

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

NO. 16, WINTER 1979

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY 1980

- 22 March 1980: This will be a full Society meeting combined with the London Reading Group to complete the reading of War In Heaven.
- 31 May 1980: A.G.M. Speaker Dr Erik Routley.
- 6 September: One day Summer Meeting in London. Further details below.

Society meetings are held at 2.30pm at Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W.1. (North Audley Street is the second turning to the right, south, off Oxford Street, going from Marble Arch towards Oxford Circus; after Grosvenor Square it becomes South Audley Street. Another convenient access is from Park Lane.)

Each meeting is followed by discussion and tea. Please bring copies of any books which might be referred to at a meeting. There is no fee for members, but 50p must be paid for a guest (each member may bring one guest) and this should be handed to the person in charge of the meeting.

The Society's Lending Librarian brings a selection of library books which may be borrowed by members.

MEETINGS OF THE S.W. LONDON GROUP OF THE SOCIETY

For information please contact Martin Moynihan, 5 The Green, Wimbledon, London SW19. Telephone: 946 7964.

LONDON READING GROUP

22 March 1980, Saturday, at 2.30pm at Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W1 (for directions see above). This will be combined with a Society meeting reading War In Heaven. It has not been possible to arrange further dates for reading group meetings on Saturdays and Sundays because of difficulties in providing accomodation for the meetings. Any suggestions, please, to Richard Wallis.

C.W. SOCIETY SUMMER CONFERENCE, SATURDAY 6 SEPTEMBER 1980, CW AND THE CITY

Venue: A room in a City church.

Conference opens 10.15am, 10.30-11.30 Charles Hadfield will talk on Amen House and its surroundings as CW knew them illustrated with exhibits. 12.00-1pm Anne Ridler will talk on the idea of the City in CW's thoughts and writings followed by discussion. 1pm-2.15, members bring sandwich lunch. Walk in lunch interval to Warwick Lane and site of Amen House. 2.30pm, Reading of Judgement at Chelmsford. Conference fee £1 to cover expenses.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Members are reminded that the 1980-81 subscriptions are due from 1 March 1980. £2 single members, £3 couples. Please send these as soon as possible to the Treasurer.

OFFICERS OF THE SOCIETY

- Chairman: Richard Wallis, 6 Matlock Court, Kensington Park Road, London W11 3BS (221 0057)
- Secretary: Rev Dr Brian Horne, 11b Roland Gardens, London SW7 (373 5579).

Treasurer: Philip Bovey, 102 Cleveland Gardens, Barnes, London SW13 (876 3710)

Membership

Secretaries: Jenet and Philip Bovey, address as above.

Lending

Librarian: Mrs Anne Scott, 25 Corfton Road, London W5 2HP (997 2667).

Editor: Mrs Molly Switek, 8 Crossley Street, London N7 8PD (607 7919).

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EXTRACT FROM AN ARTICLE BY KARL HEINZ GÖLLER

Our member Martin Moynihan spoke recently at the 12th International Arthurian Conference at Regensburg on the Danube in Bavaria, West Germany. He met there Professor Dr Göller, Direktor of the Institut für Anglistik at Regensburg University. Dr Göller sent him an article he had previously written, in English, for Lebende Antike, Symposium für Rudolf Sühnel, hg. v. Horst Meller und Hans-Joachim Zimmermann, Berlin: Erich Schmidt 1967. For brevity, some portions have reluctantly been omitted.

