

# The Charles Williams Society

N E W S L E T T E R

No. 68, WINTER 1992



## MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

5 June 1993: The Society will hold its Annual General Meeting starting at 11.00 - please see the enclosed Agenda. After lunch (please bring sandwiches - coffee and tea will be available) David Dodds will give us "An Introduction to the Unpublished Williams".

23 October 1993: Dr Paul Fiddes will speak on Charles Williams and the problem of evil".

Both these meetings will take place in Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W.1. starting at 2.30 (except for the AGM which will start at 11.00).

### LONDON READING GROUP

Sunday 23 May 1993: We will continue to read the new Arthurian Poems from Arthurian Poets - Charles Williams edited by David Dodds. We will meet at St Matthews Church Vestry, 27 St Petersburg Place, London W2 (nearest tube stations Queensway and Bayswater) at 1 pm.

### 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.

### COUNCIL MEETINGS

At the Council Meeting held on 27 February 1993 it was recorded that the Society's new banking arrangements are complete. Increased bank charges have again produced some problems with U.S. dollar cheques. Supplies having run low, new - but substantially unchanged - membership brochures are now ready. The National Portrait Gallery has accepted Anne Spalding's gift of her drawing of Charles Williams. There has been some further correspondence with the Dean of Westminster. Membership of the Council of the Society was discussed and arrangements for the Annual General Meeting on 5 June 1993.

### NEWS ABOUT BOOKS

Gillian Lunn writes: "2 newish books refer to Charles Williams. I don't feel competent to review them but enjoyed them a lot:

i. A Careless Rage for Life: Dorothy L. Sayers by David Coomes (Lion 1992: ISBN 0732 40522X);

ii. The C.S. Lewis Handbook by Colin Duriez (Monarch paperback 1990: ISBN 1 854240137) has a 3-page entry on C.W. and other references."

## NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to:

Mrs Suzanne Bray, 24 Rue du Prieuré, 5900  
Lille, France,

David Poole, 80 Park Road, Worthing, West  
Sussex, BN11 2AN,

Donald Povey, 56 Old Mill Close, Eynsford, Kent  
DA4 0BN,

Richard Hood, 2048 Evergreen, La Verne, CA  
91750, USA,

Shigeo Yokoyama, 5-34 Tsushima-Honmachi,  
Okayama City 700, Japan,

Mrs Hazel Taylor, 4 Seafield Place, Cullen,  
Buckle, Banffshire, Scotland AB56 2TF,

Mrs Laura Diviney, 61 Waban Park, Newton, Mass.  
02158, USA, and

Mrs Carla Ball, Jubilee Farm, Tholomas Drove,  
Wisbech St Mary, Cambs. PE13 4SY.

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At the Society's meeting on 27 February 1993  
Mrs Gwen Watkins spoke on "Charles Williams and  
R.H. Benson". We are very pleased to be able  
to reprint this talk in the Newsletter.

'This talk will be more in the nature of an  
entertainment than a scholarly paper such as, I  
am sure, you are accustomed to hear at your  
meetings. I cannot offer you an academic  
thesis because I have no real evidence -  
no evidence, I mean, which would be accepted  
by a scholar - that Charles Williams ever read  
much of R.H. Benson's work, much less that he  
was influenced by it. What I am offering you,  
therefore, is merely a hypothesis but one based  
on a very close study of both Benson's and  
Williams's work. Those of you who have an  
affinity with a particular author will agree  
that there is a perception intuitively arising



from reading and re-reading, which, though not based on proof, yet presents itself to us as valid criticism.

We do know, from an entry in Williams' Commonplace Book, now in the Bodleian Library under the title of The Holy Grail, that he had read at least one of Benson's novels - The Necromancers. We also know from his review of The Quest for Corvo, called Antichrist and the City's Laws, that he must have known about Benson's relationship with the egregious Rolfe, self-styled Baron Corvo. I think it extremely propable that Williams read most, if not all, of Benson's novels, since he was an avid reader, Benson was a best-seller and his books widely advertised and reviewed and published in very cheap editions. Moreover many of them were, singularly for that or any other era, what Benson himself called "spiritual fiction", and dealt with themes that were closely related to Williams' own interests. I think it unlikely that having read one, he would not have been eager to procure others.

