

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 23, AUTUMN 1981

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

- 26 November 1981 : Glen Cavaliero will speak on 'Charles Williams and 20th century Verse Drama.
- 27 February 1982 : James Brabazon will speak on 'Greater Love - a comparison of Charles Williams and Albert Schweitzer'.
- 28 May 1982 : John Heath- Stubbs will speak on 'Charles Williams and the 20th (AGM) century literary tradition'.

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.

LONDON READING GROUP

For information please contact Richard Wallis, 6 Matlock Court, Kensington Park Road, London W11 6BS. Telephone 221 0057.

S.W. LONDON READING GROUP OF THE SOCIETY

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

OXFORD READING GROUP

For information please contact either Anne Scott (tel: Oxford 53897), or Brenda Boughton (tel: Oxford 55589).

CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY SUMMER CONFERENCE : 5 SEPTEMBER 1981

The Society held a successful and enjoyable Conference in the church of St Andrew-By-The-Wardrobe in central London. In the morning Brian Horne spoke of 'The House of the Octopus' and of parallels he found between Charles Williams' plays and Berthold Brecht's principles of Epic Theatre. Joan Wallis gave us 'Charles Williams and Samuel Johnson : some suggested Parallels'. Both these talks led to lively and interesting discussion. After lunch Richard Wallis led us on a walk to (and into) Dr Johnson's house in Gough Square, which was much enjoyed in the - now traditional for C.W. Society Conferences - lovely sunshine. In the afternoon we read 'The House of the Octopus', a few parts having been allocated beforehand, the rest read in turn by other members present, who also made a fine Chorus. We were very pleased to welcome new member Sister Miriam Claire O.S.F. from the U.S.A., who is staying in London, and also Mrs Angelika Schneider, who postponed her return home to Germany to be with us. Many thanks to Brian Horne and to Joan Wallis (who had only returned from holiday the previous night) for their fascinating talks. Also to Richard Wallis for leading the lunchtime walk, Thelma Shuttleworth for so expertly organising the play-reading, Adrian Thomas for transporting the refreshments and to Father Coleman for allowing us to use his beautiful church again.

NEW MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY

A warm welcome is extended to:

- T F Jenkins, 66 Belgrave Avenue, Watford WD1 6NE
- Professor Corbin S Carnell, English Department, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida 32611, USA
- Gareth J Papps, 78 South Primrose Hill, Chelmsford, Essex
- Clement Caldwell, Solden Hill House, Byfield, Daventry, Northants
- Nicholas F Best, 43 Cawood Drive, Acklam, Middlesbrough, Cleveland TS5 7SP
- Sister Miriam Claire OSF, Holy Cross Convent, 3 Fitzjohn Avenue, London NW3 5JX

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)
- Treasurer: For the time being, please send subscriptions to Richard Wallis, address as above.
- Membership: Miss Hilda Pallan, 179 Makepeace Mansions, London N6 6ES (348 3903)
- Lending Librarian: Rev Dr Brian Horne, 11b Roland Gardens, London SW7 (373 5579)
- Editor: Mrs Molly Switek, 8 Crossley Street, London N7 8PD (607 7919)

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CHARLES WILLIAMS AND BERTOLT BRECHT - SOME SUGGESTED PARALLELS

by Brian Horne, delivered at the Society's Conference, 5 September 1981

I begin with a confession that up until recently I had not been an admirer of Charles Williams' plays and, looking back, I cannot imagine why I accepted the invitation to address the Society on a subject - The House of the Octopus - I, then, found so uncongenial. Perhaps there was a lurking suspicion that I had missed something; that the fault might lie in me rather than in the plays, and that the necessity of having to scrutinise a specific work would force either the inadequacy of my response or the weakness of the plays out into the open. Either way I would have to 'come clean'.

From time to time I have called the plays pretentious, improbable, intractable, unactable. They would certainly have been the last works I should have recommended to anyone wanting to make an acquaintance with the mind and imagination of Charles Williams; I might actively have discouraged a reading of them. It was not until I saw a production of Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury last year that I realised, at least, that the plays were not unactable. But problems remained; I continued to be baffled and irritated, for example, by figures like the Skeleton in Cranmer and the Flame in The House of The Octopus. Furthermore, I never seemed to be able to identify with any of the characters; they seemed remote and unreal. Many problems still remain, but in the past few weeks I believe I have, quite accidentally, stumbled on a key to these works. I do not say the key; there could be many entrances to these dramatic pieces and a different key for each entrance. I stumbled on this key in the most unlikely place : The Oxford Companion to German Literature. I recollect that I was consulting the dictionary to discover some fact or other about the contemporary German novelist Heinrich Böll. I must have discovered it, though I cannot now remember what it was, because after reading the article on Böll, I continued to page through the book, as one compulsively does with reference works of this kind, when my eye alighted on a passage just a few pages further on which seemed to open a door into the dramaturgy of Charles Williams:

.... he (the playwright under discussion) distinguishes sharply between feeling and the psychology of character ... Feeling is subordinated to uncompromisingly revolutionary dialectics, psychology is simplified so as not to interfere with doctrines. For this purpose

he favoured remote settings, inducing detachment, arousing curiosity, both of which stimulate thought.

The 'he' of this description is, of course, Bertolt Brecht: poet, playwright, theatre director, Communist. I doubt if anyone in this Society has not heard of Brecht and many readers will probably know more of his plays than I, but it may be useful if I refresh memories before I proceed with what must seem a most improbable thesis. Bertolt Brecht was born in 1895 in Augsburg and died in 1956. By the end of the 1920s he had already established a formidable reputation for himself as a man of wide-ranging talents, a forceful writer and theatre-director of pronounced left-wing political views. He had worked under the famous director Max Reinhardt at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin and had been influenced by his study of political theatre associated with the name of Piscator and, of course, there was his convinced and articulate Marxism. Two of his most famous pieces came from the period of the 1920s: The Threepenny Opera and The Rise and Fall of The City of Mahagonny - both in collaboration with the composer Kurt Weill. He was forced out of Germany by the Nazis in the 1930s and only returned in 1949; to settle in East Berlin where he founded his company, the Berliner Ensemble. The details of his life are not our concern; there are no parallels with Charles Williams there! What does concern us is Brecht's dramatic theory: what he thought he was doing in his writing and producing of plays.

I suppose he is best known for what is called 'epic theatre' and the theatre of 'alienation'. Both of these are technical terms which need some explanation. The American scholar, Paul Demetz, calls Brecht's 'epic theatre' the theatre of 'destroyed illusions' and 'wide-awake audience'. Here was a deliberate attempt at overturning the conventions of theatre that had dominated drama throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To put the matter crudely and into our English context: it is a revolt against the naturalism and realism of playwrights like George Bernard Shaw, Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward, and the whole tradition of drawing-room comedy or tragedy and, for that matter, kitchen-sink drama. In this naturalistic theatre the members of the audience are drawn into the action of the play; the spectacle they see before their eyes is a real-life spectacle. We, the audience, imagine that we are they - the characters the actors are portraying; we do and say just such things as those characters do and say. The stage itself is a box or room of which the fourth side, or wall, is transparent. We are led to believe this is a slice of real life we are witnessing; the naturalistic theatre is therefore, supremely, that of illusion: we pretend that we are not in a theatre at all, but eavesdropping and peeping into other lives, real lives.

All of this Brecht rejected, or tried to reject. 'Epic theatre' relieves the stage of the necessity of 'having to put real olives into real martinis or real butter on real bread Man, facing history in difficult choices, no longer appears as a prisoner of the carefully duplicated copies of drawing-rooms (or kitchen sinks) ...' (Paul Demetz, Brecht, A Collection of Critical Essays.) Men and women act out their stories in deliberately distant and exotic settings: India, Georgia, Chicago, Setzuan; in the 'never-never land of philosophical parable'. (Demetz). So we can see that issues, not techniques or characters, emerges as the centre of interest. This kind of theatre also tried to return to the stage the sister arts of music and movement; The Rise and Fall Of The City of Mahagonny was called an 'opera' and Seven Deadly Sins was a 'ballet' with words and songs. For Brecht the audience must never be allowed to forget that it is the audience watching a spectacle deliberately created, that it is in a theatre not a drawing-room, a castle, a kitchen etc. Here is an essential feature of the theory of 'alienation'. (We have to accept the fact that this term 'alienation' is an unsatisfactory English translation of the German word 'Verfremdungseffekt'. In English the word 'alienation' has rather different overtones and associations. Martin Esslin suggests that the French word 'distantiation' is a happier translation, but there

is really no English equivalent.) The member of the audience cannot recognise as his own habitat the wildly, and consciously, improbable settings of many of Brecht's plays. Furthermore, the songs and dances and scenic designs are not used to create a harmonious and coherent whole; they are devices to comment on rather than add to and support the story. The actor, in turn, is called upon to 'demonstrate' rather than 'portray' a character in the drama. This is cool, intellectual, ironical theatre. Empathy and illusion, Brecht believed, were dangerous because they encouraged man, a rational being, to forsake his critical faculties and cloud his perceptions with dreams and wishful thinking. Alienation effects were intended to make people think, to wake them up, to demonstrate that the world was capable of being changed and to spur audiences into political action. That action, of course, would be determined by Marxist theory. If the audience did not leave the theatre challenged into new efforts at action, but was only lulled into a contentment with life (perhaps we can call it being 'entertained') then the play had failed.

