

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 24, WINTER 1981

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

27. February 1982 : James Brabazon will speak on 'Greater Love - a comparison of Charles Williams and Albert Schweitzer'.

NEW DATE * * 22 May 1982 : John Heath-Stubbs will speak on 'Charles Williams and the 20th Century literary tradition'. This talk will follow the holding of the Society's Annual General Meeting. Please note the new date - not the 28 May as stated in the previous Newsletter.

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 St, 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 given 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

Sunday 28 March 1982 : This meeting will be held at Ipm in the Guild Room of St Bartholomew's Hospital, nearest station St Paul's. Walk up Newgate Street to Giltspur Street (opposite the Old Bailey), turn right up Giltspur St and walk along to the main entrance to Barts. Ask at the Porters Lodge for the Guild Room. Bring sandwiches and coffee and we will continue reading Descent of the Dove.

S.W.LONDON READING GROUP

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).

SEMINAR ON LANGUAGE ACCOUNTANCY

Members may be interested to know that a seminar on language accountancy will be held at the City University early in March. Anyone interested should contact Dr Christopher Mitchell, Department of Systems Science, City University, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB. Telephone (01) 253 4399.

CONTACT BETWEEN MEMBERS

A C.W. Society member, Mrs Joyce Taylor, living near Truro, Cornwall, would like to meet another (either in the flesh or by telephone) who knew C.W. She could occasionally travel as far as Plymouth from Probus, Truro, if necessary. She writes: 'I knew C.W. when he was a most interesting lecturer at the City Library Institute. When he enthused about Gerard Manley Hopkins' work and I said I still could not see its attraction he invited me to meet him one lunch hour and spent the time explaining some of the poems to me and ended by presenting me with a copy of the collected poems which he had edited. He introduced some of us to the word Manichaeism (we had not all met it before) and brought copies of the manuscript of Keats' 'Eve of St Agnes' poem to show us, as he put it, what difficulty Keats had "in getting the girl undressed"'. (Magor Cottage, Probus, Truro, Cornwall TR2 4JS. Telephone St Austell (0726) 882472.)

BOOK REVIEW

Dorothy L Sayers, The Life of a Courageous Woman by James Brabazon. Published by Victor Gollancz, London 1981. 308pp £9.95p - reviewed by Adrian Thomas.

I confess at the start that I read this biography not out of interest in Dorothy Sayers but because our Secretary, Gillian Lunn, told me that there was a chapter in it devoted to Charles Williams. It's not that I do not admire Dorothy Sayers, for what I have read by her I have enjoyed, but rather that I find literary biographies unhelpful. The true story of a writer is revealed in the books that are left, and merely being told domestic details or a factual account of the life does not add to one's knowledge. The reason why I admire a book like The Descent of the Dove so much is that it concentrates on the inner meaning and significance of events rather than giving a solely factual account of church history.

I first came across Dorothy Sayers in the anthology that she made for Victor Gollancz called Detection, Mystery and Horror. I then passed on to her marvellous translations of The Song of Roland and The Divine Comedy. This last has its dedication to the 'Dead Master of the Affirmations, Charles Williams'. The stimulus to her for translating Dante came from her reading The Figure of Beatrice and her discussions with Charles Williams. She wrote to him about Dante saying that 'one of Dante's nicest traits is his readiness to make fun of himself', and 'What a writer! God's body and bones, what a writer!' It would be marvellous to read the correspondence between Dorothy and Charles about Dante in full.

Hidden under a pile of books I find a copy of the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral's acting edition of The Zeal of thy House which was the Canterbury festival play for 1937. James Brabazon describes how in 1937 Charles Williams 'had bounced on his chair with excitement in Simpson's restaurant as he read aloud from The Zeal of thy House, crying "Of course, you know, it's all quite true", and "Ah now, it really is blasphemy!" - much, Dorothy claimed to her embarrassment'. I wish I had been there to watch!

