The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 40, WINTER 1985

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

22 February 1986: Dr Rowan Williams will speak on 'CW and Church History', looking particularly at The Descent of the Dove.

26 April 1986: Society AGM. Rev Dr Brian Horne will speak on 'The Bible and the Comedy'.

24 May 1986: Centenary meeting at St Albans - see Newsletter 38 for details.

22 November 1986: Elizabeth Brewer will speak on 'The Role of Women in Charles Williams' poems'.

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings will be held in Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W1, at 2.30pm.

LONDON READING GROUP

16 March 1986, Sunday: We will meet in St John's Parish Room, 2 Lansdowne Crescent, Ladbroke Grove, Notting Hill Gate, London W11, at 1pm to continue reading the Taliessin poems. Please bring sandwiches - coffee and tea provided.

OXFORD READING GROUP

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

CAMBRIDGE READING GROUP

For information please contact Drs Geraldine and Richard Pinch, 5 Oxford Road, Cambridge, CB4 3PH, telephone Cambridge 311465.

LAKE MICHIGAN AREA READING GROUP

For details please contact Charles Huttar, 188 W.11th St., Holland, Michigan 49423 USA, telephone (616) 396 2260.

CENTENARY YEAR 1986

Newsletter 38 gave information on events being organised in 1986 to mark the centenary of CW's birth. Members may also be interested to know that Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury is to be staged by 'The Company of Ten' in the Studio Theatre, Abbey Theatre, Westminster Lodge, Holywell Hill, St. Albans from Tuesday 24 June to Friday 27 June at 8pm and on Saturday 28 June at 4pm and 7.30pm. All tickets are priced £2 and are available from the Abbey Theatre. Booking is not yet open, the next Newsletter will give information on when bookings can be made.

RALPH BINFIELD

We are very sorry to have to report that Ralph Binfield died on 28 January 1986. He joined the Oxford University Press while it was housed in Amen House in the City of London, a youngster keen to learn every side of book production and editing. By 1926 he had risen to be assistant to Charles Williams and Fred Page, the two editors who handled the firm's general literary output. As this increased, Ralph learned something of everything at a working level. One of his jobs was to speed off from time to time to the British Museum to check a word or page or title against the original. He was quick and completely reliable.

Ralph had many gifts. With Charles Williams and the artist Lynton Lamb he was producer of the popular plays that were acted by the staff: such favourites as The Devil's Disciple and Berkeley Square. When Charles Williams's play Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury was acted in Canterbury Cathedral, Ralph was in the small group of us who went down to see it. During the 1939-1945 War, he came in briefly and cheerily in uniform to see his friends in the firm, then temporarily housed at Southfield House, Oxford.
He was one of the first members of the Charles Williams Society, and he gave the major part of his personal collection of CW's books to the Society's reference library.

Our deepest condolences go out to Ralph's widow, Phillis.

A. M. H.

NEW BOOKS

The 1985 Volume VI of Seven has recently been published by the Bookmakers Guild, Inc., 1430 Florida Avenue, Suite 202, Longmont, Colorado 80501, USA at a price of $ 11plus $ 2.50 (£3) postage and packing. The articles contained are: 'The Latin Letters of C.S. Lewis to Don Giovanni Calabria' by Martin Moynihan, 'The Defiant Lyricism of Own Barfield' by Thomas Kranidas, 'The Fiction of George MacDonald' by David S Robb, 'Dorothy L Sayers: Critic of Detective Fiction', 'An Introduction to Charles Williams's Incarnationalism and the Taliessin Poetry' by John-Manuel Andriote, 'The Silmarillion and the Rise of Evil: the Birth Pains of Middle-Earth' by Thomas M Egan, and 'Review Article "I wrote it just for fun"' by Barbara Reynolds.

Jos Vanachter has sent the Society a copy of his dissertation prepared for his degree of Doctor in philosophy and literature from the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium entitled 'Man of Myth , a Quest into the Arthurian World of Charles Williams'. It is available on loan from the Society's Reference Library.

1986 SUBSCRIPTIONS

The Charles Williams Society was registered as a Charity on the 23 May 1985. Members of the Society who live in the United Kingdom and who pay income tax at the basic rate or above, can pay their annual subscription under a Deed of Covenant for four years or life, if shorter, and the Society can then reclaim tax on it and thereby increase its income without cost to the member.
A form of Deed of Covenant is enclosed with a Banker's Order which you may find convenient to use. If you would like to pay your subscription in this way and help the Society, please complete the form and return it to the Hon. Treasurer. If you not wish to do this, then we would be grateful if you could complete the ordinary subscription form and return it to the Membership Secretary. This year, 1986, is the Centenary Year of the birth of Charles Williams and details of the events organised by the Council of the Society appear in this and the two preceeding Newsletters. The Centenary Fund still needs donations. If you have not already done so, could you please consider adding a donation when you pay your subscription?

R.W.

NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to the following new members:

Miss Elizabeth S Tilley, 230 Heath Street W.# 315, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5P 1N8
Dr Arcadi Nelbosine, 64 East 86th Street, New York, 10028, N.Y., USA
Jan Marie Curtis, 278 Southampton Drive, Fredericton, New Brunswick, E3B 4T6, Canada.

SUPPLEMENT

There is no Supplement with this Newsletter.

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'Arms and the Man: The Place of Beatrice in Charles Williams' Romantic Theology' by Charles A Huttar, Part 2 (Part 1 was reproduced in Newsletter 39).

III

The system which has just been described and illustrated did not spring into being complete in Williams's mind nor continue unchanged. Some of its key elements were there already by his early twenties, but the explicit identification with Dante was a later refinement, out of which emerged new emphases that became prominent in the final formulations.

