similar examples that show both the poets’ ability to use sound, diction and imagery to create a desired impression and the difference in the result. From the “Passing of Arthur”

Dry clashed his harness in the icy caves

And barren chasms, and all to left and right
 The bare black cliff clanged round him, as he based
 His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang
 Sharp smitten with the dint of armed heels. (21)

And from Taliessin Through Logres

Her hand discharged catastrophe. I was thrown
 before it, I saw the source of all stone,
 the rigid tornado, the schism and first strife
 of primeval rock with itself, Morgause, Lot's wife. (22)

Both poems convey in the sound and the words a physical sense of rock in its hardness and rigidity, combined in Tennyson with dark and cold and clangor, in Williams with the cacophony of storm. We can almost see the setting of the one, but the other seems to take us beyond the ponderous weight, roughness and crushing danger of the rocks to something like rock-ness in its essence, and this essence embodied in a woman. Hardly to be paraphrased, but the reader is struck by the intensity of the impression.

In diction too there are some few similarities to be found – an unsurprising love for archaisms, and for words connoting colour, rank and royalty. But here similarity ends.

The Holy Grail consists almost entirely of simple Anglo-Saxon words, which have a strange, two-edged effect, in keeping with the whole character of this Idyll, suspended as it is between doubt and faith, vision and illusion. The simple language heightens the impression of the narrator's naiveté, emphasising his truthfulness while yet subtly influencing the reader to take his story 'with a grain of salt', and yet also contrasting the supernatural events he recounts with the down-to-earth remarks of the humble but curious monk Ambrosius. Williams's verse, of course, abounds in Latin and Greek polysyllables, mathematical and theological terms, neologisms and unusual compounds, juxtapositions of apparently incompatible terms from concrete and abstract realms, all of which – together with the complexity of the images – serve to create a density of impression

unequaled in any other poetry I have read, intensified as it is by both syntax and imagery, to which I now turn.

The contrast in syntax between the works is equally as great as that of the diction. Percivale tells his tale almost entirely in simple parataxis like a child's 'and then,.. and then,.. and then', except where he or Ambrosius interrupt themselves with asides and digressions, descriptions or other additions that turn them from their train of thought. This sometimes carries the naturalness of ordinary conversation, sometimes effects an emotional intensity not unlike the breathlessness of an excited child. Both aspects of the syntax skilfully heighten the effects of the simple diction, increasing the sense of ambiguity which colours the entire Grail adventure.

The syntax of the *Arthuriad* is full of participial phrases piled on top of one another, ellipses and syntactically unlinked juxtapositions, and statements simultaneously connected and separated by ubiquitous semi-colons. Here too syntax augments diction to create that density of impression that characterizes Williams's writing in every genre but is most marked in his mature poetry.

A few examples illustrate these contrasting devices: From "The Holy Grail", speaking of Galahad –

At once I saw him far on the great Sea,
 In silver-shining armour starry-clear,
 And o'er his head the holy Vessel hung
 Clothed in white samite or a luminous cloud.
 And with exceeding swiftness ran the boat,
 If boat it were – I saw not whence it came.
 And when the heavens open'd and blazed again
 Roaring, I saw him like a silver star –
 And had he set the sail, or had the boat
 Become a living creature clad with wings?
 And o'er his head the Holy Vessel hung
 Redder than any rose, a joy to me
 For now I knew the veil had been withdrawn.(23)

And for examples of Williams's use of syntax,

Arthur ran; the people marched; in the snow
 King Cradlemas died in his litter; a screaming few
 fled; Merlin came; Camelot grew.(24)

The king stood crowned; around in the gate,
 midnight striking, torches and fires
 massing the colour, casting the metal,
 furnace of jubilee, through time and town,
 Logres heraldically flaunted the king's state.(25)

flat, frozen, trapped
 under desecrated parallels, clawed perceptions
 denounced to a net of burning plunging eyes,
 earth lay,(26)

A comparison of the imagery employed in the two works reveals a perplexing degree of similarity – perplexing because again the effect is so entirely different. In both works the same natural images abound – sun and stars, sea and wood, lightning and storm, mountain and waste, flora and fauna; as do those taken from the human environment – gardens, cities, buildings and sculpture, heraldry and armour, jewellery and music. Light and colour, obscurity and clarity everywhere heighten the impressions. Whence then the diversity of effect? Tennyson describes sights and sounds with a sensuous vividness. The richness of his descriptions combines with the musicality of his sound to create an almost incantatory effect, delighting the senses and often lulling the brain. Williams's images, though speaking to the senses, appeal more to the intellect and often need intellectual effort to be understood, awakening rather than dulling the faculties.

