

# The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 66, SUMMER 1992



## MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

7 November 1992: Professor John Hibbs will speak on "Charles Williams and current economic thought".

27 February 1993: Gwen Watkins will speak on "The novels of R H Benson and Charles Williams".

5 June 1993: The Society will hold its Annual General Meeting. Following this, David Dodds will speak on his work editing the unpublished writings of Charles Williams.

These meetings will take place in Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W.1. at 2.30 pm.

### LONDON READING GROUP

Sunday 4 April 1993: We will continue to read the new Arthurian Poems from Arthurian Poets - Charles Williams edited by David Dodds and published by Boydell & Brewer, PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF (paperback £14.95). We will meet at St Matthews Church Vestry, 27 St Petersburg Place, London W2 (nearest tube stations Queensway and Bayswater) at 1pm.

### OXFORD READING GROUP

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

### CAMBRIDGE READING GROUP

For information please contact 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. Tel: (616) 396 2260.

## DALLAS CATHEDRAL READING GROUP

For details please contact Canon Roma King, 9823 Twin Creek Drive, Dallas, Texas 75228, USA.

### C.W.S. A.G.M 16 May 1992 (some main points)

The Society held its AGM on Saturday 16 May 1992 in Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W.1. Reports were presented by the Hon Secretary, the Hon Treasurer, the Newsletter Editor and on behalf of the Lending Librarian who could not be present.

Gillian Lunn, Hon Secretary, reported that the Society had held a number of meetings during the year, as recorded in the Newsletter. There was £715.72 in the book-sales current account and £919.62 in the savings account. Mrs Lunn had been in correspondence with the London Borough of Islington's Tourist Directive Officer who had commissioned a Heritage Audit and wanted information about our plaque on C.W.'s birthplace and the Society. Mrs Lunn had also had a long correspondence relating to the possibility of C.W.'s name being included in a window in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. She reported that the it does not look very hopeful. Members of the Society had been invited to research in the archives of the G K Chesterton Study Centre and the George MacDonald Society had appealed to contributions to finance a granite stone memorial at his birthplace (details available from Mrs Lunn). Mrs Lunn had been disappointed to note that no literary titles by C.W. appeared in the British Books in Print microfiche lists.

On behalf of the Lending Librarian, Brian Horne, it was reported that the library remains available for use in Kings College, London. Rev Dr Horne expressed his thanks to Elizabeth Bell and Lepel Kornicka for their help in sorting out and listing reference section material.

Richard Wallis, Hon Treasurer, presented copies of the accounts. Over the past year expenses had exceeded income, largely due to the increased cost of the Newsletter. The Society currently had £771.31 in the bank.

Molly Switek, Newsletter Editor, reminded members that back copies were available for 50p each plus postage and invited any suggestions for improving the magazine. An Index of Newsletters 51-60 had been printed.

The following were elected to the Council for the next year: Richard Wallis, Gillian Lunn, Brian Horne, Adrian Thomas, Anne Scott, Lepel Kornicka, Joan Northam and Molly Switek.

In response to a suggestion raised under "Any Other Business, it was agreed that the Newsletter would should contain a brief summary of the key points discussed at the Council meetings.

Following the business of the A.G.M. Ruth Spalding with Chris Morison, Nigel Bridger and Merle Rook read Ruth's portrait of C.W. broadcast on BBC radio in September 1961. We hope to be able to include the script in a future Newsletter.

### Council Meeting 22 June 1992

At their meeting on 22 June 1992 the Council discussed dates and speakers for future society meetings. No progress was reported on the Westminster Abbey memorial. Lepel Kornicka (the new Membership Secretary) and Richard Wallis are compiling an up-to-date membership list. Stocks are low of membership brochures. Brian Horne awaits discussion with the librarian of Kings College and hopes for more convenient arrangements for using the library to be possible. The Friends of Holywell Cemetary's Newsletter includes a photo of C.W. and a brief mention of his grave. Eileen Mable has

G K Chesterton Study Centre researching for C.W. related documents. The new Registrar of Liddon House had written expressing pleasure at our meeting there and hoped we would continue to do so.

### The Ghost Story Society

The Ghost Story Society have invited C.W. Society members to enter their second Ghost Story competition. Stories should be a maximum of 4000 words and never previously published. The stories need to be submitted to Jan Arter, 198 Ormskirk Road, Up Holland, Skelmersdale, Lancashire, WN8 0AA by 31 December 1992. Please contact Mr Arter for further details.

### Members' Wedding

Our warmest good wishes go to two C.W. Society members who have recently married - David Llewellyn Dodds and Tilly Reijnen. We wish them every happiness in the future with their new life in Holland. We hope to see them at our meetings whenever possible.

### NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to the following new members:  
Robert Brodie, 2 Landsdowne House, Crofton Way, Enfield, Middx, EN2 8HW,  
Andrew Williams, 17 Upper Haliford Road, Shepperton, Middx, TW17 8RX,  
Colin Davey, 41 Esslemont Avenue, Aberdeen, AB2 4SX,  
Gavin Ashenden, The Meeting House, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN1 9QN,  
Linda Cleary, 310 E. Philadelphia # 92, Ontario, California 91761, USA,  
Jonathon Glassow, 20718-B Devonshire Street, Chatsworth, CA 91311, USA,  
Richard Jones, 14 Mote Road, Maidstone, Kent, ME15 6EP.

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Following the A.G.M. and Ruth Spalding's reading of her portrait of C.W., Rev Gorringer spoke on "Redemption and Romantic Love". We are very pleased to be able to reprint the talk in the Newsletter.

"In his brilliant and daring Outlines of Romantic Theology, to my mind the most illuminating theological reflection he ever wrote, Charles Williams attempted to explore what he called the spiritual significance of romantic love. Romantic love, or more briefly 'marriage', is he says, a 'means of the work of redemption'. In this attempt he looked back to Dante, to certain of the Metaphysical poets, especially John Donne, and to Coventry Patmore. What I want to argue this afternoon is that he could equally and properly have developed his theology in relation to the nineteenth century novel. In arguing this I will confine myself more or less to Leavis' Great Tradition, though I think it could equally be argued from the French or Russian novel. And you will have to forgive me for what may seem two rather meandering arguments in which I attempt to set up my stall.

1. The Age of Atonement. A tradition of guilt and atonement is deeply embedded in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. How ancient this tradition is I don't think we know but I think it is legitimate to find a marked intensification of it in the whole period surrounding the exile of Judah in Babylon in the 6th and 5th c B.C. The people we know as Deuteronomists, drawing on earlier prophecy, understood the catastrophe as a punishment for the people's sins. Ezekiel insisted that henceforward, once the exile was over, there would be no more corporate punishment. There might be a national resurrection but 'the soul that sinneth it shall die'. Dealing with sin became a major preoccupation after the exile, and it is at this period, as far as we know, that the Day of Atonement first becomes a major focus of Jewish national worship. Interestingly this Day is the only festival not mentioned in the New Testament, and specifically by John. John speaks of the Passover, more than once, of Tabernacles, and of the feast of

reflection about the atoning Dedication, but not of the Day of Atonement. The reason, I think, is not far to seek. We find a tradition of reflection about the atoning significance of death growing up in the time of the Maccabees and this tradition is appropriated by the New Testament writers and applied with wholly novel force to the death of Jesus. Now I am sensitive to the argument of Krister Stendahl, in a seminal paper, that we are wrong to read the preoccupations of Augustine and Luther back into the New Testament. What Paul was interested in, argued Stendahl, was not the tortured soul which found its guilt cleansed by the sacrificial death of Jesus, but the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile. In my view this is crucial to a proper understanding not only of Paul but the whole of the New Testament. Nevertheless, we have to grant that the language of the New Testament, steeped in the atonement theology of the Tenakh, proved an inexhaustible quarry for such later readings. To read Christianity as a religion of guilt and atonement is not simply perverse, but has a great deal of plausibility. Those whom William James characterised as the 'twice born', people like Augustine and Luther, could and did, from the fourth century onwards, read the gospel in this way. At the same time I want to argue that there was not only the appeal of the gospel to a certain psychological type but that guilt and atonement sometimes became the preoccupation of an age. Thus Boyd Hilton has in my view correctly characterised the early Victorian era as 'the age of atonement'. According to my reading the period around the exile in Judah is properly characterised in the same way, and my very superficial acquaintance with the art and piety of the 15th century suggests to me that that period might likewise have been an age of atonement. (Hilton does not spend much time in speculation on why this is true of the nineteenth century, but suggests that the shock of the French revolution has much to do with it. My view is that this is a very minor cause indeed and that what we are really dealing with is the seismic shock of the industrial revolution and the emergence, for the first time in history, of really great cities. It was these, the dark background of Dickens' novels, that generated a soaring crime rate which could not be dealt with by the old penal apparatus and led to the construction of the great Victorian prisons. The

underclass who lived in the filthy streets which Dickens could not characterise in a lurid enough light constituted as it were the repressed part of Victorian consciousness. Middle class people, the novel reading public, felt both guilty and helpless before these social changes. Wilberforce and Elizabeth Fry were lionised because they seemed to show the middle class successfully redeeming these others, but doubt and guilt remained.) Redemption then, and the need for atonement, were central to the Victorian agenda. It was not just that evangelicals like George Eliot's Bulstrode needed atonement because of things in their individual biographies. It was an age which sought atonement. How?