Only in the context of Williams's life can this course of development be understood, however; to approach it as a merely literary or academic phenomenon would be a mistake. The subtle interplay of art and life is well recognized: it is essential to the artist's integrity that what he creates have a stamp of confirmation from his own experience--yet one's experiences are often understood, and sometimes even fashioned, according to paradigms of meaningful behavior that are made available among one's real-life acquaintances or else through some art medium--journalism, biography, history, cinema, theatre, novels, poetry, and so on. One's experience of life, then, is in some sense a creation already, a deliberate or unconscious making, and not mere raw, unworked data. To trace the development of Williams's Dantean system involves us in several questions that cannot be fully answered. To what extent are his romantic convictions made firm through the validation found in his experiences? But to what exent was his understanding of those experiences shaped by the theoretical patterns--or even the experiences themselves caused to occur through the imitating of theoretical models? On the other hand, to what extent did those particular models attract him because they "fit" his prior experience? So the questions can go on, one inside another, and they are worth asking, even if the secrets finally elude us, because some better understanding may in the process be divined.

Further, they are essential questions on this particular inquiry because the issue was a central one for Williams himself. It was important to him that the Beatrician experience possess some universality; not that all lovers must encounter love in that way, but, first, that Dante himself have written of a real experience, not just made a fashionable fiction, and, second, that his experience not be unique, for then it could hardly be generalized into a theology. "It appears that this is an experience which has occurred to a large number of young people besides Dante."<30>

There is strong evidence that Williams could say this because he considered himself one of that "large number." But only in retrospect, it seems, did he give his experience that precise shape. At the time he met his "Beatrice," Michal (*nee* Florence Conway), in St. Albans around Christmas 1908 and fell in love, aged about 22,<31> he had other guides to help him give words to his unfamiliar experience.

Words he gave in abundance: a sequence of eighty-two sonnets<32> in which is traced the uneven progress of Love. The genre may be Elizabethan, but the implied narrative is not that of a self-assured lover's success in winning the lady; rather, of Love's conquest over *his* doubts, fears, and hesitations. The sequence begins with "the predestined lover, ignorant of love" (Sonnet 1) who inquires from outside about

this phenomenon but then suddenly must come to terms himself with "the power of Love" (9) encountered in the woman's person:

All breaking and all making of all laws
Surely from one face hath looked forth on me,
Who have not uttered nor my heart hath known
Desire of woman.

Finally, he makes his commitment to this new master in a "profession of love" (15), which concludes Book I but is only the start of a journey to deeper understanding. The road is not straight. There are "Love's enemies" to cope with--Mammon (29), Time (31), and even The Cross (33). The lover enters a stage of diffidence and fear. He is convinced "that we know not yet what it is indeed to love" (38). The claim of the body to its proper role in this experience evokes both desire and dread (40-2): the prospect of sexual union is at once exalting, as the initiation to a world of conjugal joy, and threatening, a kind of death of the lover in his separateness:<33>

a little door,
Narrow, low-arched, and carven thereabove:
"Through me by losing shall a man find love." (44)

He sees two ways of serving Love, through celibacy or through marriage (45), and struggles between them, still unable to accept that "alleys cool / Of corporal pleasaunce" can coexist with "gardens spiritual" in the marital relationship (46). Finally, however, these doubts are resolved, and he declares himself to the woman as a suitor (56). He repents of what he now sees as the shallowness of his earliest love experience; he has realized that it is a fatal error to suppose (as Williams was to put it later) "that it is sufficient to have known that state of love."<34> Having made the descent into this hell he is now able gradually, moving on through the sixteen sonnets of Book III, becoming aware of the pain of love and the "Passion of Love" (73-8: a phrase rich in ambiguities),<35> to grow somewhat toward an understanding of the higher dimensions of the love experience. Finally he can celebrate "in the fullness of Love" (82)--though in fact there is much yet to learn.

Already in these sonnets several features of Williams's mature system of Romantic Theology are present. The woman's physical beauty--"the moving hands, the neck's smooth bend . . . the wondrous head, the body's grace" (50)--is to the lover a vehicle of transcendent awareness. "All breaking and all making of all laws" is in her face (9), her "serene presence is / The world's epitome and genesis" (16). Through her there is access to the divine (17); "for every man a woman holds the secret of salvation" (22). The young man's life has been irresistibly invaded by a new master, Love, and, since he knows that the God Love is one, not divided (34), it must be the Christ already known in worship and devotion who is thus laying claim to his life--summoning him as he had Matthew to "leave all and follow Me" (43), repeating his gospel warning that only in losing one's life can one save it (44). These references are not mere clever analogies; the god Love *is* Christ. If, as the lover believes, marriage is a sacrament, he may anticipate married life as a genuinely religious experience.

Who were the guides who had taught Williams to say such things about love? We cannot know when he first met Dante's Beatrice; we must, unless it were quite incredible, respect his own statement that she did not enter into the making of these beliefs, nor would significantly for another eight years at least. The task of proof reading introduced him to the *Divine Comedy* in 1910.<36> By 1913, perhaps sooner, he had pasted in the front of his notebook of Arthurian studies a passage from the *Vita Nuova* which not only seems to declare his own "self-dedication to a life's work" as a poet but also suggests that Michal was to be his Beatrice in the sense of inspiring that work;<37> but that is only one small, separable part of the Dantean love system. Michal Williams gives a partial list of the books and authors that were frequent companions in the early days of their courtship.<38> Dante is not included.

John Donne and Coventry Patmore are, and they could easily account for the ideas in *The Silver Stair*.<39> Donne, who had written of his wife that "here the admyring her my mind did whett / To seeke thee God"<40> and on whose love poetry sometimes falls a hushed sense of holy attainment in the union of the sexes, and Patmore, whose Catholic sensibility had explored the sacramental nature of marriage in all its aspects with astonishing boldness, were among the acknowledged doctors of this

theology of love and marriage.<41> Patmore himself had drawn heavily on Dante (going beyond him as regards the association of sexual love with the theology of the Incarnation), and thus it would be an easy step later for Williams to assimilate to his system new elements direct from Dante when the time came to do so.

