The Charles Williams Society

Newsletter

CW

No. 85

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

28 February 1998: The Librarian, Dr Brian Horne, will speak on The Place of the Lion. The meeting will start at 2.30 pm in the Church Room of St. Matthew's Church, St Petersburgh Place, Bayswater (nearest Underground stations Queensway and Bayswater). N.B. There is not much heating in the Church Room - if the weather is cold, dress warmly.

6 June 1998: Annual General Meeting at 12.00 noon in the Frederic Hood Room, Pusey House, St Giles, Oxford: to be followed at 2.30 pm by a meeting at which Dr Barbara Reynolds will speak on "Charles Williams and Dorothy L Sayers".

14 November 1998: Speaker to be announced. 2.30 pm in St Matthew's Church Room.

OFFICERS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

Chairman: Mrs Eileen Mable, 28 Wroxham Way, Harpenden, Herts. AL5 4PP (tel: 01582 713641)

Secretary: Mrs Gillian Lunn, 26 Village Road, Finchley, London N3 1TL (tel: 0181 346 6025)

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The Newsletter

We are pleased to announce that Mark Brend has been appointed as the new Newsletter Editor and Andrew Williams as Assistant Editor. The two appointments reflect a division of labour. Mark will compile and edit the Newsletter and Andrew will be responsible for its production.

We are very grateful to Mark and Andrew for offering their services and wish them well in this joint venture. Material for inclusion in all future Newsletters should now be sent to Mark.

We apologize to members for the irregular publication of recent Newsletters and for the omissions and typographical errors in the last issue.

The Secretary

We are still looking for someone to take over as Secretary of the Society from Gillian Lunn, who would like to retire at the time of the 1998 AGM. The work is interesting and varied and includes dealing with the Society's correspondence, taking minutes of Council meetings and generally contributing to the smooth running of the Society's activities. The ability to use a computer or typewriter is essential. An electronic typewriter is available if needed. Both Gillian and I are happy to give more detailed information on request. A good Secretary is vital to the work of the Society. Please contact me if you are interested.

Eileen Mable

Congratulations

Our congratulations go to member Andrew Williams and Sarah Atchia on their marriage in July. We wish them every happiness.

New Members

A warm welcome is extended to:

Mrs Marie Barnfield, 25 Egerton, High Legh, Knutsford, Cheshire, WA16 6PT

R M Rowett, Bryngwyn, Wyfold Lane, Peppard Common, Henley-on-Thames, Oxon. RG9 5LR

Dr Marion Way, 5 Foxes Row, Brancepeth, Durham, DH7 8DH

John Heath-Stubbs

To mark John Heath-Stubbs' eightieth birthday in 1998, Carcanet are bringing out a collection of his major literary essays. This will be the fifth collection of his essays published by Carcanet, who also publish his *Collected Poems*. The essays 'consider many of the great English poets from Spenser to the present day.'

The Letters of Dorothy L Sayers 1937-1943: From Novelist to Playwright. Edited by Barbara Reynolds. Published by the Dorothy L Sayers Society. ISBN 0951800 04 3

The second volume of *The Letters of Dorothy L Sayers* is now available and will be reviewed in a subsequent issue of this Newsletter. During the period covered by this book, Dorothy L Sayers' play series *The Man Born to be King* made broadcasting history and she wrote two very influential books, *Begin Here* and *The Mind of the Maker*. *From Novelist to Playwright* also contains references to Charles Williams.

Charles Williams and Current Economic Thought

The talk given to the Society on this subject by Professor John Hibbs in November 1992 has now been published by the Libertarian Alliance. Professor Hibbs has included a list of Charles Williams' chief books and information about the Society.

Anne Scott: An Appreciation

Members will be saddened to hear of the death of Anne Scott at her home in Oxford on 16 October.

Richard Wallis writes:

I was very sorry to hear of the death of Anne Scott. We met as two of the founder members of the Charles Williams Society in 1976. Anne was the first Librarian of the Society and later on I served as Chairman. Anne continued as an active member of the Council until her death, never failing in her support for what it tried to do to promote interest in the work of Charles Williams and in sharing her deep knowledge of his writings and particularly her love for the Taliessin poems.