C.S. Lewis, by no means such an omnivorous reader of light fiction as Williams, had certainly read Benson and it is curious that he should have specifically denied, in a letter to an American academic, having been in any way influenced by him. Yet it is plain that the scene in That Hideous Strength in which Jane Studdock, visiting Ransome as an eldil is about to appear, feels the whole room tilting as though the centre of balance were outside the known world, repeats almost in exact words a scene from Benson's None Other Gods. Here the room of the dying hero, filled with angelic or archangelic presences, is subject to the identical vertiginous slanting or tilting. Some aspects of the Unman in Perelandra also probably owe something to Benson's

characterisation of the demon in The Necromancers especially in the scene where Ransome sees the Unman's shoulders shaking and thinks he is sobbing only to find that he is silently and horribly laughing. It is evident that Lewis had completely forgotten his sources for these details, and the American scholar recognised them.

There is nothing quite as close to Benson as this in Williams' novels. Still, a character in The Conventionalists says of another who is rapidly developing spiritual powers: "It's like finding a lion in your garden" and I have wondered whether this remark led to the appearance of the lion in The Place of the Lion.

Robert Hugh Benson was born in 1871, only fifteen years before Charles Williams. No two men could have been born to more widely different circumstances. Benson was the son of a clergyman whose dominating personality raised him from the first Mastership of Wellington College, chosen by Prince Albert himself, through the first Bishopric of Truro to the Archiepiscopal throne of Canterbury itself. His mother too came of a distinguished family; his homes were all rich and romantic - the Master's Lodge at Wellington, where he was born, the mediaeval Chancellery of Lincoln, the Bishop's Palace of Lis Escop outside Truro, the palaces of Lambeth and Addington, then the country seat of the Archbishops of Canterbury, and his mother's beautiful Jacobean mansion in Ashurst Forest. Hugh was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge, took Holy Orders in the Anglican Church and converted to the Roman church in 1903, with, being the son of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, the maximum of publicity. Charles Williams was 17 at the time, and never likely, as he probably thought,

to be accorded any kind of publicity. The son of lower middle class parents, having been born in rented rooms and later living in a house attached to the shop his parents ran with very indifferent success, unable because of financial difficulties to take a degree at the University College to which he had won a scholarship, his sight affected by illness, soon to become a mere drudge in a Methodist bookroom, he cannot have looked to his future with much confidence.

Yet with all the differences of birth and environment, there were remarkable similarities between the two men, both in beliefs and personality. Anne Ridler wrote of Williams "trembling, slight, tense, always in movement but never fidgeting, always smoking ...". This is an exact description of Hugh Benson. Both had been brought up in Christian families and neither was called on to endure assaults on his faith. Both loved ritual, with its attendant pleasures of dressing up. (Although Hugh Benson's own clothes were deplorable - indeed his sister said his shoes were like something you saw washed up on a beach after a storm - he much enjoyed dressing up in his monsignorial purple when he had been elevated to the rank of papal chamberlain.) Both men had an early interest in the occult. Williams read the works of A.E. Waite and joined the Golden Dawn. Benson, whose mother had from the early days of her marriage used the planchette, tried automatic writing and held seances (embarrassing hobbies for the wife of a Bishop and archbishop!) followed her example by experiments in mesmerism at Cambridge and later by attempting magical experiments with Rolfe. Williams and Benson both had their horoscopes drawn, and appeared to take the result with some seriousness.