Despite these debts, however, Williams insisted on his originality. "I developed my own view of romantic love by myself." Though recognizing Patmore's mighty achievement, Williams felt that in some respects he had gone beyond it.<42>

Williams's next three volumes of poetry touch on a variety of subjects, but where they deal with love they continue to develop the ideas found in The Silver Stair. In Poems of Conformity,<43> dedicated to Michal and published in the year of their marriage, he now can write of a love which has deepened and matured over the years,<44> but the beloved is still the epitome "of all beauty" and the embodiment for him of transcendent principles (Sonnet 10, p. 40) and "lend[s] the whole creation / An awful holiness" (p. 50). Although like Philip's Rosamond she has enumerable faults (p. 37), she is his Zion (pp. 40, 52-4, 70), his avenue of salvation (p. 33)--as he in turn, according to his doctrine, is hers (p. 127). In this spiritual achievement the lovers' bodies prove instrumental: "Symbol and dogma that sufficed / Dully the story of the Christ / Grew living in a kiss" (p. 126). Yet body alone has not done this, but the sacramental union of flesh and spirit<45> in a knot so intricate with "implications" that neither can be given priority:

Of her body or her ghost
Who knows which is native most?
My soul to her lordly face
Fac me salvum ever prays;
Yet my most of earth delights
In her soul's more dainty flights.
Which for wear did th' other don
To bring down salvation?<46>

Another poem, where we read, "Instincts, our bodies' depths that dredge, / Grow teachers of salvation," concludes with an audacious echo of the Athanasian Creed--"Love, of the reasonable soul / And human flesh subsisting!"--and indeed is presented as a "Commentary" on that text (pp. 60-1). Likewise characteristic of the system of Romantic Theology as Williams has developed it to this point is an identification of Michal with the Church (pp. 47, 51, 67-71) and the Virgin Mary (pp. 44, 56),<47> and of their love with Christ in his earthly career from birth through death and resurrection (pp. 72-7). For one of the themes of this book, continuing from The Silver Stair, is the expected death of love--betrayed in the course of day-to-day living by such realities as anger or desire (pp. 45-6); yet equally the poet has faith in its resurrection.

In Divorce<48> the themes of Romantic Theology continue, though with some change in emphasis. The glorious vision is still with him: he remembers how her image gave "form" to the "unruled chaos' storm" of his "dispersed heart"; "the gospel [her] bright forehead told," her "eyes' new covenant," he has held "long hid within" (p. 58). Her body is a cathedral, "more shining, mortared with diviner stuff" than any stone house of worship however "wonderful" (p. 71). She is the epitome of creation (p. 78), the Virgin Mary (pp. 78-80), the sacred Host of the Eucharist (pp. 26-7, 73-4).<49> Marriage has brought, in exchange for the glory of first love, deeper satisfactions: "Ah, sweet procrastinator, thou / Hast kept the good wine until now!" (p. 57). Yet more often this collection strikes the opposite note. Williams stresses the loss of love to such a degree that one critic speaks of Divorce as a book focused on the Negative Way--"Neither is this Thou"--rather than the Affirmative.<50> This logic should not be pressed too far, however, for Divorce is still centered in the romantic experience, which in Williams's thought from the beginning, as we have noted, had somehow to embrace loss. A. M. Hadfield, while careful not to confuse poetry with autobiography, presents a cogent discussion of these darker poems (Introduction, pp. 50-3) as reflecting both a basic pessimism in Williams's personality, not limited to matters of love, and also a difficult time in his marriage. She finds in more than one poem a sense of "defeat of the very capacity for married relationship itself" (p. 52). Her conclusion, however, that for all its disturbances Charles's and Michal's marriage was "a living one" (p. 53) nicely echoes Anne Ridler's description of it as "a tempestuous and a true one" (p. xviii).

One may conjecture, as a possible source of tension, a disinclination on Michal's part always to play the roles--even, one may say, to assume the identity--being created for her in her husband's mental exercises. His mind reveled in abstraction, hers did not, and what in his view was doing her high honor may have seemed to her more like being reduced to theology, which one would naturally resist--especially if the theology was offbeat enough to not only arouse one's scepticism but also give color of orthodoxy to the resistance. Such an attitude would account for her "delay" described in the "Epilogue" to <u>Poems of Conformity</u>:

Still must that daring heart delay
To find in me, in me, the way,
In me the truth, the life;
And where alone it hath its peace
Must still invent and still increase
Its consummating strife.<51>

It appears that she is, understandably, refusing to be absorbed into his intellectual system. Such reluctance may be part, at least, of what he refers to in "After Marriage" (<u>Divorce</u>, p. 59) as her "withdraw[ing]" her presence and thus returning him to the "pain" and "chaos" of the time before the vision of her had wrought creatively in him.

To take up such biographical questions in the context of reading his poetry seems a valid and even necessary procedure, in the light of what Williams wrote to a friend near the end of his life: "Nobody will understand my relations with my wife who has not given the full place to that early verse."<52> Further, we recall Williams's basic premise that it was important to view Dante's writing as rooted in real experience--and the same principle he would apply to his own. Still, it is important to keep in mind the distinction between the beloved as a construct of Williams's theological imagination and the beloved as she was in real life.

Looking ahead, we may anticipate these developments as we continue to trace Williams's ideas about love: (1) personal experiences in the late 1920s and beyond will force him to give still greater attention to the darker side of Romantic Theology, (2) Dante will provide new paradigms enabling him to understand these experiences and to redeem them from utter negativity, and (3) the flowering of his mature expression of Beatrician theology will run parallel with a revitalization of his marriage to Michal. We must first, however, conclude our survey of his earlier writings and the version of Romantic Theology they embrace.

By the time of <u>Windows of Night</u>,<53> his fourth book of poetry, a son has been born. Domestic life seems more satisfying, perhaps (as Mrs. Hadfield suggests) because Williams has reduced his idealistic demands.<54> There is a greater variety of subject-matter in this book, and while several poems "reveal . . . innate and unrelenting pessimism,"<55> that mood is associated with other matters than love. But "in a world of shadows and lurking dread, marriage becomes an assurance."<56> Toward Michal he is tender and affectionate, with recognition of what she means to him--"In a world insignificant thou significant wholly" (p. 126)--and testimony to the continuing recurrence of a vision which could "Nimbly transmute a cheek or hand / Into a bright eternal thing, / A landmark on our wayfaring" (p. 38). "Night Poems" I and II (pp. 38-42) present a concept of the oneness of mature lovers, as in the phrase "our twined souls," in a tone of tranquil triumph reminiscent of Donne's "The Undertaking."

