

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No 32, WINTER 1983

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

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

7 July 1984: Annual General Meeting and day conference at Pusey House, Oxford, 11am - 5pm. Rev Dr Ralph Townsend will speak.

10 November 1984: Canon Raymond Hockley will speak; subject to be announced.

All meetings except the AGM will be held at Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W.1., starting at 2.30pm.

LONDON READING GROUP

Sunday 25 March 1984: St John's Parish room, 2 Landsdowne Crescent, Ladbroke Grove, London W.II. at 1pm. We will be reading Taliessin Through Logres and Region of the Summer Stars. Please bring sandwiches - tea and coffee provided.

OXFORD READING GROUP

For details contact either Anne Scott (Oxford 53897) or Brenda Boughton (55589).

LAKE MICHIGAN AREA READING GROUP

For details please contact Charles Huttar, 188 W.IIth St., Holland, Michigan 49423, USA. Telephone (616) 396 2260.

SUBSCRIPTIONS 1894 - 85

May we remind you that subscriptions are due from 1 March 1984. A subscription renewal slip is enclosed with this Newsletter; please ignore it if you have already paid.

NEW BOOKS ON C.W.

Reviews of 2 books published in 1983 on C.W. are included in this Newsletter. Also enclosed is a publicity leaflet on Alice Mary Hadfield's new book for your information. You may already have received one in which case we apologise for the duplication. A review of this book will appear in a later Newsletter.

NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to:

James D. Russo, 166 Maplewood Avenue, Clifton, New Jersey, 07013, USA.
A.F.Webber, 22 Maids Causeway, Cambridge, CB5 8DA.

SUPPLEMENT

There is no supplement with this Newsletter.

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The Novels of Charles Williams by Thomas T. Howard, published by Oxford University Press in 1983. Book Review by Stephen Barber.

One expects the Oxford University Press to encourage interest in Charles Williams, but interestingly it is the New York branch which has given us in the same year both Mrs Hadfield's authoritative biographical study and this study of the novels by Professor Howard. Indeed, Williams seems to be more widely read in the USA than here: Eerdmans have reissued all the novels, and he has gained, as has Owen Barfield, from the recent critical tendency to discuss the Inklings as a group. We therefore have a new generation of readers for whom the personal magic of the man is only a vague report and who know him solely through his books.

Howard's book is addressed to readers coming to the novels for the first time. The design of his book is simple: a chapter on each novel, with an Introduction and Afterword. There is, intentionally, a great deal of repetition from chapter to chapter, since each chapter is intended to be self-sufficient. Howard does not say so in so many words, but the kind of reader he has in mind seems to be a college student who has been assigned one Williams novel as a set text. I do not know whether to be impressed with Howard's courage in bringing these novels to this audience or to grumble at the restrictions it imposes on him.

His book suffers from a curious defensive and apologetic tone which he falls into particularly when discussing Williams's use of occult materials in his plots. Personally, I find these fascinating and evocative, and would see no point in encouraging a reader to persist who found them repellent. Howard finds himself constantly seeking to excuse. Yet one may follow C.S. Lewis, who in The Allegory of Love, a book Williams admired, suggested that: 'For poetry to spread its wings fully, there must be, besides the revealed religion, a marvellous that knows itself as myth.' And Howard's difficulty is compounded when dealing with Williams's deliberately oblique way of drawing on Christian doctrines. Lewis elsewhere stated memorably that Williams had 'restated to my imagination the very questions to which the doctrines are answers.' But Howard lacks Lewis's tact in handling these questions in a literary context, and his tone is often jarring.

He begins with a concession, taken from an introduction T.S. Eliot wrote for All Hallows Eve, and worth reproducing: 'What he had to say was beyond his resources, and probably beyond the resources of language, to say once for all through any one medium of expression What he had to say was primarily imaginative.' This seems a fair contention and I count it in Howard's favour to cite it at the outset. Certainly, acknowledging flaws seems to be one of the first stages to go through in learning to love an author.

