

# The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 31, AUTUMN 1983

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

25 February 1984: William Anderson will speak on Charles Williams and Dante.

28 April 1984: Professor Corbin Carnell will speak on Charles Williams' influence on C S Lewis.

7 July 1984: AGM and Day Conference at Pusey House, Oxford, 11.30-5pm.

All meetings except the AGM will be held at Liddon House, 24 South Audley St, London W1, starting at 2.30pm.

LONDON READING GROUP

Sunday 25 March 1984: St Johns's Parish room, 2 Lansdowne Crescent, Ladbroke Grove, London W11 at 1pm. We will be reading Taliessin Through Logres and Region of the Summer Stars. Bring sandwiches; tea and coffee provided.

NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to:  
Mrs A. E. Harvey, 3 Little Cloister, Westminster Abbey, London S.W.1.  
Ian Longhorn, Upper Ferntree Gully, 3156 Victoria, Australia.

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The Society held a most enjoyable conference on 10 September in the church of St Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe in London. The morning talk was given by Professor Fernando de Mello Moser and we are very pleased to be able to reproduce it here: 'Charles Williams, a Quest, Vision and Myth'.

"The late Geoffrey Hunt, of the O.U.P., to whom I shall always feel greatly indebted, once wrote to me that he wondered what Charles Williams would have thought of becoming the subject of a thesis for a degree in Germanic Philology, and I understand his point. However, when I finished my book in the autumn of 1969, Charles Williams had already been the subject, wholly or in part, of a number of academic dissertations for different degrees, one in London (L.C. Huddleston's MA) and the rest in the USA. Several of these never reached book form, and therefore usually fail to be taken into account in later publications on Charles Williams, but certainly a few of them are extremely valid contributions to the understanding of individual works or specific points.

It will be immediately noticed that the overt interest in Charles Williams in North American Universities vividly contrasts with the very apparent lack of interest in British Universities. Over here, Charles Williams has always had loyal defenders, and there are a number of books in which you suddenly notice the author's indebtedness, or shy admiration of, Charles Williams, but there is, undoubtedly, on the whole, a cold front. May the recent appearance of Glen Cavaliero's book be herald to a change in this respect.

One of the reasons for the attention given to the works of Charles Williams in the USA, which the success of Eerdmans's reprints confirms at another level, lies in a much greater interest in allegorical and symbolical writing in that country together with an unashamed assumption of the present-day Christian tradition. That Charles Williams was, undoubtedly, removed from the main trends of poetry and literature of his day does not seem to have bothered those American scholars too much. Sometimes they wrote about C.W. together with other of the 'Oxford Christians', but they neither seem to have thought him unimportant, nor

a liability. And I should like to make it quite clear that most of the American theses I have read do not give you at all the impression of having been written in the attitude of Damaris Tighe, the heroine of Place of the Lion, before her alteration in consciousness - or conversion - if you like.

It now remains for me to explain what possible interest Charles Williams could have had for a junior member of the Classical University of Lisbon in the sixties, who would be submitting his thesis for public discussion with two examiners, with senior professors of all the other departments of the Faculty (Classics, Romance Philology, History, Philosophy and Geography) as members of the jury, entitled to vote - for such was the system then. The choice of subject, approved by my then Senior Professor in the early summer of 1963, proved to have been a fortunate, or a wise one, at different levels: the direct objective was attained, with unanimous approval of all the senior professors, in June 1970; in trying to understand Charles Williams better, I had read widely, and learned a very great deal; as a man and as a Christian, I had gained, or in some respects strengthened insights and points of view which have been with me ever since. Let me explain the first two points.

