

The Charles Williams Society

CHARLES WILLIAMS CENTENARY YEAR

NEWSLETTER

No. 44, WINTER 1986

the plaque and for his interest in this event.

After the short ceremony, Mr Aintree of Brodero Projects Ltd invited those present to take wine with him and the Mayor in their reception room at The Maltings where members were able to meet and talk to those concerned with the development and with St Albans residents who had attended the Abbey Service and others who had taken part in the successful production of Thomas of Canterbury earlier in the year. It was a happy and enjoyable occasion and we hope that members will find an opportunity to visit St Albans and to see the plaque which is in a prominent position in Victoria Street.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Membership subscriptions fall due on 1 March 1987 and renewal forms are enclosed for your convenience. It is requested that, as far as possible, payment should be made in sterling.

The Charles Williams Society was registered as a charity on 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 subscriptions 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 number of members gave covenants last year and we should like to invite others to do so now. A form of Deed of Covenant is enclosed (for all members with a UK address) 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 do not wish to do this, would you complete the ordinary subscription form and return it to the Membership Secretary.

SECOND HAND BOOKS FOR SALE TO MEMBERS

The following books by CW are now available:

The English Poetic Mind	£10
Seed of Adam & other plays	£6
× The Passion of Christ (2 copies)	£6 each
-Victorian Narrative Verse (ed. and intr. by CW)	£2.50p
× The Image of the City (1st Ed.)	£10
4 Modern Verse Plays (including CW's Thomas Cranmer) - a Penguin paperback	£1
The House of the Octopus	£5

There is also a withdrawn public library (but very good condition) copy of "The Rule of St Benedict, a Norman Prose Version" (Blackwell 1964 ed. Ruth J Dean & M. Dominica Legge) which might interest dedicated Taliessin-scholars no reasonable offer refused!

Please contact Gillian Lunn (address on back sheet) if you would like any of these books but please send no money when ordering. When the books arrive, please note the cost of the stamps on the parcel, add this sum to the price of the books and send your cheque to: Gillian Lunn account no. 51053922. Overseas members - please be so kind as to pay in sterling.

REFERENCES TO C.I.

Gillian Lunn has reported that "two fairly recent books mention C.I.:

In A N Wilson's ninth novel Love Unknown (Hamish Hamilton 1986, ISBN 0 241 119727), the first instance is in a name-dropping passage - the literary scene is set of '... Hitler's war ... rather the era of Anglicanism ... Charles Williams ... enjoyed a vogue ... Christopher Fry, the Rev. Hugh Ross Williamson ... John Betjeman ... all came to Madge's wartime parties...' The second reference to Charles Williams is very different; I won't spoil it by quoting. Like all A N Wilson's novels this one got very mixed reviews (mostly good I think) and The Times's reviewer (Peter Ackroyd 28.8.86) discusses Wilson as 'a religious novelist ... in a quite unfashionable category ... yet a tradition ... stronger than most others ... It has continued in the 20th Cent., alternately more bizarre and more tremulous in the work of Charles Williams and Barbara Pym, and now Wilson has taken it up again.' (I have long thought I felt C.W. hovering around some of Wilson's novels, particularly in my favourite - The Healing Art - but I believe that is the one he himself likes least!

Richard Barber's splendid, marvellously-illustrated King Arthur, Hero & Legend (Boydell Press 1986, ISBN 0 85115 419 0) is companion-volume to his recent (also splendid) Arthurian Legends. He has a high regard for CW's Arthurian poems, discussing and quoting fully and asserting that his achievement is: '... in its mystical way, one of the great works of Arthurian literature'.