2. The Pure Relationship. Alongside this story I want to put the emergence of what Anthony Giddens, the Professor of sociology at Cambridge, calls 'the pure relationship', pure not in the sense of Hardy's 'Pure Woman', but meaning 'the relationship and nothing but'. What makes this possible is the way individuals, in different ways, stand out more and more from the social whole from the early sixteenth century onwards. Just compare the portraits of Rembrandt with those of the end of the fifteenth century. Interest in the 'type' has disappeared, and what we see is an absolutely rounded individual, marked by compassion and pain. Part and parcel of this development is the emergence of a truly secular literature in the West, a literature which is not consciously set within a theological framework. What is this literature interested in? For an answer we can turn to Shakespeare, not the forerunner but the great ripe classic of secular literature, for, as Terry Eagleton puts it, this conservative old patriarch is still in many ways ahead of us. His plays fall into three divisions: the histories, which look at the world of politics, and the way in which men scheming for power are brought down by forces larger than they are. It is incredible to me that Shakespeare did not presage what was coming, that the 'histories' are not also 'prophecies' of a very dangerous kind. Second, the Comedies, where romantic love is the focus, the relations of men and women, falling in love, described as the greatest thing in the world, the moment in which the world is made new. Thirdly the tragedies where it is not, as it was for Sophocles, that destiny wreaks its havoc, but where 'the fatal flaw' which Shakespeare saw in us all could, in a person sufficiently great, bring the

world tumbling around our ears. Running through all of these plays, but especially through the Comedies and Tragedies, is the theme of redemption. I have said that secular literature is literature freed from a theological framework, as Dante, for instance, is not, but what emerges in Shakespeare is, we could say, an alternative form of theological discourse, the Wisdom tradition of the Tenakh set in an imaginative and personalist frame. Israel saw the need to include Wisdom even though much of it had nothing to say about God. Shakespeare did not have to begin with, or rehearse, the creed, to set the question of human destiny in the context of ultimate questions. What are we made for? What is human life about? Wherein do we find salvation? These are the questions he addresses, and the answer he gives to the question about salvation is that of the triumph of love and goodness over power, love including, though not equivalent to, romantic love.

The social and economic developments which led to the breakup of feudalism, a society largely consisting of organic wholes, are clearly essential to understanding this process. The rise of what is unhappily called individualism is part and parcel of this, and the invention of printing, and the possibility of the production of books on a mass scale part of it in turn. In the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries we have the growth of a reading public which finally makes possible the development of Shakespeare's concerns in and through the novel. The nineteenth century novel at its best, it seems to me, carries on the concerns and interests of Shakespeare's comedies, though embracing at its edges those of the histories and tragedies also. As I hear the long low melancholy roar on Dover Beach, where do I find salvation? The answer was only very partially articulated in the theological tracts and treatises, as the authors of Essays and Reviews knew very well. It was given in poetry and in art; in his own way Marx sought it and articulated it; but perhaps most characteristically men and women found an answer in that creation of a world of moral discourse which is what the great novel is. Here typically, as in Shakespeare's last plays, redemption is mediated by a young woman, sometimes as sister or as daughter (we think of Florence Dombey and her father), but above all in and through romantic love. 40,000 novels are said to have been published during Victoria's reign. The canon is probably

60 or 70. Of these I am going to look at a mere handful, though these include some of the greatest. What I hope to show is that in these we find, not simply another mode of moral discourse, but an alternative mode of the discourse of redemption.

### 3. Redemption and Romantic Love. (a) Dickens

(i) By way of establishing the connection between Romantic love and Atonement consider this dialogue between Rose Maylie and Bill Sikes' girlfriend Nancy in Oliver Twist (1837-39):

'Oh', said the earnest girl, folding her hands as the tears coursed down her face, 'do not turn a deaf ear to the entreaties of one of your own sex; the first, I do believe, who has appealed to you in the voice of pity and compassion. Do hear my words, and let me save you yet, for better things.'

'Lady', cried the girl, sinking on her knees, 'dear sweet angel lady, you ARE the first that ever blessed me with such words as these, and if I had heard them years ago they might have turned me from a life of sin and sorrow; but it is too late, it is too late!'

'It is never too late', said Rose, 'for penitence and atonement.'

'It is', cried the girl, writhing in the agony of her mind; 'I cannot leave him now! I could not be his death.'

'Why should you be?' said Rose.

'Nothing could save him', cried the girl. 'If I told others what I have told you and led to their being taken he would be sure to die. He is the boldest and has been so cruel!'

'Is it possible', cried Rose, 'that for such a man as this you can resign every future hope, and the certainty of your immediate rescue? It is madness.'

'I don't know what it is', answered the girl. 'I only know that it is so, and not with me alone, but with hundreds of others as bad and wretched as myself. I must go back. Whether it is God's wrath for the wrong I have done, I do not know; but I am drawn back to him through every suffering and ill usage; and I should be, I believe, if I knew that I was to die by his hand at last.'