In the meantime, Williams had written his first treatise on Romantic Theology, the never-published "Outlines."<57> The ideas presented there were essentially the ones already embodied in the poetry we have surveyed: that Love is Christ, and that the conjugal life is a form of the imitation of Christ--including pain, death, and renewed life--by which ordinary people are transmuted into a sacrament of divine glory. There is a sense in which sexual love is a communion of "the Real Presence of the Most Sacred Body."<58> But such a life is difficult, frequently endangered. To be aware of the ideal is no guarantee of attaining or keeping it.

These ideas must still have been very much in his mind while the manuscript of "Outlines of Romantic Theology" went around the publishing houses, as Williams turned his hand to fiction and wrote the passage with which we began this study.

Dante, though not wholly absent, is still very much in the background. Williams knows the Vita Nuova by now; he "looks at" it in "Outlines," Mrs. Hadfield tells us (p. 44) but without indicating what difference, if any, that look may have made; and earlier, in Divorce (not in a love poem, however) he had clearly referred to it in the phrase, "the Burning Heart of Dante" (pp. 32, 34). Yet "Outlines" seems to have little to say about the glorious vision and the invasion of Love as a master, ideas which are central in the Beatrician system. The name of Rosamond in Shadows of Ecstasy suggests the rose imagery which is prominent in Beatrice's Paradise--but it equally suggests the symbol of Eternal Beauty in Yeats's rose poems of 1893 (including "The Rose of the World"), some of which had become old favorites; however, I think both these associations represent false trails. The primary association of the name Rosamond, as the one through whom her lover Philip glimpses divine glory, is more probably the Zoharic identification of Shekinah as "the rose of the world," as recorded in a book Williams is known to have studied carefully.<59> In connection with Rosamond there is, however, a more credible allusion to Dante.

> She was a kind of centre, and all the others vibrated in peculiar poses on the circumference. She herself had no circumference, Philip thought, ignorant of how closely he was striving after St. Augustine's definition: "God is a circle, whose centre is everywhere and His circumference nowhere." (p. 36)

Williams was to cite this aphorism again much later,<60> remarking on its close similarity to a line in Vita Nuova 12. Here Love rebukes Dante for a life not truly lived in the "center" where all points of the "circumference" are equidistant. I believe the same perceived parallel is already implied in Shadows of Ecstasy, for Philip's situation is similar to Dante's. He is made aware of the idea of centricity and at the same time made to realize that he is ec-centric.

Still, despite these glimpses of Williams's growing knowledge of and interest in Dante, his system in 1925 was fundamentally Patmorean, with some additions and special emphases of his own (reflecting other influences). Not yet was it a theology that could claim the epithet "Beatrician."

In the Vita Nuova Williams had read of Dante's second, rival love; he was soon to encounter it as part of his own experience. In his early poetry he had taught that the loss of love may be inevitably a part of the whole experience, and in Dante he had found this loss related first in Beatrice's snub and then in her death; but not, apparently, until he himself felt a comparable shock did he appreciate the potential of the Dantean experience as a precise paradigm for his own.

Even at first, when at forty he fell in love with a young woman of twenty-five, a fellow-employee at the Press, he thought not in terms of Dante but of seventeenth-century poetry, bestowing on Phyllis Jones the name "Celia" and on the moment of transcendent vision, when the beloved's person is perceived at once in its actuality and its infinity, the term "the Celian moment."<61> That the returning vision should have a different woman as its vehicle did not trouble him. Even though he could speak of Celia as a "full well in a thirsty land," bringing him abundance of life,<62> he did not see the situation as one calling for any forsaking of his marital commitment. His larger allegiance was to Love, as a master to be obeyed--not in sexual union but in a heightened creative life and an acknowledgment and celebration of its source. When Phyllis, after an initial return of love, declined the role of Celia, preferring more ordinary romances, Williams would, in a sense, not allow her the choice, insisting that to him she was Celia and always would be. But her rejection, soon apparent and within two years or so inescapable,<63> was a great blow to him and meant that his experience of Celia would be essentially one of loss, even of betrayal, for which, however, out of his own loyalty to Love's vision, she must not be blamed. That sense of loss, the "Impossibility" which has to be accepted as fact though one's whole being cries out against it, was to be a continuing theme in Williams's writing from about 1930 on to the end. It is especially intense in the first half-dozen years,<64> but later work shows that he continued to brood on it as one of the paradigmatic human experiences and finally to transmute it into a doctrine of the necessary connection between the highest love and suffering.<65>

This experience must have brought home to Williams the inadequacy of the Patmorean model of Romantic Theology. Both there and in Donne, an understanding of love's

transcendental significance is something belonging to the shared life of the man and the woman. (Donne, desolated by his wife's death, did surely face an Impossibility; but as a source for a complete system, Donne offers only sketchy hints.) With first "Michal" and now "Celia" not all that interested in his theories, Williams needed new insights in order to come to terms with his own crisis. The alternative, to abandon faith in his doctrine, would mean himself betraying the master Love whom he had vowed to serve.<66> He feared the "mid-life silence," resulting from "some interior wound," which "has killed some poets," but took heart from Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth, who recovered.<67> It was through Dante that he learned how to bring his own experience more firmly into his system of thought. In his reading of Dante he found a Beatrice who fully rewarded her lover's devotion, whose very snub was salvific, and who in the *Divine Comedy* (now dead, the real Beatrice could not reject the role Dante created for her) moved in love to bring about her lover's salvation. He encountered three fruitful concepts, the Death of Beatrice, the Second Image, and the Re-assertion of Beatrice,<68> by means of which it was possible to talk more fully about aspects of the whole experience which, if present in his earlier system, had not been carefully enough examined.