Anne had been an undergraduate at Oxford when CW was invited to lecture and tutor at the University in 1943 and attended some of his lectures. She wrote of her experience in an article in Newsletter No. 3 entitled "CW as I knew him."

When Anne moved to Oxford in 1980 she gave up being the Librarian and Brian Horne took over the Library which was transferred to King's College London. Anne invited an Oxford Reading Group to meet at her house and this Group, to which students would come, was the most successful of the Reading Groups.

Whenever the Society held its AGM in Oxford, Anne was always looked to with her helpers to ensure that the day's programme went smoothly and successfully for lecturers and members alike.

She was a very splendid person, ever ready to help, always to be relied on and one of whom it can truly be said that she will be much missed.

THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY CONFERENCE
Friday 18 July - Saturday 19 July 1997

The Society's two-day conference in July at the Royal Foundation of St Katharine commenced with early evening drinks and supper, after which the participants adjourned to be welcomed officially by the chairman, who observed that this was the first such conference since 1978. The overseas members attending were especially welcomed.

The Librarian briefly said that Christine English had now started to impose order on the jumble of material in the Reference Library. He would put out boxes of interesting matter for people to look at, including a letter from Alice Meynell to CW, and the edition of *Poetry London* containing John Heath-Stubbs' appreciation of CW's poetry.

In response to a number of requests, Richard Sturch then initiated the conference proper by presenting a brief introduction to the life and writings of Charles Williams. This was followed by a reading of CW's play *The Death of Good Fortune*, introduced by Ruth Spalding, who had played Mary in the first performance in 1939. The play had been written for the Oxford Pilgrim Players, who had wanted something to act together with *Seed of Adam*, but found *The House by the Stable* too short. The play was originally written for six actors (four male, two female), and then adapted and extended to accommodate a company of eight, with the addition of the characters of the Girl and the Youth. Ruth Spalding possessed copies of the different versions. After the reading, she quoted two lines from the first speech in the original version, describing Dante:

> On the steep stair munching the salt bread,
> A dead woman in his heart, and a lost cause.

The discussion that followed turned mainly on the manner of staging the play, the role of Mary, and the play's relation to CW's readings in Boethius and Dante. The readers were:

Mary - Eileen Mable
Good Fortune - Brian Horne
The King - Richard Sturch
The Lover - Andrew Williams
The Magician - Huw Mordecai
The Old Woman - Anne Scott
The Youth - Andrew Smith
The Girl - Gillian Lunn

After the play-reading, there was an opportunity for those present to talk and socialize.

On the Saturday morning, after breakfast, the Revd. Canon Roma A King, Jnr., delivered a paper entitled *From Serge to Michal: CW's Oxford Letters to his Wife*, illustrated with copious quotations from the letters (members will be glad to know that he is in the process of editing a selection of these for publication). A lively conversation ensued as to how the letters reflected CW's character, compared with the memories of those present who knew him. After a break for coffee, the Revd. Huw Mordecai then spoke on *The Continuing Relevance of Charles Williams*, the text of which appears below. This was in large part an account of the speaker's personal response to CW's writings, and provoked much discussion of the nature of evil and CW's understanding of it.

After lunch, Brian Horne spoke on the subject of *Co-Inherence*, making use of *Divorce*, CW's 1920 book of poetry, to illustrate many points. The text of this paper will be published in a future Newsletter.

The extensive conversation afterwards centred around the nature and practice of co-inherence.

In conclusion, the Chairman made a brief speech in which she thanked the staff of the Royal Foundation of St Katharine for their hospitality and care. She also thanked the speakers, Toby English (who had run an impressive bookstall during the two days of the conference) and others, particularly Andrew Williams, Brian Horne and Brenda Boughton, whose idea the conference was. She hoped the Society would hold another conference without a further twenty years' delay.

THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF CHARLES WILLIAMS

A talk given to the Charles Williams Society Conference on Saturday 19 July 1997

I have given this talk a rather grand title - pompous, some might say. However, what I intend to do in it is comparatively modest. There is indeed a paper to be written on the continuing effects that Charles Williams has on novelists and poets, and probably other types of writers as well. Only a month or two ago, as I was browsing in the tiny branch library my local village possesses, I came across a collection of modern short stories on the Grail theme and - to my pleasure and surprise - the introduction recognized Williams as one of the leading modern exponents of this ancient theme. Sadly his influence was not easily detectable in the stories that followed. I suspect that examples like that could be multiplied, but to list them all would demand more research than I have found time for recently. Not only that, but I suspect that such a catalogue would prove dry reading on an occasion such as this. Instead, I would like to offer you some of the reasons why I continue to find Charles Williams relevant, to explore some of the themes and ideas that both challenge and inspire me. Inevitably,

such an approach will be somewhat idiosyncratic, but if there are major areas that you feel I have omitted, I trust you will raise them at the end.

I first read one of Williams' novels when, as an undergraduate in the late 1970s, a friend gave me *Descent Into Hell* as a birthday present, with the words, "I think you'll like this: I'm told it's rather like C S Lewis". (There was a certain irony at work here, of the sort which amused Williams himself. The friend in question was a deeply conservative Evangelical, who thought himself daring when he read anyone as liberal as Lewis. He never got round to reading any Charles Williams, and I am quite sure that, had he done so, he would not have approved of what he found.) Be that as it may, I was fascinated by what I discovered. I'd never read anything quite like this novel, and I was intrigued by the ideas it contained - ideas which, again, were completely new to me, and yet which the author seemed to assume would be familiar to all his readers. At that time the American publishing firm, Eerdmans, were reprinting all of the novels in paperback, and I began tracking them down. I can still remember the frustration of waiting for *All Hallows Eve*, which came out a few years after the rest of the set. Purely by chance I read *The Greater Trumps* before I read any T S Eliot, and it was with great excitement I wrote an essay for my tutor suggesting that the Fool was the inspiration for the famous image: "the still point of the turning world" (*Burnt Norton,1.62*). That was probably the most original idea I had as an undergraduate, and I was both pleased and annoyed when I read Humphrey Carpenter's *The Inklings* and discovered that I had been right, but that this identification was well known.

From then on, Williams' name continued to crop up in all sorts of places. At that time I was completely bowled over by the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the first edition of whose poetry had sunk almost without trace. Widespread appreciation of him came with the

publication of the second edition - edited, I was surprised to discover, by one Charles Williams. I already enjoyed C S Lewis; I now discovered that one of my favourite pieces of criticism, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, was dedicated to Williams, while the central figure in his novel, *That Hideous Strength*, was in some ways a portrait of his friend. When I started asking people what they knew of Charles Williams many people looked blank, but a significant number did not. In fact, their eyes lit up, and I found myself deep in conversations that I did not always understand, but which were compelling even so. My quest to collect his novels widened to include all of his works - a quest I now suspect to be almost as difficult to complete as that for the Grail itself, given the large number of books he wrote or edited. In the late 1980s I began a research degree with Williams as my subject, and it was while I was working on that that I made contact with this Society - a contact that was to prove enormously helpful.

There is nothing particularly unusual in what I have said so far - we will all have a similar story to tell, I suspect. But it does mean that, for almost twenty years now, Charles Williams has been at the back of my mind at least, and often at the front. Others here have a far longer pedigree, I realize, but in my wider circle of friends my attachment to Williams has caused some perplexity. I have done my best to encourage people to read him and, while some have responded well, I have had a fair share of comments such as, "I just don't understand him at all," and particularly, "What *do* you see in him?" None of the present audience respond like that, I feel sure, but it is a question worth considering. Given that Williams never had the large following of his friends and contemporaries, such as Eliot, Lewis or Tolkien, what is it about him that draws us back to him? Why do we still read him with enjoyment, and come to meetings such as this one? Clearly Williams, while still alive, had great charm, and a following that can be partly explained in terms of his personal magnetism. He has now been dead

for over fifty years, and most of us here did not have the privilege of knowing him, and yet there is something about his writing that still stirs us. What is it? The answers we give would all be different, but in the time remaining I would like to share some of the themes to which I keep returning. My own list includes his confidence in omnipotent benevolence, the risks he was prepared to take, his sense of humour and, above all, the challenge he poses - something I can only call a challenge to seriousness.