Nancy does, of course, die at Sikes hand, the direct result of her trying to help Oliver. As so often in Victorian

fiction she has to pay the price, only death makes atonement. Her death, however, does not avail for Sikes. In the days when hanging had just been put inside the jail walls and removed from Tyburn, Sikes has what is in effect a public hanging, cheered on by the crowds.

(ii) The theme of atonement is prominent, too, in Bleak House. When we first meet Esther, the heroine, she is being told that it would be better if she had no birthday, if she had never been born. 'Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace and you were hers ... pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head, according to what is written ... Submission, self denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it. You are different from other children, Esther, because you were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. you are set apart'. It is the language of the sin offering, the offering set apart for atonement and Esther tries 'to repair the fault she was born with'. The action of the novel turns on one of the commonest themes of Victorian fiction - the guilty secret. It slowly emerges that Esther was the illegitimate daughter of Lady Dedlock, who had a relation with a loose living army officer, Captain Hawden. On the discovery Sir Leicester Dedlock is raised momentarily above caricature through his willingness to forgive her but Lady Dedlock must, to meet the proprieties, atone for her own sin by death, and she is found at the sordid cemetery gates where Hawden is buried, one arm groping through the railings. One of the two wards of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, Richard Carstone, also has to pay the price to be liberated from being caught up in the spirit of the never ending Chancery suit. Meanwhile the foil of this middle class story, as so often in Dickens, is the appalling poverty of Tom all Alone's, and the wretched crossing sweeper, Jo. Jo is caught up in the story as the one who showed Lady Dedlock where Hawden was buried and is finally buried alongside him. When the episode of the death of Jo appeared in Household words the nations stopped work:

'Our Father! - yes, that's wery good sir  
Which art in heaven  
Art in heaven - is the light a comin sir?  
It is close at hand. Hallowed be thy name!

Hallowed be - thy -

The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!

Dead your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen.

Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order.

Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day.

Jo and his class play almost the role of the Suffering Servant in Dickens' atonement theology; by their stripes we are healed. But Esther more directly bears some of his burden: when she takes him in she contracts the smallpox which he is carrying, and loses her beauty. But as such, as the one who insists on a rigorous quarantine, and so spares Ada, she redeems all around her with her selfless love.

(b) Charlotte Bronte. Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre is also germane to our topic. The novel is set up between two men; the muscular, almost grotesque looking Rochester, trapped into a hopeless marriage with a madwoman, who has gone through a series of mistresses and is unsure whether his ward might not be his child, and the goodlooking rigorously idealistic St John, determined on missionary service, turning down the love of a beautiful and wealthy girl in the neighbourhood to do so. Both wish Jane to be their wife, the one nearly traps her into bigamy, the other she refuses with difficulty because he sees in her only a partner for his noble task. Charlotte Bronte comes down firmly in favour of Rochester, setting the theme out clearly as a choice between the relative merits of the domestic life and a supposedly 'higher' call to God's service, claiming her 'for labour, not for love'. As Jane in the elation of her new found fortune prepares Moor House for Christmas, St John remarks that he hopes she will soon look a little higher than domestic endearments and household joys. 'The best things the world has' she interrupts. Nevertheless she is nearly bludgeoned into acceptance:

'I stood motionless under my hierophant's touch. My refusals were forgotten - my fears overcome - my wrestlings paralysed. The Impossible - ie my marriage with St John - was fast becoming possible. All was changing utterly, with a sudden sweep. Religion called - Angels beckoned - God commanded - life rolled together like a scroll -

death's gates opening, showed eternity beyond: it seemed, that for safety and bliss there all here might be sacrificed in a second.'

But she withstands the temptation, and Charlotte Bronte makes clear that in being true to her love for Rochester (described with some of the complete intensity of the love of Cathy for Heathcliff) Jane is fulfilling her redemptive role. God wants her here, and in the arms of Rochester. In her love for him Jane is, as Rochester says himself, the instrument of his redemption, 'Remorse is the poison of life', says Rochester to Jane:

'Repentance is said to be its cure, sir.'

'It is not its cure. Reformation may be its cure; and I could reform - I have strength yet for that - if - but where is the use of thinking of it, hampered, burdened, cursed as I am?'

As he meditates taking Jane to the altar without telling her of his wife he reflects on atonement:

'Again and again he said, Are you happy Jane? And again and again I answered Yes. After which he murmured, It will atone - it will atone. Have I not found her friendless, and cold and comfortless? Will I not guard and cherish and solace her? Is there not love in my heart and constancy in my resolves? It will expiate at God's tribunal. I know my Maker sanctions what I do. For the world's judgement I wash my hands thereof.'

