

The Charles Williams Society

CHARLES WILLIAMS CENTENARY YEAR

NEWSLETTER

No. 41, SPRING 1986

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

26 April 1986: Society Annual General Meeting - see enclosed Agenda. Following the official business, Rev Dr Brian Horne will speak on 'The Bible and The Comedy'.

24 May 1986: Centenary meeting at St Albans - see enclosed programme of Centenary events and Newsletter No. 38 for details.

12 July 1986: Unveiling of plaque to CW on the house of his birth - see enclosed programme.

20 September 1986: Centenary meeting in Oxford - see enclosed programme.

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

The meetings in April and November will be held in Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W1, at 2.30pm.

LONDON READING GROUP

Sunday 8 June 1986: 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

Please see the enclosed complete list of events organised to mark the Centenary in 1986 of the birth of Charles Williams on 20 September 1886.

CENTENARY SELECTION OF POEMS

Copies of the selection of Charles Williams's poems made by Anne Ridler to mark the centenary of his birth and printed for the Society by Vivian Ridler at the Perpetua Press, Oxford, are now available from the Chairman, price £5 to which should be added 25p for postage in the UK and £1 for postage overseas. Copies will be on sale at the AGM on 26 April and at the events during the Centenary Year although limited stocks mean that only one copy can be sold to each member for the moment.

NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to the following new members:

Mrs Blanche M Petros, 46 Park Street, Apt., 15, Lowell, Mass., USA
Mr A McMillin, 34 Battlefield Road, St Albans, Herts., AL1 4DD,
Susan Cox, 4 Trowse House, Beacondale, Norwich, Norfolk, NR1 2EQ.

SUPPLEMENT

There is no Supplement with this Newsletter.

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On 16 November Renée Haynes spoke to a meeting of the Society on 'Charles Williams and his imagery'. We are very pleased to be able to reproduce the text.

'A year ago I was rash enough to promise to talk about Charles Williams and his imagery. Twelve months later, here I am hoping that he will forgive me if I should mis-represent him. I know he would forgive my arguing with him. I knew him off and on from 1938 (when we met at a party for contributors to a series of books in a series called I Believe, which was edited by Ellis Roberts), until he died during the war in Oxford, where he had gone with the London branch of the O.U.P. for which he worked.

It is very odd, in the case of someone for whom image and reality were essentially related, that I cannot accurately recall his physical presence. The curious quivering of his hands - also recorded by CS Lewis - yes; this reinforced the impression of a self like a bright candle flame flickering in still air. His Londoner's voice, yes; and the vivid current of what it said, whether speaking in public, engaged in ordinary talk, or reciting large chunks of Paradise Lost over lunch in a Bloomsbury cafe. But the impact of someone moving about, standing, sitting, no, and hardly a visual memory except for one occasion when after a metaphysical discussion over a meal he rushed to help a woman get her baby in its pushcart down the stone steps of an Underground station.

What remains - and that most clearly - is recollection of his skilled, startling and unpremeditated use of words, not only on paper but in living speech. I cannot hope to emulate him - look at me now, reading what I have written down lest I should forget anything I wanted to say - but I hope to do justice to his memory. He had an accurate and passionate concern with words, and never, as far as I know, fell back, as did one speaker at a conference I attended last Spring, on saying at inordinate length - or saying at all - that words could not express feelings ^{which} were "ineffable". I emerged from the infinite boredom of that hour convinced that the first duty of all speakers was precisely to be effable; to communicate with their hearers "in a language understood of the people". Music, dancing, the visual arts, telepathy may be as ineffable as you like; but, I repeat, speakers and writers must be effable.

May I stress once more Charles Williams' work with words; not just for statement, logical presentation, argument, but as flaming darts to fire the imagination, or to set the memory glowing; as rhythms, sounds echoes, lightning reflected firm over the edge of the world. May I quote from another language, another culture, an example of what I mean, and it is a sentence from a French poem, and it runs "si triste, le son du cor, le soir au fonds des bois"(it may be translated, quite inadequately, "how sad, the sound of the horn deep in the evening woods").

That he was also aware of the difficulties, the brutal failure of some attempts to handle words appeared when he described with wry laughter one day the dilemma faced by a group of conscientious persons trying to translate the Scriptures into some South Sea island language that had no word for lamb, because even sheep were unknown there. In the end, he said, they had to settle for a term meaning "small woolly pig".