However, I want to start in another area, and talk about a theme that may be minor, yet which helps put some of the larger ideas into context. The first novel that Williams had published was *War in Heaven*, in 1930; the first character we meet there, if you exclude the corpse which he discovers under his desk, is Lionel Rackstraw, who works in a publishing office. In many ways, despite his opening prominence, Rackstraw remains a minor character. Events happen around him, rather than to him - a murder has already taken place in his office, later his wife will be driven mad by a strange drug, and his son will be kidnapped to be used as a sacrifice - but it will be the actions of others that resolve these situations. Rackstraw actually does very little. And yet he is an intriguing character because of the way in which he views life. To call him a pessimist is a gross understatement, for he sees horror and darkness lurking behind the smallest everyday event. Later in the novel he is caught up in terrible events, but his desolate view of life is established long before they begin. When he returns home, in chapter 2, his thoughts run like this:

> His usual sense of the fantastic and dangerous possibilities of life, a sense which dwelled persistently in a remote corner of his mind, never showing itself in full, but stirring in the absurd alarm which shook him if his wife were ever late for an appointment - this sense now escaped from his keeping, and, instead of being hidden,

> became too universal to be seized .... It occurred to him even as he smiled at Barbara that perhaps another lover had not long left the house; it occurred to him even as he watched Adrian finding pictures of trains in the evening paper that a wild possibility - for a story, perhaps; not, surely not, as truth - might be that of a child whose brain was that of a normal man of forty while all his appearance was that of four. An infant prodigy? No, but a prodigy who for some horrible reason of his own hid his prodigiousness until the moment he expected should arrive. And when they left him to his evening meal, while Barbara engaged herself in putting Adrian to bed, a hundred memories of historical or fictitious crimes entered his mind in which the victim had been carefully poisoned under the shelter of a peaceful and happy domesticity. And not that alone or chiefly; it was not only the possibility of administered poison that occupied him, but the question whether all food, and all other things also, were not in themselves poisonous. Fruit, he thought, might be; was there not in the nature of things some venom which nourished while it tormented, so that the very air he breathed did but enable him to endure for a longer time the spiritual malevolence of the word?
>
> *(War in Heaven, pp. 16-18)*

In fact, so deep is his pessimism that he can shake the confidence of those actively involved in evil. Gregory Persimmons is one of the most unpleasant characters to be found in any novel; he has already driven his father and wife mad, and we see him working to achieve the same result with his son. It is completely in character for him to seek pleasure in twisting the knife a little deeper into Lionel when Barbara has lost her reason. And yet his games do not work:

> [Persimmons] went on accordingly: "There seems a hitch in the way things work. Happiness is always just round the corner."

"No hitch, surely," Lionel said. "The whole scheme of things is malign and impotent. That *is* the way they work. 'There is none that doeth good - no, not one.'"

"It depends perhaps on one's definition of good," Gregory answered. "There is at least satisfaction and delight."

"There is no satisfaction and delight that has not treachery within," Lionel said. "There is always Judas; the name of the world that none has dared to speak is Judas."

.... "But," he said doubtfully, "had Judas himself no delight? There is an old story that there is rapture in the worship of treachery and malice and cruelty and sin."

"Pooh," said Lionel contemptuously; "it is the ordinary religion disguised; it is the church-going clerk's religion. Satanism is the clerk at the brothel. Audacious little middle-class cock-sparrow!"

"You are talking wildly," Gregory said a little angrily. "I have met people who have made me sure that there is a rapture of iniquity."

"There is a rapture of anything, if you come to that," Lionel answered; "drink or gambling or poetry or love or (I suppose) satanism. But the one certainty is that the traitor is always and everywhere present in evil and good alike, and all is horrible in the end."

....A silence fell upon them, and Gregory was suddenly conscious that he felt a trifle sick.

(War in Heaven, pp 167-168)

I have quoted at a little length to establish this bleakness, because it was something that puzzled me when I first read *War in Heaven*. The main message of the book is far more positive; it asserts the benevolence of God, to which I want to move in just a moment. So why is there such a powerful statement of the futility of existence?