KING ARTHUR AND THE GRAIL IN THE POETRY OF CHARLES WILLIAMS

..... Among modern poets Charles Williams has been the most successful in recreating and re-modelling Arthurian myth. At his death in 1945 he left an unfinished study on the Figure of King Arthur which informs us of the intention of his Arthurian poetical works, Taliessin Through Logres and Region of the Summer Stars. He wanted to point out the development of the myths of King Arthur and the Grail, their gradual approximation to each other, their amalgamation and the future fate of the Grail. Two subjects are near to Williams' heart: King Arthur's world and the world of the Grail. If we compare the two focal points of this 'Arthuriad' with similar mediaeval works, e.g. Sir Thomas Malory's Morte D'Arthur, which must be regarded as Williams' main source, we shall indeed recognise his individuality and originality. The tale of Lancelot and Guinevere, which is the most perspicuous and accessible part of the story to modern readers, is only treated in passing. The centre of the whole myth and thus the raison d'être of Williams' work is the Grail. King Arthur's empire is from the beginning ^{deliberately} designed for the Grail. The union of the Arthurian world and the Grail is for Charles Williams not a historical or legendary event, but a complex symbol of the union of 'imperium' and Christianity, and therewith the symbol of Christ's return to earth, the Παρουσία.

On the model of the Old French Prose Lancelot Williams calls Arthur's kingdom Logres. It is part or province of the Byzantine Empire which in turn represents the incarnation of divine order. Coming from the mediaeval Arthurian legend we should have expected the Roman Empire as the more obvious starting point. But for Charles Williams Byzantium means a strictly hierarchical orderliness and organic subdivision. For him divine order is geometrical precision and perfect harmony of the component parts. He therefore did not want a rivalry between the members of the empire or a representation of struggles for political predominance. Thus Williams gives the story of King Arthur a new turn

..... Charles Williams presents a new concept of the Arthurian kingdom and at the same time of Arthurian myth. The most important innovation is the abandonment of the antithesis between Logres and Rome. Already in Tennyson's Idylls of the King Rome had only been "the slowly fading mistress of the world". The war against the empire is reduced to one laconic sentence: "And Arthur strove with Rome." Williams says that this war against the emperor "ought not to happen", "it had better be dropped"; "No national myth was ever the better for being set against a more universal authority." Williams gives up the rivalry between Logres and Rome and thus gets rid of the nationalism prevalent in Geoffrey and Malory. Arthur's kingdom becomes an organic part of the Byzantine Empire.

Williams develops the idea of the empire as an organism in a quite literal way. He takes up a suggestion of William Wordsworth who in the Prelude terms the human body an index of grace and honour, power and worthiness; in other words: the structure of the body is an index to the structure of the greater whole. Williams is anxious not to separate the physical structure from the greater whole. The body is treated as an index, which means that the verbal element and the microcosmic physical structure are duplicated in the greater structure of the whole. In Williams' poetic imagination the microcosmic-macrocosmic structures are fused. The head of the empire's body is Logres, for it is in Britain that the historical process has its origin and becomes conscious. The breasts are France, whence Christendom has received the milk of learning and of faith ("the breasts of intelligo and credo"). Rome is represented through the hands of the pope which mediate the blessings of the church. The navel stands for Byzantium, the organic centre and residence of the emperor. The genital organs are Jerusalem where Christ was crucified and where the redemption of man took place. Thus the empire is an organism, the human body on the other hand an image of the empire, the kingdom of God.

Beyond the empire is P'ol'u, the land of the antipodes, where order slides into anarchy. Octopods with enormous slimy tentacles move waving across the silent sea and glower with lidless eyes upon the coast of the empire. Ideas from Coleridge's Ancient Mariner mingle with the mediaeval lore of the Antipodes which was sometimes even counterpoised with the Arthurian world, as e.g. in Etienne de Rouen's Draco Normannicus. P'ol'u is a kind of hell, the kingdom of the headless king. West of Logres is Broceliande, the mysterious wood of making and of everything concerned with making, the country of Apeiron. Mistress of this forest is Nimue, "mother of making". She is evidently modelled under the influence of Swinburne's 'Lady of the Lake', but as the great mother and lady of Broceliande she combines time and place, her children Merlin and Brisen, twins of parthenogenetical birth. In the forest of Broceliande, outside the empire, lies the Castle of Carbonek, where Grail and Bleeding Lance are kept.....