James Brabazon brings out quite clearly the differences between Charles and Dorothy. He says that she was more aroused by the wrongness of pagans than by the rightness of Christians, whereas Williams responded most vividly to the beauty of holiness. In particular the ideas of 'co-inherence' and 'exchange' were foreign to her and she instinctively hated the idea of self-sacrifice. Dorothy was aware of these differences herself and describes Charles as 'a practising mystic', and herself as 'only apprehending intellectually what the mystics grasp directly'.

Mr Brabazon leaves me almost gasping at the extent of his factual knowledge of the life of Dorothy Sayers. If one wants such a detailed description then the reader will be richly rewarded. For myself I felt that the significance of some of the events was rather lost in the wealth of detail. However, the book is worth reading and in particular the chapter relating to Dante and Charles Williams is not to be missed. (Editor's note: A copy of the book is in the Society's Lending Library.)

SUPPLEMENTS

The first volume of Taliessin Through Logres has now been treated by Supplements. Whether to cover the second volume is now under consideration. No more Supplements will therefore be issued for the time being.

Success and esteem came to Johnson with the publication of the Dictionary. He had left Oxford without taking a degree but Oxford offered him an honorary one in 1755 and an LL.D in 1756. Oxford University at the end of the war honoured C.W., whose studies as a student had never been completed, with a degree. C.W. suffered from the neglect of his works in the O.U.P., their reluctance to publish him and his necessity to do 'hack work' continuously to raise his income. It is no coincidence that his selection of Johnson's work to include in the 'New Book' is taken from 'The Variety of Human Wishes -

'There mark what ill's the scholar's life assails

Toil, envy, want, the patron and the gaol'.

C.W. often quoted that last line finding in it the terror and unhappiness of existence.

Neither was a native Londoner but both found it the ideal place in which to exist, never going far from it, Johnson rather critically to Scotland and C.W. equally critically to Paris, until both added Oxford to their lives. They enjoyed walking in cities. Johnson walked all round St James' Square one night with Richard Savage when they were both short of money for a lodging. C.W. indifferent to landscape enjoyed walking and talking in London or Oxford, usually with a precarious clutch of papers in one hand. The greatest thing they had in common apart from religion was their acceptance that Poetry was the greatest art, not only the greatest, almost the only art.

These may seem superficial resemblances or that they could be drawn between any other two literary persons, but one of the main concepts they held in common was that happiness and dignity arise out of obedience. In this they could be joined by Milton. It is the hierarchical conception that everything, except God, has some natural superior, and everything except informed matter has some natural inferior. C.W. often quoted Dante on 'the observation and judgement of the rules'. It caused T.S. Eliot reviewing The Descent of the Dove in 1939 to write: 'one of Mr Williams' most remarkable virtues and sensibility in fact, is a capacity for understanding certain modes of feeling which have become extinct'.

As both poets believed in a ruled existence within the City and under God and the Ruler, both wished to be acknowledged by their own societies. In 1784 Johnson was buried at the foot of the Shakespeare monument in Westminster Abbey and not far from where were placed the ashes of T.S. Eliot in the 20th century. Before he died Reynolds had commissioned a full length statue of Johnson to stand under the dome in St Paul's Cathedral. Does the Society have any plans to commemorate that other Christian poet, a citizen of London?

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CHARLES WILLIAMS AND 20TH CENTURY VERSE DRAMA - by Glen Cavaliero, delivered at the Society meeting on 28 November 1981.

The comparison made in the last Newsletter by Brian Horne between the plays of Charles Williams and Bertolt Brecht is illuminating; it seems to me to provide what is probably the most helpful way of approaching the former's dramatic technique. That his plays make good theatre has by now been established in numerous performances, albeit on a small scale (he has yet to undergo the challenge of a major West End production) and in the teeth of the evidence of at least one of the actors in them, Richard Heron Ward (whose Names and Natures (1968) gives a distinctly unfriendly portrait of Williams, both as man and playwright.) It would not, I think, be a difficult task to demonstrate the superior vitality of Williams' verse over that of most of his contemporaries, certainly in its rhythmic inventiveness and flexibility and its avoidance of the measured tread of the iambic foot: speed, a speed not unlike his own utterance in life, is a characteristic of his dialogue. In the following paper, however, such considerations will be secondary to an examination of how Williams' dramatic art developed, both in relation to his thought, and, in turn, in relation to the effect of his theological ideas upon his art. The inter-relation between form and content in Williams' work is of a peculiarly fruitful kind.

