

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 26, SUMMER 1982

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

18 September 1982: The Society will hold a one day conference at St Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe church in Queen Victoria Street, London EC4, starting at 10am and continuing until about 5pm. In the morning Joan Wallis will talk to us about the history and architecture of the church of St Magnus the Martyr referred to by T.S. Eliot in 'The Wasteland', to be followed by Stephen Medcalf speaking on 'The novels of Charles Williams and the Four Quartets of T.S. Eliot'. This will be followed by discussion and lunch (bring your own food - coffee and tea will be provided). To aid the digestion, those who wish to can then visit St Magnus the Martyr nearby in Lower Thames Street. After lunch and the walk we will read the first Masque - 'The Perusal' - and Thelma Shuttleworth will talk on her recollections of Charles Williams. The Committee hope that this programme will be of interest to members and friends and that as many as possible will be able to attend.

13 November 1982: David Llewellyn Dodds will speak on: "I Am A Wonder Whose Origin Is Not Known" - some thoughts on Taliesin and Taliessin.!

26 February 1983: Richard Sturch will talk on 'Common Themes among Inklings'.

11 June 1983: Annual General Meeting. Professor Barbara Reynolds will speak on 'Charles Williams, Dorothy L. Sayers and Dante'.

Except for the September Conference, all the meetings will be at Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W.1.

LONDON READING GROUP

Sunday 31 October 1982: The Group will start reading Arthurian Torso and will meet at 'St Basil's House', 52 Ladbrooke Grove, London W11 at 1pm. Please bring coffee, sandwiches and copies of the book.

OXFORD READING GROUP

This Group meets fortnightly to read alternately a play and a novel by Charles Williams. For details contact either Brenda Boughton (Oxford 55589) or Anne Scott (Oxford 53897).

LAKE MICHIGAN AREA READING GROUP

We are delighted to have news from this Group sent by Charles Huttar. The Group has completed a successful first year with monthly meetings from October to May (except December) reading Descent into Hell. The attendance was generally 10 - 15, some driving as much as 90 - 100 miles each way to attend meetings in Holland, Michigan. The next meetings of the Group will be on Sundays 19 September, 17 October and 21 November, all at 2pm. Generally the location will be Holland, but there will be some variation to encourage attendance by those farther away - we are thinking especially of several we know to be interested who live near South Bend, Indiana (Notre Dame University). Readers who would like information should phone Charles Huttar -(616) 396 2260 - or write to him at 188 W. 11th St., Holland, Michigan, 49423, USA. For the autumn meetings we plan to begin Descent of the Dove.

1982 A.G.M.

The Society's 6th AGM was held on 22 May at Liddon House. Some points of general interest were that the Chairman reported on the year's activities, thanking all those who contributed to the Society's work and in particular the speakers who had addressed our meetings. The centenary of Charles Williams' birth will fall in 1986 - a sub-committee will be formed to consider how this should be honoured and any suggestions would be welcomed. The sale of books was going well under the guidance of Gillian

Lunn and Adrian Thomas, and the Society's finances were healthy, thanks to the payment of subscriptions and donations from members. The previous Committee were all re-elected but one vacancy exists.

C.W. BOOKS FOR SALE

The following books are for sale from Mrs Gillian Lunn, 26 Village Road, Finchley, London N3 1TL:

Descent of the Dove	2 copies	£4.50p each
Figure of Beatrice		£5
Forgiveness of Sins	1st Ed.	£5
Letters of Evelyn Underhill (intro by C.W.)		£2.50p
Victorian Narrative Verse (Ed. by CW)		£0.75p
House of Octopus	2 copies	£5 each
Seed of Adam		£5
All Hallows Eve		£2.50p
Place of the Lion	2 copies	£2.50p
Paperbacks - 50p each:		
War in Heaven (Faber)	2 copies	
War in Heaven (Eerdmans)		
Shadows of Ecstasy (Faber)	2 copies	
Many Dimensions (Penguin)		

Please send no money when ordering. On receipt of the book(s) add the cost of postage to the price of the book(s) and make out a cheque to Gillian Lunn a/c no. 51053922. Overseas members are asked, please, to pay in sterling for otherwise the Society loses a considerable proportion of the money through the exchange and bank-charges.

NEW BOOKS

Members may be interested to know that Vol. 3 of 'VII', the Anglo-American Literary Review devoted to study of the works of George MacDonald, G.K.Chesterton, C.S.Lewis, J.R.R.Tolkien, Charles Williams, Dorothy L. Sayers and Owen Barfield is now available. It contains an article: 'Known in a Different Kind : A Comment on the Literary Criticism of Charles Williams' by the Society's Librarian, Brian Horne. 'VII' is available in England from Mrs P. Andrews, c/o Heffers Printers Ltd, Kings Hedges Road, Cambridge CB4 2PQ at £5 plus 50p postage; and is available in the USA from The English Department, Wheaton College, Illinois 60187 at \$ 10 plus postage.

