

Charles Williams

Society

Newsletter

No. 89 Winter 1998 —

2 THE SOCIETY

The Charles Williams Society

The Society was founded in 1975, thirty years after Charles Williams's sudden death at the end of the Second World War. It exists to celebrate Charles Williams and to provide a forum for the exchange of views and information about his life and work.

Members of the Society receive a quarterly newsletter and may attend the Society's meetings which are held three times a year. Facilities for members also include a postal lending library and a reference library housed at King's College London.

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Reading groups

For information about the **Oxford** reading group please contact Brenda Boughton, tel: 01865 515589.



Charles Williams Society

No 89 Winter 1998

From the Editor

Having been doing the job of Editor for a year now I feel able to offer a few observations about the Newsletter and associated activities. Consequently this column is a little longer than usual!

First and foremost, I would very much welcome more contributions from members. These could include anything from brief letters to longer articles. They need not fit into any "house" style, and need not reflect any "orthodox" view of C.W.'s work (if there is such a thing!). I think this publication should be a forum for discussion about the life of C.W. and his work. There is plenty of room for debate, an exchange of views and even straightforward disagreement, as long as it is all directed at an enlarging of our understanding. I am sure all mem-

bers of the Society would, at times, be able to make valid and interesting contributions.

On the inside back cover of this issue there appears for the first time an Editorial Policy. I have decided to introduce it for a number of reasons. Firstly, I hope it will provide useful guidance for anybody considering making a submission. Secondly, as Andrew and I will shortly be producing two publications – the Newsletter and the Web site - and will therefore be dealing with much more written material, it will make the process of editing and producing both publications much easier. Thirdly, such policies - whether made public or not are the norm in "professional" publications, and our aim is to make the Society's publications as "professional" as possible given the

obvious resource constraints.

Finally, another update on the progress of the Web site. Andrew has now created the structure of the Web site - there remains the task of writing material for each of the sections before we can go on-line (that is, publish the Web site on the Internet). We had originally intended to go on-line by the end of this year. That will probably not be possible now. Both Andrew and I have limited time to give to the project, especially given our commitments to producing the Newsletter, and we are not able to write all of the material needed for the site.

We are in the process of exploring whether it will be feasible for us to use an existing biographical essay on C.W. We also have a selected bibliography written by Brian Horne. These two pieces would form a good basis for the site, but we will need to gather together more material if it is to become as vibrant and informative as we would wish. We would, therefore, very much value contributions from other Society members.

We would welcome any suggestions. Short personal recollections

from those members who knew C.W. would be particularly interesting, as would personal views on the significance of C.W.'s work and his influence on other writers etc. And would anybody be willing to produce a "time-line" history of C.W.? This would take the form of a list of significant dates in C.W.'s life, with a , brief explanatory sentence by each date. I should also mention that the content of the site will not be static we hope that it will evolve over time, so even if you are unable to contribute now the opportunity will still be open to you in the future.

If you do feel you would like to take part in this project please do get in touch. Please remember that the guidelines in the Editorial Policy apply for the Web site and the Newsletter. I look forward to hearing from you.

Wishing you all a Merry Christmas,

Mark Brend

Charles Williams Society meetings

Saturday 27th February 1999

This meeting will include a showing of a video of a recent performance of Charles Williams's *The Masque of the Manuscript* and *The Masque of Perusal.* Please note that this meeting will start at 2.00 pm and not the usual time of 2.30 pm.

It will take place in St. Matthew's Church Room, St. Petersburgh Place, Bayswater, London (nearest underground stations: Queensway and Bayswater). Please note that there is not much heating in the Church Room—if the weather is cold, dress warmly.

♦ Saturday 5th June 1999

Annual General Meeting at 12.00 noon in the Church Room of St. Matthew's Church. At 2.30 pm Grevel Lindop will speak on "Charles Williams, Robert Graves and the White Goddess".

♦ Saturday 16th October 1999

Bishop John V. Taylor will speak on The Doctrine of Exchange. The title is to be confirmed. The meeting will take place in Pusey House, Oxford, at 2.30 pm.