Both men had strong and extremely charismatic

personalities. Both attracted shoals of adherents with emotional and spiritual difficulties, of which a large number were women, and both appear to have dealt with them in ways which showed the extent and the limitations of their powers. Hugh Benson said that he could not "prop"; that people came to him for advice or support and then passed on. He felt that God had not intended him to form intimacies. Both C.S. Lewis and Alice Mary Hadfield have described Williams' relationship with those who came to him. Hadfield wrote: "However freely he seemed to give of his energies, he had always a certain inner detachment ... you felt that he depended on no-one. ... He did not repel them but he did not need them." Both Benson and Williams passed through a mid-life crisis, a shock to their moral being: Benson when Rolfe so suddenly and inexplicably turned against him (and made his revulsion public) and Williams in his Celian crisis.

They resembled each other in their writing also. Both started writing at an early age. The whole Benson family indeed appeared to have inherited a form of logorrhea and began to scribble as soon as their infant hands could hold a pencil. Hugh is said to have composed a puppet play while still very young on, curiously enough, the subject of Cranmer. Both had an early interest in drama which later resulted in verse plays, including some "mystery" plays. Their historical interests centred around the same periods, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But it was in their "spiritual fiction" that they most resembled each other, and it is this genre that I shall try to show that Benson did influence Williams to some extent, or at least was a source from which he drew some of his ideas.

Anne Ridler has said of his work: "The conflict



between the powers of good and evil, romantically expressed, was always one of Williams' most intense literary enjoyments, but even more deeply felt was the theme of substitution in love." Now these were the sole and entire themes of Benson's novels, as well as the themes of the Negative and Affirmative Ways. His work could therefore hardly fail to be of the greatest interest to the young Williams, even though he may have forgotten such early reading.

In Benson's novels the plot concerns itself continually with the choice made by the characters between good and evil, or even with the choice between what appears to be conventionally harmless and the greater good. In Loneliness, Initiation, None Other Gods, The Sentimentalists, The Conventionalists, an individual is led by many ways and continual choices to his final good, often a good as harrowing, as apparently destructive as that of Chloë Burnett in Many Dimensions. The hero of Initiation dies of brain tumour, the heroine of Loneliness, a former celebrated opera singer, loses her voice, her career, her lover and many friends. The hero of None Other Gods dies after a brutal attack by the lover of a worthless girl whom he has tried to save. The main characters of The Coward and An Average Man make the wrong choice. I have wondered whether the character of Quentin in The Place of the Lion was not to some extent drawn from the character of Val in The Coward. Neither man is a deliberate coward, but seems to have inherited or acquired the affliction through no fault of his own. The choice to be made is to acknowledge it, not to conceal it, and to be as brave or kind as possible within the given limitations.

Lord of the World and The Dawn of All are the

two of Benson's books which most nearly approach science fiction, since they are tales of the future written, not from opposite points of view, but from opposing premises. In one, the whole civilised world, except for a few atheists, humanists and socialists, has embraced Christianity; in the other, the whole world except for a remnant of the faithful has rejected it. We are reminded of Williams' love of changing sides in the middle of an argument just to see what the other side looks like.

We have in these two novels an almost cosmic opposition of good and evil, but of course this conflict must be the subject of any book dealing with spiritual matters. I am not saying that Williams was influenced by Benson to use this theme, only that books so vividly written dealing with the very themes that so compelled his own imagination cannot have escaped his attention. We must remember too that in the years before the First World War, fiction was given an enormous amount of space, even in the very cheap and popular journals. Although Charles Williams was only twenty-eight when Benson died, the novels were reprinted in very inexpensive editions all through the 1920s.

I have mentioned Benson's vivid writing, and I should here explain, and demonstrate, its peculiar impact. My hypothesis is that, if Williams derived his extraordinarily magniloquent and sometimes grandiose style from anyone at all, it was from the echoes of Benson read in his youth. Although it is possible to see threads of influence in his early poetic style through Abercrombie, Bridges and much less Chesterton than is generally supposed, until he reaches his own unmistakeable poetic voice, it is difficult, if not impossible, to see the same threads in his prose style. Obviously at some time the young Williams was

immensely struck by Henry James' use of the adverb - "he charmingly murmured" and the like - but apart from that, there seems no source for his curiously mannered style, unless indeed there is a resemblance to that other outstandingly idiosyncratic prose writer, Benson's friend and enemy, Baron Corvo.