In August Collins is publishing a new C.S.Lewis book Of This and Other Worlds, which contains the 'Panegyric' C.S.L. wrote for Dorothy L. Sayers' memorial service in 1958. In it he talks about Charles Williams' considerable influence on Miss Sayers. The book will also contain Lewis' BBC talk on 'The Novels by Charles Williams' which members may recall was read to us at our meeting in Oxford by Walter Hooper.

C.W.'s HOUSE IN ST ALBANS

The house that C.W. lived in in his youth, 36 Victoria Street, St Albans, will shortly be demolished and the site re-developed. At present the house is used as a Sue Ryder Charity shop and the manageress says they expect demolition to begin very soon. The building is very delapidated indeed, the upper floor unsafe and ivy coming through the walls at the back of the shop. So any members wishing to pay their respects are advised to go soon! The shop is open between 10 - 5, Monday to Saturday.

EXHIBITION IN ST ALBANS

If anyone has any recollections or - even better - anything suitable for a visual display - relating to C.W.'s life in St Albans we would be most grateful and interested as there is a possibility of some sort of exhibition being planned in St Albans. Please let Gillian Lunn know if you can help in this way.

Time & Tide containing the phrase: "There is something of Hollywood in Dante's Heaven". His comment was: "It would be truer to say that there was something of Dante's Heaven in Hollywood".

CW differed from most of the authors I have indicated in having a clear and lucid way of thinking about such matters, and a fundamental orthodoxy. But the use of such occult symbolism always carries with it the danger that the author may be tempted into gnosticism. W.B. Yeats is certainly affected in this way, as is John Cowper Powys. For some modern critics, the orthodoxy present in CW's novels is more disturbing than the heterodoxy in Powys or Yeats. The novel of the supernatural is not a genre that is really a living one today. However, one book written in the 1960s - Kingsley Amis' The Green Man - is, I think, a deliberate exercise in the manner of CW, a supernatural thriller with surprising traces of theological orthodoxy in it.

CW's early poetry, such as that in The Silver Stair (1912), Poems of Conformity (1917), and Divorce (1920), shows a capacity to imitate other poets. These include the lyricists of the 17th century as well as Swinburne, Kipling and G.K. Chesterton. One must remember that in the early 20th century Swinburne had a great influence on poetry in spite of being concerned with a narrow range of subject matter. In CW's poem "On a Poet Going to Rome" from Divorce, the pilgrim is admonished by the spirits of Shelley and Keats who ask who their successors are and they obtain a surprising answer - Rossetti is seen as Shelley's successor, Coventry Patmore as Keats'. Among contemporaries, Walter de la Mare and Lascelles Abercrombie are named as being "most renowned". De la Mare, especially in his prose, plays with ideas of the supernatural similar to those of CW. Lascelles Abercrombie is not much read today but deserves re-examination. He had a hard struggle to earn his living as a writer until late in life. With regard to his later life, two factors have worked against him - his best poems are lengthy and dramatic, not lending themselves to anthologisation, and his plays, although interesting, have a turgid style which led to his being rejected by the early modernist movement, for example Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Herbert Read. Key dates in this modernist movement were the foundation of the Imagist Group in 1910 and the publication of Eliot's "The Wasteland" in 1922 - a "shift of sensibility" was taking place. According to F.W. Bateson in his English Poetry - A Critical History, such shifts are linked with transfers of social power. Each new movement is preceded by its fore-runners, for example in the 18th century Chatterton and Blake are the fore-runners of the Romantic movement, Gerard Manley Hopkins is the fore-runner of the Modernist movement in the 20th century. One of the effects of these shifts is that many poets and poems valued in the previous generation are rejected and disappear from currency. Some poets are caught between these shifts and both CW and Yeats are examples. To suit the new Modern, they needed to re-form their style. Some of CW's earlier poems on Arthurian themes in Chestertonian metres, for example those included in Three Plays, were later re-written and included in Taliessin Through Logres. The work of Gerard Manley Hopkins (whom CW edited for O.U.P.) doubtless taught CW the importance of freedom of rhythm and the use of internal rhyme.