..... Williams has changed the geographically unfixed Logres of mediaeval authors into a spiritual landscape which is characterized by geometrical order. But order is not only in itself a value, it also refers to holiness, to God who manifests himself in mathematical and geometrical symbols as "operative providence". Religion should be expressed in mathematically clear images with precise outlines. Sin, for example, is the rejection of a pattern, the overthrow of a divine plan through man. The ordered and hierarchically graded Logres refers to a macrocosmic universe to which it corresponds in the same way as the human body does to the empire. But Logres is only a transitory realisation of the ideal social order - the creation of a happy moment - and therefore unstable, dependent on men's readiness to conform to the laws. If they are lacking in disinterested love and make themselves the centre of the world, the original chaos comes back: "... things fall apart, the centre cannot hold."

Compared with Malory's work on the downfall of Arthur's world, the dimensions have widened. They remind us of Milton and his representation of the Fall of Man. Heaven and earth combine in a new mythical empire which is not less real because it has never existed. Neither is it the idealistic portrait of a utopian $\phi\alpha\nu\tau\alpha\sigma\tau\iota\chi\acute{o}\nu$ but a universally valid representation of the situation of man, even of modern man. But apart from this applicability to contemporary history Williams' myth lives from its own centre, its meaning and inherent grandeur.

As with the kingdom of Arthur, Williams presents the Grail in a form it has never had in the preceding literature. One might even say that before Williams there has never been an adequate poetical version of the Grail legend in English literature. Besides the unimportant work of Henry Lovelich there are five versions

of the early history of the Grail, which was already well known in England about 1250.

..... Malory is more interested in worldly honour and fame than in spiritual chivalry. This is by no means inconsistent with the fact that Malory follows his source during the quest much closer than in the rest of his work. He draws upon the 'metière', but he changes the 'sen'. The transcendental aim of the quest should help the all too secular knight to find his primary destination. But Malory did not or could not recognise the spiritual significance of the quest. He takes the Grail into his secular world.

..... Malory's unwillingness or inability to grasp the significance of the Grail quest is certainly not a unique failure but rather a general human response to the spiritual world. Modern man in particular does not appreciate the ascetic ideal. John W Donaldson, one of the recent editors of Malory, has therefore omitted the quest altogether. He calls this part the interpolation of a monk, incompatible with the spirit of a tale of chivalry, because based on the ideals of chastity and penitence and therefore a stranger to the world of Arthur. In a similar way Tennyson has represented the quest as an experience of the three mystics Galahad, Perceval and Bors, evoked by ecstatic visions of holy virgins. The 'Table Round', and with it the average man, has nothing to do with the quest.

Charles Williams knows about this human attitude towards holiness. Mordred, the cynic and traitor says:

My father dwelled on the thought of the Grail for his luck,
But I can manage without such fairy mechanism
If it does prove to be, which is no likely thought
I will send my own dozen of knights to pull it in.

For Williams, the Grail is not a fairy mechanism, but a spiritual power. He devotes the greater part of his later poetry to the re-establishment of the Grail in the world of today, a very courageous though not a promising enterprise. Williams enters upon his task as a literary historian and as a poet. His prose work The Figure of Arthur displays his astonishing erudition in the field of Arthurian literature. His conception of the Grail is straightforward and unambiguous, and certainly a little prejudiced in favour of Christian associations. No matter whether the Grail was originally a chalice, a platter, or any other kind of vessel, it enters Europe together with the Eucharist.

..... The wound of the Fisher King is in Williams' myth an injury of man physically and spiritually. Of course, he does not deny the sexual implications of the wound, but he is most of all interested in the symbolical function of sex, namely its reference to Jerusalem, and the significance of Jerusalem in the anatomical myth. The wound of the Fisher King is explained by means of the "dolorous blow" which becomes in Williams' myth a symbol of Man's Fall. When Perceval was crowned king, King Arthur and the whole 'Table Round' remained in the Grail Castle for a month. Here we recognise the new centre of the Arthurian legend which moves towards the Grail.

The last Arthurian legend mentioned by Williams is Perlesvaus. It is easy to see why Williams was especially interested in this particular work. Its exposition seems to indicate that the Arthurian world and the Grail should for the first time be united in a literary work. But an amalgamation of the two worlds did not take place, there was not even a contact between them. Williams, however, regarded the unification of these two worlds as his foremost task and duty.