His early plays, found in The Myth of Shakespeare (1928) and Three Plays (1931) are wordy and derivative in expression, pseudo-Shakespearean and quite unaffected by the rhythms and syntax of the Modernist movement. Even so, one detects in the Shakespeare play, as in the Masques performed at Amen House, an apprehension of a timeless present that indicates Williams' essentially metaphysical cast of imagination. Dramas in time, the enactment in a linear progress of human actions and their temporal consequences, actually slowed down and thus clogged up the darting force of Williams' perceptions: The Witch and The Chaste Wanton reflect this in a blank verse that veers between the clotted and the flabby. Ornamental language, swamping metaphors, are essentially materialistic: they draw attention to themselves, not to the reality they are supposed to indicate. So too with archaic diction. All the 'doths' and 'thereofs' and 'wots' and 'sooths' spell out for their readers that this is 'poetry'. It is to Williams' credit that he became aware of what was wrong with his own verse; but the interesting thing about that awareness is that it appears to have come to him less through sensitivity to the literary climate of the time than to the theological problems of Incarnation. How was the knowledge of God to be reconciled with the knowledge of man?

There were to be two paths to a solution. One was the realisation of timelessness, the other the experience of contradiction. The realisation of timelessness is foreshadowed in The Rite of the Passion. This might be described as a kind of non-musical oratorio, in which the performers recite their parts and the action is produced through what they say rather than through what they do. Conceived as part of a Three Hour service of Good Friday devotions, it does, in its presentation as well as in its content, suggest the existence of a timeless world of absolute realities to which the characters conform and to which and in which their personalities are relative. This is underlined by the pairing of characters, Peter with Caiaphas, James with Pilate, John with Herod, in addition to the more obvious apposition of Gabriel to Satan. But more than apposition is implied: 'contraries are not negations' and clearly we can see the seeds of Williams' later understanding of the mutuality of good and evil in human experience. I stress 'in human experience': that no ultimate dualism is implied becomes explicit in Williams' later plays. But the abandonment in this early work of even a relative dualism witnesses to the eschatological nature of Williams' imagination, for which all things are seen in relation to their place in an ultimate pattern which controls, and is exhibited in, the contradictions and diversities of experience as we know it.

In The Rite of the Passion the opposing forces exist side by side rather than in strife or, as in the later plays, apparent indissolubility. And this is reflected in the verse, which simply states its propositions limply. When Williams makes Satan proclaim that 'Lord,

I am thy shadow, only known as hell
where any linger from thy sweet accord.'

we feel that the dictates of rhyme and the regularity of rhythm alike drain the statement of dramatic force: the idea is debilitated by the feebleness of its expression. Williams' theological insight was to grow in and through his understanding of poetic energy and form.

The exploration of contradiction was to be the moving force in this poetic growth. At the time he wrote The Chaste Wanton he was also exploring in his critical writings the problem of divided consciousness, the simultaneous awareness of conflicting qualities in any given experience. In his Introduction to The Letters of Evelyn Underhill (1943) he coins the term 'the Impossibility' for this state of knowledge. In her case it involved her dilemma, as a Catholic postulant, when Pius X's Encyclical of 1907, condemning Modernism, contradicted her own intellectual probity. Whether the situation was as acute as Williams makes out is open to question; but in continuing going to Mass while refraining from communion, she lived out a contradiction in terms. Williams comments:

'It is imperative, and in the end possible, to believe that the Impossibility does its own impossible work; to believe so, in whatever form the crisis

takes, is of the substance of faith; especially if we add to it Kierkegaard's phrase that, in any resolution of the crisis, so far as the human spirit is concerned, "before God man is always in the wrong".'