Many members of the Society have helped me understand Williams better, but the one to whom I owe the deepest debt died only a few months ago, otherwise I am sure she would have wanted to be here today. Thelma Shuttleworth wrote me several fascinating letters, quite apart from the conversations I had with her at meetings, which illuminated various problems I was working on. When I asked her about this strand of the novel she replied:

> <u>He</u> [Williams] is Rackstraw with wife and child, and job in OUP (that's his desk, and the back way out is the way we would go out to Ludgate Hill to lunch). <u>And</u> the cottage lent by a friend in the country house grounds. That is Charles' despair - he is also Mornington and the Duke, exploring poetry and aspects of Christianity. *(personal letter, 2/2/90)*

Earlier she had sent me the version of the Lord's Prayer that Williams had written for her in 1930, the year *War in Heaven* was published. The clause: "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" was reinterpreted as:

> lead me not any hour into temptation, but deliver me from evil, this thou canst and this thou dost, from treachery, from treachery, from all lust of self; *(personal letter, 2/2/90)*

And so the fear of treachery, the possibility that: "the name of the world that none has dared to speak is Judas," was very real for Williams. I admire his courage in looking this fear full in the face, in feeling the terror that it brings - and still asserting the ultimate benevolence of God. His was no Pollyanna creed born out of natural optimism, but a mature faith that had been tried deeply. In 1943, only two years before he died, he wrote to Alice Mary Hadfield:

> At bottom a darkness has always haunted me - as you know. I am a Christian (as far as I am) by compulsion of mind and sense; "I think, not natural." *(Hadfield, Exploration, p. 213)*

It is because he has the honesty to admit with Rackstraw that: "there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (*Romans 2,12*), that the overall theme of his work carries weight, the belief that: "all things work together for good to them that love God." (*Romans 8,20*)

For it is this belief that is affirmed time and again in Williams' works. Although those who have only a passing knowledge of his works often think of him as a dualist - that is, someone who sees the world as a battleground between two equal and opposite forces of good and evil - nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, his understanding of the nature of evil falls in the philosophical tradition that stretches back to Thomas Aquinas, and behind him to Plato, which sees evil as an absence of good, as non-being. In *He Came Down From Heaven* (1938), Williams discusses the existence of evil in the world, as we see it, and examines the Biblical story of the Fall. It is significant that he entitles that discussion, "The Myth of the Alteration of Knowledge." The temptation faced by the Adam (the perfectly united human couple) was:

> merely to find out what the good would be like if a contradiction were introduced into it .... They knew good; they wished to know good and evil. Since there was not - since there never has been and never will be - anything else than the good to know, they knew good as antagonism. All difference exists in the mode of knowledge.
>
> *(He Came Down From Heaven, pp. 18-19)*

God had not changed; the goodness of what God had done had not changed - neither is a serious possibility. Humanity had changed, had insisted on perceiving good as evil - a choice made by each member of the human race. What is humanly perceived as evil is, therefore, the goodness of God at work. And that goodness remains so firmly in control that even sin can find a place in the scheme of salvation. In his own personal notes on the Arthurian cycle Williams makes the following observation on Garlon, the invisible knight who treacherously kills others, yet is a member of the household of the Grail, and on the final destructive clash between Arthur and Mordred in which they and the kingdom are destroyed:

> In the shape of a little viper, Garlon, the Invisible Knight - *who is Satan to us but the Holy Ghost to the supernatural powers* - provokes the last battle.
>
> *(The Image of the City, p. 178, emphasis added)*

This bold assertion does not only appear in note form, but is embodied in the emblematic figures to be found in his plays. All of his mature plays contain one of these figures, and there is a strong line of continuity between them. For me, the most striking and most successful occurs in *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*, which Williams wrote for the Canterbury Festival of 1936, the year after T S Eliot had given *Murder in the Cathedral*. The symbolic character here, the

Figura Rerum, is a Skeleton. This means that, whatever deeper conclusions the audience may come to, the Skeleton's initial and continuing visual impact is of decay, destruction and death. At first his words and actions are consistent with such an understanding, as he mocks the righteous Cranmer, and declares:

> I only am the pit where Gehanna is sprung
>
> *(Collected Plays, p.11)*

But, almost immediately after this, he is making it clear that he embodies a more subtle purpose:

> ....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. *(Plays, p. 12)*

From Cranmer's point of view the Skeleton may well seem evil, as so much of value - finally even Cranmer's integrity - is destroyed. Yet, what appears to be Satan, finally proves to be the Holy Ghost. When the Archbishop is imprisoned by Queen Mary, he cries out:

> CRANMER: Did I sin in my mother's womb that I was forsaken all my life? Where is my God?
> SKELETON: Where is your God?
> (After a pause)
> When you have lost him you shall at last come into God.
>
> *(Plays, p. 52)*

This is the destruction of all false images of God, of which the Via Negativa speaks; the divine cleansing which we all shun, but which we all need. W H Auden summarizes the work of the skeleton:

> As a messenger and agent of God, he has certain affinities with the Satan of the book of Job; he can read men's hearts, he understands their weaknesses and self-deception, and is permitted to put them to tests which they may well fail; he represents, that is to say, that aspect of the Divine activity which we have in mind when, in the Lord's Prayer, we pray: lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. He is also, in a sense, the voice of the Holy Spirit, of the truth which forces upon our attention the reality which, as Eliot says, we cannot bear very much of. For that reason, too, the silence of the void, the dark night of the soul, when everything in which we have trusted fails, the experience which, the Gospels tell us, even Christ had to endure.
>
> *(W H Auden, Secondary Worlds, Faber and Faber, 1968, p. 32)*

"He is also, in a sense, the voice of the Holy Spirit." The workings of God may seem ironic from a human viewpoint, they may be perceived as destructive, but they remain divine. Thus it is that the Skeleton can describe himself as:

> I am the Judas who betrays man to God. (*Plays, p. 35*)

But the fullest description of the work of the Skeleton comes as Cranmer waits to be taken to the stake:

> Thomas, all your life you have sought Christ
> in images, through deflections; how else can man see?
> Plastic you sought integrity, and timid courage.
> Most men, being dishonest, seek dishonesty;

> you, among 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. (*Plays, p. 53*)

This suggests that Cranmer has found salvation "in corners of sin" - it is through his sin, not despite it, that he has been saved. The Judas, the Satan, has turned out to be Christ's back. Cranmer's cowardice, his overweening love of words, have both obscured his view of God, and finally led him to God. The benevolence of God is clearly at work, for although when Cranmer thought he was moving towards God he was moving away, when he realized his distance he was brought close. This paradoxical view of the relationship between sin and salvation reminds me of the famous saying of Dame Julian of Norwich:

> Sin is behovely, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.
> (*Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love, ch. 27*)

that is, sin is necessary. It is not just an accident that needs to be rectified, but is an integral part of the Divine Purpose:

> that in the dispensation of the fullness of time (God) might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him. (*Ephesians, 1.10)*

or, to repeat a quotation I have already used:

> We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose.
>
> (*Romans, 8.28*)

All things work together, all things will be gathered together. Nothing is superfluous, nothing can be lost - not even that which, at first sight, appeared evil.

In the Arthurian poems Williams often uses the web as an image of the working of God, and of the relationship which holds people together. This web lays down duties and responsibilities and yet it is not onerous:

> manacled by the web, in the web made free;
> there was no capable song for the joy in me:
> (*Taliessin Through Logres, "Taliessin at Lancelot's Mass", p. 91*)

So complex is the weaving of this web, so great the active love of God, that any step away from the centre may yet prove to be part of the path leading to the heart of the design. The lines just quoted come from the last poem in *Taliessin Through Logres*, which describes the final healing of all that has been injured - Arthur reconciled with Lancelot, Guinevere to Blanchefleur - in a celebration of the Mass. It is surely significant that at the service:

> the unseen knight of terror stood as a friend; (*p. 90*)

The forces of destruction have been revealed as the agents of wholeness. Had this been just an abstract idea it would be tempting to dismiss it as a pleasant pious fantasy, interesting to hear but out of touch with reality. Yet this was a creed hammered out by a man who, as we have already seen, knew what it was to struggle with a view of life so bleak that it might be called depressive. Moreover, he lived through

both World Wars, and lost two of his closest friends in the First. That is, Charles Williams had experienced the suffering that evil brings in a far starker way than I know I have. And yet, having looked at that evil, having faced the possibility that:

> the name of the world that none has dared to speak is Judas

his settled conclusion remains that this is:

> the Judas who betrays men to God.