In Dante the Death of Beatrice is a real death; but generalized, it might also be the "disappearance" of "the particular glorious Beatrician quality."<69> Its central meaning for Williams is the obligation to remain faithful, even in the face of dispiriting loss, to Love's call to a life of *caritas*. The Second Image is likewise a concept which Williams broadens beyond its immediate place in Dante's story.<70> What if the renewal of the vision occurs in another woman, Williams asks, and "Beatrice is not dead" except "in the sense . . . that the Beatrician quality has been withdrawn?" He answers that the Beatrician experience need not be the "unique thing" it "was felt at first to be." Rather, "such a perfection" as first appeared in Beatrice "is implicit in every human being." In the fullness of paradise Dante is permitted to see "the light of all the saints . . . united with that of Beatrice." We may wonder if Williams is hinting here that a second falling in love, far from being inherently a sin, might without infidelity to the first be a foretaste of Paradise insofar as we shall attain there a "universalism" of glorious vision. Certainly it can lead to sin, and "the Christian Church has insisted that certain conditions are necessary for the carrying out of that great experiment of marriage. . . . The physical union which is permitted, encouraged, and indeed made part of the full 'salute' of that first experience is to be forbidden to any other." Yet Williams sees the Second Image as a "great opportunity"--often thwarted, unfortunately, by jealousy or misguided zeal--to serve the kingdom of "primal Love" not through "physical union," which belongs to the first, but through "separation"<71> --what he extols elsewhere as the way of virginity, involving only "intellectual nuptials."<72>

It is in this framework that the place of sex in Williams's life and thought has to be considered. Sexual union in marriage he considered a way of serving Love and, in that vocation, one of the proper loci of bliss. It should not be considered a "consummation" but "at best . . . the channel by which a deeper marriage is instituted."<73> And there was a period of "months and months," in the first shock of the Impossibility, when he abstained from "any kind of married intercourse."<74> Sexuality he considered a core aspect of human identity, but physical intercourse only one expression of it, and not an end but a means. Though he rejected, because it served self-love and not Love, the enterprise of Nigel Considine in *Shadows of Ecstasy* to bend sex along with other energies toward the monomaniac quest of personal immortality, yet the idea that sexual energy might by abstention be transmuted into spiritual power was one that fascinated him. It gave him the eloquence to extol chastity in his famous spellbinding Oxford lecture on Comus.<75> It lies behind the lengthy, still, unerotic embrace described by one of his young female disciples<76> (an imitation perhaps of the *Subintroductae* whose "great experiment" received unwonted prominence in his history of the Church)<77> and the curious rituals involving another one.<78> It is shown in a sinister light in the anointing of Barbara Rackstraw's body in *War in Heaven* and more positively in the *post mortem* feelings of Lester Furnival in *All Hallows' Eve* as they center upon her genitals. To dismiss these passages in the novels as pornographic<79> is to overlook completely Williams's seriousness of purpose in exploring the theology of sex.

The first exposition of Williams's Romantic Theology in its fullness, with the new emphases from Dante and the Dantean reorientation of the whole, came in 1938 with He Came Down from Heaven. Significantly, this book was dedicated "to Michal by whom I began to study the doctrine of glory." It is possible, of course, to stress the word "began" and read the dedication as an implicit slur: began, but any progress in the study required Celia. But it is truer to one's sense of Williams's character to read it without irony, as a genuine outward expression of the renewal in his marriage which we are told was taking place about this time.<80> It is truer to his doctrine as well, in which the adoration of the Second Image in no way devalues the first. As he modified his Romantic Theology to give due place to the figure of Beatrice, it appears that he reaffirmed Michal's place as his Beatrice, the first awakener of a lifelong devotion to Love; nor did that reaffirmation need to entail the denial of Celia.<81>

In another publication of 1938, Taliessin Through Logres, both paths of response to the Beatrician vision are, as we have observed, given their due: the conjugal way in Bors and Elayne and the virginal in Taliessin and Blanchefleur. In both Bors and Taliessin, Williams mirrors aspects of his own experience. "Taliessin's Song of the Unicorn" (pp. 22-3) reflects a deepened self-knowledge: he now understands that he, in a way, is Taliessin the poet,<82> the "unicorn" ill-suited to love a woman in the ordinary fleshly way, attracted by her but "to her no good." Understandably, she will reject him. Thus perhaps, with a decade's perspective, he can coolly estimate his relations with Celia (though the coolness has not been attained once and for all). It is possible, though, for an unusual woman to respond differently to such a "snorting alien love." It takes "cunning" (line 21) and Christ-like suffering (lines 23-9) if she will accept the unicorn as her "paramour," but the union ("intellectual nuptials") results in "her son the new sound" and she becomes "the Mother of the Unicorn's Voice."

Both these 1938 publications are evidently still in his mind a year later as he addresses to Michal a poem he has composed in the train "coming down from London."<83> He speaks of his own life, which

> owes through all the years
> its energy to you, whose cares
> provided it with freedom, peace,
> and room for doctrine to increase.
> Therefore the first that held it even
> and swore that it came down from heaven
> I with your name sealed to the earth
> since once from you it had its birth,
> madonna; and your first-born Son
> was Love, and that your youngest one--
> threefold a mother! look and see--
> God, Michael, my capacity.
> Few, blessed one, the women are
> who wear so sharp a triple star:
> much, as I know, though you have spent,
> behold the spreading increment! (58)

Regarding the "intellectual nuptials" of Taliessin, C. S. Lewis comments (p. 114), "Would Beatrice have borne The Divine Comedy to Dante if they had been married?" But Williams is Bors as well as Taliessin, and his wife thus goes beyond Beatrice in being the mother of the poet's flesh-and-blood child, Michael ("with [her] name"), as well as the Mother of Love--that is, "God"<84> --and of the poet's Voice; the star she wears is "triple." The inspiration of his life's creative work he traces (in the same poem) to "that first incalculable break / of glory" when they walked together in St. Albans and her "head / a double weight of glory shed"; then it was that "my future sprang." "Our great vocation," he tells her, was "opened . . . through you alone."