A very different King Arthur book is Artorius Rex Discovered by Baram Blackett and Alan Wilson (published by: King Arthur Research, 3 Ty-Draw Place, Penylan, Cardiff, 1986 ISBN 0 86285 061). I don't feel competent to comment on the amazing discoveries the authors report (it might help if one were a Welsh Nationalist, perhaps) but they've clearly done a lot of history and map-reading, travelling and photographing. Indeed, the dust-jacket entices with: '... after more than ten years of serious research - the King Arthur enigma has been completely resolved. The fascinating evidence is documentary, physical and tangible. The King Arthur Discoveries are explosive and final ... backed by overwhelming evidence...' What's more ... '... the Discoveries could generate a major tourist industry in South Wales and even the North East of England ...' and '... Queen Elizabeth II is connected with these Kings. This information has been conveyed to Buckingham Palace ...' This book is not concerned with CW at all, however!

I was interested to hear performances recently on Radio 3 of music by Robin Milford. This reminded me that he wrote a setting of some of CW's Arthurian poems, now in the Bodleian Library. On a visit there I was shown the music - on a quick 'reading' (and attempting to 'hear' it mentally therefrom) it looked exciting and tuneful. Does anyone know whether it was ever performed?"

Anne Ridler writes: "Peter Vansittart, writing of his schooldays at Haileybur in the 1930s, recalls 'visits from Charles Williams, speaking on William Blake with cyclonic energy, so that I began to think, rather uneasily, that he was Blake himself.' - from Paths From a White Horse, A Writer's Memoir, Quartet Books, 1985."

MARION E WADE CENTER

Members may wish to note that the Marion E. Wade Collection at Wheaton College, Illinois is from now on re-named the Marion E. Wade Center.

NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to the following new members:

Rev Canon W R Hartley, 21, Easby Close, Ilkley, Yorks, LS29 9DJ
Mr Tim Naish, Flat 3, 33 Francis Road, Birmingham, B16 8SN

THOMAS CRANMER OF CANTERBURY

Following the staging at St Albans of Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury by The Company of Ten to mark the Centenary of the birth of Charles Williams, the Director, Terence Newell, was persuaded, somewhat against his better judgement, to set some of his feelings and impressions down for our interest:

"When I was approached, in November '83, to direct one of Charles Williams' plays to mark the centenary of his birth the name meant nothing to me. I read the biography and discovered that the shop in Victoria Street where I used to purchase my artists materials was his home for many years. I also realised that a rather detached dark girl who stalked rather than walked the streets of St Albans and ran a secretarial school in the town was his sister. I further discovered that (despite a considerable discrepancy in age) a great friend of mine, George Robinson, had been Charles Williams' close companion through school and university. This did not surprise me - George himself had a quicksilver mind. Then I found that a man with whom I took communion every Wednesday had been (as a young man) a regular attendant at discussions organised by Williams and labelled 'Smokers'.

I found the novels in the City Library and was disturbed by the occult element which the author seemed to approve of even at its most sinister. I asked Rev Brian Horne to send me the plays and, finding them heavy going, put them on one side. Four months later a polite note assured me that there was no hurry but could some answer be given to the council in principle. I re-read the plays, reinforcing my first thoughts as to their apparent obscurity, but admitting that Cranmer was a possibility and that certainly the centenary should be marked by a presentation of a CW play - preferably in the Abbey.

Technical reasons too detailed to mention here prevented an Abbey production on this occasion but, long before this had become obvious, I had read the play for a third time and, at last, with some sense of wonder. I could now 'see' it, 'hear' it, savour that extraordinary use of the Liturgy; know it, in fact, for the masterpiece which it undoubtedly is. And it seemed to me that although the play would blossom, and the pageantry come to full fruition, in a marvellous setting like the Abbey yet (with much of it occurring in a non-clerical background) it would in no way be harmed by humbler surroundings. In fact the bare brick walls of our studio theatre could provide just the simple and uncluttered background to call for the maximum contribution from each of the three theatrical A's: Author, Actor and Audience, with no distraction to catch the eye and invite the mind to wander. I now had complete faith in the author's ability to meet this challenge triumphantly: neither did I doubt the audience although I feared that they might be very small in number. No, it was our amateur actors who would pose the problem.