The conversations in Benson's novels are usually more naturalistic than those in Williams', yet there is a startling intensity in his descriptive writing, especially when he is concerned with the inner experiences of his characters, which to my mind is not found in any other writer. The very few quotations for which I have time will serve to illustrate what I mean. The first quotation is simply a description of a headache:

"Then he had got ready for bed; and when all was ready had once more soaked his handkerchief and tied it round his forehead. Then he had got into bed, turned out the light, and pretended that he was going to sleep.

Then the interior drama had begun.

It was first a galloping horse that approached from the immeasurable distance to which the hot water and eau-de-cologne had temporarily banished the agony - that approached to announce to him that they were all coming back as fast as they could.

This horse galloped slowly and rhythmically, at a steady rate of progress: and the beat of his four hoofs all together marked the blows of pain that he experienced. The horse came nearer and nearer, growing, as was but natural, in weight as he approached; until he was really there, so to speak. He remained there a few seconds - never longer than about a minute, apparently prancing to the same rhythms, in the same place, without otherwise moving at all. Then he began to recede again, intolerably



slowly, it is true; but yet it was very nearly pleasure that he should recede at all. It was as this movement began that Neville really resolved to go to sleep before the next. ...

But at that moment two horses began to gallop, again in the immeasurable distance; and the worst of it all was that they would not keep in step. These two then punctually pursued the course of their fore-runner; they approached, they arrived; they remained steadily prancing, the four feet of each rising and falling, not quite together; they began to recede.

Then, three horses came; then four; then five; then a regiment. He tried to count them sometimes, in a kind of bitter humour; but they were unreckonable. They kept tolerably in step; that was one comfort; but they took longer to arrive, and remained longer, prancing. It was very nearly interesting, when they all pranced together; they looked almost ludicrous - this long line, from horizon to horizon - (the horizons, of course, were his own temples) - rising and falling together like performers in a circus.

Then even these began to recede - very slowly, it is true - yet they receded, further and further, until the thunder of their hoofs was no more than a murmur ... and at last silence. Neville began to breathe very carefully through his nostrils. He had already arranged his attitude. He turned on his side always, as the troop began to move off; until that he lay on his face with the pillow clasped about his ears: he did so, that is, generally after the group of three began to approach.

He lay then, softly, afraid to stir, lest a horse should gallop up to see what he was doing; and sometimes he managed really to go to sleep. But tonight it was useless. In spite of every conceivable precaution, the single horse began to suspect something, as he fed there miles away in the prairies, scarcely stirring the ground as he moved. He began to trot; he began to canter; to gallop ... and the

CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

Renewal of Subscriptions

May I remind you that subscriptions for 1993 - 1994 are due on 1 March 1993. Payment should be made in pounds sterling, in favour of the Society, to the Hon Membership Secretary at the address below. If you are unable to send a cheque in sterling, please send \$18 (single) or \$22 (joint) to cover bank charges for conversion.

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hunt was up.

It was as the clock struck half past one in the hall below that Neville sat up in bed, very nearly delirious with pain. 'This is perfectly ludicrous!' he said aloud to the listening night."

We all remember very well, I am sure, Charles Williams' description of the first perceptions of a soul after death, in the opening pages of All Hallows' Eve. Here is an equally remarkable description of the actual process of dying from R.H. Benson's Initiation:

"Once again at some remote point in time, detached from all experience, he found that his consciousness was still attached to his body; but it was attached in a new kind of way. He was aware that somewhere in the universe, as if at an enormous depth beneath the point where he himself stood poised, great wheels of blue flame were all crashing and whirling together. The clamour of them was incredible, harsh and grinding; but they no longer affected him. There was a loud rasping sound of breathing, too, such as he had heard when his father died. Then, through the crashing and the gasping, he heard the thunder of a voice repeating Latin. He was as a man who, at the edge of a huge dream, himself at ease and in safety, looks down on the tumult below, where great forces strive together.

