

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 20, WINTER 1980

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

21 February 1981: The Lighter Side of Charles Williams - readings and discussions from his contributions to periodicals.

2 May 1981: A meeting in Brasenose College, Oxford - details to be announced.

6 June 1981: AGM

5 September 1981: CWS one day London conference.

Society meetings are held at 2.30 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 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 S.W.19
Telephone: 946 7964.

LONDON READING GROUP

29 March 1981: This meeting will be held at Alice Mary and Charles Hadfield's house, 21 Randolph Road, London W.9., starting at 1pm. Please bring sandwiches. We will continue reading The Descent of the Dove.

OXFORD READING GROUP

A small group of people interested in reading together Charles Williams' Arthurian poems has begun fortnightly meetings in Oxford. We are meeting alternately at the homes of Anne Scott (tel: Oxford 53897) and Brenda Boughton (tel: Oxford 55589). Anyone who would like to join us would be very welcome.

NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to the following new members:

Mrs Angelika Schneider, Scharrenbroicher Str. 15, D-5064 Rösraath 2, West Germany.

Mr and Mrs J. Samuel Hammond, 920 West Marlham Avenue, Durham, North Carolina
27701, U.S.A.

J.G. Sparkes, 72 Hadley Highstone, Barnet, Herts.

OFFICERS OF THE SOCIETY

Chairman: Richard Wallis, 6 Matlock Court, Kensington Park Road, London
W11 3BS (221 0057)

Secretary: Mrs Gillian Lunn, 26 Village Road, Finchley, London N3 1TL (346 6025)

The clue has already been supplied by the author himself in his curious sub-title. I believe that Williams is returning to a tradition of historical writing that is older than our scientific one, older than Tacitus and Josephus, older, even, than Thucydides and Herodotus. This is the tradition we have come to know by the German term heilsgeschichte: 'sacred' history or 'salvation' history. This is the tradition of those books of the Old Testament which we call 'historical' and that go under the names, I & II Samuel and I & II Kings. Here in these books we find the same kind of 'imbalance', the same lack of interest in the mere reporting of historical 'facts'. All significance lies in the interpretation of the presented facts, with what might be called the inner, spiritual meaning of the facts. The books seem to be histories: they describe the rise of the monarchy, the establishment of Jerusalem, the division of the kingdom, the exile and restoration etc., but their overarching concern is God and His Covenant and the ways in which His nature and purposes are revealed in actual historical events. They are, therefore, the History of God in the People of God. If the ancient Jews did not believe this was either an impossibility or a blasphemy, why should we be so coy? Just as the compilers of those ancient records believed that there was a spiritual, religious significance to be discerned within the events, so the presupposition of Charles Williams is that the historical process follows a discernible pattern: that it is possible to trace the 'bright passage' of the Holy Spirit through the ages. The book is as much a treatise on Providence as it is a history. All events are interpreted and evaluated in terms of certain theological maxims. In the preface he writes:

A motto which might have been set on the title-page but has been, less ostentatiously, put here instead, is a phrase which I once supposed to come from Augustine, but I am informed by experts that it is not so, and otherwise I am ignorant of its source. The phrase is: "This also is Thou; neither is this Thou." As a maxim for living it is invaluable, and it - or its reversal - summarises the history of the Christian Church.

The book is dedicated to 'The Companions of the Coinherence' and the only illustration is a reproduction of Ludovico Brea's Paradise, a painting taken by the author to represent the 'whole redeemed city'. It could be said, with justification, that The Descent of the Dove is a historical survey in which the significance of every event is judged by the extent to which it provides evidence for the principle of the ultimate co-inherence of man and the universe with God, and demonstrates the actuality of the principle of exchange and substitution.

Williams begins precisely where one would expect an historian to begin: with the earliest documentary evidence of the Christian community, the letters of Paul the Apostle. And he sees in Paul's letters a great exposition of the notion of co-inherence, though he makes no attempt to examine the various ways in which the apostle developed that doctrine. His treatment of Paul is terse in the extreme and occasionally this becomes self-defeating: it is not enough to quote from a letter and hope that the implications will be discerned. Not all the great phrases speak for themselves and torn from their context they often hang mystifying and illegibly 'in the air'. But this is the only section of the book in which the author's style fails him. Much of the writing in The Descent of the Dove is revelatory, in the real sense of that word. He has the capacity to reveal, in a precision of phrase and a vividness of imagery, what one had never seen before or had only dimly perceived as though in a half-light. Above all, he has the capacity to discover connections between apparently disparate and distinct phenomena which have gone unnoticed before. Take, for example, a short passage about the Gnostics and their theories:

The stones they (the Gnostics) offered fitted the corners of many temples; only not of the City of Christendom. God

was not really responsible for the appalling putrescence of misery which we call the world. The soul and the body (so to divide them formally) were not responsible for each other. The Gordian knot of the unity was cut, and the bits fell radically apart. Toothache, cancer, women's periods, frustrated sex-love, these and other ills were without relation to the activity of the celestial spheres.