Williams came to recognize several different ways in which Michal helped make his creative work possible. One was by the stability which her moral character gave to his existence. It seems very possible that such support from her was what brought him, and their marriage, through the difficult early 1930s. There is a hint of the

penitent in his general remark about "the extreme generosity of temper" which wives display.<85> Absent from her in wartime, he confided to a friend his discovery of how much he "depended" on his wife's "steady, unnoticeable nourishment and repose."<86> After twenty-odd years of marriage, she is still his "Zion," for whom from Oxonian exile he longs (180 [cf. above, p. 20]). He calls her "a tower of strength. . . . When I think of what this last year would have been like if you hadn't had courage, resolution, initiative, thrift, and laughter: besides sympathy, sweetness, intelligence, honour, unselfishness, and tact--I shudder at the idea" (23).<87> "If you were not what you are," he writes her late in 1939, "I could never be comfortable" (58).

"What you are" includes an intelligence and sympathetic critical judgment which also made their contribution to Williams's creative career. From Oxford he reported to Michal Basil Blackwell's praise of her "masculine . . . intelligence" (143), and he was willing to have her substitute for him in reviewing a book manuscript for a publisher (249). It had been with her encouragement that he accepted the commission for the 1936 Canterbury play (186). "You & victory," he wrote her in April 1940, "may restore poetry to me; I have had to begin the Whitsun play [Terror of Light] in prose!" (132). The next month he was following her advice in revising it,<88> a situation that recurred with his last novel, All Hallows' Eve.<89>

From 1938 on, as his writings include fewer pot-boilers and more of what he considered his best work, and as he grows in the literary world's esteem, Williams conveys a sense of having arrived finally where he belongs--or rather, he and Michal, for he calls it "our great vocation" (58). He looks forward to the day when she "will be attended" by "great minds"--he mentions Lewis, Eliot, and Tolkien--who will "walk round you, & admire, & say 'This was the Origin of all, and the continual Friend and Supporter'" (114). If Auden is indebted to Williams ("He has gone all Christian and is composing verse under your husband's influence--he sends me four poems and says so"), his partner deserves a share of the credit. "Thus we--you & I--'move the minds that move the world'" (217). He tells her: "My distinguished admirers--from Alice Meynell to C. S. L--always admire you. Lewis says it would be fatal for a great man's wife to read him; I said that you, as unique in that as in all, read, admired, mocked, and left me free to play at my own job" (48).

The ending of that statement shows Williams's appreciation for another facet of Michal's intelligence, her tendency to be sceptical of his theologizing. From this may derive his observation in The Figure of Beatrice (p. 182) that "in the actual facts of life" it may be Beatrice's function to "see that the poetry . . . is not overdone," and that probably "the actual Beatrice would have been both charming and intelligent about, but fundamentally indifferent to, the Commedia." "You may eschew metaphysics," he writes to Michal, "but then your metaphysics are in your vitality. It would have been fatal to my genius had you been other. . ." (70). Of his teachings he is sometimes compelled to "labour to convince you" (277)--and not always successfully (238), even in the case of so important a doctrine as Exchange, although "it was your remarks about not being separate from people that aided me along the lines" (249). He finds it "odd" that the one who has inspired his ideas "should scorn your own children" (134).

Especially her child is Williams's Beatrician system. "All my critical statements about these high subjects (you must let me say it again) derive from your permanent existence" (23); she has become "the basis of Romantic Theology at Oxford" (105), and her presence has contributed to the making of The Figure of Beatrice.<90> This is strong support for the view I am putting forward that the Williamses' marriage was revitalized over the closing eight years or so. She is "the cause of poems on marriage as the Good Life," he tells her (referring probably to the "Bors and Elayne" poems of 1938); "everyone else observes the relation" and therefore she should not complain (209).<91> He has become an apostle of marriage, teaching that "a wife & marriage are--after God--the most important things in a man's life" (277) and that "it ought to be easier to live from God or peace in marriage than anywhere else" (209). When invited to give a talk on marriage, he has but to describe Michal (224). He acknowledges her "the absolute Fact of my life. . . . There is not even a choice; it is merely so" (272). It is with his attitude toward marriage in mind (the institution of marriage, and his own) that we should weigh the emphasis Williams

gives in his unfinished "Figure of Arthur" (pp. 49-51) to the high place of marriage in the early courtly love treatises.

The vision of glory founded upon the body is still with him,<92> both contemporary and in memory. The memories were especially important, as when a dull and unpleasant evening in Oxford was reclaimed by a memory of "meeting you in the dark nights of the last war," that is, during their courtship; for he had a Wordsworthian view of "such fundamental recollections as power" (211). To others who are sceptical of his enthusiasm regarding marriage, he would "hurl our St. Albans days in their faces, and . . . say there is no disillusion, there is never disappointment, there is no break in that mystery, because it is divine" (224).

These quotations convey Williams's strong sense of a continuity over the whole course of his romantic life. In many and obvious ways they resemble the ideas about love expressed in his early poetry. Less clear to the observer, perhaps, is the continuity overall; we may fancy that we see instead an initial vision, a slow breakdown, a Celian interlude, and then a return or closing of the circle. Yet Williams could see it all as a whole, taught by Dante the place that a seemingly antithetical movement could take within a larger single pattern, the "scattered leaves" of substance and its various accidents "in a single volume bound by Love" (Paradiso 33.86 ff.). That unity is perhaps easiest to recognize in his creative life, for the torments of his forties not only energized a great burst of writing at the time but also contributed to the more profound wisdom contained in the works of his fifties. To the Beatrice through whose glory he had first been overmastered by Love he now owes also his rescue from the dark wood. As a result, he stresses the human person's divine potential not in the glorious vision alone but, even more, in suffering and forgiveness. The theme had been present in his writing from the first but appears now with a new emphasis. In this, as in his exaltation of marriage and of the simple domesticities of life, he is making good the promise of his earliest work. But his range is wider. He appreciates Michal in her many roles on the stage of his life--to use a metaphor from an apparently late poem--whether they are roles of his making or not. He is delighted with her gamut of contrasts--the wild, the exalted, the everyday. Her "white arms" have something of the old radiance, and he sees her "Fair as the moon, clear as the sun, / Terrible still as a host with banners." Yet the other side is simultaneously present: she is "the Millamant of domestic manners."<93> As Williams himself might have put it: Dante never thought of calling Beatrice that.