Dying, then, was still in process somewhere; and he watched with a kind of pity that dreadful conflict that roared below. It was to him, in some sense, that Latin was spoken; and he understood its power. ... Here and there he could catch a phrase. He was being bidden to 'go forth' in the name of Powers and Principalities ... of all those great Existences which, he knew now, waited invisible in that wide expanse that was all about him, poised here above the struggle that raged

beneath ... It was down there, then, that all those whom he loved waited about his struggling body. He knew they were there, as a man who has climbed to a great height knows, as he looks back, that there in the valley are the fields and the house that he knows so well. They were all in the surge and the stress still - there in that plane from which rose up the great words of power that battled with the roar of the pulses in his head, and the blinding shocks of pain, and the fighting for breath - and not with these, only or chiefly, but with the rushing tides of evil and revolt that swayed and tossed - seen by him from up here as a great tumbling torrent or a tossing waste of water looked down upon by a man on a cliff. But he himself was far off and remote. ...

Where then, was he? Then, as he considered this, he, too, began to thrill and vibrate. From beneath rose up thin, imperceptible tides; or, rather, he perceived now for the first time that he was in them still; that he was not yet wholly apart as he had thought from all acts and volitions and experiences. But they were thin and subtle, as befitted his new condition; and he saw that he could not yet act. ...

Then a great and piercing sorrow surged through him, not indeed at the memory of his sins and rebellions, but at his consciousness of their very essence. It was not that life passed before him as a series or progress of events, but that the quality of it - as he had lived - had a thin and bitter aroma which he had never suspected. And, as there met him from above that piercing breath of the world to which he went - as clean and sharp and radiant as the light reflected from snow - these two tides mingled in him like a chord of sorrow and love and ecstasy. ... Every image faded from him; every symbol and memory died; the chasm passed into nothingness; and the Grail was drunk, and colours passed into whiteness; and sounds into the silence of Life; and the initiation was complete."

Finally, there is a very ambitious piece of writing, such as Williams would have loved: a description of the end of the world. In Lord of All, Felsenburgh (who, is finally revealed as Antichrist) has totally destroyed Rome, where most of the remaining Christians were gathered, and six of his "Volors" are now approaching Nazareth, where the Pope and a tiny remnant of the faithful are at Mass:

"Yet even at that sound and sight his soul scarcely tightened the languid threads that united it through every fibre of his body with the world of sense. He saw and heard the tumult in the passage, frantic eyes and mouths crying aloud, and, in strange contrast, the pale ecstatic faces of those princes who turned and looked; even within the tranquil presence-chamber of the spirit were two beings, Incarnate God and all but Discarnate Man, were locked in embrace, a certain mental process went on. Yet all was still as apart from him as a lighted stage and its drama from a self-contained spectator. In the material world, now as attenuated as a mirage, events were at hand; but to his soul, balanced now on reality and awake to facts, these things were but a spectacle. ...

he turned to the altar again, and there, as he had known it would be, in the midst of clear light, all was at peace: the celebrant, seen as through molten glass, adored as He murmured the mystery of the Word-made-Flesh, and once more passing to the centre, sank upon His Knees.

Again the priest understood; for thought was no longer the process of a mind, rather it was the glance of a spirit. He knew all now; and, by an inevitable impulse, his throat began to sing aloud words that, as he sang, opened for the first time as flowers telling their secret to the sun.

O Salutaris Hostia  
Qui coeli pandis ostium. ...



They were all singing now; even the Mohammedan catechumen who had burst in a moment ago sang with the rest, his lean head thrust out and his arms tight across his breast; the tiny chapel rang with the forty voices, and the vast world thrilled to hear it. ...

Still singing, the priest saw the veil laid as by a phantom upon the Pontiff's shoulders; there was a movement, a surge of figures - shadows only in the midst of substance,

... Uni Trinoque Domino. ...

- and the Pope stood erect, Himself a pallor in the heart of light, with special folds of silk dripping from His shoulders, His hands swathed in them, and His down-bent head hidden by the silver-rayed monstrance and That which it bore.

