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The
Charles
Williams
Society



Newsletter

No. 92 AUTUMN 1999

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.

Officers of the Society

President: **John Heath-Stubbs**

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|---|--|
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<i>Until the appointment of a new editor, please send all newsletter material and editorial correspondence to Eileen Mable.</i> |
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Reading groups

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



The
**Charles
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No 92 Autumn 1999

From the (temporary) Editor

We welcome John Heath-Stubbs as the first President of this Society. "There may but need not necessarily be a President..." says our Constitution. It was the unanimous and enthusiastic wish of those present at the June AGM that John be invited to accept this office. We are honoured to have him as our President. John has done much to advance interest in Charles Williams's work. He is held in great affection and respect by us and it is fitting that a poet of John's stature should be President of the Charles Williams Society. We know how highly C.W. himself held the poet's calling.

It was good to have a few more members at this year's AGM. With the election of John as President and that of two new members, Guy Carter and Edward Gauntlett, to the Council,

the meeting was quite a lively affair and a happy precursor to Grevel Lindop's talk on 'Charles Williams, Robert Graves and *The White Goddess*' in the afternoon. This was learned, witty and completely absorbing. It will appear in a future issue.

I have only recently had news of the publication of Charles Hadfield's biography/autobiography last year. *Charles Hadfield – Canal Man and More* by Joseph Boughey (Sutton Publishing Limited) gives a full account of Charles as the world's leading waterways historian. Many of us, I suspect, were not fully aware of his eminence. The book also contains Charles's own account of his private life and his love for Alice Mary. We hope to review the book.

With all good wishes,

Eileen Mable

Charles Williams Society meetings

- ◆ **Saturday 16th October 1999**
Bishop John V. Taylor will speak on The Doctrine of Exchange. The meeting will take place in Pusey House, St. Giles, Oxford, at 2.30 pm.
 - ◆ **Saturday 5th February 2000**
Dr. Georgette Versinger will speak on a subject to be announced later. The meeting will take place in the Church Room of St. Matthew's Church, St. Petersburg Place, Bayswater, London, W2. at 2.30 pm.
 - ◆ **Saturday 6th May 2000**
Annual General Meeting in Pusey House, St. Giles, Oxford at 1 pm. At 2.30 pm the Revd. Graham Leonard will speak on a subject to be announced later.
 - ◆ **Saturday 14th October 2000**
In the Church Room of St. Matthew's Church at 2.30 pm. Speaker to be arranged.
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Society conference

The Conference will be held from **Friday 16 June to Saturday 17 June 2000** at The Royal Foundation of St. Katharine, London E14. The speakers will be Dr. Glen Cavaliero, Dr. Charles Huttar and Dr. Stephen Medcalf. Dr. Brian Horne will present readings from *Arthurian Torso* and the Taliessin Poems.

Application forms and further details will be included in the next Newsletter.

Annual General Meeting report

The Annual General Meeting of the Charles Williams Society was held on Saturday 5th June 1999 at St. Matthew's Church, Bayswater.

1. The Chairman welcomed those present, fifteen in all. Apologies were received from Brenda Boughton and Ruth Tinning. The Chairman said that Ann Ridler had broken her hip and was at present in hospital; a card of good wishes was circulated for signature.

 2. **Reports from Officers.**
 - ◆ The *General Secretary* reported on the AGM of the Alliance of Literary Societies. The proposed universal insurance scheme had been abandoned.
 - ◆ The *Librarian* reported a quiet year with only three borrowings. The third volume of Dorothy L. Sayers' letters had been acquired.
 - ◆ The *Treasurer's* report and accounts would appear in full in the Newsletter (see pages 8 and 9). There had been less activity than last year. Income had been £1122, expenditure £1225 (chiefly on the newsletter and on software for the computer), so that there had been a deficit of just over £100. There were £9760 in the bank and building society; most of our funds had been moved to the latter, so that income from interest should increase by £100 or so.
 - ◆ The *Newsletter* report was given by Andrew Williams. The year had begun with an editorial team of two, but Mark Brend had had to resign early on in the year. Because of work pressure, a new Editor and an assistant for himself were both very badly needed. The back number service was now in use.
 - ◆ The *Membership Secretary* reported that the total membership was now 111, 3 up on last year: 81 were in the United Kingdom, 30 overseas. Three members had not yet paid their 1998 subscriptions. Four UK members and one overseas had joined during the year; another four UK and one overseas had joined so far in 1999.
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- ◆ The *Chairman* thanked the members of Council, especially thanking Mark Brend and Andrew Williams for the high standard of the Newsletter. The Web site was on hold at present, as there was no Editor to organise it.