NOTES

30>Figure of Beatrice, pp. 20-1. Cf. Williams, The Descent of the Dove (London: Longmans, Green, 1939), p. 139: "Most lovers feel as Dante felt." On the authenticity of Dante's experience see the discussion by William Anderson, Dante the Maker (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 74.

31>Michal Williams, "I Remember Charles Williams," Episcopal Churchnews, 12 April 1953, pp. 13-14; a sizable portion of her account is quoted by Ridler, p. xvii. Bare months earlier he had been, he writes (Poetry at Present, p. 69), "twenty, a poetaster, never in love."

32>Eventually to be published (1912) as The Silver Stair (London: Herbert & Daniel, n.d.). References in my text, whether to the verses themselves or to their titles, will be by sonnet number. Glen Cavaliero, Charles Williams: Poet of Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), devotes a chapter, pp. 9-21, to the early poetry. Hadfield's two accounts of it (Introduction, pp. 31-66, and Exploration, pp. 16-36, 49-52) are largely independent of one another.

33>Cf. comments in Hadfield, Exploration, p. 26.

34>He Came Down from Heaven, p. 80.

35>Here and elsewhere in The Silver Stair is a full anticipation of this central point in Williams's mature theology, that "the beloved . . . becomes the Mother of Love; Love is born in the soul; it may have its passion there; it may have its resurrection" (He Came Down from Heaven, p. 81, quoted and discussed by Cavaliero, p. 133).

36>Dorothy L. Sayers, The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement (London: Gollancz, 1963), p. 73; essay rpt. in her Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World (Grand Rapids: Eeerdmans, 1969), p. 163.

37>Ridler, p. lviii and facing photograph. "It is my hope," Dante wrote, "that I shall yet write concerning her [Beatrice] what hath not before been written of any woman."

38>"I Remember Charles Williams," p. 14.

39>Christopher E. Fullman, "The Mind and Art of Charles Williams" (unpub. Ph.D. diss., Wisconsin, 1954), p. 131, proposes St. John of the Cross as another major source.

40>Holy Sonnets, xvii, lines 5-6, in Poems, ed. H. J. C. Grierson (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933), p. 301.

41>Hadfield, Exploration, p. 44. Two of Williams's mentors, Alice Meynell and Frederick Page, were followers of Patmore and must have encouraged his interest.

42>Letters respectively to Phyllis Potter (1945) and Alice Meynell (1917), quoted by Hadfield, Exploration, pp. 34, 27.

43>(London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1917). Parenthetical references in my text to these poems, as well as to those in Divorce and Windows of Night, will be by page number.

44>See "Marriage" and "The Christian Year" as discussed by Hadfield, Introduction, p. 44.

45>Cf. Sonnet 9: "From sacramental joys world's pleasures run" (p. 40).

46>"A Song of Implications" (pp. 33-4). The whole 32-line poem is worth study for its Donne-like style and spirit and its paradoxes which "for joy perplex" the "riddling intellect." Cf. the companion poem just preceding, "A Song of Opposites," where "all her spirit is expressed / In all her body's holy charms." These poems are an early expression of Williams's characteristic doctrine of Coinherence.

47>An identification parallel to that which he is later to note in Dante (He Came Down from Heaven, p. 97; The Figure of Beatrice, pp. 112, 222).

48>(London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1920).

49>Again, we may note the Beatrician parallel: cf. Figure of Beatrice, p. 188; Sayers, pp. 190-2. But where Dante is interested in allegory, Williams comes closer to asserting identity.

50>Cavaliero, p. 16.

51>P. 127. This is one of the texts for that doctrine of mutual salvation mentioned earlier in my account of Poems of Conformity. As to the doctrine itself, cf. Sayers's observation, Further Papers p. 193, that where Dante presented a woman as instrumental to the man's salvation, Charles Williams went further to proclaim the equality of the sexes in an "exchange of hierarchies."

52>Quoted by Hadfield, Exploration, p. 233. A similar remark occurs in a 1941 letter to Michal (Wade Collection, No. 277).

53>(London: Oxford University Press, n.d.). Hadfield, Exploration, pp. 49 and 239, supplies documentary evidence for a publication date in 1925 rather than the previously conjectured 1924--a difference of only eight days, however.

54>Introduction, p. 64.

55>Cavaliero, p. 19.

56>Cavaliero, p. 18.

57>Hadfield, Exploration, pp. 41-5, gives the only extended account available of the contents of this manuscript.

58>Quoted by Hadfield, Exploration, p. 43.

59>A. E. Waite, The Secret Doctrine of Israel (London: William Rider, 1913), p. 72 n; see Ridler, p. xxv. (The fact that "rose of the world" as an etymology for "Rosamond" is incorrect is not relevant.)

60>Figure of Beatrice, p. 24, where he credits it, probably from working on the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, not to Augustine but to Bonaventura. (It was, in fact, already an aphorism by the thirteenth century. See C. A. Patrides, ed., The Cambridge Platonists [London: Edward Arnold, 1969], p. 36.)

61>The phrase has broader implications as well. Cf. Hadfield, Exploration, p. 74.

62>Hadfield, Exploration, p. 129.

63>Hadfield, Exploration, pp. 68, 74-5, 83-4.

64>Cavaliero, pp. 25-42, 60, 74-7, traces it in early plays (The Chaste Wanton--treated more fully by Hadfield, Introduction, pp. 109-11--and Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury), biographies, criticism (especially in his emphasis on the plight of Shakespeare's Troilus), and some novels. By Descent into Hell (1937), says Cavaliero, Williams was "on the far side of [his] confrontation with the Impossibility" (p. 86).

65>In Williams's Arthurian poems such experience centers in Lancelot. His label "Impossibility" surfaces in a 1943 essay, and in the same year he devotes an essay ("The Cross," Ridler, pp. 131-9) to defining Christ's crucifixion as the divine answer to the Impossibility, now seen as a universal human experience in an inexplicably painful universe (Cavaliero, pp. 26-7, 149-51, 97). The link of love and suffering emphasized in his mature theology is a return full circle to the doctrine of The Silver Stair (Hadfield, Exploration, pp. 225-6).