I distributed books around the Company, and they were quickly returned with discouraging comment or evasions. An act of faith was needed - I confirmed and dates and 'set' the play. Faith was rewarded. One of the (eventual) Lords admitted that there was 'some good stuff in it', although he wore an anxious expression as he said it. The Figura Rerum didn't return his book. Was this to be interpreted as acceptance or rejection? An apprehensive phone-call set my mind at rest. All we needed now was a Cranmer - for all else could be managed by coaxing or coercion. But, one by one, all the potential Cranmers opted out and the situation seemed desperate. And then came the second miracle. An actor, quite new to us, came to the first casting-reading and signed to read Henry VIII. He read it brilliantly but was destined for higher things. In his hands the poetry came alive, the obscurities receded. There followed seven weeks of fascinating rehearsal gradually building up the remainder of the cast as we went.

From the director's point of view the Lords came to heel fairly quickly, and then their counterpoint the Commoners as 'their images go abroad', although they have their difficult passages: 'Dry is the green, brittle the tree where the Lord sits to throw taunts at me'. Priest and Preacher are fairly straightforward; so, too, the Queens. But the King? Obviously the symbol of complete power with the ego totally rampant: 'a crimson flashing creature, full of power.' And, yet, at the end of his dream there is a voice calling: 'Where is the prey, King of England? but I was not the King ... In the nothingness, for the creature was not, I stood and answered: I - and before I added more the nothingness broke over me in a peal of laughter, all the angels crying You - Here is a fellow calls himself I'.

And so to Cranmer who outlines his journey (as far as he can see it at the time), within the first page: 'Coming in from the gallop, I vault on language, halt often but speed sometimes, and always heed the blessed beauty of the shaped syllables. I would let go a heresay or so for love of a lordly style with charging challenge, or one that softens a mile to a furlong with dulcet harmony, enlarging the heart with delicate diction. Come, today's journey waits: open gates.' This is quickly countered in the Skeleton's first speech: 'We of Heaven are compassionate-kind; we give men all their mind; asking, at once, before they seek, they find ... why do the poor wretches shriek in despair? They run; after each, entreating him, runs his prayer.' And what does this Skeleton really stand for, sometimes claiming: 'Yet I only am the pit where Gehenna is sprung', or, again, 'I am the way, I the division, the derision, where the bones dance in the darkening air, I at the cross-ways the voice of the one way, crying from the tomb of the earth where I died the word of the only right Suicide, the only word no words can quell, the way to heaven and the way to hell'.

The way to Hell? Patently Cranmer will have to pass through 'the grand hydroptic desire of human learning' and face the challenge: 'Beckon your image, call and repel it, serve and slay it. Till the day when I sound its knell and yours as well, have, have, have your will, for what it is worth, precisely what it is worth; have, have, have your prayer. And the battle rages throughout the play until Cranmer is stripped of everything: 'The rope constricts. Hope is beginning to feel a little choked: Faith soon. Love - we shall see presently'. The parallel to the Crucifixion plays itself out, and we reach 'the hour when the pure intellectual jurisdiction commits direct suicide', and Cranmer cries out: 'Christ my God, I am utterly lost and damned. I sin whatever I do ... Where is my God?' The Skeleton echoes: 'Where is your God? ... When you have lost him at last you shall come into God.' But he is not yet finished with Cranmer: 'Most men, being dishonest, seek dishonesty; you, ~~and~~ few, honesty such as you knew, in corners of sin, round curves of deception; honesty, the point where only the blessed live, where only saints settle, the point of conformity. Mine is the diagram; I twirl it to a point, the point of conformity, of Christ. You shall see Christ, see his back first - I am his back.' Yes, still his back. Cranmer still has to hope that the cup will pass from him: 'They will burn me then?' 'Friend it is necessary', answers the Skeleton, 'Love necessity; I am he ... You shall find that in me is no more necessity ... I am necessary Love where necessity is not'.

Never had we worked on such compressed thought before. There was meaning, and sometimes counter-meaning, in every phrase. It was terrifying, magnificent and it had us all by the throat. Anglicans, Romans, Free Church, Agnostics and, maybe even Atheists - enthralled every one. Enlarged too and possessed by a total dedication which the play demands and a continuing joy as the edifice grew.