I shall now try to show where parallels between Brecht and Williams occur.

First there is the shared concern about the importance of the 'intellect'. In 1938, Williams published an essay on religious drama; Brecht would have found much to agree with. Here is Williams on 'ideas' in plays - Brecht might have called them 'issues':

The drama of ideas is not, per se, religious drama, and religious drama has not of late shown much tendency to become a drama of ideas. This misfortune will probably correct itself in time; modern religious drama is still young, and has about it generally a kind of adolescent - not to say infantile - simplicity Christian drama then must - and I think will - recover the speculative intellect. It will consider the nature of God. I do not wish the plays of religion to be confined to an indeterminate presentation of an undefined love. They might, in fact, take up the business of defining, with intense excitement, the nature, habits, and mode of operation of Almighty Love, infusing into their excitement a proper scepticism as to its existence at all. It is not dogma that creates narrowness; it is the inability to ask an infinite number of questions about dogma.

(The Image of The City Ed. Anne Ridler p.57)

In Brecht, of course, the ideas were political; in Williams they were religious. I am well aware that many of Williams' plays were religious because they were commissioned by those wanting religious drama: Cranmer by the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral and The House of The Octopus by the United Council for Missionary Education, and that he did not only write religious plays; but religious drama is central to his dramatic output and, as I see it, he chose to accept these commissions not merely because they 'came his way', but because they offered him the opportunity of writing a kind of play which was not a Shafesbury Avenue kind of play, not naturalistic, not a copy of proscenium arch productions: a drama of ideas. I would go so far as to say that, apart from the content of the ideas themselves and the music provided by Weill, Brecht's term 'epic theatre' and Williams' term 'religious drama' are almost interchangeable.

What Williams preached in his essay he attempted to put into practice in his plays. Here is an example of the 'speculative intellect' at work in The House

of The Octopus:

In the second Act the Marshal of P'o lu has tempted the missionary priest Anthony into a betrayal of his faith with the seductive half-truth that it is possible to use different words to describe the same thing - even if, perhaps especially if, that 'thing' is God. Anthony seems to see a way out of martyrdom for his church when the Flame appears to confront him with the implications of his decision to agree to the Marshal's suggestions.

ANTHONY

As for this trouble of a word, with me to show,
it may go well enough. The spirit matters
more than the letter. It were better to let slide
some jot or tittle, that has in its mere self
little significance than to split peace wide.
It is fit, if possible, not to antagonize souls
by the more-or-less, the give-and-take, of words:
better that quarrels should cease, and peace live.

THE FLAME

It is, we of heaven agree, a thing indifferent;
but any indifference may become sometimes a test.
Will God dispute over words? no; but man
must, if words mean anything, stand by words,
since stand he must; and on earth protest to death
against what at the same time is a jest in heaven.
Alas, you are not in heaven! the jests there
are tragedies on earth, since you lost your first poise
and crashed. Yet pray that his will be done on earth
as it is in heaven - tragedy or jest or both,
and so let it be. Do you know, Anthony, what I say?

Nothing could be more remote from naturalistic drama. We are deliberately distanced from Anthony; we see his predicament and we recognise it as, possibly, our own, but the playwright refuses to allow us to identify with the priest and make an emotional response. He forces us to think: to consider the nature of language, the exact relationship between words and concepts, the possible ambiguity of the famous statement that the letter kills but the spirit gives life, the difference between the life of heaven and the life of earth, the nature of God in whom there is no language but only the Word and the nature of man who is actually defined by words. What we want to find out as a result of this encounter is how Anthony will resolve the problem - in intellectual terms. This is drama asking questions about God and man. The dramatic technique employed here would have delighted Brecht as much as the religious content would have appalled him.