66>That he sometimes teetered on the edge of this abyss is suggested by words he wrote to Phyllis, in Java, in 1935: "If you say that all this is my own hobby and not the you, I shall hope you are wrong" (Hadfield, Exploration, p. 122); and again, "This effort of mine to create a unity here is, by its nature, bound to failure, anyhow as far as your nature--and perhaps your apprehension--is concerned" (p. 133). See also pp. 116, 134, and Carpenter, p. 197, where Williams is quoted concerning the difficulty of living his "myth."

67>Letter to Phyllis Jones, in Hadfield, Exploration, pp. 113-14.

68>These are the designations Willilams gave to them in The Figure of Beatrice.

69>Figure of Beatrice, p. 35.

70>Sayers, Further Papers, p. 189, observes that in Williams "the implications of [Dante's] theology are explored in fresh directions and charged with the accrued experience of the intervening centuries." The point is developed, with examples, through to p. 197.

71>Figure of Beatrice, pp. 47-50. See also the discussion, p. 157, of "the three degrees of all fidelity to the Images."

72>Taliessin Through Logres, p. 23.

73>"Outlines of Romantic Theology," quoted by Hadfield, Exploration, p. 44. See also her discussion on pp. 45, 105-7.

74>Letter to Phyllis Jones, in Hadfield, Exploration, p. 86.

75>See Carpenter, p. 119.

76>Lois Lang-Sims, A Time to Be Born (London: Andre Deutsch, 1971), pp. 202-4; see the discussion by Carpenter, p. 106.

77>Descent of the Dove, pp. 12-14.

78>See Hadfield, Exploration, p. 106.

79>R. T. Davies, "Charles Williams and the Romantic Experience," Etudes Anglaises, 8(1955), 298.

80>Hadfield, Exploration, pp. 130, 197-202.

81>Cf. the guarded idealism of this sentence in The Figure of Beatrice, p. 50: "If it were possible to create in marriage a mutual adoration towards the second image, whenever and however it came, and also a mutual limitation of the method of it, I do not know what new liberties and powers might not be achieved."

82>Cf. C. S. Lewis's lucid exposition (Torso, pp. 113-14).

83>During the war the Press was evacuated to Oxford and the Williamses were separated. Michal kept the flat in London, Charles roomed in Oxford, and often they could be together only on weekends. They wrote frequent letters; nearly 700 of his survive, in the Wade Collection, Wheaton College. Quotations from these letters are identified parenthetically in the text by serial number. The numbers usually give some indication of chronology, as the great bulk of the collection is arranged in order of date. Nos. 1-25, however, are undated and in many cases fragmentary, consisting only of a single concluding leaf of a letter, or even of two or more such leaves brought together under one identifying number. For these letters, the numerical designation is an archival convenience for ease of reference.

84>Cf. above, note 47 and accompanying text. Several Marian allusions are to be noted in the lines quoted.

85>Quoted in Hadfield, Exploration, p. 228. We may conjecture that Michal's behavior, as well as academic theology, went into the making of his book on The Forgiveness of Sins (London: Bles, 1942).

86>Letter to Thelma Shuttleworth, quoted in Hadfield, Exploration, p. 230.

87>Cautions have been raised about taking the wartime letters to Michal at face value. (1) Carpenter, p. 180, suggests that the devotion they express existed more in Williams's imagination than in fact. He mentions letters to others which extol their beauty and virtue in "almost identical terms" to those used toward Michal. But such generalized compliments are not the same as the statements I am referring to, in which the focus is on Williams's sense of his wife's relationship to him. There is nothing comparable to these statements in other correspondence, to my knowledge, apart from much earlier letters to Celia. (2) How much distortion do Williams's sentiments acquire by being filtered through the highly abstract doctrinal system in terms of which they are often expressed? This question is too difficult to answer summarily; indeed, it is an underlying concern of this whole essay. It seems, however, that any simple dichotomy between sincere expression and abstract thinking would fail to do justice to Williams's conviction that many states of mind considered pure feelings are really dependent on the will guided (as may be) by reason. (3) Another interpretation would read the letters as aimed at cheering Michal up or reassuring her, even at the cost of exaggeration. She might well want cheering or reassurance (cf. Letter 238), under the difficult wartime circumstances, but statements having such a function need

not be untrue. In some of the letters there is, to be sure, an air of hyperbole, but in my judgment the overall tone--often including the wry humor that belongs to Williams's style when he is at ease--is that of an honest expression of feelings, perhaps now being felt with a renewed intensity.

88>Hadfield, <u>Exploration</u>, p. 191. It remained in prose, however--uniquely among his plays.

89>Carpenter, pp. 193-4.

90>Carpenter, p. 179. Cf. Hadfield's comment (<u>Exploration</u>, p. 202) about the earlier pamphlet <u>Religion and Love in Dante</u>.

91>C. S. Lewis called their marriage "brilliantly happy" (<u>Torso</u>, p. 113). Carpenter (p. 179) believes that he was naively mistaken--and certainly at one time the phrase would not have applied--but it is possible that, for the time when Lewis knew them, he was right. Certainly his statement harmonizes with other evidence.

92>See Letters 163 and 224, and cf. the passage in the chapter "The Re-assertion of Beatrice" where Williams, speaking of Dantean parallels in real life, observes, "Even physically, there is a moment at which a new highness appears in the adored . . . a forehead, a gesture, a word . . . a new strangeness of beauty." So Dante proves cognizant of "our most intimate life" (<u>The Figure of Beatrice</u>, p. 177).

93>"To Michal: After Marriage," <u>The Grasshopper Broadsheets</u>, ser. 3, no. 10 (Derby: Kenneth Hopkins, 1944). Williams's concluding stanza, from which I have just quoted, reuses (with the insertion of "still") the same verse from the Song of Solomon (6:10) which he had printed in 1917 as part of the dedication to Michal of <u>Poems of Conformity</u> (p. 4), thus bearing witness to his own sense of the continuity of his Beatrician experience, early and late.

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