Williams' new Arthurian myth consists of two unfinished lyric cycles which have appeared under the titles Taliessin Through Logres and Region of the Summer Stars. As in the Morte D'Arthur and similar versions the starting point is the crowning of King Arthur. Even at this point a presage of future mischief creeps over the reader. Merlin does not take part in the crowning of the king. He sits in the steeple of St Stephen and meditates on the inevitable decline of the kingdom.

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..... As in most mediaeval romances King Arthur is an unmoved mover, the passive centre of his kingdom. Someone else has to act in his stead, and, as Malory did before him, Williams chooses Lancelot for this part, the favourite of King and Queen, the poet's best example of the way of affirmations and of images, just as the nun Dindrane who sacrifices her blood for a leper, is an example of the negative way, the way of image-rejection. Only Guinevere is treated without the slightest sympathy. In all the previous versions she was, as the schoolgirl said, "a lady very much subject to the misfortune of being run away with", and even Williams cannot think of very much for her to do or to be. She can only sit, wait, and love. Galahad, the pure knight, cannot be born from her. His mother must come from the family of the Grail kings, his father must belong to the secular chivalry. Carbonek and Camelot are to be united in the person of Prince Galahad. Williams follows literary tradition and makes Lancelot father of the elect. After the begetting of Galahad Merlin's work is done. He disappears into the mystical darkness whence he came. The advent of Galahad, subject of the poem 'The Coming of Galahad', is modelled according to the symbols of stone and shell. This is taken from Wordsworth's Prelude. At the beginning of Book V the poet tells us his dream: in a sandy desert he met a Bedouin carrying a stone and a shell. The stone was Euclid's elements, geometry or intellect, the shell prophetic poetry. For Williams these two symbols are the poles of human life: the geometric and the vital, Byzantium and Broceliande. In the person of Galahad the stone has been fitted to the shell - this he calls the finding of identity. Galahad is the image of the New Man, an example of the necessary union of the Arthurian world and Grail.

Taliessin has seen this identity in five different houses, in the house of poetry, in sensual life, in the intellect, in the Church, and in the imaginative vision. The intellectual Gaul needs the shell, the life of the flesh needs the stone. All the houses are linked with each other, none of them can exist on its own. In my opinion Taliessin does not speak uncertainly here, as C S Lewis has said. The five houses turn into the triangular points of the pentangle which was regarded as a symbol of perfection by Pythagoreans, Platonists and Gnostics. The immediate source of Williams might be the Middle English romance Gawain and the Green Knight, in which Gawain bears the pentangle on his coat of arms. The allegorical explanation of this symbol rests on the idea of the endless knot, so called, because the "interlacing lines are joined so as to be continuous". If you follow the lines, you will always return to the same point.
..... The poem on Galahad closes with Taliessin's vision of the ascent of the soul to the inner heaven. Like Dante, who regards the planetary spheres as different grades and classes of holiness, Williams takes the planets as stages in the spiritual development of man. The first planet is Mercury, the God of opposition and change, the stage of competition among the houses. Venus is the sphere of orientation and decision, i.e. of preference. Jupiter with his two moons refers to irony and defeated irony, which does not chafe against the unalterable state of the world, but draws its sting by laughing at its absurdity. Saturn is the planet of loneliness and meditation, promise and symbol of the future Golden Age. Logres has only reached the sphere of Jupiter.

..... Like Galahad, who has seen the holy Grail already in Camelot, Perceval and Bors are the elect of the Grail. They are at the same time living flesh

and blood and incarnations of typical attitudes towards life. Perceval is the pure lover, full of spiritual questions and problems, Bors the ordinary mortal man, married, with children, a man aspiring to perfection but laden with earthly concerns. Galahad however does not belong to this world. Williams would not want us to see him as Christ. But he is a symbol for the divine spark in man, "man's capacity for Christ". In Carbonek Galahad heals the wounded king, Christ appears to him in the Grail and sends him to Sarras where he recedes from man's view. His leaving Camelot marks the final separation of the Arthurian world and the Grail.