In this brief discussion of his imagery I shall say little about his able literary criticism and nothing about his novels, partly because I find them so hard to read. They give me what I can only call "cerebral creeps"; and probably stem, in their horror of what he called "goetry" (from the mediaeval "goetia") from the brief time in which, like Evelyn Underhill, WB Yeats and some sinister figures, he was a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn, with its frightening sunset. It is his poetical work, in his essays and in his theological studies that his imagery is most clearly seen. He renewed the recognition of what earlier writers studying human approaches to God had called the Via Affirmativa and the Via Negativa, translating them as the Way of Affirmation of Images and the Way of the Rejection of Images. Each is probably congenial to different human temperament, that of the visualizers and that of the non-visualizers; types differentiated - in other contexts - by the 19th century scientist Galton, who remarked that though many people habitually thought more or less in pictures, most scientists and most Quakers did not. In our own time the late Dr Grey Walter, of the University of Bristol took note of this again, and urged that educationalists and teachers should recognise the contribution made by both modes of thought, and that each kind of thinker should acknowledge the value of the other approach.

Of course, a whole gradual spectrum stretches between the two extremes. One feels that perhaps Henry Vaughan's poem comes half-way: "There is in God, men say, a deep and dazzling darkness O for that night, that I in Him / might live invisible and dim". The senses are still here, but do not know the day. Like Dr Grey Walter, Charles Williams wished the followers of each way to acknowledge the merits of the other; but his own attraction was towards that of the Affirmation, rejoicing in the images of things both in themselves as parts of the living creation to which we all belong, and as objects that can be charged with intense meaning, with what Roger Fry, an art critic of the past called "significant form". This could convey something of the divine mystery, or again, the sense of that object's own identity. This was said to have been achieved sometimes in traditional Chinese art, when a painter after a lifetime of effort managed to portray say a quintessential goldfish in a quintessential stream.

Charles Williams was as deeply impressed by the more abstract imagery of mathematics as many other thinkers have been, from the ancient Greeks to Pascal, and on to the English scientist who affirmed that God is a mathematician, the French poet Paul Valéry, the German poet Erich Maria Rilke and the Hungarian Arthur Koestler, who facing death by a firing squad in the Spanish Civil War, worked out with a pencil on the white-washed wall of his cell the proof of a mathematical theorem, and realized with a sense of profound peace that this was something given to the human mind, discovered not invented, a true revelation of the nature of things. This theme echoes through Williams' writing of "the bright mathematics of heaven", "the wheels and rings and lightings of Isaiah and Ezekiel", "the doctrine of Euclidean love" and geometry breathing geography, the double fledged Logos". It should be noted that this awareness of "mathematical glory" has like all awareness of Imagery the possibility of a decline into incredible mental oddities and tangles. Witness on the one hand those early Fathers of the Church who affirmed that as the sphere is the most perfect of mathematical forms the virtuous will all arise as spheres on the last day (all right for St Thomas Aquinas!) and on the other the superstitious mazes of "numerology", intricate as the paths of cheese mites and clothes moths eating their corruptive and disruptive way through the matter of thought. All imagery, of course, is subject to the possibility of

degradation, all images may become labels, illuminated buttons pushed to provoke reflex emotions, reverential habits, or worse still may be thought holy in themselves, idols. I wish I could remember who it was - George Herbert perhaps? - who wrote of stained glass windows "on which a man may stay his eye Or look right through". If their observers "stay the eye" the imagery remains opaque, screening off light instead of admitting it, can imprison the mind and finally bring about an explosion of fierce iconoclasm. More mildly, the images may become the tedious matter of allegory, pictures deliberately labelled with explanations of what they are intended to indicate.

The Via Negativa has its corruptibility too. Withdrawal of attention from created things and their images can slide into gnosticism, the belief that the Creation was the same thing as the fall, that matter is inherently evil and that man's most urgent need is to withdraw from it, even, possibly, by starving himself to death. Gnosticism, which once infested some forms of Christianity is probably best known today in its Eastern manifestations; the turning away from outer things, the denial of reason in the psyche-tickling techniques of Zen meditation, the doctrine of Karma, reward or punishment for what was done in previous incarnations, governs human life, so that it is useless to try to bring about better things. In fact, to be frivolous: "Ring a ring a roses, Pocket full of posies, Krishna! Krishna! We all fall down."