But I find Howard unsatisfactory on the question of genre. He points out that Williams does not work in the tradition of the realistic novel, but gives no attention to working out what traditions he does work in and what its conventions are. Dr Cavaliero has recently drawn attention to Williams's predecessors in what he calls the occult novel, and Northrop Frye once grouped Williams with other mythopoeic writers such as Hawthorne and Melville whose work was founded on naive romance. Nevertheless, when all has been said for these conventions, Williams's novels remain vulnerable. The plot and interpretation are manipulated to conform to the romance expectations, whereas the events are presented naturalistically, and a gulf can open between the two. The clearest example of this is in Descent into Hell, in the interpretation of

the two flaws in the pageant: the slowness of the actors' diction, and a defect in a detail of the soldiers' costumes. Stanhope's tolerance of the first is presented as admirable: Wentworth's indifference to the second is presented as damnable. Williams justifies the distinction, but it has to be read into the narrative rather than emerging naturally from it.

The individual chapters are largely expository, but some good critical points got made. In considering War in Heaven, Howard usefully compares the attitudes taken by the Duke and by the Archdeacon to the Grael to the Eucharistic doctrines of their respective churches:

'Both of these churches are sacramentalist in the sense of seeing that the eternal touches time at real physical points. But the Duke, being Catholic, is stoutly attached to the vessel itself. He will go to any lengths to rescue the cup, whereas the Archdeacon, with his typically Anglican demurral on questions like this, is prepared to let the physical item go if that must be, so long as the Love of which it is the token still rules his own heart. This would be in keeping with the Anglican refusal to work out just how the Bread and Wine at the Eucharist may be held to be the Body and Blood of Christ, whereas the Roman Church has formularies that spell it out fairly rigorously.'

However, he seems to miss the point that, in the Grael mass at the end of the book, each communicant receives from the vessel according to his expectations - an idea Williams may have derived from A.E.Waite.

There is a fine sentence about the part played by the law in Many Dimensions:

'Law is perhaps the knotted under-side of a great tapestry which, seen from above, turns out to be a pattern of such beauty and perfection that our bliss at seeing it too soon would overthrow us entirely.'

Also here Howard suggests that Williams's deliberate avoidance - he calls it shyness - of the routine theological words springs not only from his wish as an artist to revivify what has become routine, but also from a tension in him between believer and sceptic:

'it was the very believer in Williams that was shy of routine pieties.'

Howard is weakest on The Place of the Lion, which is unfortunate since this and Many Dimensions seem to me the finest of the earlier novels. He gets into a hopeless philosophical tangle on the relation between Platonism and Christianity and to what extent Williams suggests that the visible appearance of the Platonic principles in the novel is a legitimate possibility or a fanciful extension of that philosophy. I think the source of the confusion is that Howard accepts the two-world misinterpretation of Plato, according to which visible things are parasitic on a comparable world of similar things in a mysterious second world. In fact Williams, like most poets, accepted the neo-Platonic interpretation that it is only the principles that are ever truly-knowable. This fits very well with Christian doctrine and accounts for the technical excellence of this novel.

Howard discusses Descent into Hell after All Hallows Eve, which is perverse as it preceded it by eight years. Moreover Mrs Hadfield cites a letter from Williams to Eliot saying that the later book went on from the point at which the earlier left off - surely an intention confirmed by the experience of readers. However, Howard is right as against Cavaliero in treating the phantom Adela in the earlier book as specifically a succubus and therefore objective. She is, after all, real enough for the real Adela to see and be frightened of.