From Gillian Lunn to the Members

I am quite overwhelmed by your kindness — what a wonderful retirement present! The flowers are glorious and I am happily giving thought to spending the very generous cheque.

Thank you so very much.

Gillian

Council meeting

The Council of the Charles
Williams Society met on
Saturday November 14th 1998
at St Matthew's, Bayswater.

- The Council agreed that as back copies of the Newsletter had to be individually produced the price would have to be increased to £2 per Newsletter for UK members and £3 for overseas members. (see insert with this Newsletter for further information on back copies).
- Andrew Williams reported on progress with the Web site, for which a framework had now been prepared. It was hoped to show Society members at some future meeting the completed site before it was actually opened.
- Council discussed the suggestion of some members that part of our funds be used to publish some of Charles Williams's less available writings. This was approved in principle, though a lot of work needed to be done (e.g. over copyright).

 A committee was formed to plan the Conference to be held at the Royal Foundation of St. Katherine in June 2000.

Richard Sturch

New member

A warm welcome is extended to the following new member of the Charles Williams Society:

Mr Guy Carter
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Back issues

As mentioned above, back issues of the Society's Newsletter are now available for purchase. These provide a fascinating record of comment and reflection on Charles Williams and his work dating back nearly a quarter of a century. The list of articles in the accompanying insert conveys something of the breadth of scholarship involved. We hope that newer members, in particular, will choose to avail themselves of the opportunity to obtain these valuable publications.

8 News

The Society's AGM, 1998

The AGM was held on 6^{th} June 1998 at Pusey House, Oxford. Eileen Mable chaired the meeting.

- Gillian Lunn, General Secretary, reported that last year's conference had taken place as planned, and was generally felt to be a resounding success. All Society meetings through the year had taken place as planned. She mentioned two long-standing Society members who had died during the year, Ann Scott and Sharon Battles. Only a few bids were received for the recent postal auction of books.
- Brian Horne, Librarian, reported that the cataloguing of papers in the Reference Library was now complete.
- Richard Jeffery, Treasurer, presented the accounts for year ending 28th February 1998. The Society's finances remain "healthy", with assets of £9864.40. £2122.65 was spent during the year on computer equipment, for use in the production of the Newsletter and the setting up and maintaining of a Society Web site.
- Newsletter Editor, Mark Brend, said that as he had to date edited only one issue, his report would be brief. He mentioned the excellent contribution of Andrew Williams, who is responsible for the new layout of the Newsletter. Andrew and Mark are working together to create a Society Web site.
- Lepel Kornicka, Membership Secretary, reported that the membership of the Society was now 110, representing a slight fall compared to last year. This was felt to be largely due to the process of discontinuing the membership of those who had not paid subscriptions for 2 years or more.

Eileen Mable, Chairman, paid tribute to Gillian Lunn, who was resigning as Secretary. Eileen expressed gratitude for Gillian's well-informed presentation of the Society, and her friendship. She thanked all members of the Council for their work in the past year, making particular mention of Lepel Kornicka, who in addition to serving as Membership Secretary provides refreshments at Society meetings. Eileen also mentioned last year's conference. 27 people attended, including some overseas visitors. Plans are now being made for another conference in June 2000.

Eileen closed her report by saying that the Society is a place where poets should be honoured, and reminding us that "poet" was the title C.W. most desired. She went on to say:

"We are fortunate indeed that we have a number of poets among our members today. Pre-eminent among them are Anne Ridler and John Heath-Stubbs.

John will be 80 next month, and Anne also has a birthday in July. This is a good opportunity to offer them our congratulations, our affection and our gratitude. We thank them for the exercise of their life calling – for right words in a right order – for enabling us to see what we might otherwise not see, to understand what we might otherwise not understand...."