Williams, like all poets, worked with images drawn from the natural world, mountains, seas, wolves, wreathing octopods, from the human body, from human relationships - as citizens, as warriors, as lovers, from mythology (though not the mythology of Freud, or, more surprising, Jung), and from the theology of those who believe in Christ's Incarnation and all that it implies. He will probably be remembered most vividly in this connection for his use of two main groups of light transmitting images. They interlock in much of his work, but it is easier and clearer to look at them separately. One group is concerned with the mainly temporal adventures of the Arthurian legend; the other involves the interaction between romantic love and the Beatific Vision.

The Arthurian legend is part of European tradition in general and Britain's heritage in particular. Stories about that gallant King from the Dark Ages echo from Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh to Tintagel Castle in Cornwall, from Glastonbury to the wildest hills of Wales where the Tudor dynasty claimed him as an ancestor. From ancient chroniclers to Malory's Morte d'Arthur, from Elizabeth I's alchemist Dr Dee to Tennyson, from the Pre-Raphaelites to the recent musical Camelot, the fable of Arthur, rex quondam, rex futurus and his ultimate return, has been a numinous background, a golden glow in our history. Children hear tales of the Round Table, of its chivalrous knights - Sir Galahad, Sir Lancelot - of the sword Excalibur drawn from the depths of a lake, and of strange Merlin the magician (recently discussed by Nikolai Tolstoy in terms of a shaman, but traced, nevertheless to the ruins of a Welsh mountain shrine).

Williams did, in fact, write part of a fascinating historical and literary study, a fragment called The Figure of Arthur which was published after his death with notes and a very perceptive commentary by C S Lewis. But this, I think, should be read after the mysterious, lively, lyrical Taliessin Through Logres, the first collection of the author's poems on this theme. The legend is still so much a part of our lives that these significant poems have an immediate impact on the mind even though we do not necessarily realise what all the references indicate. Consider in this connection an Irish song from another context: "On Lough Neagh's banks when the fisherman strays, When the cold clear eve's declining, He sees the round towers of other days, Through the wave beneath him shining." Consider also the tales of bells said to chime on the verge of human hearing from the lost city of Lyonesse, under the sea. Such experiences are more immediately moving than historical and archeological studies mapping out the town plans, the dates and the

architecture of those buildings, valuable and even exciting as such studies may be later on, and much as they may contribute to a re-reading of the original work. To the second volume of Williams' Arthurian cycle - The Region of the Summer Stars - which I personally find less inspired - this careful structure can be more relevant. It is useful to know that Logres is Britain, that Taliessin was a Welsh bard, that Nimue is equivalent to Nature, and that the forest of Broceliande is what some early writers called "the ancient wood" and others have later compared with the jungles of the collective unconscious - (but I cannot forget driving through Brittany in a bus with two small sons years ago now, a signpost pointing the way through the woods to Broceliande).

I do not want to devalue Charles Williams' Figure of Arthur or C S Lewis' admirable commentary (which seems to have been written partly because he feared disputes about the meaning of the Arthurian poems might become as irritated and barren as disputes about Blake's "prophetic books"). Charles Williams was, after all, a literary critic and a historian - witness his life of Bacon - with a sensitive scholarly conscience. It is fascinating to find an account of the early "histories" chronicling how Arthur was crowned at 15 years old in Caerleon, how he fought the invading Saxons, how he killed a giant at St Michael's Mount, how he died in the year 542. It is fascinating to have notes that nearly 600 years later there was a current belief that he would return. It is fascinating to discover some of the 12th century sources of Malory's legend, sources compiled and written up at a time when that legend, linked with belief in the Holy Grail, was as living, exciting and topical a subject as science fiction has been in our own day.