Now Gnosticism is a complicated matter, both historically and theologically, but in these few phrases it is nailed with astonishing accuracy. Gnosticism was a pervasive force, too dissipated to be called a movement, in the Early Christian world, but behind all the hundreds of sects there lay a common stock of ideas: that the way to salvation was by the possession of a secret knowledge; that matter and spirit were totally distinct and contrary substances which by some misfortune had become 'mixed' as a result of some cosmic 'faux pas'. The most serious battle the Early Church had to fight was the battle against Gnosticism. For Williams the Gnostic inability to see spirit and matter as a co-inherent entity was a failure to see the world as it actually was. The Church's ultimate rejection of Gnostic theories represents the preservation of the true understanding of creation's interdependent nature, the recognition of what simply is the case. Nothing could be further removed from the sensibility of Williams, who accepted the authority of the romantic vision, and who saw in the physical world an image of the heavenly glory, than a system like the Gnostic's which, whatever its form, divided soul from body, spirit from matter, and which either debased the flesh in licentiousness or attempted to suppress its demands in wild and perverse mortifications.

In the second chapter of The Descent of the Dove the originality of his interpretation and reconstruction of Christendom's history becomes apparent. Amidst the brief survey of the events and personalities of the second and third centuries - events which included spectacular martyrdoms and the writing of documents that have become classics of Christian literature, and personalities that included Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus - we are taken to North Africa and our attention is focussed on the relatively unknown figure of a slave-girl imprisoned and under sentence of death for her profession of Christianity, Felicitas. She has no feastday of her own in our calendars, but is remembered with her mistress Perpetua, an account of whose sufferings has been preserved (perhaps edited by Tertullian). She was pregnant when captured and gave birth to a child in captivity. It is said she cried out in her pain and was mocked by her goalers who warned her of greater torments to come. She replied that then: "Another will be in me who will suffer for me as I shall suffer for him". So Williams sees her death as one of the most significant in the history of the Church, not because she showed particular nobility or graciousness, but because her single utterance epitomises what is meant by Christian co-inherence and reaches more deeply into the heart of the mystery of creation and redemption than millions of words uttered, or millions of actions performed, by thousands of others.

Lack of space prevents me from commenting on the way Williams deals with the early councils of the Church and their doctrinal definitions, or on the saint whose figure towers not only over Western Christianity but over the whole of Western culture: Augustine of Hippo, or that intricate and perplexing document which he calls the 'great humanist Ode' - the Athanasian Creed. I must, perforce, be highly selective and draw out of this treasure-store only two more subjects: the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist and the figure of Soren Kierkegaard.

I have been talking of the co-inherence of matter and spirit in relation to Gnostic controversies and I turn now to the co-inherence of matter and spirit in relation to the doctrine of the Eucharist. It would be impertinent for me, who never knew Williams, to say anything about his personal devotion, but I

detect an attitude of deep reverence and wonder in so far as the Eucharist is a recurring theme in his early poetry, and his choice of the Holy Grail as one of the central motifs of the Arthurian poems inexorably draws the reader towards the contemplation of one of the central mysteries of the Christian Church. As he points out the mysteries of the co-inherent Godhead had been, as far as possible, defined in the Trinitarian formulae of the Council of Nicaea and the mysteries of the co-inherent Godhead and Manhood in the Christological clauses of the Council of Chalcedon, but the extension of those mysteries had been 'accepted rather than discussed' for the first eleven hundred years of the Church's life, and never defined. But in the year 1215 Pope Innocent III summoned the Fourth Lateran Council which in due course formally promulgated the dogma of Transubstantiation. The council was remarkable for reasons other than its dogmatic pronouncements, but Williams does not comment on those reasons: his interest is focussed on that dogma, which is a philosophical explanation of the way Christ could be said to be really present in the elements of bread and wine at the Mass. Fifty years after the Fourth Lateran Council the liturgy of the Western Church was enriched by a new festival in honour of the Holy Sacrament: the festival of Corpus Christi. Here is Williams's memorable comment:

The co-inherence of matter and Deity as a presence became as liturgically glorious as it was intellectually splendid, and the performance of the dramatic Mysteries and Miracles celebrated in many places through a long summer's day the Act in the present sacrament as well as in history and in the soul. It was organised and exhibited.