- Richard Sturch was elected as the new General Secretary. Gillian Lunn was elected as an Ordinary Member. Andrew Williams was elected as Production Editor.
- The following members were re-elected to the Council: Eileen Mable (Chairman), Brian Horne (Librarian), Richard Jeffery (Treasurer), Lepel Kornicka (Membership Secretary), Mark Brend (Newsletter Editor), Brenda Boughton and John Heath-Stubbs.

The Place of the Lion

Chasing Philosophical Rainbows

The following paper was delivered by Brian Horne at a meeting of the Charles Williams Society on 28th February 1998.

About halfway through this novel the protagonist, Anthony Durrant, struggles to explain to his fiancée, the scholar Damaris Tighe, the meaning of the extraordinary, and terrifying, events that are occurring all around them – breaking in on life in the peaceful English countryside.

... It's the thing that matters: the truth is in the thing. Heart's dearest, listen – the things you study are true, and the philosophers you read knew it. The universals are in the world, and what are you going to do about it? Besides write about them.

What are these universals he is talking about? What is Damaris studying? Why should she have to 'do' anything if she is a scholar? Is not scholarship enough? What is this relationship, which Anthony seems to find so important, between the truth and the thing?

The Place of the Lion was the third of Charles Williams's novels to be published and it appeared in 1931. Like all his novels it has, as its central theme, the relationship between the natural and the supernatural; between the world we experience as we walk down the street, talk to friends, conduct our business, live out our quotidian, perhaps uneventful and unexciting existences, and the vibrant spiritual world that surrounds us: unseen and for the most part unfelt and unknown – except that we have heard rumours of it which disturb our dreams and excite our imaginations, making us aware from time to time of a strangeness to life that we have not grasped: a strangeness which is both threatening and life-

giving. Most of his novels tell the story of the sudden incursion into the daily round of 'telegrams and anger' of supernatural power; power of inexplicable beauty and terror. The barriers that normally separate the worlds suddenly dissolve and the natural world is, for a moment, seen in the light of the supernatural. Charles Williams portrays this irruption of the supernatural in the natural in a variety of ways; and none is more fascinating than the way in which he does it in *The Place of the Lion*.

Intimations of what he was going to do appeared at the end of the novel which immediately preceded it, *Many Dimensions*. Towards the end of that book Williams describes a scene which points forward to the new approach he was going to adopt in the novel that was coming.

He (Lord Arglay) saw – even while, rightly wise in his own proper generation among these things, he refused to believe too easily that the Stone no longer rested on the table but that it threw out of itself colour shaped into the table: the walls and furniture were in themselves reflections of that Centre in which they secretly existed: they were separations, forms, and clouded visibilities of its elements, and he also and other mortals who moved among them.

(Many Dimensions. Faber & Faber. 1947, p. 230)

Stylistically the passage is clumsy and, in the context of the novel, unconvincing, but it is interesting for the new slant it gives on the movement of Williams's mind. The words 'shaped', 'separations', 'forms' hint at a philosophical interest which some have seen as Platonic. In *The Place of the Lion* these so-called Platonic concepts were to become the means by which the author could once again focus his readers' attention on the mysterious relationship between the world of sense and the world of spirit. The book is plotted along the axis of the notion of archetypal imagery – admittedly a quasi-Platonic notion. Fantastic creatures of extraordinary potency: a lion, a butterfly, a snake; archetypal beasts, suddenly ap-

pear in the English countryside. Anthony, after a meeting with one of these creatures, enters into an argument with a friend whose, understandably bewildered, imagination cannot accept the existence of anything beyond the phenomenal, material world of the five senses.

"I can't entirely disbelieve it without refusing to believe in ideas," Anthony answered, "and I can't do that. I can't go back on the notion that all these abstractions do mean something important to us. And mayn't they have a way of existing that I didn't know? Haven't we agreed about the importance of ideas often enough?"