He has several formulae for the fund of pattern that he sees. Williams' work, he says, focuses on two themes 'the inter-relatedness of every aspect of human experience' and 'the absolute relativity of all human apprehensions of truth': or again, at the heart of all his writing is the endeavour, not to see beauty as truth, but to reveal 'that truth is beauty': yet again, Williams' work is directed to resolving the modern contradiction between 'the conscious knowledge of our consciousness' with the myths which structure it 'and our revolt against our knowledge': and again, Williams' aim is to find an equivalent in literary expression for the mystery of the incarnation, reconciling the knowledge of God with the knowledge of man. What unites all those attempts to resolve opposite things is intimated in Dr Cavaliero's subtitle 'Poet of Theology': Williams developed a theology out of poetry (Dr Cavaliero is particularly good on the relation of his understanding of the incarnation and the atonement to the theories about literature of such books as The English Poetic Mind) and treats theology as he would treat poetry, by relating both to 'the responsive imagination'. Dr Cavaliero thinks that his 'technique of interlinked associative symbolism', calls for 'an intelligent reliance on the imagination' which makes his poems - and it would apply to his theology also - 'anachronistic because they are ahead of, rather than behind, their time'.

Perhaps unavoidably, Dr Cavaliero does not wholly succeed in holding imagination and intelligence in union when he discusses the Arthurian poems, which I find the most uneven, the weakest part of his book. He succumbs to the temptation of interpreting the poems one by one, in each trying to follow out the interlinking of the symbolism with the whole of the book in which it appears. (He is surely right in treating Taliessin and The Summer Stars each as wholes, avoiding C.S.Lewis' inter-weaving of all the poems into a kind of chronological sequence). And in the passion to exhibit all the threads, he rather forgets Williams' own dictum: 'It isn't what poetry says, it's what poetry is'. Perhaps the defect is in the poems themselves, to some extent. Dr Cavaliero compares their sense of 'the aloof formality of (the) patterned civilisation' of Byzantium to Yeats's, though, he says 'without the piercing particularity of Yeats's evocations'. But I think it is he who is missing the particularity of Charles Williams' poems, which seem to me generally much better than that very over-patterned poem, Yeats's Byzantium, and frequently as good as Sailing to Byzantium. (I suspect that the images of Byzantium in the two poets have a common origin not only in the historic city, but in the rituals of the Order of the Golden Dawn: Byzantium, Yeats's poem, is a kind of working up of the rituals of All Souls Night, where there is a piercing concreteness for which in Williams one would have to look to the novels, though they do not have the peculiar evocations of poetry.)

Is there not in fact a way of reading Williams' verse which sometimes even in their oddest phrases, 'the rounded bottom of the Emperor's glory' for example, recognises, not the consistent following out of a pattern ending in 'a sense of contrivance' which Dr Cavaliero finds, but something concrete, emotional, felt, a particular sense of a particular thing, which just happens to be odd - in this case, a strong erotic sense of the beauty of female buttocks? This way of reading has of course to go with a further recognition of what would be Williams' least attractive quality if it weren't for his understanding of it, his latest sadism: Dr Cavaliero takes a hesitant step towards recognising this when he comments on the beauty Williams finds in a scarred slave-girl's back, but there too it seems as if he only sees Williams's pattern working itself out. Yet he goes a little too far in my opinion in stressing the absence of mutuality in Williams' sense of adoration in love, the sense of using the beloved as part of a cosmic experiment, like Henry in The Greater Trumps: after all, there is Isabel in Shadows of Ecstasy whose conversation Dr Cavaliero rightly praises, to show that Williams could imagine another side of love, and a wife. But in the peculiar sensualities which look as though they are part of a cerebrally devised pattern, isn't there something like the powerful and eccentric feelings of D.H.Lawrence, with whom Williams notable sympathised?