... Qui vitam sine termino

Nobis donet in patria. ...

... They were moving now, and the world of life swung with them; of so much was he aware. He was out in the passage, among the white, frenzied faces that with bared teeth stared up at that sight, silenced at last by the thunder of 'Pange Lingua', and the radiance of those who passed out to eternal life. ... At the corner he turned for an instant to see the six pale flames move along a dozen yards behind, as spear-heads about a King, and in the midst the silver rays and the White Heart of God. ... Then he was out, and the battle was in array.

That sky on which he had looked an hour ago had passed from darkness charged with light to light overlaid with darkness - from glimmering night to Wrathful Day - and that light was red. From behind Thabor on the left to Carmel on the far right, above the hills twenty miles away rested an enormous vault of colour; here were no gradations from zenith to horizon; all was the one deep smoulder of crimson as of the glow of iron. It was such a colour as men have seen at sunsets after rain, while the clouds, more

translucens each instant, transmit the glory they cannot contain. Here, too, was the sun, pale as the Host, set like a fragile wafer above the Mount of Transfiguration, and there, far down in the west where men had once cried upon Baal in vain, hung the sickle of the white moon. Yet all was no more than stained light that lies broken across carven work of stone.

... In suprema nocte coena,  
sang the myriad voices,  
    Recumbens cum fratribus  
    Observata lege plena  
    Cibis in legalibus  
    Cibum turbae duodenae  
    Se dat suis manibus. ...

He saw, too, poised as motes in light, that ring of strange fish-creatures, white as milk, except where the angry glory turned their backs to flame, white-winged like floating moths, from the tiny shape far to the south to the monster at hand scarcely five hundred yards away; and even as he looked, singing as he looked, he understood that the circle was nearer, and perceived that these as yet knew nothing. ...

... Verbum caro, panem verum  
    Verbo carnem efficit. ...

... They were nearer still, until now even at his feet there slid along the ground the shadow of a monstrous bird, pale and undefined, as between the wan sun and himself moved out the vast shape that a moment ago hung above the Hill. ... Then again it backed across and waited. ...

... Et si sensus deficit  
    Ad formandum cor sincerum  
    Sola fides sufficit. ...

... He had halted and turned, going in the midst of his fellows, hearing, he thought, the thrill of harping and the throb of heavenly drums; and across the space, moved now the six flames, steady as if cut of steel in that stupendous poise of heaven and earth; and, in



their centre the silver-rayed glory and the Whiteness of God made Man. ...

... Then, with a roar, the thunder again, pealing in circle beyond circle of those tremendous Presences - Thrones and Powers - who, themselves to the world as substance to shadow, are but shadows again beneath apex and within the ring of Absolute Deity. ... The thunder broke loose, shaking the earth that now cringed on the quivering edge of dissolution.

Tantum ergo sacramentum

Veneremur Cernui

Et antiquum documentum

Nono Cedat Ritui ...

Ah! yes: it was He for whom God waited now -

He who far up beneath that trembling shadow of a dome, itself but the piteous core of unimagined splendour, came in His swift chariot, blind to all save that on which He had fixed His eyes so long, unaware that His world corrupted about Him, His shadow moving like a pale cloud across the ghostly plain where Israel had fought and Sennacherib boasted -

that plain lighted now with a yet deeper glow, as heaven, kindling to glory beyond glory of yet fiercer spiritual fame, still restrained the power knit at last to the relief of final revelation, and for the last time the voices sang. ...

Praestet Fides supplementum

Sensuum defectui. ...

... He was coming now, swifter than ever, the heir of temporal ages and the Exile of eternity, the final piteous Prince of rebels, the creature against God, blinder than the sun which paled and the earth that shook; and, as He came, passing even then through the last material stage to the thinness of a spirit-fabric, the floating circle swirled behind Him, tossing like phantom birds in the wake of a phantom ship. ... He was coming, and the earth, rent once again in its allegiance, shrank and reeled in the agony of divided homage. ...