(The Place of the Lion Faber & Faber. 1965. p. 63)

The publication of this third of Williams's novels was not greeted with universal acclaim; George Orwell, for example, roundly dismissed it, saying it was intellectually confusing and philosophically promiscuous. Well, of course, it is - both of those things; but while we may be concerned about the former we need not worry about the latter. My judgement is that it is less confusing than Orwell claimed - though it is not as well constructed a novel as either Descent Into Hell or All Hallows' Eve - and that its philosophical promiscuity forms a substantial part of the interest of the book. That very promiscuity, however, does make it quite difficult to assess. Where did Williams get all this philosophical and theological stuff from? What were his sources? It is always as well to be alert to the dangers attendant upon the practice of what is called 'source criticism' when one is dealing with imaginative literature. It can become the literary equivalent of chasing rainbows - and sometimes finding only fool's gold. Searching for theological and philosophical influences in works like novels or poems can lead easily and quickly into the realm of the ridiculous; into merely fantastic speculation. Few artists proceed along the path of the scholar, laying out their sources for inspection and verification; and as their primary concern is not for this kind of accuracy, but for truth of a different kind, they are frequently unaware and careless of whether sources are primary or secondary. Williams is just such an artist: his

remarks about the necessity for 'accuracy' elsewhere are not to be confused with the concerns of the meticulous scholar. He was quite prepared to throw his net far and wide and gather in anything that suited his purpose (promiscuity); and could, himself, be quite careless about sources. His vagueness about the origin of the ubiquitous maxim: 'This also is Thou: neither is this Thou' illustrates the point. There is a kind of intellectual playfulness about this novel that some readers find irritating but I find engaging.

Critics are wont to refer to the Platonism of *The Place of the Lion* but I can see little evidence from the novel itself that Williams had read much Plato or that he was deliberately incorporating ideas from the thinking of the ancient Greek philosopher into the book. Such Platonism as there is probably comes from secondary, perhaps Medieval Christian, sources, and is not the less interesting for that. Furthermore, in the novel he seems to lay a trail of clues which leads us in precisely this direction.

There is, first, a great deal of talk about Medieval theology: the title of Damaris Tighe's thesis is 'Pythagorean Influences on Abelard'. The Platonism of Thomas Aquinas is referred to, and at one point a scholarly paper is delivered under the title, 'The Eidola and the Angeli. "A comparison between the sub-Platonic philosophers on the one side and the commentators on Dionysius the Areopagite on the other". Williams has great fun with these exaggeratedly academic subjects. Perhaps that is why so many readers were suspicious of this novel; they found the ironic, jocular tone uncomfortable. More important than all these allusions however is the single sentence that introduces John the Scot. Charles Williams can only mean the ninth century scholar and philosopher-theologian, John Scotus, sometimes called Erigena. Again whether he had first-hand knowledge of the work of this somewhat obscure figure or not is a matter for conjecture. There are two references to him in The Descent of the Dove, though no direct quotations from any of the texts of the early medieval scholar. Nonetheless, there is good reason for saying that, even if Williams knew of Erigena's complex thinking only by hearsay, the principal themes of the Scot's theology attracted him and that the ideas of the novel owe more to the principles of Erigena's De Divisione Naturae

than they do to any other philosophical system. De Divisione Naturae, Frederick Copleston is careful to remark, is not easy to interpret 'since the author's attempt to express Christian teaching and the philosophical doctrine of Augustine on the lines suggested by the Pseudo-Dionysius and the Neo-Platonic philosophy leaves room for dispute whether John Scotus was an orthodox Christian or very nearly, if not quite, a pantheist', (A History of Philosophy, Bellarmine Series, London, 1950. Vol. II, p. 114) Williams's free, though perfectly justifiable, adaptation of the, perhaps only partially understood, system of Erigena makes the task of unravelling the intellectual threads in the novel particularly difficult – and intriguing. Chasing rainbows, even philosophical ones, can bring its own peculiar rewards: part of the fun is in the chase.