The phrase might serve as an epigraph to Williams' Collected Plays.

The Chaste Wanton has the experience of Impossibility for its theme; but in form and language it is simply a rather leaden, though obviously deeply felt, presentation of the crisis in linear terms, resulting in a purely mental resolution: the characters choose the consciousness they will have of their predicament. The sublimation of forbidden sexual impulses (in this case the love of the Duchess for a commoner when she is called to make a state marriage) was a familiar theme of the time, from Housman's A Shropshire Lad on; but Williams declines all temptations to romantic nostalgia. The contradictory experience allows for no easy emotional resolution. The Play's failure to convince is in itself a tribute to the author's rigorous imagination. The invitation to write Thomas Cranmer must have seemed heaven - as well as ecclesiastically - sent - a rare combination as Williams would have been the first to point out.

Since the production of John Masefield's The Coming of Christ in 1928, the Canterbury Festival had been an important occasion for the presentation of verse plays with Christian themes, foreshadowing the post-war renaissance of this kind of drama at the Mercury Theatre and the achievements of Christopher Fry, himself a friend of Williams. The play preceding Cranmer, Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral had been an attempt to combine an authentically Christian drama, in a specific time and place, with a sense of contemporary relevance. The problem of relevance in a society of dwindling religious belief is partly a question of language. The capacity of religious language for extending the imagination is pre-empted by pious associations: it has an inbuilt, predetermined resonance. Eliot's achievement in Murder in the Cathedral was the presentation of a historic religious conflict in such a way that the issues were seen to be valid for his own time. Becket's martyrdom is interpreted sacramentally: that is to say it both enacts the redemptive passion of Christ and points to that Passion as part of the fundamental pattern which underlies life at every moment of time. Eliot's way of achieving this is through a combination of spiritual analysis with the realistic presentation of the murderers and the rationalisation of their case. Two interpretations of experience are proffered, the knowledge of the world and the life of Christ. This particular action demonstrates the eternal pattern.

The word 'pattern' is central to Williams' thinking, and illuminates his particular contribution to religious drama. Fired by Eliot's example, he writes a play which follows the historic progress of Cranmer's career and at the same time makes it a portrait of humanity's relationship with a Creator who is simultaneously and painfully a Redeemer. This theological point of view in part arises as the solution of a dramatic problem. How to infuse a religious drama with a contemporaneity that would not renege on that drama's initial premisses? How to make the past truly present, true both to its own contemporaneity and to ours? Williams' solution is to abolish time, place and external events, so that the play's time and place is shared by the audience and the characters. The action does not take place through a series of set dramatic pieces; rather scenes dissolve into each other cinematically. External events are conveyed through a stylised symbolism (the resemblance to Brecht is apparent here); and the characters are representative less of qualities or humours than of capacities and attitudes. The language too has changed. Instead of regular stresses and elaborate metaphors Williams writes a vigorous rhythmical verse which varies the beat of the decasyllabic line with one strung on five irregularly placed stresses, inlaid with rhymes. He is attempting a marriage between poetic and colloquial idiom. But the experiment is not an entire success. The language is too knotted and succinct; there are insufficient concessions to the naturally sluggish ear.

The key figure is of course the Skeleton, the *Figura Rerum* or shape of things, the knowledge of God as fallen man experiences it. He derives from Satan in The Rite of the Passion, there designated 'dark viceroy of the Holy Ghost'; and his function is to be developed in the succeeding plays. These figures of remedial providence are Williams' unique contribution to twentieth century drama, a remarkable instance of the embodiment in dramatic terms of a complexity of theological associations. They reflect his interest in the writings of Kierkegaard, and are the outcome of his preoccupation with the springs of action and the nature of tragedy, as found in the biographies and the two books on the poetic mind. In these he posits that men and women can only truly act when their fortunes conflict with their natures, so that they are compelled to deny their self-sufficiency. Man exists, as it were, in dialogue with his circumstances. In Cranmer the fact of the opposition between fortune and nature, the Impossibility, is personified in the Skeleton, the divine providence that is adverse fate, 'Christ's back'. The Skeleton does here for one man what such figures as the Accuser and the Flame do in the later plays for many. This play is, for all its historical trappings, an interior drama, one that takes place within Cranmer's mind: the subordinate characters exist primarily in relation to his state of soul. It is not so much the interaction of personalities that interests Williams as the hounding of a man into salvation. Thomas Cranmer is an exhibition of how God takes man at his word.