Williams does all this with a far lighter touch than I have suggested so far. Another of my reasons for coming back to him is his sense of humour, which often comes into play at moments which are deeply serious. This is an aspect of his work that deserves a talk all to itself, but let me give you a couple of examples I particularly enjoy. Neither of them gives rise to a deep belly laugh but, even though I know them well, they still bring a smile to my face every time I read them. In *The Greater Trumps*, for example, the turning point of the novel is the revelation of Divine Love that Nancy receives in Church on Christmas Day. Williams prepares us for the wonder of what is to come by stressing how ordinary the service is:

> A door opened; the congregation stirred; a voice from the vestry said: "Hymn 61. 'Christians awake,' Hymn 61." Everyone awoke, found the place, and stood up. (*The Greater Trumps, p. 107*)

That gentle reminder that, even on Christmas Day, the congregation are half asleep, I find amusing because it is so accurate.

Or again, in *The Place of the Lion*, when the great Platonic archetypes have broken though into the world, causing havoc as they disrupt what we think of as the natural order. With a doctor, Anthony Durrant

forces himself to visit the house at the centre of all these disturbances, unsure of what he will find:

> Couldn't he get back now, on some excuse or none, before the door opened and they had to go in where that old man, as he remembered him, lay in his terrible passivity? What new monstrosity, beast of indescribable might or beauty, was even now perhaps dragging itself down the stairs? What behemoth would come lumbering through the hall?
>
> Actually the only behemoth, and though she was fat she was hardly that, was the housekeeper. (*The Place of the Lion, p. 111*)

Mentioning *The Place of the Lion* brings me to my final point, what I have called Williams' challenge to seriousness. It is not a good title, but I can't think of a better one at the moment. Of all his characters, the one who is most important to me is Damaris Tighe. She is writing a thesis on *Pythagorean Influences on Abelard*, she lectures on *The Eidola and the Angeli*:

> "It's just a comparison, you know; largely between the sub-Platonic philosophers on the one side and the commentators on Dionysius the Areopagite on the other, suggesting that they have a common pattern in mind." (*The Place of the Lion, p. 24*)

Therefore, of all the characters, she is the one who ought to recognize what is happening, and be able to identify the Archetypes. However, she is intellectually and spiritually blind, unable to appreciate the object of her study. She is only interested in her doctorate because it will increase her own importance, rather than because these philosophers and their ideas are important in and of themselves. Her father's illness, Anthony's love for her - these are irritating interruptions which she

wants to be rid of, so that she can concentrate upon her work. Because of her attitude to her subject she reduces it to triviality:

> There was to be a graph of human thought as an appendix - three graphs actually, from 500 BC to AD 1200, showing respectively the relation of official thought, cultural thought, and popular thought to the ideas of personalized and depersonalized supernatural powers. By looking at the graph it would be quite easy to see what attitude an Athenian citizen of the age of Thucydides, an Alexandrian friend of Plotinus, or a Burgundian peasant of the Middle Ages had towards this personification ... Personification was in itself evidence of a rather low cultural state; she had called it somewhere "The mind's habit of consoling itself with ideographs." As education developed so a sense of abstraction grew up, and it became more plausible to believe that the North Wind was a passage of air, and not an individual, or that St. Michael was a low-class synonym for - probably for just warfare, and justice pure and simple ...It was a good graph and she was proud of it.
>
> (*The Place of the Lion, p. 127*)

All of this is clearly absurd. Not only are her beliefs about personification deeply challenged, but so too is her attitude towards other people, for she tries to reduce them to points on a graph as well.