In Poetry at Present (1930) CW looks at his contemporaries. These are mostly the so-called Georgian poets but the volume also includes a consideration of TS Eliot. Each chapter dealing with the work of a single poet, concludes with a sonnet in the style of that poet. That on Eliot has the following sonnet:

'Put out the light and then put out the light,
quietly the faithful mind puts everything out,
Not with a gesture, not with defiance to flout
the lamps (the ranter called them) of heaven, nor spite,
but wait till the theatre empties; then with the flight
of our tangled spectres, after the last tired shout
of applause, time ends. The attendants will go about
the empty corridors, putting out even the night.

Emptiness and fullness wholly alike enjoyed,
since enjoyment must be, even of bleakness and void;
mingled extremes and delights of poetry -
attentive in both, a mind hath everywhere stirred
to (O hark, hark! all richness held in a word)
to entertain divine Zenocrate.'

In concluding his poem with Marlowes line from Tamberlaine, CW is here imitating Eliot's practice (for example in 'The Wasteland' of including lines from other poets, mostly the Elizabethans. But he is also suggesting - and here his insight is in advance of many of his contemporaries - that the apparent darkness and confusion which he found in the earlier poetry of Eliot may, after all, be a preparation for a positive and spiritual vision. CW came to terms with Eliot's poetry with difficulty, and it is also true that Eliot found CW's own later poetry extremely obscure. Nevertheless the work of the two poets did converge and in their later years I think each was receptive to influences from the other. The Four Quartets have possible echoes of The Greater Trumps in the concept of the circling dance with the still centre. In CW's novel, the figures which make up the Tarot pack are seen dancing in this way. Only Sybil, the most spiritually developed of the characters, is able to see the figure of the Fool, the highest card in the pack which symbolises God. CW incidently shows a detailed knowledge of the Tarot pack, based on the works of Mathers and Waite. T.S. Eliot, when he used the symbolism of the Tarot pack in 'The Wasteland', admitted that he had no such detailed knowledge. Eliot's play The Cocktail Party and CW's novel Descent into Hell also have links of ideas. This is not only illustrated by the fact that Shelley's lines:

" 'Ere Babylon was dust

The magus Zoroaster, my dead child,
Met his own image walking in the garden"

are quoted in both these works, but also in the way that ordinary, middle-class people are made the agents of a higher and supernatural purpose. The influence of Eliot on CW has not been so often recognised. In this connection I should like to point out the resemblance in imagery between the following two passages. The first of these is from 'Palomides Before his Christening' :

" In the blank between the queen's meaning and the queen
first I followed my self away from the city
up a steep trail. Dinadan rode past me,
calling: "Friend, the missing is often the catching."

But I climbed; I bruised my ankles on gaunt shapes,
knees, wrists, thighs; I climbed up a back;
my feet jarred on the repetition of shoulders;
crevasses showed their polished slippery sides.

At other times I clambered over house-roofs,
without doors; on their blank sides
the king's knights were flat cracks, chinks,
rubbed patches, their heads grey blobs.

At last, above them all, I came to a cave
and a heap of twigs some traveller had left;
I rubbed a fire and sat within; the beast
lay at the cave's mouth; I was glad of its company.

The fire burned awhile; now I know
time was petrifying without. I sat and scratched.
Smoke in a greasy thickness rolled round the cave,
from flames of fierce fancy, flesh-fire-coloured.

Fire of the flesh subsided to ache of the bone;
the smoke rolled out, faded, died;
the beast, as the smoke thinned, had disappeared;
starveling, I lay in bone on the cave's floor.

Bone lay loving bone it imagined near it,
bone of its hardness of longing, bone of its bone,
skeleton dreaming of skeleton where there was none.
From the cave the greasy smoke drifted slowly outward.

Skeleton dreamed of skeleton it loved to neighbour,
thigh yearning for thigh, humerus for humerus;
by infinitesimal jerks on the cave's floor
it thrust sideways to the shining cates it imagined.

Bones grew brittle; sinews yielded; spirit
hated the air, the moving current that entered,
movements in the cubical plot of the cave, when smoke
emptied and bones broke; it was dull day.

Spirit spread in the cave, hating the air.
Bat-like, it hung to the roughness of rock; it lay
sucking the hollow cavities, less than a bat,
in bones where once it had found a nourishing marrow.

At last the bats frightened me; I left
my pretties; airy currents blew my light
flimsy ash to the cave's mouth. There
was the track; it went over the mountain to Caerleon.

The sky had turned round; I could not think
why I should not be christened in the city of astrologers.
It was true I should look a fool before everyone;
why not look a fool before everyone?"

The next passage is from T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland' :

'Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
If there were only water amongst the rock
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain
There is not even solitude in the mountains
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
From doors of mudcracked houses ... '

The image of the dry bones also occurs in Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday'. There is, however, of course, a common source, that of Ezekiel's vision. Both poets may also have been influenced by Yeats' play The Dreaming of the Bones (1919) in which the life of the dead is seen as a kind of dream.