... He was coming - and already the shadow swept off the plain and vanished, and the pale netted wings were rising to the check; and the great bell clanged, and the long sweet chord rang out - not more than whispers heard across the pealing storm of everlasting praise. ...

... Genitori genitoque  
Laus et jubilatio  
Salus honor virtus quuoque  
Sit et benedictio  
Procedenti ab utroque  
Compar sit laudatio. ...

and once more

PROCEDENTI AB UTROQUE  
COMPAR SIT LAUDATIO. ...

Then this world passed, and glory of it."

Williams may have derived some of the content of his books from Benson. Benson had been used to meet all the aristocracy of Church and State in his father's palaces, where his mother also entertained distinguished writers and artists; Archbishop Benson sat in the House of Lords and was persona grata at Court. When he converted to the Roman Church, it was with the maximum of publicity, since it was only the second time in the history of England that a son of the Archbishop of Canterbury had become a Roman Catholic; he was naturally well received at the Vatican and met many eminent clerics. It was therefore natural to him to fill his novels with the kind of people he had always known, and the important issues with which his family had always been concerned. Cabinet Ministers, cardinals, duchesses and earls appeared in his books because these were the kind of people he knew. Prime Ministers, dukes and Lord Chief Justices were not the kind of people Williams had known from his childhood; but he must have felt that this was the world, if only he had been born to different parents, in which he could have made his mark, and in which his powers would have been recognised. I think Benson's familiarity with this world, and with national and international affairs, fascinated him, and compelled him to introduce

the same sort of atmosphere into his own novels.

Another kind of figure which he might have first met in Benson's work was the Uebermensch, the would-be superman. Williams' imagination was always held by power, and by the acquisition of supernormal powers - it was almost certainly why he joined the Golden Dawn. I have often wondered whether the figures of Nigel Considine and Simon the Clerk owe anything to the character of Felsenburgh in Lord of the World. The plot concerns the eradication of Christianity over the whole world, and the man who plans and masterminds this gigantic operation is one Julian Felsenburgh. He is a mystery figure, who has perhaps lived much longer than the normal span of life but appears not to age, who is seen in all parts of the world, possibly simultaneously, who has charismatic powers and is able to dominate huge numbers of people, and who is worshipped almost as god. It is easy to see how this character might have seized Williams' imagination, and reappeared in his own books. Interestingly enough, the two supermen appear in Williams' first and last books.

I have wondered too whether he did not first meet the theme of substitution in love, which Anne Ridler called one of his most deeply felt preoccupations, in Benson's novels. I have read fairly widely in Victorian and Edwardian fiction, but have met this theme nowhere else, although the theme of self-sacrifice (which is a different thing altogether) is very common. Both Benson and Williams believed in this practice in life as in literature, and both saw every form of co-inherence as possible only because of the Crucifixion, in which Christ bore the weight of all sin. Benson wrote in 1903 to a convert: "You can offer your life for another, as long as you in no sense regard it as apart from Our Lord's One and Only Oblation." Likewise, one of Williams' recommendations for the Order of Co-inherence was "It [the Order] concludes in the Divine Substitution of Messias all forms of

exchange and substitution, and it invokes this Act as the root of all." Benson, like Williams, actually followed this practice. He once offered to bear the desolation of a convert. "That sort of thing", he wrote, "is not at all reserved for the Contemplatives and Religious Orders: people of the most ordinary and sinful sorts do it every day in various forms. It is just the literal acceptance of 'Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.'"

In The Conventionalists there is a sentence which, if Williams read it, may well have suggested to him the idea of substitution in love. The hero is a young man brought up in a conventional upper-class family who go to church on Sundays as a social duty but who would be horrified if religion were to intrude upon daily life. They are therefore outraged when their second son begins to take his religious duties seriously, and disown him when he becomes first a Roman Catholic and then a Carthusian monk. The sentence which may have struck Williams is spoken by a priest about the young man (who is struggling with his new emotions without much help) "For example, he asked my opinion about a very odd idea that had come to him - he did not remember ever having read it or heard it mentioned - but it was nothing else than the Law of Mystical Substitution."