The early Middle Ages, which developed with the Arthurian saga the cult of the Holy Grail in the Provençal rituals of Courtly Love, the beginnings of romanticism, the idea of "falling in love" as an almost religious experience - to quote Williams "a kind of adoration" in which "the sight of the beloved arouses a sense of intense significance, a sense that an explanation of the whole universe is being offered". This is most vividly stated, later in time, by Dante's Divine Comedy, and the theme of Beatrice seen in himself as a given revelation of beatitude, becomes one of Charles Williams' favourite themes. C S Lewis, writing of the tradition to which it gave rise, hazarded that, long as this had lasted, it might yet fade. It may well be on the way out, speeded off by the hygienic reductionism of sex education in schools on the one hand, and on the other by the kind of feminism that works for the recognition of women as ordinary human beings, with ordinary civic and economic rights and duties.

Williams would not, of course, have denied or opposed this recognition; what concerned him was the experience itself. I wonder how much, even in his lifetime, that experience had become a peculiarly English one. Thus when I was at school it was still an accepted thing that girls would develop what was called a g.p. or grand passion for one of the teachers, very often the gym mistress, who tended to be the most beautiful member of the staff. This woman was haloed with adoration, seen as marvellously good, noble, heroic - no-one was ever allowed by the adorer to say a word against her. At 17 I was sent to study Molière and Mme de Sevigne at the Institut Francais in London, as I was taking French literature as a subject for University Entrance. Most of my fellow pupils were French and it was a real shock to discover that, though grand passions were no less common than at English schools, their objects were not idealised in the English way. I was really startled to hear a girl saying: "I adore la Bossavy" (who was indeed a vividly intelligent and stimulating teacher) and adding "I shall buy her some chocolates because she is so greedy".

Nevertheless, what might be called Dantean mythology, or again the theology of romantic love became for Charles Williams and some of his contemporaries, notably Dorothy Sayers, a lasting inspiration. He wrote indeed a whole book on The Figure of Beatrice (whose very name is surely significant) and showed most clearly there

and elsewhere how the sighting of such a figure in ordinary life could illuminate the seer with "wonder, love and praise" of God and good will, caritas, to his fellow men. I do not know whether he, or any of his followers, ever realised what a heavy burden was being put upon the person so adored, called upon to fulfil the function of that stained-glass window "whereon a man may stay his eye, Or look right through". Stained glass windows are not conscious selves, liable to lose their beauty, liable to pain, misunderstanding, wrong doing, even frivolity. If "the eye stays" upon their human counterparts a process of idolatry, disillusion disgust and worst of all boredom may set in. If the eye "looks right through" they are forgotten as human identities, fallible, loving, suffering, needing personal warmth. The position of a woman here is almost as painful as that of Milton's ideal husband worshipped in ignorance by a spouse who accepts the axiom "he for God only, she for God in him".

Williams did not forget the complexities of revelation by way of Beatrice in continuing daily life. Indeed he spent much time in considering them, in pointing out that that revelation was incomplete, a matter of flashes rather than enduring light, and that it would be fulfilled and surpassed in the eternity of the Beatific Vision. But he still stresses the original, transfiguring experience. Perhaps, for some of us, Beatrice should be "a lady passing by" rather than someone known - a dazzlingly beautiful girl in a bus queue, a man all sculptured strength as he reins back the horse pulling his laden haycart, an exquisite child laughing. But he would, I know, have insisted that these contained a theological - as well as an aesthetic - glory.

I have no time to do more than list a few words used as stimulants of the mind in a religious context. Here is God as "The Omnipotence", the "I AM". Here he cites as his examples of substitution, of Christians being used in one another's stead, the part played by god-parents at the baptism of infants (and, perhaps one might add the Mormon custom of being "baptised for the dead") which may have had parallels in the early Church. Here are the terms Co-inherence and Exchange indicating the unison of Christians and their carrying for - as well as with - such burdens as grief and anxiety and even terror (which probably involve considerable telepathy as well as ordinary contact).

Three pungent quotations to end with:

"Fallen man has the strongest objection to being the cause of caritas in someone else" - would it be better or not to adopt the attitude of the Indian mendicant who allows the rich man to "acquire merit" by putting something in his begging bowl?

"the new heaven and the new earth come like two modes of knowledge"

and, quoting the Lord's Prayer "the great transmutation" is illustrated in the words "thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory", the web, and the operation down all the threads of the web, and the eternal splendour of threads and web at once.

© Renée Haynes

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