It is possible that at some deeper level the sadism and the sense of love as an experiment of which the beloved, however glorified, may sometimes seem like the material, both go with the love of pattern: Blake would have thought so. And recognition of this as a peculiar constellation of feelings in Williams helps to reveal in him an intuitive

wisdom which goes deeper than the wisdom of interlinked associative pattern. C.S. Lewis in his Letters to Malcolm uses the word magic to describe those moments and things where one recognises meaning as objectively present without any possible further explanation in terms of structure, pattern, intellectual explication, or what Jacques Derrida calls differance. These are the moments typified when Beatrice, in the line particularly loved by Williams and at the heart of the belief in the holiness of fact in Descent into Hell, says 'Look well: we are, we are indeed Beatrice.' Williams combined an awareness, an obsession with pattern so great that he regarded a warning against it (for 'patterns are baleful things') as the best advice he could give himself, with a great power of conveying this magic. He remarks in Witchcraft on two experiences which predispose to a belief in magic in the ordinary sense - 'the moment when it seems that anything might turn into anything else' and the moment 'when one is aware that a phenomenon, being wholly itself, is laden with universal meaning'. This pair of experiences, of negative and positive meaning one might say, could be added to the pairs of opposites on which Williams' work focusses. Different temperaments tend to identify meaning either with the particular or with the pattern: but both are in themselves false concretisations of meaning, and it was meaning that Williams aimed at (not life, not death, but meaning'.

In aiming at meaning he had at his service gifts which Dr Cavaliero well describes as creating 'a trans-sensuous awareness'. Apropos of his excellent analysis of this effect in the poems he cites Anne Ridler, 'it is at ... a moment of almost hallucinatory vision held in the senses but on the point of reaching beyond them, that (Williams's) images must have been made'. And apropos of his parallel remarks on the 'blending of abstractions with concrete imagery' in the description of Margaret Anstruther's dying in Descent into Hell, he remarks that the 'account of spiritual experience challenges comparison with ... the later novels and tales of Henry James'. In dealing with Williams' descriptions of process and long-drawn-out experience, then, Dr Cavaliero is subtle and balanced. But I should have liked to hear from him on those passages in which Williams concentrated his sense of magic in both senses, the visionary passages in the novels which embody supranatural versions of the two lands of experience mentioned in Witchcraft. For many readers of Williams these are the passages most peculiarly characteristic of, most peculiarly admirable in him: the visions, for example, of the butterfly in The Place of the Lion or of the policeman in The Greater Trumps, or the ghostly meetings of Pauline in the streets of Battle Hill at night in The Greater Trumps. Eliot describes Williams as able to describe experiences such as his readers may have had once or twice in a lifetime and been unable to put into words: those passages must have had large effects on the writing of Four Quartets. But Dr Cavaliero plays them down in a manner consistent I think with his preference for pattern over event. He compares the vision of the policeman with a spiritual being's vision in Evelyn Underhill's Column of Dust of an imperial procession in London: 'he saw Sovereignty, the ruler and governing Idea, behind its poor image, and hardly perceived the shabbiness of the symbol through which he gazed'. But the abstractness of this, the concentration on pattern and idea, the scorn of the poor image, are infinities away from the moment when Nancy saw 'in that heavy official barring their way the Emperor of the Trumps, helmed, in a white cloak, stretching out one sceptered arm, as if Charlemagne, or one like him, stretched out him controlling sword over the tribes of Europe ...'

Such visions as these Dr Cavaliero a little neglects, and with them commoner experiences, as the works of art seen as the intersection of Many Dimensions in the novel Many Dimensions, or the peculiar loneliness of suburban streets at night in Descent into Hell, and again Williams' mystical delight in physical beauty, as of Rosamund's arm in Shadows of Ecstasy. He gives an excellent definition of the novels, 'in each one the supernatural threatens to overwhelm the natural order, and equilibrium is only resorted to by those who can accept both aspects of reality', but spoils it, I think, by saying that The Place of the Lion and The Greater Trumps 'are parables in the fantastic mode, esoteric spiritual fables of the same genres, though hardly of the same literary attainment, as T.F. Pavys's Mr Weston's Good Wine'. The judgement I personally find surprising enough: Mr Weston's Good Wine is more smoothly written indeed, but does not otherwise seem to me to come anywhere near the literary magnitude of those two novels of Williams. This might be debated at length: what seems to me scarcely open to doubt is that the