In fact, of Benson's eleven non-historical novels, seven contain the idea of substitution as a main or subsidiary theme. In Initiation the hero, at first hating all ideas of pain or self-sacrifice, with almost pagan beliefs in the right to pleasure and happiness, is gradually led to feel that he must take on himself the burden of his father's unexpiated sins, and all the things in which he took so much enjoyment are gradually withdrawn from him. In Loneliness, a foolish but loving old maid offers herself as expiation for a mortal sin which the heroine is determined to commit, and her death ensures that the girl shall remain innocent. A Winnowing has a neat twist on



the idea of substitution; a young wife whose husband has died suddenly makes a vow on his deathbed that she will give herself entirely to God if only He will bring her husband back from the dead. The husband does indeed return to life, but it is he who is now completely possessed by the idea of giving himself to God, while his wife is horrified at the prospect of giving up her luxurious life, and opposes all his attempts to live more religiously. It is only when her constant opposition has worn him down, and he begins to take up all his former habits and interests, that, to her horror, and determined resistance, she finds herself impelled towards doing whatever God wishes for her. In The Necromancers, Benson's most famous novel, and one which was made into a film in the thirties, the young hero, after the death of the girl he loves, takes up spiritualism in order to communicate with her. He is at last possessed by an evil demon, and his soul is saved only by a battle waged against Hell on his behalf by his adopted sister.

I have given you these few brief summaries to show you how very powerful are the themes of co-inherence and substitution in Benson's novels. Williams acknowledged his debt to Chesterton, but it is not in Chesterton's work that he found these themes. I have not had time to mention Benson's collections of short stories, The Light Invisible and A Mirror of Shalott, which deal entirely with the occult from a religious standpoint, and which may have given Williams the idea of 'spiritual thrillers'. There is a rivetting story in A Mirror of Shalott called "Monsignor's Maxwell's Tale, in which a very devout man, whose love of God is his whole life, actually promises to give up his faith for the salvation of his apostate brother: "There is only one thing to be done," says the man. "I must offer myself for him." "I didn't understand him at first", says the priest who is telling the story, "But we talked a little, and at last I

found that the idea of mystical substitution had seized on his mind. He was persuaded that he must make an offering of himself to God, and ask to be allowed to bear the temptation instead of his brother. ... To tell the truth, I had never come across it before in my own experience." Neither have I come across that phrase in any novelist but Benson.

This very condensed account of R.H. Benson's writing will not of itself have convinced you that my hypothesis is a possible one: but his books are still to be obtained in second-hand bookshops, and I urge you to try to read some of them. You will, I think, admit that there is at least a very real affinity between their themes and beliefs and those of Charles Williams.

I should like to end with a quotation from a biography: "One cannot take up a pen without remembering him - remembering his patience, his courage, his generosity to his correspondents ... who overwhelmed him with letters; ... remembering the long list of books he has left us, books at which, too often, he toiled with weary brain and wearier fingers. ... No living writer has so given of himself in his books, the very depth of his soul, the breadth of his mind, and the heights of his soaring spirit - he has given us all. In the heritage he has left to us, he, being dead, yet speaketh." That was written of Hugh Benson; this Society will know rightly it might have been written of Charles Williams.'

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## OFFICERS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

**Chairman:** Richard Wallis, 6 Matlock Court,  
Kensington Park Road, London W11 3BS (tel: 071  
221 0057),

**Secretary:** Mrs Gillian Lunn, 26 Village Road,  
Finchley, London N3 1TL (tel: 081 346 6025),

**Treasurer:** Richard Wallis, address as above,

**Membership Secretary:** Mrs Lepel Kornicka, 12  
Amherst Avenue, Ealing, London W13 8NQ (tel:  
081 997 0807),

**Lending Librarian:** Rev Dr Brian Horne, 11b  
Roland Gardens, London SW7 3PE (tel: 071 373  
5579),

**Newsletter Editor:** Mrs Molly Switek, 8  
Crossley Street, London N7 8PD (tel: 071 607  
7919).

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