Cranmer is a man who prides himself upon his integrity, his singleness: the division of his fortune from his nature is the action of the paly. The Skeleton (death-in-life?) says:

... I must divide
his life to the last crack and pull his soul
- if it lives - through the cracks ...

It scourges Cranmer to his heavenly doom with sardonic laughter, in which the rhythms of Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes may be detected,
crying from the tomb of the earth where I died
the word of the only right Suicide,
the only word no words can quell,
the way to heaven and the way to hell.

By outraging the expectations of his audience, and by introducing violently discordant associations into his presentation of the providence of God, Williams involves that audience in the action of his play: in this scene he goes beyond Brecht. We share, take part in, the experience of the play's protagonist from within. Moreover we do so through the verse itself. When the Skeleton answers Cranmer's demand to know 'Have I erred?' with the words:

'In thinking, though it was important for you to be right,
it mattered at all in the end whether you were right '
it is the metre which determines the sense of the line: the stress comes on 'you', not 'were'.

Here was a perfect medium for Williams' peculiarly intellectual imagination - one, too, which was at its happiest operating within predetermined limits. Religious drama provided a set framework of images and myths; the conventions of the theatre enabled him to embody abstractions and to clothe his pictorial, associative method of thought in appropriate forms of character and action. And nowhere was he to be so entirely himself as in the Nativity play Seed of Adam. It is a spirited attempt to revivify traditional religious imagery. Indeed, such revitalisation was a feature of all Williams' writings, from the early poems on, reaching its logical term with the Arthurian poetry.

The problem facing any specifically Christian dramatist is that, while the play's form must arise from the author's imagination, the form of religious drama is predetermined by the author's beliefs. It is Williams' great strength as a Christian apologist that in him Imagination and belief fully coincided. In Seed of Adam we see imagination illuminating belief. The dramatic stroke whereby

Mother Myrrh the negress who symbolises Hell acts as midwife at the Incarnation, is a stage in Williams' realisation that Hell is ultimately to be seen as Heaven's complement. It is a state of negation so intense as to beget its opposite. Together, the negress and the Third King turn out to be another manifestation of the Skeleton. The essentially schematic nature of Williams' imagination fuses Nativity and Redemption in a single vivid piece of symbolism. His work as a literary artist always impels him towards the affirmation of a total spiritual world - 'event-landscape-web' over-arching or subsuming or enveloping or interpenetrating this one.

Seed of Adam goes beyond Cranmer in its supra-temporal personifications, and becomes a vehicle of multi-significant references. Thus the first two kings are not merely iconographical representations: they embody the life-experiences involved in the capacities they symbolise. For one, Paradise 'is bought for a penny / and slept off'; for another, 'wise men have recognized / it is only our mothers' forms rationalized.' For both, 'tomorrow everything begins again.' The human setting for the Incarnation is thus not so much the historical moment as the timeless need.

The verse attempts a similar timelessness. The imagery is a blend of Islamic, English and Biblical references. The 'folk' element is pervasive. At his best Williams achieves a marvellous fusion of physical and mental experience, as in Mary's description of the Archangel, in which the angel emerges from the sounds and activities of everyday life at the fair; but at other times his language can be intolerably pretentious:

Do not with descent, O altitude, even of mercy,
sweeten the enhanced glance of those still eyes
which to my lord's house, and to me the least
illumine earth with heaven, our only mortal
imagination of eternity,
and the glory of the protonotary Gabriel.

No one, surely, ever, ever talked like that.