What a pity that, in spite of wide-flung doors and extract fans, we had to roast you in the process of watching it.

On 26 April 1986, following the Society's AGM, Rev Dr Brian Horne spoke to members on The Bible and the Comedy : Biblical Allusion in The Divine Comedy. We are very pleased to be able to reproduce his talk in the Newsletter.

"I begin with a passage from Kenelm Foster's fine collection of essays The Two Dantes which first led me to ask the question 'How does Dante use the Bible in The Divine Comedy?'

Let us start from the arresting phrase with which the Comedy opens: 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita', 'halfway through the journey of our life'. Nothing could be simpler, we all know, and are assumed to know, what 'our life' means; and the path-metaphor comes so naturally that the reader may scarcely avert to it. Yet a whole culture speaks through this line, and one nourished, in the first place, on the Bible. Dante's contemporaries were doubtless better prepared (if not by actual reading, by church-going) to catch the frequent biblical echoes in his verse, and so to recall here the Vulgate rendering of Isaiah 38,x: 'Ego dixi: in dimidio dierum meorum vadam ad portas inferi,', 'I said: in the mid-point of my days I will go to the gates of hell.' The announcement of the general theme of the Inferno could hardly be plainer, once you have noticed it.

The Two Dantes p. 157

This passage contains a number of remarkable statements; at least, remarkable to the vast majority of well-read twentieth-century men and women. Who, today, would believe it possible that Dante's contemporaries were better prepared to catch biblical echoes than we are? Our idea of the medieval world is, on the whole, not one of a biblically informed culture. One is led to ask: how many of Dante's readers - and I am referring to those of his contemporaries who could actually read his writings as opposed to those who had the poems and essays read to them - would have been regular readers of the Bible? And how familiar must they have been with the Scriptures to have caught, for example, the allusion in this opening phrase to the thirty-eighth chapter of the book of Isaiah? His readers, we have to remember, would not have been members of the monastic orders, and many would have heard Bible readings, not at the liturgical Offices which contained a good deal of biblical material, but at the Mass. Did Isaiah 38 appear frequently in the Church's lectionary, or in the Propers of the Mass, so that that 'nel mezzo del cammin ...' would be associated with 'in dimidio deorum ...'? Or did Dante write for a tiny audience which would have had the requisite knowledge to make the necessary connection?

Fr. Foster's word 'contemporaries' is unsatisfactorily vague. My feeling is that Dante in The New Life and The Divine Comedy intended to reach an audience that stretched far beyond the small circle of scholars that would have immediately have recognised allusions to the Vulgate. The works, are, after all, in Italian; when Dante wrote for a more scholarly audience, he used Latin. I am, however, certain that Fr. Foster is correct when he says that the culture that speaks through this line was one that was nourished on the Bible: for The Divine Comedy, the greatest poem of the medieval world, is saturated in biblical allusion. There are ninety-six clear, unambiguous biblical references in its hundred cantos, and over seventy actual quotations from the Holy Scriptures. I am not going to attempt to answer in detail the questions I have raised; my purpose is much simpler: it is to try to demonstrate some of the ways in which Dante incorporates his biblical material, but some answers might suggest themselves in the process.

First, there is, what I can only call, the overall 'simplicity' of his approach to the Bible. By this I do not mean naivete; he could be as elaborate and as complex in his biblical interpretations as the most sophisticated scholars of his

age when he chose to be. It is clear that he understood and used the various senses of Scripture when he needed to, but when he came to the Comedy, the literal meaning of the text is what is most frequently presented to us. 'Spiritual' meanings do appear, but they are used only sparingly by him. In this concentration on the literal sense, he was probably influenced by the new Franciscan attitudes to biblical interpretation. Beryl Smalley has pointed out, in her Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages, that the Franciscan and Dominican scholars accomplished something like a revolution in biblical interpretation in the thirteenth century. The Franciscans had little patience with fanciful allegorizations of the sacred text and strove for a directness of use and interpretation in keeping with the simplicity of their outlook. 'The spiritual exposition', Smalley remarks, 'was doomed to artificiality as soon as it ceased to give outlet to religious feeling'. We know that Dante (although taught by the Dominicans) was deeply affected by Franciscan sentiment, and we can see from the way he uses scriptural references in the Comedy that his concern was precisely with the direct expression of religious feeling.