The 'divisions' of which John Scotus speaks in *De Divisione Naturae* are divisions of process not divisions of essence, for the basis of his system is a cycle of evolution and involution. Being is seen to originate in a primeval unity and to pass by stages through a 'world' of Ideas (archetypal images) and sensible phenomena (material things) back to original unity. The world of 'things', matter, is said to participate in, or rather emanate from, the world of 'Ideas' - these archetypal images. So the material objects of our lives, matter itself, are shadows of the archetypal images and are destined to return to the archetype, as the archetypes themselves are destined, ultimately, to return to the oneness of the Divine. The full significance of the strange scene in *The Place of the Lion* in which Mr. Tighe, Damaris's father, witnesses the absorption of all the individual butterflies into one great butterfly now becomes apparent. This scene, and the others like it, signifies the beginning of a great Return to Origins.

A fictional presentation obviously cannot rely on the abstractions of philosophy when describing the archetypal images – Justice, Beauty, Truth, Love — to make its impact. Some concretisation is needed, and Williams audaciously concretises his Ideas in the shape of beasts – a lion, a snake, an eagle. But he engages in a delicious, neat academic joke by pretending to find justification for these animal representations in the writings of a sixteenth century Christian Gnostic whom he conjures into being specially for the occasion. A fragmentary

manuscript – the address of one Marcellus Victorinus of Bologna to Pope Leo X in 1514 – turns up unexpectedly in a second-hand bookshop, and Williams produces some passages of delightful, and almost totally convincing, pastiche as extracts from this 'sub-Scotist' document are read and translated by one of the characters.

For by such means the Master in Byzantium ... expounded to us certain of the symbols and shapes whereby the Divine Celestials are expressed, but partly in riddles lest evil men work sorcery ... As it is written: Michael and his angels fought against the devil and his angels, and the dragon was cast out. Which is falsely apprehended by many of the profane vulgar ... for they ... suppose that the said dragon is himself a creation and manifest existence, and not rather the power of the Divine Ones arrogated to themselves for sinful purposes by violent men. Now this dragon which is the power of the lion is accompanied also by a ninefold order of spectres, according to the composed wonders of heaven . For though 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 the others... and is their own knowledge.

(pp. 90 - 92)

In this exaggeratedly eclectic excerpt it is possible to detect echoes of the famous first century Jewish thinker Philo of Alexandria (20 BC - 50 AD): 'the divine celestials', and references to the nine orders of angels discussed by the Christian mystical writer of the sixth century, Dionysius the Areopagite (circa 500) in his book, *Celestial Hierarchy*. But the most significant reference is the last one. This is a repetition and an elaboration of Erigena's own exposition of the activity of the Word of God derived from the thought of both Dionysius and the seventh century theologian of the Eastern Church, Maximus the Confessor. The Eagle, which for many centuries has been the primary symbol of the Word of God

(hence all those brass lecterns in the shape of an eagle in English churches) plays the same role here as the Word does in Erigena's system. According to Gorden Leff, the medieval historian of our own day, 'The Word ... is the intermediary from the One to the many. It contains all the immaterial archetypes of being, and these are transmitted through the Holy Spirit into actual things, divided into their genera, species, and individuals. Creation, strictly speaking, becomes a procession from God through these first causes or principles into incorporeal and corporeal beings.' (Medieval Thought, Penguin Books. 1965. p. 69) For Erigena, the Ideas i.e. the 'primordial causes', come into being by means of the operation of the Logos, the Word, so that in creating primordial causes, God appears to Himself, becomes known to Himself.

At the conclusion of the reading from Marcellus Victorinus's manuscript Anthony Durrant experiences a terrifying sense of the dissolution of the known, established world of thought and feeling and a receives a bewildering vision of the Eagle. The meaning of this vision has to be discovered; and discovered it is – by him, later. Man, according to Erigena, made in the image of God is the microcosm of creation: the link between the material and the spiritual. Williams goes beyond this to suggest that he is not merely the link between the spheres but is the locus of authority in both worlds. He is given mastery over the universals too, and in an extraordinary scene towards the end of the novel Anthony assumes the role of the archetypal man – Adam – who restores the material world to its former pattern by performing that action of command exercised by the original Adam: the naming of the beasts (Ch. XVI).