I have mentioned the word 'alienation' several times. Let us look more closely at how Williams achieves this effect. We recall that it is a dramatic technique the purpose of which is to remind the audience that it is the audience in a theatre watching a play, and that the play is not real life. Brecht might set up a scene which would give the appearance of real life and then deliberately suspend the action and break the spell of the plot; an ironical song might be added to comment on the motives of the protagonist and assumptions of the audience. This is the way in which I see the curious figures in Williams' plays - the Skeleton in Cranmer and the Flame in The House of The Octopus - working. Their purpose is to suspend the action and comment on the plot and characters;

to push the audience away from identification and expose real motives and underlying assumptions. These figures actually withdraw themselves from the action and, from time to time, round on the audience to address it directly. Williams uses this technique with total assurance and authority. In the scene towards the end of the second Act in which the motives of Anthony are finally revealed, the plot could have proceeded, quite satisfactorily, without the interventions of the Flame, as a dialogue or even a monologue. The Flame's questions and comments come between the audience and the characters thereby forcing the audience to consider the issues over which the battle is being fought rather than sympathise with the predicament of the personalities.

It is true that in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama the Chorus is frequently used to comment on the progress and meaning of the play, but only at the beginning and the ending of the Acts; in classical theatre the Chorus is woven more tightly into the action and is sometimes used to support the action, and sometimes to offer moral and religious comment on it, but never, as far as I can remember, to challenge the spectator as in Brecht's epic theatre or Williams' religious drama. I used to ask the question: What or Who is the Skeleton? What or Who is the Flame? and be irritated when I received no satisfactory answer. The Skeleton seemed to be connected with death but was not Death; the Flame seemed to be connected with the Holy Spirit but was not the Holy Spirit. Now I think I see the point: if the Skeleton could be identified with death and the Flame with the Holy Spirit then they would become, immediately, characters, involved in the action with their own part to play on the furthering of the plot - in the classical tradition of naturalistic drama. Now I think it is not relevant to ask Who or What are these creatures. They are that which stand between us, the audience, and the action, reminding us that we are in a theatre; that we are human beings with minds to use, actions to take and a world to change.

Here we must note a difference between Williams and Brecht: they are both striving for the same end, but they go about it in a different way. Brecht, because he was a Marxist, could not possibly achieve the alienation of his audience by the creation of unearthly, mysterious, puzzling figures; he has to make the actors distance themselves from the characters they play, and there is no doubt that the sudden transmogrification of protagonist into commentator has a startling and bewildering effect on an audience; but I do not believe it is more startling and bewildering than Williams' achievement.

In conclusion I want to turn again to Williams' essay on religious drama and the remarks he makes there about the relationship between art and propaganda. Brecht, throughout his life was concerned about this relationship and it seems to me that it was a question which troubled him - as well it might; because in his critical writings i.e. his own understanding of what his theatre was doing and what it ought to do seem to be at variance with what he actually achieved. He appeared to have believed that the theatre was there to serve a political end: Marxism; in short, that it should be, however marvellously entertaining, propaganda. But the plays themselves are often brilliant refutations of his own theory: autonomous works of art. Williams, in his essay on religious drama, spends some time on this question and comes up with an answer which is more subtle than Brecht's:

"Keats in his Letters says: 'We distrust poetry that has a palpable design upon us.' Most religious plays have precisely this palpable design; they exhibit it, they even brag of it. So much certainly they might do and yet remain effective. A good deal of the very greatest poetry has a palpable design upon us - Lucretius, for example, and Dante. At the present time a great deal of writing has the palpable design of the noble and passionate ideals of the political Left, and is the better for it. Propaganda does not destroy art; missionary plays

(with whatever mission) can yet be well written and effective. But there is a condition, and it is that the design must not be imposed from without. The propaganda must be the inevitable result of the art Religious drama then must create its excitement from within."

(The Image of the City p.56)

Whether Williams' dramatic achievements actually embody this fine sentiment is another question.

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ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE FORMATION OF A READING GROUP IN U.S.A.

Society members and others interested in Charles Williams, who live within driving distance of Holland, Michigan, are invited to join a Reading Circle which is being formed there. The next meeting will be on November 15 at the home of Mr and Mrs Charles Ruttar, 188 West 11th Street, Holland, at 2p.m. (lunch at 1.30 - bring a sandwich). Those attending should, if possible, bring copies of the book being read - Descent Into Hell.

At the Society's AGM, the possibility was raised of other such groups being organised in sections of the U.S. where there are several members within fairly close range. Anyone interested in doing so should inquire of Dr Corbin S Carnell, 1708 S.W. 43rd Ave., Gainesville, Florida 32608; he has information on the American membership (including Canadian) and their geographical distribution.

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