Of the ninety-six references to the Bible, fifty of them occur in the text of the second of the three cantichi which make up the complete work: Purgatory. I shall be dwelling upon this cantica, Purgatory, because fifty biblical allusions appear here. Thirty-two occur in Paradiso and only thirteen in Hell. This fact in itself is significant. Hell and heaven are places of finality, completion: the damned are fixed for all eternity in their separation from the love of God; the blessed spirits in heaven have arrived at that condition of joy which cannot be altered. Only the souls of those who are being purged are in a state of movement; they progress towards beatitude. Meditation upon the word of God in Scripture will not affect the condition of those in Hell or Paradise, it simply serves to remind them of what has been lost or achieved. But the souls in Purgatory have the words of the Bible constantly on their lips. Such reverent meditation upon the revelation of God enables their repentance to be more profound, their acceptance of the pains of purgation more eager and their movement towards release from the mountain all the more swift.

I suppose that Dante's mountain is one of the most astonishing 'inventions' in Western literature. This is not to suggest that when he 'invented' his purgatory he saw himself creating a new doctrine, but it is to say that by the power of his imagination he made the teaching of the Church come alive in such a way that its truth could be discerned and embraced eagerly by the believing heart and mind. From the horror and ugliness of Hell, Dante and his guide Virgil emerge trembling and terrified to 'look once more upon the stars'. The world they find themselves in, so light and clear after the stench and clamour of the underworld, is the world of purgatory; the stars are those which circle in eternal serenity about the holy mountain. It is set in a glittering ocean; and, bathed in sunlight as they approach it (for it is early morning), it rises far higher than any mountain on earth. The ascent of this mountain will bring Dante to Paradise. After the initial terraces, purgatory proper begins: seven cornices or ledges upon which the capital sins are purged: Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony and Lust.

So it is that at each cornice one of the Beatitudes is referred to, At the cornice of the proud: Matthew V, 3: 'When we were turning our steps there, "Beati pauperes spiritu" was sung in such tones as no words would tell.' (Canto XII, ll 109-111). At the cornice of the envious: Matt. V, 7. 'When we had reached the blessed angel he said with a glad voice: "enter here", at a stairway far less steep than the others. We were mounting, having already passed on from there, when "Beati misericordes" was sung behind us and "Rejoice, thou that overcomest". (XXV, ll 34-39) At the cornice of the wrathful: Matt. V, 9. '.... and as soon as I was on the first step I felt beside me as it were the motion of a wing fanning my face and I heard the words: "Beati pacifici" who are without sinful anger.' (XVII, ll 66-69). And so on. Moreover, at each cornice the penitent souls are given a prayer which

is peculiarly suited to the sin of which they are being cleansed. Only two of these prayers are non-biblical: the gluttonous recite Psalm 51, Labia me Domine; the avaricious recite Psalm 119 v. 25, Adhaesit pavimento anima mea. Perhaps the most remarkable of all is the prayer given to those on the very first cornice at the root of all sin - pride. It is the Paternoster; the clauses interlarded with brief meditations 'directed towards the virtue of humility' (D.L. Sayers).