But more is needed by way of expiation than constant love. Rochester atones for his sins (one would rather say propitiates justice) by losing his sight and one hand in the fire in which his mad wife dies:

'I would have sullied my innocent flower', he reflects later, as he thinks of the attempt to commit bigamy, 'breathed guilt on its purity' 'The Omnipotent snatched it from me. I, in my stiff-necked rebellion, almost cursed the dispensation; instead of bending to the decree I defied it. Divine justice pursued its course; disasters came thick upon me: I was forced to pass through the valley of the shadow of death. His chastisements are mightily; and one smote me which has humbled me for ever.'

After 18 months without Jane and believing her dead he is sufficiently purified to receive her back again. 'Of late Jane - only - only of late - I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. I began to experience remorse, repentance; the wish for Reconciliation to my maker. I

began to pray; very brief prayers they were, but very sincere.' With this behind him Jane can undertake the task of 'rehumanising' him. As she learns his side of the story of the mysterious call in the night, borne over the long miles from Ferndean to Moor Hall, like the Virgin Mary she 'ponders them in her heart', knowing from whence they came. Rochester for his part 'thanks his Maker', that in the midst of judgement he has remembered mercy'.

(c) Mrs Gaskell. In Mrs Gaskell's North and South we find another dimension of the redemptive process explored, namely reconciliation. Margaret Hale is at the centre of the novel, indeed the novel was written under the title 'Margaret'. This girl, growing up as a child in the New Forest, and then spending her teens in Harley Street, mediates between the north and south of the title, between masters and men, and to some extent between men and women. the novel begins with her prejudice against tradespeople, and her hatred for Milton Northern (Manchester). These are overcome largely through her visiting the family of one of the weavers, Nicholas Higgins, a strong union man, whose daughter is dying from consumption. She dislikes the forbidding practical mill owner Thornton, and the story shows the process of her falling in love with him and leaves them on the brink of marriage. On the way his love for her, awakened especially at the crucial moment of a strike, leads him for the first time to a new attitude to his workers. On their first meeting she speaks of the suffering she has seen and he tells Margaret about his rise - a classic example of self-help.

'Now when I feel that in my own case it is no good luck, nor merit, nor talent - but simply the habits of life which taught me to despise indulgences not thoroughly earned - indeed never to think twice about them - I believe that this suffering which is impressed on the countenances of the people of Milton is but the natural punishment of dishonestly enjoyed pleasure at some former period of their lives.'

The strike is the great set piece of the novel as the crowd of angry workers smash down the gates of the factory. Trapped accidentally in the house, Margaret vehemently urges Thornton to go and disperse the workers himself, and not wait for the soldiers who are due at any moment. She has seen how the weaving families are starving to death. Thornton is stung into obeying her but she then sees that

he is likely to be torn to pieces and rushed down to address the crowd herself. A stone aimed at him strikes her on the temple and knocks her unconscious - she collapses with her arms about his neck. At the sight of her blood the crowd begins to disperse. Both Thornton and his mother interpret Margaret's action as a sign of love, to her intense confusion. She reflects that the action sprang from her desire for fair play:

'It was not fair, she said vehemently, that he should stand there - sheltered, awaiting the soldiers who might catch those poor maddened creatures as in a trap - without an effort on his part to bring them to reason. And it was worse than unfair for them to set on him as they threatened. I would do it again ... If I saved one blow, one cruel, angry action that might otherwise have been committed, I did a woman's work. Let them insult my maiden pride as they will - I walk pure before God!'

She is all the more able to stand between masters and men here as her brother lives a permanent exile owing to his having taken the part of his crew in a naval mutiny. If he returns to England he faces certain death. Analogies between brutal command at sea and in the mills are obvious. Her brother's crime remains 'fresh and vivid on the Admiralty books till it is blotted out by blood'. This is of course the language of satisfaction theory of which Mrs Gaskell, wife of one of the best known Unitarian ministers in Britain, did not approve. Owing to Margaret's mediation, Thornton and Higgins get to know each other, and Thornton for the first time realises how little his workers have to live on, and sets up a works canteen. 'Once brought face to face, man to man, with an individual of the masses around him, and (take notice) OUT of the character of master and workman they had each begun to recognise that 'we have all of us one human heart'. Whilst she is back in London after the death of both her parents there are 'changes in Milton'. When Thornton goes broke, through refusing to speculate in a deal which might put his creditors at risk, his workers write to him to say they hope he will find a way through his difficulties as they wish to work for him. Mrs Gaskell wishes to show that the love of a woman like Margaret, marked by integrity, compassion and courage, has the power to bring about reconciliation even between capital and labour. It is love which will do this, in her book, and not analysis: she

wearies of talk of 'capital and labour' and goes straight to the question of relationships: God has made us so that we must be mutually dependent says Margaret. 'We may ignore our own dependence, or refuse to acknowledge that others depend upon us in more respects than the payment of weekly wages; but the thing must be, nevertheless. neither you nor any other master can help yourselves'. It is love and mutual understanding which produces the 'true men' who can bring the good society into being.