..... The 'Prayers of the Pope' bring the cycle to an end. As a kind of refrain we hear the desperate cry: "Send not, send not the rich empty away." The whole empire has divided itself into antagonistic groups. The pope feels inside himself the schism, the return of chaos, the spiritual death. Thus Williams leaves us in a world similar to that described by T S Eliot in 'The Waste Land' where the Fisher King asks: "Shall I at least set my land in order?" and where he receives answer by means of the nursery rhyme: "London bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down ..." The vision of a significant voyage towards a fixed destination has evaporated. There will be no salvation from the curse of sterility.

But Williams does not send us home without any hope: Taliessin's household will remain. Though he has formally dissolved the company and restored to God his task and lieutenancy, there will be a kind of hidden communion, the work will go on. And there is still another hope: Broceliande will always remain good. The roots of the forest fasten on the tentacles of P'ol'u, the forces of death are checked and chained by the mother of making.

Can we call Charles Williams a modern poet? What is his place in literary history? The avant-garde of modern lyric poetry will reject him. In modern poetry (they declare categorically) the individual perception of the world has to be transferred to the infinite field of potential experience. Modern poetry is destructive. It dismisses idealistic conceptions of the world, it insists on breadth of vision and outlook. But above all, modern lyric poetry has to shift its subject out of the light of clarity and perceptibility into the darkness of obscurity, mystery, and uncertainty. The metaphor is only tolerated as a kind of irritating impulse which blots out other impulses and thus gives rise to a dialectical movement. But contrary to the ruling tendencies of modern lyric poetry the mysteriousness of (Charles Williams') poems gives way to flashes of deepest insight, the cryptic darkness changes into lucid objectivity.

Yet Williams is not a traditionalist. He is not primarily involved in examining whether traditional myths and legends are suitable for modern use. For Williams, the Grail is not part of a venerable mythology, but a spiritual incentive, a challenge and a destination. Though his Grail remains a symbol of the transcendental, his message has nothing to do with the a-logical fascination of modern poetry. Even the reader who cannot accept Williams' message, because he finds it repellent, antiquated, or unrealistic, must nevertheless admit that Williams' poetical world is coherent, consistent, intelligible, perspicuous. Moreover, it is modern, full of spiritual unrest, stir and fermentation. In spite of Williams' adherence to Malory and other mediaeval authors, the subject appears to be an appropriate means of expression for the poet's message to his century, perhaps because Williams has penetrated deeper into the Arthurian myth than any of his predecessors, because he has clearly expressed what they had only vaguely anticipated.

In spite of the assurances of modern literary historians it is by no means certain which kind of poetry will in future years be regarded as the typical expression of our time. But surely Williams' poetry is also modern, though it exploits the treasure-house of the past, for it reflects the situation of modern man. Indeed some people believe that only by returning to the old sources can we regain the lost centre of life.

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"SEVEN" George Macdonald, G K Chesterton, C S Lewis, J R R Tolkien, Charles Williams, Dorothy Sayers, Owen Barfield. An Anglo-American Literary Review is being prepared on these seven writers. The first number is to be published on 31 March 1980. The magazine, 128 pages, will be edited by Clyde Kilby of Wheaton College, Illinois, U S A, curator of the Wade Collection of original and other material concerning the Seven authors; also by Dr Barbara Reynolds, co-operator with Dorothy Sayers in the verse translation of Dante's Paradiso; and Beatrice Batson. The first volume will contain an article on Charles Williams and his Arthurian Poetry by Alice Mary Hadfield. Price of Vol 1 is £5.00 or \$10.00 US.

The magazine is being published by Wheaton College, designed, printed and distributed by Heffers Printers Ltd of Cambridge, England. Orders for Vol.1, cheques payable to Heffers Printers Limited. Send cheque with your name and address to Mrs P Andrews, c/o Heffers Printers Ltd., King's Hedges Road, Cambridge, CB4 2PQ, England.

Alice Mary Hadfield

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