What can be deduced from all this? First, that Dante's thought, his vision of the world, humanity, sin and redemption grows out of his reading and interpretation of the Bible. I do not pretend that his method of reading and interpretation, his selection of texts and the use to which he puts them, is the same as ours; of course it is not. He refers only once, for example, to St Paul's letters (Hell, II. 13) a fact which strikes us in the twentieth century as very odd. The Apocalypse appears, but no other book of the New Testament is mentioned apart from the Gospels. His attention is focussed, throughout, on the Psalms and the Gospels. The reason for this is two-fold. These are the parts of Scripture which would have figured most prominently in the liturgy of the medieval Church and could be relied upon to arouse some response of recognition. Perhaps more importantly, his selection of texts shows his indebtedness to the Franciscan spirit: a devotion to those parts of the Bible that appeal most strongly - simply and directly - to the religious sensibility. His imagination was very like that of St Francis: a pictorial imagination. Throughout the Divine Comedy actual physical scenes are continually being brought vividly before our eyes; even in Paradise, the most philosophical of all the cantichi, we are meant to envisage the eagle, cross and rose. The appeal is direct and sensuous. Secondly, we can deduce, strange as it may sound to us, that Fr. Foster was quite correct: that the whole culture in and for which Dante was writing was profoundly biblical in its sensibility. The manner in which the references are made cannot but imply that. Again I must stress that the kind of biblical knowledge and understanding among the public at large (and among the scholars as well) was probably quite different from our own - and we may want to criticise much of what they took for granted - but we cannot, without deliberately ignoring the facts, claim that they were less familiar with the words of the Scriptures than we are; everything, indeed, suggests that they were more familiar. It is the ease and naturalness with which Dante introduces all those biblical allusions; his expectation that only a few words would conjure up text and context, that is most convincing. Since the seventeenth century there have been no modern parallels. In English literature John Milton and John Bunyan were the last major artists to have the capacity to handle biblical material with anything like the ease and naturalness of Dante.

From this effective, but essentially simple and obvious, kind of biblical allusion we pass to one which is more complicated, difficult and, certainly stranger to minds like our own which are as unaccustomed to finding allegorical meanings in Scripture as they are to symbolic modes of thinking.

Let us suppose a reader fully acquainted with classical Catholic eschatology (the four last things: death, judgement, hell and heaven) coming to the Comedy for the first time without any previous knowledge of its structure. He will have noticed that the three sections are entitled Hell, Purgatory and Heaven - all very orthodox. He would suppose that Dante and Virgil, having ascended the mountain of purgatory and having passed through the terror of the refining fire at the top, they would find themselves in heaven. He would expect this section, therefore, to end with the passage through the wall of flame. Not so: the fire leaps up in the twenty-seventh canto and there are five more cantos to go. What is Dante up to? The reader finds himself in a strange place: it is the 'earthly paradise'; and it is conveyed in an outburst of lyricism characteristic of Dante's highly-developed visual imagination:

'... I left the slope without waiting longer, taking the level very slowly

over the ground which gave fragrance on every side. A sweet air that was without change was striking on my brow with the force only of a gentle breeze, by which the fluttering boughs all bent to the part where the holy mountain throws its first shadow, ...'

Why is this earthly paradise, this little plateau of trees, meadows and streams here? The answer occurs to us, first, in a dramatic form. It is necessary to the structure of the story: it is a place of transition. The time has come for the arrival of Beatrice and the departure of Virgil. Virgil cannot enter heaven; his place is with all noble pagans in the outer circle of Hell. Beatrice's place is with the blessed in the circles of Heaven. In an earthly paradise their lives can touch (and yet how delicately they are actually prevented from meeting); in an earthly paradise the exchange can be made. At the allegorical level this is the place of the meeting of philosophy and theology; the point at which Reason having brought human nature as far as it can by natural power has to pass over into Faith. Here Grace enters to perfect Nature; but Nature already purified and in a state of innocence. The achievement of this earthly paradise is nothing other than the achievement of Eden. That is the biblical allusion here:

'And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed' (Genesis II, 8)

Nearly all the commentaries on the Comedy recognise the allusion to Genesis and the garden of Eden, but I believe there is a richer vein of biblical reference than has been generally seen by the Dante scholars. The image of a 'watered garden' is one of the most powerful images of Old Testament prophecy. It appears in the major prophets: Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. The restoration of the nation to the favour of the Lord is most often seen by them in terms of life in a quiet cultivated place - a garden. Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah actually invoke Eden. Yet there is more: One of the most popular books of the Middle Ages was the Song of Songs. It was read and loved and interpreted over and over again by scholars, preachers and mystics; partly because it seemed so open to secondary and tertiary meanings - and the medieval mind loved multiple meanings. And one of the most seductive images of the book is that of the garden. Why not? It is a love poem, and gardens have always been places of assignation and dalliance for lovers:

'Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind. Blow upon my garden and let its fragrance be wafted abroad. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its choicest fruits.' (IV,16)

'My beloved has gone down to his garden to the bed of spices to pasture his flock in the garden and to gather lilies.' (VI,2.)