visionary quality in Williams' writings puts them in a different genus from Mr Weston's Good Wine. If there were nothing else, the ease with which T.F. Pavys puts God into his novel as a character, an act which would be mindlessly blasphemous if it were other than it is, sheerly parabolic, contrasts with the scrupulousness with which Williams in all his novels presents only appearances of God. The nearest he comes to presenting God as an active character is in the Fool of The Greater Trumps, who himself is only an appearance whose activity is experienced as a rare revelation. Elsewhere, as Dr Cavaliero remarks, Williams shrinks even from mentioning the name of God, preferring again the names of manifestations like the Mercy, or the Omnipotence. But I do not think this is only, as Dr Cavaliero thinks, for freshness: it seems to me rather in the paradoxical spirit of the Jewish visionaries and mystics, who precisely because they seem to have experienced God more nearly than most people, proclaim that it is not God Himself they have experienced but only the Chariot of His glory. So far from being parables, these novels of Williams seem to me to convey just that numinous and flaming quality of existence which is the dominating manifestation of the God of the Bible. Williams again displays exquisite balance when talking of the manifestation of God to Ezekiel he remarks that glory 'usually means no more than a mazy bright blur. But the maze should be, though it generally is not, exact, and the brightness should be that of a geometrical pattern'. It is characteristic of him that he stresses the pattern, because he thinks we must be reminded to examine the pattern of the glory. But he recognises the brightness.

The question of balance between existence or event and pattern is very difficult. I began by saying that one had to catch the pattern in Williams, but then I meant it of an intuitive recognition of tone, balance and individuality such as we experience not only in relation to writers, but in the ordinary circumstances of a growing friendship: indeed it is only a special case of something we experience in discovering the nature of anything, what I.T. Ramsay called the ice breaking, the penny dropping and the light dawning. In coming to know the nature of Charles Williams, the element of intuition is, as always, essential, but the element of explicit recognition of pattern is larger because he made it so. For example, in Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury the whole point and climax of the play seems to me to come when the Skeleton brings Cranmer on his way to the fire to the recognition that if the Pope had bid him live, he would have obeyed his laws. Cranmer achieves total self-knowledge, is equated to his very soul. I feel that here a nail is driven home: but I know that some of my feeling is derived from the knowledge that this actually happened - a friar asked if this were true of Cranmer as he went to be burnt, and Cranmer assented. The knowledge of historical truth is not what one could gather from the play. Williams, in making the interlocutor the Skeleton has to that extent shifted the event nearer the pattern. The event in the play, to that extent, loses what Lewis calls magic, and for me a certain literary power which it would have had if Williams had intimated the element of historic fact more strongly. On the other hand, I would not have the connection with the Skeleton broken, both for the play's sake and even more for the historic event's sake. For it is the historic event that gains by the relation: it, and the area of Oxford where it must have happened is for me charged with meaning, because here the Skeleton spoke. I had the same feeling at Aachen lately when in the company of Martin Moynihan of this Society: he quoted the further words from the vision of the Policemen 'The great roads ran below him, to Rome, to Paris, to Aix, to Byzantium ...' Williams was not remembering the concrete reality of Aix / Aachen, but using the name to give concreteness to his pattern. But it was the concrete reality of the place that he enlarged for me.

Now Dr Cavaliero in dealing with Thomas Cranmer neglects that final interchange, talking indeed of an earlier event as 'the final renunciation'. I think he is missing something: yet I recognise that if I found it, it is through paying attention to something Williams himself had played down. So if here I stick to my recognition it is with the awareness that Dr Cavaliero is closer to Williams' thought processes.