Of course, it is unreasonable to demand philosophical consistency of a novelist, but it has to be admitted that, for all its intellectual exuberance, *The Place of the Lion* has so many loose ends and ill-fitting parts that one can understand and even sympathise with the impatience of George Orwell when he said that he found Williams in this novel '... quite unreadable, one of those writers who just goes on and on and have no idea of selecting'. (*The Selected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell.* 1968. Vol. IV. p. 504). The ideas in *The Place of the Lion* are, indeed, a jumble of Platonism, Neo-Platonism, magic, Gnosticism,

medieval theology and so on, and one is left wondering how seriously the author expected his readers to take it all. But beneath the intellectual confusion and the bravura writing of the surface there moves a story of human relationships; a story in which is expressed a single unshakeable conviction which is unmistakably Christian in origin: the conviction that love is the means of redemption.

It is treated at two levels in *The Place of the Lion*. There is the friendship-love of Quentin and Anthony, and the romantic love of Anthony and Damaris. More clearly than in any of the earlier novels the concept of love's redemptive power is here portrayed. At the brink of her destruction, for instance, Damaris is rescued by the sudden realisation of her love for Anthony; of her need for, and her dependence upon, his love for her.

There was nothing around her but a hideous and vile corruption, nothing, nothing except a vibration that went rhythmically through her, as if - almost from somewhere within her - a horse were galloping. And then she heard her name. ... When she heard it she felt herself straining to hear it again, and did, but this time with a note of command in it ... She obeyed; not easily, but she obeyed.

(p. 133 - 134)

And it becomes apparent that Anthony's power to assume the character of the archetypal man, in the closing pages of the book, and re-name creation in imitation of the Adam in the Genesis story lies in his own capacity to love. The scene is of particular interest because of its extraordinary eclecticism: the Neo-Platonist's Ideas and Universals, the Biblical (and Philonic) Cherubim and Seraphim, Gnostic theories of the power of the divine names – all make their appearance, and Anthony stands before the gathering animal kingdom like a mighty magician casting a spell. But the scene is concluded in a manner that owes nothing to Plato, Gnosticism or Erigena; it is, uniquely, Charles Williams's own vision of Christian truth.

All things were named — all but man himself, then the sleep fell upon the Adam, and in that first sleep he strove to utter his name, and as he strove he was divided and woke to find humanity doubled. The name of mankind was in neither voice but in both; the knowledge of the name and its utterance was in the perpetual interchange of love. (p. 191)

A year before *The Place of the Lion* was published Williams had written to Thelma Shuttleworth: 'The older I get the more amazed I become at the pure convenience – of what we call Love. It is not merely beautiful; it is useful. Which, of course, it said it was all along'. (An Introduction to Charles Williams. By Alice Mary Hadfield. London 1959. p 140). The Place of the Lion, however, takes it further. Love may very well be convenient and useful, but it also has authority and power: its work is the work of regeneration. In the last two novels he wrote, Descent Into Hell and All Hallows' Eve the distinctive nature of this activity of love and its mysterious power receives a fuller fictional investigation. The issues are presented with a startling clarity: either one learns to love or one dies; and love is demanding in the extreme. The Place of the Lion may not have the intellectual clarity or artistic integrity of those later novels, but it is, in its own peculiar way, of singular interest.

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Editorial Policy

The Charles Williams Society's Newsletter and Web site have two functions. Firstly, to publish material about the life and work of Charles Williams. Secondly, to publish details of the activities of the Society.

Contributions to the Newsletter and the Web site are welcome. If you wish to submit a contribution, please take note of the following:

- Submissions should be sent to the Editor.
- Submissions over 300 words should be made on floppy disc, typewritten paper, or by e-mail.
- Submissions under 200 words can be hand-written.
- Submissions on paper should be one-sided and double spaced.
- All quotations should be clearly referenced, and a list of sources included.
- The Editor reserves the right to decide whether to publish a submission.

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