The reference to the gardens of the Song of Songs is unmistakable in Dante's earthly paradise. Beatrice makes her appearance in Canto XXX and is heralded by a thrice-repeated cry: Veni sponsa de Libano (Song of Songs IV, 8). Could there be a more appropriate setting for the meeting of the lovers: a garden which is the place in which innocent love can be entwined with erotic passion. Dante and Beatrice are not only the lovers of the Song of Songs, but Adam and Eve and, even, at the allegorical level, Mankind and Christ. In making this last observation I am bearing in mind the long history of the allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs in the Church in which Christ and His bride are seen in the figures of the lovers, and the fact that throughout the Comedy Beatrice is an image of Christ.

But despite the wonderful richness of association given to the lovers' meeting by the evocation of the Song of Songs, the Eden theme is dominant, and echoes of the Genesis story play in and out of these last cantos. In XXXII Beatrice takes Dante to a great, withered tree at the centre of the garden. It stands sadly and accusingly, stripped of its leaves - a clear reference to the tree of the forbidden fruit. In this same context the original inhabitants of Eden are brought to our attention:

'as we passed through the lofty wood, empty by her fault
who believed the serpent, an angelic music timed our
steps ... I heard a murmur from them all of
"Adam!" ...

(XXXII, ll 31ff)

So the poet moves our imaginations in and out of the past and the present;
creating a world in which time is suspended.

There are further layers of meaning and more obscure associations to be
discovered in these last cantos of Purgatory, but discussion of these must
wait for another time. Those who know anything about medieval biblical
exegesis will be aware of the intense delight which was often taken in the
discernment of obscure connections and correspondences, the construction
of elaborate patterns, the revelation of multiple meanings. It is a
delight which few of us in the twentieth century share; we are more at home
with Dante's simpler usages. As C.S. Lewis was wont to lament: so feeble
is our modern poetic intelligence that we can hardly detect an allegory
let alone enjoy one, so our first reaction to a complicated series of
correspondences (as we find in Dante's earthly paradise) is one of disbelief.
Our second reaction, once we have realised that it is so and not the clever
speculation of some ingenious scholar, is to be conscious of the distance
between ourselves and Dante; between our age and his. But, if we are at
all sensitive, we find we cannot forget the Comedy, with all its medieval
strangeness, as we might forget some theological treatise. We are drawn
back to the poem by its warmth and humanity; by the intimate way in which
it so often speaks to us, and by the vistas of belief it opens out to us.
And then if we ponder still further, questions about modern attitudes to
faith and religion, to Scriptural interpretation, to poetic style and
custom begin to rise, often uncomfortably, to the surface. Our assumptions
and attitudes are challenged. Only the great artist can disturb us in
this way. And Dante was certainly a great artist; not least in his power
to put to his own singular use material that was not his own.

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OFFICERS OF THE SOCIETY

Chairman: Richard Wallis, 6 Matlock Court, Kensington Park Road,
London W11 3BS (tel. 01 221 0057)

Secretary: Mrs Gillian Lunn, 26 Village Road, Finchley, London N3 1TL
(tel. 01 346.6025)

Treasurer: Richard Wallis, address as above.

Membership Secretary: Miss Hilda Pallan, 167 Holly Lodge Mansions,
Oakeshott Avenue, Highgate, London N6 6DU
(tel. 01 348 3903)

Lending Librarian: Rev Dr Brian Horne, 11b Roland Gardens, London
SW7 3PE (tel. 01 373 5579)

Newsletter Editor: Mrs Molly Switek, 8 Crossley Street, London N7 8PD
(tel. 01 607 7919)

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