A doctoral dissertation, as I see it, aims at showing that the author has reached a certain degree of intellectual maturity, through his elaboration and presentation of the result of research, the command of the methods of which will also become apparent. Ideally, it should review the object as hitherto discussed by others, and throw fresh light on it, in one way or another. Last, though not least, it ought to fit in with the field of study the author has been or is specialising in. As a junior lecturer in English Studies, who had a strong cultural-historical bias and, indeed, was put in charge of a subject then called 'History of English Culture and Institutions', Charles Williams offered great possibilities, as I stated at the beginning of the Introduction to my book (p.I). On the other hand, as an ecumenical Christian, as I already tended to be at that time, the author of The Descent of the Dove and Judgement at Chelmsford was particularly attractive. Furthermore, he was characterised by a very keen dipolar vision, which I admired in a number of thinkers.

As my reading progressed, the amount of material gathered was tremendous. Charles Williams literally sent me reading across time and space, from the Fathers of the Church to the Occult, from the early centuries to the day before yesterday. It was, all things considered, very rewarding, but the time came when I had to find a pattern. This began to take shape in 1967, and, curiously enough (or perhaps not), it worked out through a number of arrangements in 'threes' and 'twos'.

Let me begin with the problem of presentation. I did not, for a number of reasons, wish to write a 'Life and Works of C.W.' monograph; but my immediate audience would be mostly ignorant of him, and I needed to place him. I did not wish to write a genre by genre discussion, on account of my great interest in systemising his ideas, if possible. And I did not (could not / should not) relegate the poetic and literary aspects in a dissertation which, in however broad a sense, fell under the heading of 'philology'. Finally, I struck on a solution, which fitted in with the phases of Charles Williams, as I saw them. Later, these again were related to the perspectives expressed in the title, i.e. Quest, Vision and Myth.

This is how the pattern worked itself out in the book:

b)	a)	c)
<u>Part One</u>	<u>Phases of C.W.'s life and work</u>	
the <u>formative period</u> and <u>early poetry</u> , etc. }	{ 1886-1926 1927-1935 (to intellectual and personal maturity) }	} After the <u>title</u> had been found: mainly <u>Quest</u> (personal and for expression)
<u>Part Two</u>		
the ideas systemati- cally presented, and hence the themes he constantly glossed. }	{ 1936-1945 (artistic maturity, ripeness of expression) }	} mainly <u>Vision</u>
<u>Part Three</u>		
the poetic and literary <u>expression</u>		} mainly <u>Myth</u>

The title of the book, which occurred to me after a rather depressed moment, suddenly began to prove its further aptness because, though to a great extent corresponding to the three parts of the book, it also applied to each part, and to the whole book, in the following manner: Charles Williams's personal quest was always deriving from and leading up to vision, and found its supporting images, both in search and in expression, in myth. Conversely, his vision came to find its ultimate expression in the myth of which the quest is an essential part. And so on ...

The reference to 'search and statement' I have borrowed from a paper by Dorothy Sayers, and applied it to Charles Williams's poetry, which I take to be both simultaneously - poetry of search and poetry of statement - though with occasional emphasis or priority of one perspective over another. This twofold perspective is consistent with Charles Williams's dipolar Vision, and with what I take to be his cyclical progress: each point of arrival is, in a sense, a new point of departure (α and ω).

In his Life of Saint Catherine of Jenra, etc (1908), Baron Friedrich von Hügel considered the existence of three fundamental elements in religion, which corresponded to other triadic emphases and tendencies in History, as well as in personal development. He further considered these elements to have found their fullest expression in Christianity, though, again, not always in perfect balance. These elements, then, are : the Institutional, the Intellectual, and the Mystical, or, in other words, the external historical, the speculative, and the interior perspective, or approach, or eventually, way of life. In early Christian terms, these can also be referred to the so-called 'School of Peter' (including the Synoptics), 'School of Paul' and 'School of John'.

Now, it will be obvious at once that Charles Williams can be singled out as an outstanding example of the balance of these three elements: for his acute sense of tradition and ritual shows the institutional perspective; while his searching critical mind, looking for formulations, trying, like he said of Paul, comparing him to the poets, to re-generate words, show the Intellectual element; and his spiritual intensity, double-world vision, and cosmic consciousness show the 'mystical' element permanently present as well.