'Oh!' said Mr Hale sighing, 'your Union in itself would be beautiful, glorious, - it would be Christianity itself - if it were but for an end which affected the good of all, instead of that merely of one class as opposed to another.' In Mrs Gaskell's vision Margaret's courage and love can bring something like this about.

(d) George Eliot.

George Eliot's Middlemarch is by common consent, I think, the greatest English novel of the century. Already in Silas Marner, published in 1861, she had portrayed an old man hardened by rejection, corrupted by avarice, and finally redeemed by love. In Middlemarch these themes are worked out with far greater depth and subtlety. The background is Coventry in 1829, the Industrial Revolution in full swing. The moral heart of the novel is the Garth family, plain and impoverished by integrity, for whom 'business', in a non Thatcherite sense, is the centre of the religious world.

'Caleb Garth often shook his head in meditation on the value, the indispensable might of that myriad headed myriad handed labour by which the social body is fed, clothed and housed. It had laid hold of his imagination in boyhood. The echoes of the great hammer where roof or keel were a making, the signal shouts of the workmen, the roar of the furnace, the thunder and splash of the engine, were a sublime music to him; the felling and lading of timber ... the crane at work on the wharf, the piled up produce in warehouses, the precision and variety of muscular effort wherever exact work had to be turned out - all these sights of his youth had acted on him as poetry without the aid of poets, had made a philosophy for him without the aid of philosophers, a religion without the aid of theology. His early ambition had been to have as effective a share as possible in this sublime labour, which was peculiarly

dignified by him with the name of "business" ... Though he had never regarded himself as other than an orthodox Christian, and would argue on convenient grace if the subject were proposed to him, I think his virtual divinities were good practical schemes, accurate work, and the faithful completion of undertakings. His prince of darkness was a slack workman.'

Caleb Garth's practical integrity along with Rev'd Farebrother's intelligent and practical Christianity, leavened by entomology, form the moral bedrock of the novel. Nevertheless the story turns around four romantic liaisons: the love of the ne'er do well Fred Vincy for plain but good and honest Mary Garth, a love which finally redeems him and brings him into Caleb Garth's world. Two relationships which begin in a false idealising of the other: Rosamunde Vincy's determination to fall for the first well to do single stranger who turns up and Dorothea Brooke's idealising of Casaubon. It is Dorothea who is the real force of George Eliot's interest. Already in her Prelude she alerts us to what she is up to in referring to Theresa of Avila whose 'passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic like'. (Later, in Rome, Naumann the artist describes her as 'a sort of Christian Antigone - sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion'). Dorothea Brook is to be her Theresa, and the epic is marriage. Marriage, she says, in the closing chapter, 'is still the beginning of the home epic - the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union which makes the advancing years a climax, and age the harvest of sweet memories in common.' 'Marriage is a state of higher duties. I never thought of it as mere personal ease' she says to her uncle as he tries to dissuade her from marriage to the pedantic Casaubon, whom Dorothea mistakes and idealises as a great scholar. 'There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by.' Sooner or later comes knowledge of the Fall. She realises Casaubon's needs are as great, if not greater, than hers. 'We are all of born in moral stupidity', George Eliot remarks, 'taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves.' This is the original sin from which only the baptism of experience delivers us. By the accident of Casaubon's death Dorothea

is delivered, as Lydgate cannot be, and she duly finds her spiritual vocation in marriage, a vocation no less important and heroic than Teresa of Avila's, Eliot wants to say: 'A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is for ever gone. But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas ... the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs.'

Dorothea is sustained by a belief which it is hard not to conclude speaks for Eliot herself:

'That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil - widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower.'

'That is a beautiful mysticism - it is a - '

'Please do not call it by any name' said Dorothea ... 'You will say it is Persian or something else geographical. it is my life. I have found it out, and cannot part with it. I have always been finding out my religion since I was a little girl. I used to pray so much - now I hardly ever pray.'

Such a regenerating belief in goodness is seen in Farebrother's renunciation of Mary Garth. 'Some one highly susceptible to the contemplation of a fine act has said, that it produces a sort of regenerating shudder through the frame, and makes one feel ready to begin a new life.' It is through such an act, rather than through doctrine, that redemption comes.