Williams' subsequent plays attempt a more naturalistic treatment: he entrusts his message to his tale. They continue to personify the divided consciousness and to make use of the innovatory breakthrough from the framework of time and space achieved in Seed of Adam. But they also lay greater stress on the authentic life of the symbol; they are increasingly naturalistic because more truly sacramental in approach. In the pageant play Judgement at Chelmsford Williams was helped by the form of the play itself. The naturalistic detail flourishes in the individual episodes, the mythical timeless element governs their framework: as John Heath Stubbs observes, the retrospective action, from Hell through Purgatory to Paradise, owes much to Dante. The function of the Skeleton is taken over by the Accuser, designated, by a nice fusion of celestial and demonic associations, 'the dweller on the threshold of love.' His role is to be a devil's advocate within the self, a conception less mythical than existential. This play seems to me to be generally undervalued. It is one of the most immediately accessible of Williams' works, and one of the most satisfactory in its presentation of an over-arching providence.

Its greater naturalness is put to good use in the small plays written for the Oxford branch of the Pilgrim Players, where the sharper personifications, such as that of Grace as a mischievous urchin or Pride as a slithery gushing cheat, amount in their total effect to an imaginative theology. Their verse carries the theological overtones with ease. Here is Man telling Pride about his new friend, Faith:

She was a friend of Immanuel, the child born
the night you went ... O well, Pride -
I beg your pardon; it is old habit in me -
we need not go into all that now.
There was a misunderstanding of what he meant
and a tussle - you, my dear, will understand

there was something to be said on my side;
but anyhow - it was all rather unfortunate - he died.

Such verse has a suppleness that retains its lilt while responding to the demands of idiomatic speech. It is more authentically Williams' own than the prose employed in Terror of Light (as he recognised when he proposed to turn the latter into verse); here he seems to be aiming for the kind of popularity (but also scandal) enjoyed a year later by Dorothy L. Sayers' broadcast sequence, The Man Born To Be King. But this was not his metier. "Oh, Augustitude pray for me", says John to Mary Magdalene. Elsewhere the language is flat and over-definitive: Thomas speaks of being 'put completely into one's own identity'. Williams was always tempted to define what he meant instead of saying what he meant.

But both this play and the radio play The Three Temptations afford evidence of how Williams' use of the drama to explore the divided consciousness had resulted in a comprehensiveness of theological statement which sees creation and redemption, joy and pain, as aspects of a single reality, God's way with man. Indeed The Three Temptations, freed from the requirements of stagecraft takes us back to the alignments of The Rite of the Passion, Herod, Caiaphas and Pilate now being fused with Christ's three temptations in the wilderness. The compression shows how essentially spatial Williams' imagination was: he sees the events of time as so many facets of eternity. The austerity of his moral viewpoint is now absolute. Everything relates to everything else; and men shall have what they have chosen. 'Hell is always there for the craving, and the having is easy.'

I cannot do better than describe The House of the Octopus in the words of one contemporary reviewer: 'the play stands to his entire output much as the final note or chord of a piece ... stands to the foregoing musical elements; it designates their relative positions, and reveals their deeper significance.' This play represents the full maturity of Williams' thought on the question of human integrity and its relation to the providence of God, and it throws a searching light on a certain kind of religious temperament. It was evidently too searching for comfort, since it is said that at one performance by the students of a theological college the missionary was praised in the synopsis for his courage and devotion. Williams might, or might not, have appreciated that.

The temptation of this second Anthony is presented with a skill that matches Eliot's in Murder in the Cathedral. The Imperial Marshall of P'o-L'u knows what he is about:

Every pious man - and, of course, woman -
has one - just one - surface where religion and he
are so delicately mixed in his soul as to be
indistinguishable; he is never quite sure -
and does not (believe me!) ever want to be sure -
whether his religion or he is being soothed
into a lascivious spiritual delight.

The House of the Octopus, more than any of Williams' plays succeeds in blending the mythical and the naturalistic; and in its use of political issues this drama of redemption through self-knowledge compares favourably with Eliot's more esoteric treatment of the theme in The Family Reunion.