True to inherited Anglican tradition Williams does not espouse the definitions of the Church of Rome, nor any other dogmatic formulations of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but he recognises in the Medieval doctrine of Transubstantiation and the institution of the festival of Corpus Christi a courageous attempt to understand and display the reality of the Presence existing within and transforming, however mysteriously, the elements of bread and wine. Despite his reluctance to enter into theological controversy about the precise way Deity and matter are joined in the Holy Sacrament, Williams leaves us in no doubt that he regarded the Eucharist as a rite which signified far more than the commemoration of a past event, for he chooses to describe the mystery in his own terms of 'image' and 'co-inherence'. Divine life and sensible matter co-inhere and the image both points away from itself to the reality while containing, in its own distinctive way, the reality itself. "This also is Thou: neither is this Thou".

But there is another, or rather an extended, meaning in that aphorism which introduces the figure of Soren Kierkegaard.

Perhaps the most surprising, and certainly one of the most interesting, aspects of The Descent of the Dove is the number of pages Williams devotes to this nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian. It will be remembered that it was Williams who furthered the cause of Kierkegaard in England by his successful efforts at persuading the Oxford University Press to publish the first English translation of Kierkegaard in 1936, and Williams's anthology of spiritual 'epigrams', The New Christian Year includes as many quotations from Kierkegaard as from Augustine and Dante. What attracted him to this difficult and puzzling man? Alice Mary Hadfield, in her biography of Williams, writes:

It was then (in the 1930's) that he heard a new voice ...
It spoke of faith and paradox and dread. It cried that God
is love and therefore man lived in terror and anguish....
The voice was Soren Kierkegaard's.

Perhaps he saw in the paradoxical Kierkegaard another way of understanding that central aphorism with which he prefaced his book. The more one reads Williams's work the more one is made aware of a deeply sceptical streak in his mental, emotional and imaginative constitution. He had a mind which delighted in tensions and paradoxes: he would have loved to be able to believe ten impossible things before breakfast. Such a religious sensibility must have been strongly drawn to Kierkegaard whose profoundly serious approach to the experience of personal suffering resulted in his assertion of the co-existence, almost the co-inherence, of misery and joy, of despair and hope. Even in the strange business of Kierkegaard's love affair with Regine Olsen Williams could have been attracted by the Dane for it can be seen to be the obverse of Dante's love for Beatrice. Romantic love is treated with the utmost seriousness by both Dante and Kierkegaard. It makes enormous demands upon the lover and places him under certain obligations. But whereas Dante affirms the experience and lives in obedience to the vision, Kierkegaard deliberately denies it, seeing in it the awful possibility of destruction for himself and Regine because of his own weakness. Oddly enough, Williams makes no mention of the whole curious affair of Regine Olsen. Dante was no stranger to pain and despair, but he saw in his love for Beatrice a means by which he could pursue his vocation and in Beatrice a representation of the glory of God, whereas Kierkegaard, despite his love for Regine, could only see in her a figure that would eventually 'undermine his courage, depress his resolve, and become the worst inner obstacle to the exercise of his true vocation'. (I)

I am forced to say that I do not think Williams quite understood Kierkegaard, partly because the Danish thinker was such a new phenomenon and hardly known even in his own country. It was inevitable that Williams could not get him into perspective and so missed the fact that much of Kierkegaard's thinking takes the shape it does because it is built upon the basis of the Lutheran categories of Sin, Guilt, Faith and Justification. Kierkegaard would have understood all that Williams meant by the Troilus experience but I doubt if he would have been sympathetic to, or even understood, what Williams meant by the Affirmation of Images. And, to take the comparison further, how could Kierkegaard's mind, obsessively concentrated upon Revelation and the necessary absurdity of Faith, respond to a mind like Williams's which produced a comment like the following (on Shakespeare's last plays)?:

A little more, and all our human world would undergo
that almost terrifying alchemy, our joys would be
pearls, our griefs coral. The elemental simplicities of
the last plays, the facts of being uttering their
essential nature, alone remain.

(The English Poetic Mind)

I would not recommend The Descent of the Dove to a student whose only aim was to cram his or her head with enough facts to pass an examination in ecclesiastical history, for in Williams's hands the facts themselves, to use his own words, undergo an almost terrifying alchemy. They all: personalities, conflicts, councils, creeds, famines, floods - the stuff of history - undergo a 'sea-change' into 'something rich and strange'. This is not a history book which shows us 'wie es eigentlich gewesen' - how it really was, but a history book which shows us 'wie es eigentlich ist' - how it actually is.

(I) Denis de Rougemont analyses Kierkegaard's love affair with Regine Olsen in some detail in The Myths of Love 1963.

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