And the lover of event is not always so divided from the lover of pattern. Dr Cavaliero ends his chapter on the novels with a paragraph from All Hallows Eve which, he says, expresses Williams' fullest consciousness that 'to love truly is to be reconciled with every aspect of life'. It also confers meaning on a particular place under an aspect one can see any day - the Thames at London, 'dirty and messy', whose dirt and corruption 'also were facts.. They could not be forgotten or lost in fantasy; all that had been, was; all that was, was. A sodden mass of cardboard and paper drifted by, but the soddenness was itself a joy, for this was what happened, and all that happened, in this great material world, was good.'

If I have focused for too long on what seems to me Dr Cavaliero's overstressing of pattern at the expense of Williams' expression of the quality of 'what happened', it is to be taken as part of my initial praise of the book. Even in disagreement, the reader will learn much from Dr Cavaliero: and his disagreement will be governed by his admiration and delight.

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Inklings Week in Aachen, November 1983, by Martin Moynihan

Germany's newly-formed Inklings Society (Inklings-Gesellschaft) held a very successful inaugural session in Aachen, 21 - 25 November. It was devoted especially to Tolkien and C.S.Lewis - the 20th anniversary of Lewis's death fell on 22 November 1983.

Dr Gisbert Kranz of Aachen was the moving spirit, and an article by him in the Aachen press 'Warum ist C.S.Lewis immer noch so beliebt?' heralded a week of exhibitions and lectures. The audiences came from far and wide - Switzerland and Belgium besides Germany - and the speakers were from a broad spectrum. The talks themselves were full of vivid interest. The Austrian novelist, Dr Peter Marginter, currently at the Austrian Institute in London, spoke on 'Tolkien and Phantasy', Prof. Dr Jörg Splett on 'Joy and Pain in C.S.Lewis' and Prof. Dr Helmut Schrey on 'From Paradise Lost to Perelandra'. For theological reasons, Milton, it seems, was earlier known and read in Germany than Shakespeare; Paradise Lost, by its very subject, attracted a wide readership. Dr Kranz himself spoke on C.S.Lewis and Aldous Huxley'. Britain was represented by Stephen Medcalf ('The Making and Breaking of C.S.Lewis' Personae') and Martin Moynihan ('C.S.Lewis and the Arthurian Tradition'). The Society will reproduce these talks in its forthcoming Year-book, and has produced a first-class bibliography of C.S.Lewis writings (Dr Kranz will lecture at the C.S.Lewis Summer School, 4-15 June, St Deiniol's Library.)* Needless to say, Aachen, with its Carolingian associations, provided an excellent setting. A Mayoral Reception acknowledged this launching of Germany's new Society. And the Society will evidently go from strength to strength. The British Council was represented, and gave their support. Last, not least, Colin Hardie, one-time Public Orator at Oxford and himself an Inkling, sent the Society a message of greeting, in Latin elegiacs. Translated into both German and English, these were very warmly received at the first session. Nam vos Grani ad Aquas, they concluded:

Nam vos Grani ad Aquas studiis et nomine eisdem,
convocat ad Caroli scissa lacerna rotam.
Sit vobis felix opera, atque haec quaecumque
verba salutantis consulite, oro, boni.

which, in English paraphrase, read:

* St Deiniol's Library (the residential Gladstone Memorial Library) Hawarden, Chester.

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Stabat Mater Dolorosa

In that wounded Prince of passion
Let me, after thy great fashion,
Find my own most certain part.

Let our holy sorrows mingle
For His sacrifice, my single
Meditation while I live.

To the cross of darkness take me
And thy sad associate make me,
In the grief whereby I thrive.

Of all maidens lordliest maiden,
Be my heart with thy heart laden,
Let me too be sacrificed.

I, His wounds again receiving,
I, companion of His grieving,
May I bear the death of Christ.

By those pangs may I be wounded,
May my final depth be sounded
By the anguish of thy Son.

Lest the fire of hell invade me,
Virgin, be thou near to aid me
When the judgement is begun.

When I leave this world for ever,
Christ my Lord, my soul deliver
With the shout of victory.

From this body's deathly failing,
Draw me by thy grace availing
Into thy felicity.

Amen.

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