Both poets use imagery as a structural element, the same images recurring again and again in different settings. In the Idylls we find above all images of nature reflecting the feelings and experiences of the figures or the state of the kingdom and forming a sub-theme linking the poems, whether it be it the burgeoning growth of spring, decay and death of autumn or the wildness of winter storm. In the Arthuriad recurring images from nature and especially the human body are, however,

continually juxtaposed with those from science, mathematics, theology and generally abstract thought, to create an entirely different effect, as in the third quotation above, from “Son of Lancelot”, or “mystical milk”, “magnanimous stair”, “bewildered wood” and a myriad of others. As CSL put it, Williams is “a poet ... of the transmuted senses, of poetry which by an unfulfilled invitation to the senses lures us beyond them.”(27) We can directly compare two visions of the Grail: “And down the long beam stole the Holy Grail,/ Rose-red with beatings in it, as if alive”(28) and “In the rent saffron sun hovered the Grail”(29) (or in a later poem) “the saffron veil of the sun itself/ covered all”.(30) The language here is equally simple, yet in the first we see the Grail (albeit at a remove through the mode of narration) yet clearly, almost concretely, whereas in the second it is beyond all seeing, veiled even by the sunlight.

The more, on the one hand, one seeks interrelationships between the images used in the Idylls, the more one becomes aware of their ambivalent character. Each individual image conveys a rich, vivid sensory impression, expanding and emphasizing the psychological state or moral condition of a character. Yet every image positive in one context appears negative elsewhere. Galahad’s description of the Grail is totally different from the nun’s: “Fainter by day, but always in the night/ Blood-red, and sliding down the blacken’d marsh/ Blood-red, and on the naked mountain top/ Blood-red, and in the sleeping mere below/ Blood-red.”(31) The gardens that bloom under the gardener’s ordering work of human hands both conceal and divulge the dangers of erotic passion – everywhere, apparently clear images conceal doubt and uncertainty under the surface. In Williams’s *Arthurian* the culminating impressions of the recurring images augment rather than cast doubt upon one another. The prime example for this effect may be seen in the human body, which is an image of the Empire with its provinces, of erotic love, of poetry, of work and nourishment, of learning and of ritual (and probably more), carrying each meaning to all the contexts in which it is used, linking all of these as images of the soul’s way to God and reaffirming the poet’s conviction of the unity of all aspects of creation with the creator. The hazel is another ubiquitous image with manifold meanings and similar effect, as are simpler images such as the repeated colours red, gold, and cream.

Conclusion

After this brief comparison of narrative, structure and style, what then can we conclude? Both the *Idylls of the King* and Williams's *Arthuriad* embody the greatest attempts made by the two poets to give expression to their vision of the nature of reality and the human character and the few similarities we have found between the two works throw into relief the profound differences between them. Tennyson's technique of casting doubt on the affirmations expressed in his works has often been noted and it is prevalent here. In "The Epic", which he later added as a frame to his early poem "Morte D'Arthur", the poet throws "his epic, his King Arthur, some twelve books" into the fire as worthless. An expression of despair, that the *Idylls* did not fulfil his hopes? Worthless, perhaps, because the work does not answer, or answers in the negative, his hope that his own poetic power may affirm to himself the reality of the divine, of a world beyond this and the capacity of the individual to attain to it against the powers of dissolution. For the Grail – a subject he did not even dare tackle for fear of incurring the charge of irreverence, until he found an indirect way of framing his story – far from being a sign of salvation, is not even so much as "a sign to maim this Order which I made"(32, italics mine) as Arthur calls it, it turns out simply a sign of its gradual disintegration.

Fascinated by the advance of knowledge and the technical and economic progress made possible by scientific materialism, Tennyson was yet filled with despair by the concomitant decline of traditional values and disregard of spiritual ideals which he saw spreading through all levels of society. The subjective force of his own inner vision of a transcendent, spiritual reality convinced him of the necessity of faith in "the High God" and "that One Who rose again" and in the moral teachings of Christianity to combat the prevalent moral chaos. His liberal Protestant ethic stressed the importance of moral effort; yet never having truly grasped the central tenet of the Christian creed, man's redemption through Christ, he was left with little but despair when this failed. Unable to reconcile his inner conviction of transcendent goodness with the evil he experienced in the world, he was again and again forced to assert faith in his ideal in the teeth of his own experience, and never attained an understanding of reality which could encompass both objective knowledge and subjective conviction, material fact and moral necessity, actuality and ideal. As one critic put it, "His is a poetry of illusions, none of them bearing the ultimate authority of reality."(33)

Charles Williams's understanding of the Arthurian myth is based on a unified vision of reality, in which matter and spirit partake equally. It embodies – more movingly, it seems to me, on every reading, as new understandings of the many-levelled images present themselves – the poet's own conviction that among all the evils and disappointments of life redemption is open and a cause for joy to each person. The last words of Taliessin through Logres carry this conviction into the present of the poet and the reader: "In the dispersed homes of the household, let the company pray for it still."(34)

According to Charles Williams, the way of the poet is one of the great ways of affirmation, his imagination empowering him to recognize truth in its images and to give it expression in his work. Tennyson, like his own Grail knights, could not make his vision a viable basis for action in the physical world. While he was aware that "Words, like Nature, half reveal/ and half conceal the Soul within"(35) he never learned that every image must be rejected even as it is affirmed, and that only so can all levels of existence be seen as images of and participants in a single reality: "This also is Thou; neither is this Thou".