The Holywell Cemetery, in which the grave of Charles and Michal Williams was located, was only cleared a quarter of the area at a time, to allow wildlife to flourish. It was hoped that it would be possible to turf over the Williams grave and get it regularly tended. Mr Michael Williams had given his approval to this, and Richard Sturch would be trying to get it arranged.

A Conference had been booked for June 16th – 17th 2000 at the Royal Foundation of St. Katharine. There would be three speakers, and it was hoped that Toby English would be able to run a bookstall. Details and a booking form would appear in the Newsletter in due course.

3. Elections.

John Heath-Stubbs was unanimously (and to applause) elected to the post of President, which had hitherto been vacant. The following were proposed, seconded and elected as ordinary members of Council: Brenda Boughton, Guy Carter, Ed Gauntlett, and Gillian Lunn. The officers (Eileen Mable, Richard Jeffery, Lepel Kornicka, Richard Sturch, Brian Horne and Andrew Williams) continue in office.

4. Other business.

John Hibbs reported that his paper on *Charles Williams and Modern Economic Thought* had been republished by the Libertarian Alliance, with a list of Williams's main writings.

Gillian Lunn reported the death of Bertie Shuttleworth.

Brian Horne thanked the Chairman for all she had done for the Society, and she was warmly applauded.

Richard Sturch.

Society accounts

Income and expenditure account for the year ending February 28th 1999

Income	1998-9		Expenditure	1998-9	
		(1997-8)			(1997-8)
Subscriptions and donations	£1000.80	(£1337)	Newsletters	£801.33	(£353)
Interest	£121.72	(£88)	Hire of hall	£90.00	(£125)
Conference	—	(£930)	Expenses	£146.39	(£177)
Legacy	—	(£7278)	Software	£187.42	—
Total	£1122.52	(£9633)	Computer	—	(£2123)
			Conference	—	(£964)
			Leaflets,		
Balance of expenditure over income:			books, etc.	—	(£226)
	£102.62		Total	£1225.14	(£3968)

Assets

28th February 1998:

28th February 1999:

Royal Bank of Scotland current account	£6754.64	£1530.30
Bristol and West building society	£3112.87	£8234.59
Total	£9867.51	£9764.89

Excess of expenditure over income 1998-9

£102.62
£9867.51

This year, unlike last, there was no major movement of the Society's money affairs, apart from transferring £5000 from the bank to the building society to earn some income. The payments on newsletters were for four letters this year, and about two in last year's column.

Richard Jeffery, Treasurer

Wanted

We still need a Newsletter Editor and a production assistant to help Andrew Williams with distribution.

The Newsletter plays a vital part in the life of the Society. Help is needed urgently.

Anyone interested should contact Eileen Mable, Andrew Williams or Mark Brend to find out more.

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Charles Williams and Dorothy L. Sayers

The following paper was delivered by Dr. Barbara Reynolds at a meeting of the Charles Williams Society on 6th June 1998.

Charles Williams entered the life of Dorothy L. Sayers at three crucial moments. On each occasion he changed the direction of her creative activity. The results were momentous. The first was her religious drama for Canterbury Cathedral, *The Zeal of Thy House*, which itself had momentous consequences; the second was her translation and interpretation of Dante which has reached over a million readers; the third was her religious drama for Lichfield Cathedral, *The Just Vengeance*, which she once told me was the best thing she had ever done.

This is a remarkable sequence of events. It was unplanned and yet there is a pattern in it, of the kind that makes people say "This cannot have happened by chance". There are minor links connecting the three crucial interventions. The earliest goes back to 1918. In that year Dorothy Sayers published her second volume of poetry, *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*. She had not met Charles Williams then and was probably unaware of his existence. But fate, or whatever it is, had him standing in the wings, ready to make his first entrance. Dorothy Sayers had heard that Theodore Maynard, a Catholic poet and critic, intended to review her poems unfavourably in *The New Witness*, so in a spirit of mischievous defiance she persuaded her friend Muriel Jaeger to write to the journal under a series of assumed names and stir up discussion. There would be, she said, "a scrumptious row" which would make the book "go like wildfire".