Starting from von Hügel's thought, W. H. Auden (in the Introduction to Anne Fremantle's The Protestant Mystics (1964), picked out the first two elements, or preferably perspectives, and considered them to correspond to two attitudes, which he called the 'catholic' and the 'protestant' attitude, respectively. Furthermore, he developed his thought by using two phrases to express this attitude. When I read this passage, I immediately sensed that both attitudes co-existed in Charles Williams, not exactly in delicate balance, but asymptotically completing each other. Let me make myself clearer: according to Auden, the 'catholic' attitude is summed up in the sentence: 'We believe still' (notice the plural, implying community, and the expression of continuation). This is, of course, the Institutional, conscious membership attitude, continuing to believe, in all humility, in the historically transmitted body of doctrine - dogma, if you like. As to the 'protestant' attitude, in Auden's sense, it is summed up in the sentence 'I believe again' (in which it is now the individual conscience that, after courageous facing of the difficulties, believes with extra, and fully personal, force). The latter perspective fully accords with Charles Williams being a Christian of 'examined life' - an expression that I have taken up by contrary from a reference in Charles Williams's Flecker of Dean Close. (We are told that the Rev. Flecker regretted that most Christians led an 'unexamined' life.

Anyone who is at least vaguely familiar with Charles Williams's works and has paid attention to the incredibly wide reading behind his thought and his poetic and literary expression, will realise that I was up against a technical difficulty: I was supposed to be writing a thesis on an English subject, one of the two main subdivisions of Germanic Philology as it then was, and a number of authors and texts from outside the field kept cropping up and getting in - the Pseudo Areopagite and Dante among the most conspicuous. However, I hope I managed to bring them in as aspects of the individuality of Charles Williams, whereas the pattern continued to pay particular attention to the 'Englishness' of Charles Williams, by placing him in the tradition, or traditions. Basically, there were two traditions to be taken into account: the religious tradition and the literary tradition.

I have already said something concerning Charles Williams and the religious tradition, but I should point out that I found it essential to devote a whole chapter to the Anglican tradition. (Though actually two chapters deal with 'Williams and the Anglican tradition', the first is a presentation of Anglicanism in History and in doctrines, which the second places Charles Williams against that background.) It is one I have great respect for, but which is, inevitably, misunderstood in traditionally Roman Catholic countries. (Roman Catholic prejudices tend to survive culturally, when practice has decreased, just like Protestant prejudices survive in traditionally Protestant countries where religion itself has ceased to play the role it once played). I thought it necessary, and perhaps useful, to explain Anglican views on the doctrines of 'comprehensiveness', the via media, and the 'branch

theory of the Church'. I ended the chapter with what I thought was a rather good reply to a well-meaning but intended to be devastating comment on the Church of England. Again, I made it quite clear that, as a writer, Charles Williams must be considered as a peculiarly Anglican one, even in his originality.

There is still another way in which I placed Charles Williams within an English religious tradition, later in the book, and that is in respect of the mystical tradition. While there are interesting affinities between Charles Williams's vision and those of speculative mystics he must have known less well (Eckhart) or not at all well (Nicholas of Cusa), the medieval English mystical tradition was brought in, chiefly through the Lady Juliana of Norwich of course, and perhaps my personal contribution in this area is the comparison with views of William Law - which, through the latter's contemporary, the poet John Byron, led me to an interesting speculation concerning one possible source of the Skeleton.

Part Two of my book, in which the main references to the Lady Juliana and to William Law occur, opens with a chapter which bears the title 'The Process of Knowledge'. Its sections include discussions of the two ways, that of affirmation and that of negation, in Charles Williams's thought, of the concept of Romantic theology, and of the two stages of any romantic experience, i.e., the vision, and the examination, leading to knowledge. It also includes a discussion of the asymptote, and my own suggestions as to possible cumulative sources of the 'Neither is this Thou / This also is Thou' formulation.