It is here that the final strength of Williams's poetry lies – in his intellectual grasp of a single unifying metaphysic, his ability to see all reality as one and as good, and yet to recognise evil in its full complexity and power; to accept the necessity for both the affirmation and the rejection of images.

For Williams, seeing matter and spirit as one, the Grail represents redemption on every level, which, though society continue to reject it, the individual, through grace, can achieve. For Tennyson, unable to reconcile the ideal with the actual, the Grail remains an enigmatic vision, as the aspiration of the human soul to the spiritual realm yet brings but dissolution to the earthly.

NOTES

1. C.S.Lewis, "Preface", *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Grand Rapids 1962) p vi
2. Anne Ridler, "Introduction", *The Image of the City by Charles Williams* (London 1958) p x.

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3. Dorothy L Sayers "Introduction", *James I* by Charles Williams, quoted in Mary McDermott Shideler, *The Theology of Romantic Love* (Grand Rapids 1962) p 2.
 4. Charles Williams, *The English Poetic Mind* (London 1932) p. vii.
 5. Quoted in Arthur J. Carr, "Tennyson as a Modern Poet", *Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson* (London 1960) p 41.
 6. F.E.L. Priestley, *Language and Structure in Tennyson's Poetry* (London 1973) p 181.
 7. quoted in Ridler, *op cit*, p. lxiv-lxv.
 8. "The Holy Grail" in Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Poems and Plays*, ed. T. Herbert Warren (London 1975²) (hereafter abbreviated HG) p 389.
 9. *ibid*.
 10. A. Dwight Culler, *The Poetry of Tennyson* (New Haven and London 1977) p 228.
 11. HG p 391.
 12. HG p 393.
 13. HG p 397.
 14. HG p 402.
 15. "The Calling of Taliessin", in *Taliessin through Logres, The Region of the Summer Stars and Arthurian Torso* (Grand Rapids, 1974) (hereafter abbreviated as AT) p 134.
 16. "The Coming of Galahad", *ibid* p 87.
 17. "The Crowning of Arthur", *ibid* p 38.
 18. "The Founding of the Company", *ibid* p 158.
 19. HG, p 402.
 20. Quoted in Ridler, *op cit* p lxii.
 21. HG, p 439.
 22. "Lamorack and the Queen Morgause of Orkney", AT p 56.
 23. HG, p 396
 24. "The Calling of Arthur", AT p 33.
 25. "The Crowning of Arthur", AT p 37.
 26. "Son of Lancelot", AT p 72.
 27. "Arthurian Torso", AT p 381.
 28. HG, p 392
 29. "Percivale at Carbonek", AT p 99
 30. "The Calling of Taliessin", AT p 136.
 31. HG, p 396.
 32. HG, p 393.
 33. Arthur J. Carr, *op cit* p 63.
 34. "Taliessin at Lancelot's Mass", AT p 109.
 35. Tennyson, "In Memoriam" v, *op cit* p 231.

A CAROL

Hear, ye proud and famous men -
Now is come the midnight when
God descended to our ken;
O venite cito!

Kings and champions, come and see,
For this night begins to be
Blessèd with nativity;
Verum ac fidele.

Come ye down from choir and stall;
Christ is born not in the hall
Where your expectation fall:
O venite cito!

From Hierusalem he hid
Sheep and cattle well amid;
Now He hides as once He did.
Verum ac fidele.

Herod saw not come to pass,
Nor Pilate nor Dom Caiaphas,
What lay between the ox and ass;
O venite cito!

Take not now from dame or fere
'Christ is here' or 'Christ is there';
He Himself shall show you where:
Verum ac fidele.

In between the moon and sun
God shall show you, one by one,
How the secret way to run,
O venite cito!

Where ye looked not, ye shall find,
Where ye sought not, He is shrined;
What ye bind He shall unbind,
Verum ac fidele.

Search to left, and search to right,
Can ye see whence comes the light
(Saith He) in a world of night?
O venite cito!

Ye who mourn the dolorous blow,
Hear the sweet word through your woe
'*Omnia nova facio*':
Verum ac fidele.

Dare to see and to believe
Wheresoever He retrieve
Things that battle, things that grieve
O venite cito!

Glory to the Sanctity
Of that blessed advent be,
And to his epiphany,
Verum ac fidele.

CHARLES WILLIAMS

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- ◆ All quotations should be clearly referenced, and a list of sources included.
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