(e) Joseph Conrad. My last example of a novel where romantic love is redemptive is Joseph Conrad's Chance. Although the theme of chance is introduced at regular intervals through the book Conrad takes care to say that he does not have 'the pagan notion' in mind and the book's real theme is the feminine and feminism, Conrad's own reflections on women put into the mouth of his persona

Marlowe. Militant feminism is represented by Mrs Fyne who believes that 'no delicacy, tenderness or scruples should stand in the way of a woman (who by the mere fact of her sex was the predestined victim of conditions created by man's selfish passions, their vices and abominable tyranny) from taking the shortest cut towards securing for herself the easiest possible existence' - even if that involved suicide. Marlowe on the other hand confesses that 'A woman is not necessarily either a doll or an angel to me. She is a human being, very much like myself.' for all that it has to be said that Marlowe's description of women, all intuition and mysterious sentiment, is very Jungian, to say the least. But in Captain Anthony, the hero, he gives us a character who, whilst archetypally male in some ways is at the same time marked by a passionate tenderness. The story revolves around Flora de Barral, a girl who has what we would call 'a low self image', which she has learned from her governess, who has taught her that she is unlovable, that no one can ever really care for her. This problem is compounded when her father, a fraudster of the Maxwell variety, goes bankrupt and is imprisoned. All her former acquaintances desert her, rubbing in her worthlessness, and she is taken in by the Fynes. The girl is hovering on the edge of suicide and as far as Mrs Fyne is concerned she has a perfect right to do it. Into this situation comes Mrs Fyne's brother, a merchant sea captain who has not seen his sister for fifteen years. The girl's declaration that she is absolutely alone, and has no one to love her, strikes a chord with him, as he sees this to be his situation. Flora was 'washing about with slack limbs in the ugly surf of life with no opportunity to strike out for herself, when suddenly she had been made to feel that there was somebody beside her in the bitter water.' In truth Anthony too (the 'son of the poet, Caerleon Anthony' who bears more than a passing resemblance to Coventry Patmore) also deep down believes he is unlovable. He is, in Marlowe's words, hungering and thirsting for femininity to enter his life ('in a way no mere feminist could have the slightest conception of') because femininity is the ability to love without return. The Captain himself is endowed with a large measure of this feminine trait. He proposes to her without even knowing her real name and wants to take her to sea,

the sphere of integrity and true values, where the hatreds of the land are not nurtured. Marlowe, who in his severe dress rather resembles a friar notes that 'I have observed that profane men living in ships, like the holy men living in monasteries, develop traits of profound resemblance. This must be because the service of the sea and the service of a temple are both detached from the vanities and errors of a world which follows no severe rule'. Just at this moment the girl's father is released, a crazed old man determined to get his own back on those who brought him down. He accompanies Flora and Anthony to sea, bitterly resenting the person who supplanted him in Flora's affections. The couple are estranged by him for some time but the father's attempt to poison Anthony provokes a crisis in which the girl has to respond to the Captain's love. Her self esteem is restored: 'I have had a fine adventure' says Flora:

'The finest in the world! Only think! I loved and I was loved, untroubled, at peace, without remorse, without fear. All the world, all life were transformed for me. And how much I have seen! How good people were to me! Roderick was so much like everywhere. Yes, I have known kindness and safety. The most familiar things appeared lighted up with a new light, clothed with a loveliness i had never suspected.'

Thus this adventure, of loving and being loved, proves her salvation.

(f) Thackeray, Emily Bronte and Hardy. Finally it may be worthwhile to look at three novels where romantic love is the central theme but where it does not play a redemptive role.

(i) Thackeray's Vanity Fair contrasts the fortunes of the conventionally moral Amelia, who falls in love once with a man not worthy of her, and who cherishes his memory ever afterwards to the exclusion of all others, and Becky Sharp on the other hand, a girl whose face is her fortune and who makes an early mistake by netting the first man with prospects she can, the stupid Rawdon Crawley. Thackeray depicts her as having no moral scruple whatsoever, but at the end of the novel we find her, after a period when she has wandered Europe as a courtesan, having come into her husband's title, living in Bath and given to charity and good works. The book ends with a quotation from Ecclesiastes, whose cynicism provides the

basso continuo throughout. Thackeray includes one of the stock characters of Victorian fiction in the novel, the plain, solid and devoted Captain Dobbin, who is from the first devoted to Amelia. Such love is often understood to be redemptive, but Thackeray throws this all up at the very end when Dobbin finally has enough and leaves Amelia to go to England. When the two come together again it is with her as the meek submissive wife, and after the birth of their daughter she has to suspect that he cares more for their child than he does for her. The pessimism of Ecclesiastes cannot recognise any redemption and, in this novel at least, this is true for Thackeray. 'As the Manager of the Performance sits before the curtain on the boards and looks into the Fair', Thackeray wrote in the introduction 'a feeling of profound melancholy comes over him in this survey of the bustling place ... yes, this is VANITY FAIR: not a moral place certainly, nor a merry one, though very noisy'.