The subsequent two chapters deal with: Creation, Incarnation and Redemption; the problem of Evil, and the Fall; the First Cause, certain formulations in the English language which necessarily conditioned or at other times enriched Charles Williams's own speculations and formulations. A comparative/contrastive examination with a French sentence (by Claudel) that Charles Williams would have certainly enjoyed, but is not workable in English; the concept of Necessity (Alice Mary Hadfield's most useful information about the 'necessity' of figures); the meaning of the Cross, 'exchange', 'substitution', and 'co-inherence'; the criticism by Charles Williams of a certain number of dichotomies; the rehabilitation of the body; time and space; the image of the City; etc. (Conclusion to this part, p.195f).

Part Three of the book - the poetic and literary expression - begins with a chapter, 'The Poetic Process', somewhat symmetrical to the 'Process of Knowledge' chapter of Part Two. It was certainly not necessary to place Charles Williams in the English literary tradition as it had been to inform the reader concerning the religious tradition, and this had, in any case, been done gradually, as from the discussion of the early poetry. In this chapter (viii) then, I discuss Charles Williams's concepts of poetry, of image and of myth from a predominantly literary point of view, against the background of the Romantic tradition (Wordsworth and Coleridge particularly), and in relation to contemporary concepts of symbol, allegory and myth. This leads me to question the terminology used about Charles Williams, as much as the terminology he himself used.

Chapter IX deals with almost everything Charles Williams wrote, and it

is certainly a little too long. From Biography and History to the novels, then on to poetic drama. The chapter attempts to combine presentation, explanation and comment, and though the general pattern and several points satisfy me, it is the part of the book I am least happy about.

And so we reach Chapter X, entitled 'The End of the Quest'. It traces Charles Williams's routes pursuing the matter of Arthur and Grail, discusses briefly the early versions, and then introduces the final versions, with reasonably full commentary of a number of poems. In a sense, the whole book, up to and including these commentaries, forms an introduction to the reading of the Taliessin cycle, even though several parts may stand on their own.

'This talk may appear to have taken a narcissistic turn. But, after all, the book having been written in Portuguese, very few of you are likely ever to read it. Let these paragraphs, too, be a kind of introduction. I will end them with a summarised version of the last paragraphs of my book and hope that the real talk may take place afterwards, i.e., now, when the Rev. Brian Horne first, and the rest of you who may wish to join in, may ask me lots of questions concerning what I have alluded to but, in fact, have not said .....

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A lively discussion then followed covering a wide range of topics including the poetry of William Law and Passeeo (a Portuguese poet), the importance of the Authorised Version of the Bible and the exact meaning of words; other religions but the predominance of Christianity; good versus evil and opposing forces. Lunchtime being upon us, the discussion broke for sandwiches and we stretched our legs with a walk guided by Joan Wallis to the nearby Wren church of St Martin's within Ludgate. During the afternoon we read Seed of Adam and concluded a most interesting and stimulating day.

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Members may be interested to read the following poem. It was written by Anne Ridler and submitted as a contribution to an anthology edited by Susan Hill in aid of Oxfam, published in 1983 by Chatto & Windus, entitled People. Mrs Ridler was asked for a poem or essay about someone who had been an influence on her life:

"Charles Williams: in anamnesis

'That which was once Taliessin rides to the barrows of Wales'  
Anne Ridler

This is a likeness but it does not speak.  
The words are echoes, the image looks from the wall  
Of many minds, kindling in each the spark  
Of passionate joy, yet silent in them all.  
Pupils grow older, but a long-dead master  
Stands where they parted, ageless on his hill.  
The child grows to be father of his father  
Yet keeps relation, kneels in homage still.

What is the speech of the dead? Words on a page  
Where Taliessin launched his lines of glory  
Capture for him a poet's immortality

As every reader wakes them. So the image  
Speaks through a living mind, as he in life  
Would use from each the little that each could give.

© Anne Ridler

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