CW also had an influence on poets younger than himself. Taliessin Through Logres

appeared in 1938, The Region of the Summer Stars in 1944, the latter published by Nicholson & Watson for Tambimuttu's Poetry London publications. Because this firm was a leading publisher of new poets, CW's poems secured a far wider attention among younger readers than they might otherwise have done. Taliessin Through Logres was not widely read or acclaimed at the time of its publication. It did not appear to be in tune with the poetry of the 1930s but it is, in fact, more so than it might seem. 'The Calling of Arthur' with its account of the overthrow of King Cradlemas is close to the political poetry of the 1930s. King Cradlemas is seen as the representative of a decadent capitalism; Bors carries as his symbol the hammer and sickle.

Of these poets of the 1930s, by far the most influential was W.H. Auden; CW's concept of the image of the City enters prominently into Auden's later work. In a lecture I heard him deliver at Oxford, CW defined the romantic experience in terms of five images. The first of these was the religious experience itself, the second was the image of romantic love as in Dante's Beatrice, the third was the image of Nature as in Wordsworth, the fourth the image of the City, and the fifth was the image of great art (of which Keats' Ode on a Grecian Urn was a partial exploration). In regard to the Image of the City CW might have cited Virgil but instead he referred to those who 'until recently were thought of as our younger poets but are now regarded as hopelessly middle-aged'. By these he meant Auden, Day Lewis, Spender and MacNiece. CW thought that their poetry of social criticism showed an image of the Unjust City which was a partial, negative realisation of what he wished to indicate. Sometime in the late 1930s, Auden returned to the Anglican orthodoxy of his upbringing. In 1937 he had met CW in connection with the publication by the OUP of Auden's anthology The Poet's Tongue. According to Auden's own testimony this meeting was crucial.

CW was more aware of, and open to, contemporary poetry than were his friends and fellow members of the Inklings group, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. Kafka was almost the only writer in the modernist tradition that Lewis accepted, doubtless because of the allegorical nature of his novels.

In the 1940s CW's poetry did make an appeal to many younger poets, including Vernon Watkins, Christopher Fry, Arne Ridler and Norman Nicholson. To these we may add a rather surprising addition - the name of Dylan Thomas who attended CW's lectures at the City Literary Institute in London. It is notable that Giorgio Melchiores in his book The Tightrope Walkers (1955) links the poetry of CW, Christopher Fry and Dylan Thomas as representations of what he calls 'mannerism' in modern poetry. Their styles are marked by a certain disturbance of and departure from colloquial spoken English, in a manner which marks them off from the style of the 1930s. Dylan Thomas' poem 'The Conversation of Prayers' in Deaths and Entrances (1946) seems to me to reflect the influence of CW's doctrine of exchange. The late G.S. Fraser has also made this point. In this poem an older man is praying in anguish and despair because his wife is dying. At the same time his child is beset by a nightmare of horror of the dark. Somewhere, it is suggested, their two prayers meet so that the child may be carrying some of the older man's (perhaps his father's) suffering:

' The sound about to be said in the two prayers
For the sleep in a safe land and the love who dies

Will be the same grief flying. Whom shall they calm?
Shall the child sleep unharmed or the old man be crying?

not that the physicists' "principle of uncertainty"? Is there any branch of knowledge to which CW does not give insight?

But to write about CW is itself ambiguous. It is like the statement "I hold up my finger - that is Zen; I say I hold it up - Zen is gone". To answer Dr Routley again, perhaps that is why he has escaped the fate of C.S. Lewis - one cannot but feel a fool if self-consciousness or posturing breaks in. When I first 'discovered' the novels, I felt as I read each one that I envied those who could live in such a world. Over the years since then - and with many re-readings - as I have discovered that the world CW opens to you is the real world, with its windows open to eternity.

And the biddest of these windows is the Beatrician one. I found myself writing recently, in another context, that an instrumental attitude to sex is peculiarly revolting, and that the pursuit of mutual satisfaction is no more acceptable than individual self-seeking. The paradox is only to be resolved within a higher frame of reference altogether, and, in The Figure of Beatrice, CW makes it plain that this is startlingly high. It cannot be easy to live with that insight - it requires the most delicate equilibrium of all - but, for me, it "feels right" (as a scientist would say of a hypothesis).

In a final reference to Dr Routley - yes, I too am a puritan. In my way, this means trying to find a basis for understanding life that is not contingent, and in this search I find that Charles Williams has covered the ground before me. So that is why I came to him in the first place, and why I continue to return.

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