(ii) A second novel where romantic love is hardly glimpsed as redemptive is Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights. The novel has struck a chord because of its portrayal of a love which shatters the bounds of convention and decency. Here we have the demonic aspect of eros which writers like Suzanne Lilar and Susanne Heine have properly drawn our attention to. Perhaps the novel may be said to turn on Cathy's choice between amour voulu and amour fou. She confesses to Nelly Dean that she loves Edgar Linton because he is handsome, cheerful, rich, because he loves her, and so 'she loves the ground under his feet, the air over his head, and everything he touches, and every word he says'. Still, she says, in her soul and heart she's convinced she's wrong. In trying to explain why she tells of a dream when she was in heaven:

'heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy. That will do to explain my secret, as well as the other. I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if the wicked man in there had not brought Heathcliff so low, I shouldn't have thought of

it. It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall never know how I love him: and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.'

What has happened here is that the pagan divinity Eros has usurped the Christian heaven. Eros becomes metaphysical: 'If all else perished and HE remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger.' It is this pagan force Cathy sins against in marrying Linton and she pays the price, because Heathcliff takes a terrible revenge, turning the demonic energy of eros against all around him, destroying Linton and Cathy in the process and seeking to destroy Hareton. It is not just amour fou but eros made the centre of the universe. Emily Bronte never criticises this - there is no moralising in the novel, any more than there is in Jane Eyre - she simply describes what a terribly destructive force it can be when it is balked. However we do at least end with young Cathy Linton and Earnshaw in love, and her teaching him his letters, humanising what for years had been a de-humanised landscape. It is only here that we feel in touch with those central Christian virtues of integrity and compassion which animate the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot.

(iii) Hardy's case is different again, and this is because he deliberately moves out of the biblical and into a Sophoclean frame of reference. His novels are quire self consciously Sophoclean tragedies with romantic love at the centre. 'It was one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world', wrote Hardy of Little Hintock, the setting for The Woodlanders, 'where may usually be found more meditation than action, and more listlessness than

meditation; where reasoning proceeds on narrow premisses, and results in inferences wildly imaginative; yet where from time to time drama of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely knit interdependence of the lives therein'. The dramatic action begins when Grace Melbury's father rejects the Christian scheme of sin and atonement. Because of the wrong he did to Giles Winterbourne's father Melbury has always determined to 'make amends' by letting Giles wed his daughter. It is his social ambitions which thwart this and thereafter fate takes over, conspiring towards the destruction of the good and the true, leaving the compromised and imperfect in possession of the field. So in The Woodlanders, published in 1887, Giles Winterbourne and Marty South are the two who represent the values of true and honest love. But where in Far From The Madding Crowd Gabriel Oak finally gets his woman, here Grace Melbury is trapped by the divorce laws and unable to leave Fitzpiers for her first love Giles. Giles dies as a result of providing shelter for Grace and choosing to sleep himself in a little shelter of twigs and leaves. Grace is reclaimed by Fitzpiers, momentarily penitent after the shooting of his mistress, Mrs Charmond, and Marty South is left to tend Giles' grave. As with Vanity Fair it is the world view here which rules out the possibility of real redemption.

Charles Williams remarked that it would be a sad day when the theme of romantic love fell into the hands of the professional theologians, but he is one of the foremost to teach us that theology is not done alone by them. On the other hand, if it is truly done by artists, poets, composers and novelists it is perhaps not done wholly without the professional theologians either. To recognise a theological dimension in these novels is to see that the theme is not ethics, but salvation. People are saved by experience of the divine. If this is debarred them by the character of organised religion - and religious people in Victorian fiction are often unsympathetic - then it is available elsewhere, pre-eminently in the love relations of men

and women. This was why Walter Allen was right to characterise George Eliot, for all her scepticism, as an essentially religious writer. Where this framework is dispensed with, however, either for paganism, as with Emily bronte and D H Lawrence, or because of an option for a determinist world view, or because of a world weary pessimism, there can be no discourse of salvation and hence no theological dimension. To say this is to recognise Iris Murdoch for the old fashioned writer she is, an author preserving the notion of salavation, like George Eliot, in the face of considerable personal scepticism, when so many of her contemporaries opt for a cheery hedonism overshadowed by the dark cloud of nihilism. Perhaps the emergence of a genuinely theologicla discourse, which speaks of the divine even if it does not name the name, and free from the tutelage of the theological systems, is what Bonhoeffer was searching for in his comments on the world come of age. We find in these novels, as Barth found in Mozart, an alternative discourse of redemption in which we have to see God's hand at work. Williams was alert to this and focussed on the experience of romantic love, seeking to articulate the ways in which God is discovered within it. In doing this he is one of those who hears most acutely what the Spirit is saying to the churches and any failure to listen to him in turn leaves us immeasurably the poorer.

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