When Quentin, needing help himself, tries to help her, she pushes him away contemptuously (*The Place of the Lion, pp. 99-101*), because she wants to continue working on Abelard. On hearing about this Anthony warns her:

> Dearest, you'll be like the fellow in the New Testament; you'll meet Abelard one day and he'll stare at you and say he never knew you.
>
> (*The Place of the Lion, p. 105, ref. to Matthew 7. 21-23*)

This warning is fulfilled when Damaris reaches a turning point. As she sits working for her Doctorate, the safety of her house is shattered by an angelical in the shape of a pterodactyl breaking in. Bit by bit familiar surroundings fade away, until she seems to be in a marshy landscape, attacked by this terrible bird. A figure appears, who might bring help:

> It was Peter Abelard himself, Abelard, mature, but still filled with youth because of the high intensity of his philosophical passion, and he was singing as he came ... Against that angry sky he came on, in that empty land his voice rang out in joy, and she tried to move; she ran a few steps forward, and made an effort to speak. Her voice failed; she heard herself making grotesque noises in her throat, and suddenly over him there fell the ominous shadow of the pterodactyl. Only for a few seconds, then it passed on, and he emerged from it, and his face was towards her, but now it had changed. Now it was like a vile corpse, and yet still it was uttering things: it croaked at her in answer to her own croakings, strange and meaningless words. *Individualiter, essentialiter, categoricum, differentia substantialis* - croak, croak, croak.
>
> (*The Place of the Lion, p. 133*)

This is exactly the way in which she has treated Abelard; she has not responded to "the high intensity of his philosophical passion", she has made him a "vile corpse" through her dissection of his ideas (was Abelard, too, to be fixed on a graph?). Damaris has taken something good, and turned it into something evil, by the power of her perception.

What makes this change plain, what reduces a highly intelligent woman to incoherence, is the "shadow of the pterodactyl" falling over her.

By contrast, Durrant is able to rescue her, and finally to command all the angelicals because he moves in the power of the Eagle. This he does instinctively at first: when Sabot and he meet the Lion, Sabot shoots at it, then runs away. Anthony wants to respond differently:

> To keep himself steady, to know somehow within himself what was happening, to find such a capacity of his manhood even here - some desire of such an obscure nature stirred in him as he spoke. He felt as if he were riding against some terrific wind; he was balancing upon the instinctive powers of his spirit; he did not fight this awful opposition but poised himself within and above it.
>
> (*The Place of the Lion, p. 67*)

As the experience continues he feels almost as though he is in an aeroplane. It is the bookseller, Richardson, who explains what has happened, as he reads from the Latin document that describes "the power of the Divine Ones":

> For though these nine zones are divided into a trinity of trinities, yet after another fashion there are four without and four within, and between them is the Glory of the Eagle. For this is he who knows both himself and others, and is their own knowledge: as it is written *We shall know as we are known* - this is the knowledge of the Heavenly Ones, and it is called the Virtue of the Celestials.
>
> (*The Place of the Lion, p. 92*)

The Eagle seems to represent knowledge and balance together, which might be summarized as wisdom. This capacity exists naturally within Anthony, who learns to exercise it deliberately. Damaris also has the

capacity, but she has perverted it, using it only for herself. When Durrant breaks into her vision and saves her, the Eagle rests on his shoulder and the pterodactyl is seen no more (*The Place of the Lion, p. 134*). But it is not that the one has scared the other away, rather they are the same thing seen in different ways. Damaris has known "good as antagonism," she has turned good into evil. Anthony, acting as Adam, reverses that and knows evil as "an occasion of good".

Because she thought she was dealing with ideas that were no more than abstract philosophical speculation, because she reduced that philosophy to points on a graph, Damaris meets the mature Abelard and finds only a corpse; the eagle of wisdom appears to her as a pterodactyl that steals rational thought from her. To compare small things to great, for a moment, I too study great thinkers from the past, and try to understand them so that I may pass that understanding on. While engaged in that study there is always the temptation to be over-selective in my choice of material, so that those thinkers appear to support my own prejudices. There is also the deeper temptation to think that all that matters is assembling a coherent intellectual case, and to leave on one side the question of whether or not that case is true. Damaris Tighe shows the danger of such an approach.

And so I come back to Charles Williams for many reasons. I admire his courage, and the risk he takes in presenting so forcibly the darkness that can lie at the heart of experience. I receive new strength when he affirms, in the face of that darkness, that God is all powerful and all loving. I enjoy the humour which is so much part of the way he presents all this. But I am also challenged by him to take my own words seriously, as I speak or write them. For all of these reasons, but particularly for the challenge of Damaris Tighe, I am grateful to him.

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For information please contact Brenda Boughton (01865 515589)

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