Muriel Jaeger obligingly entered into the game and wrote under two names "H. Hunter" ("heresy-hunter") and "M. James" (a combination of her initial and her nickname, Jim). "Very wicked of you", wrote Dorothy, "they'll take you for M. R. James." Theodore Maynard had asserted that the poems equated Christianity with paganism. Several genuine correspondents refuted this, among them Wilfred Rowland Childe, a volume of whose poems had preceded Dorothy's own

Op. 1 in Basil Blackwell's series, "Adventurers All". He objected to what he called Maynard's "patronising clericalism", adding that he had noticed the same attitude towards "Mr Charles Williams, whose truly noble poetry he vilified from the same standpoint".

This drew Charles Williams into the debate. He was himself already a published poet. His first collection, *The Silver Stair*, came out in 1912 and his second, *Poems of Conformity*, in 1917. He was by then established at the London branch of the Oxford University Press and was in touch with the literary world. Responding to Wilfred Rowland Childe's reference to himself, he wrote to *The New Witness* on 12 January 1919, saying that he had read the Sayers volume, most of which he liked, and, since the controversy, had read it again and liked it more. He singled out for special mention the poem in dramatic form entitled "The Mocking of Christ". This is the first link in the chain.

The next link brings us forward to 1934, the year when *The Nine Tailors* was published. Victor Gollancz had sent an advance copy to Charles Williams, who responded with enthusiasm:

Your Dorothy Sayers!...Present her some time with my profoundest compliments. It's a marvellous book; it is high imagination - and the incomprehensible splendours of the preludes to each part make a pattern round and through it like the visible laws and the silver waters themselves...You won't do a greater book in all your serious novels this year. The end is unsurpassable. (I dare say I exaggerate, but I've only just finished it and I'm all shaken!)

Victor Gollancz sent the letter to Dorothy and she and Charles Williams met soon afterwards. Williams had by then published five novels himself: *War in Heaven*, *Many Dimensions*, *The Place of the Lion*, *The Greater Trumps* and *Shadows of Ecstasy*. He had also written a good deal of criticism. The two authors had thus reached a comparable level of achievement and public esteem.

Their friendship was based therefore on mutual respect and admiration. One topic they surely discussed was the Canterbury Festival, for which T.S.Eliot wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and Williams himself wrote *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* (1936). This is indicated by the next event, the first of the three major interventions. On 6 October 1936, Margaret Babington, the Festival organiser and steward of the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral, wrote to Dorothy Sayers asking her if she would consider writing a play for the Festival of 1937. She said that she did so at the suggestion of Charles Williams.

In the light of subsequent events, Dorothy Sayers would seem to have been an obvious choice. At the time it was not obvious at all. She had then made no pronouncement on the subject of religious drama, she had not written any of her articles or given any of her talks on religious topics. She had written a play, *Busman's Honeymoon*, but few people were then aware of it. It had not even gone into rehearsal and it was in any case a secular comedy.

The explanation goes back to 1918. Williams had read her early morality play, *The Mocking of Christ* and he told her he had done so. (This is proved by a letter I have seen.) Evidently their discussions of religious drama convinced him that she had it in her to write one and so it came about that he put her name forward. In so doing, he changed her creative life.

As I said in my biography, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul*, "The Canterbury experience created a new Dorothy L. Sayers. From then on she became a public person, a figure of authority, whose opinions would be increasingly sought, not only on detective fiction, which had long been the case, but, more important, on religious drama and the tenets of the Christian faith."

Charles Williams had now set in train a long chain of consequences. *The Zeal of Thy House* led to a number of invitations to write articles on the Christian faith. In April 1938, the *Sunday Times* published "The Greatest Drama ever Staged". This was followed in the same month in *St Martin's Review* by "The Dogma is the Drama". Her views, sharpened and made articulate by her experience of writing *The Zeal of Thy House*, were now reaching a wide public. The

BBC took notice and invited her to write a Nativity play. This was *He That Should Come*, broadcast on radio on Christmas Day 1938. Canterbury Cathedral asked for another drama for the Festival of 1939. She agreed and wrote *The Devil to Pay*, produced in June 1939. In April of that year the *Sunday Times* published another of her articles, "The Food of the Full-Grown" (later reprinted as a pamphlet with the title *Strong Meat*). The momentum gathered force. When war was declared, she published another article in the *Sunday Times*: "What Do We Believe?" and Victor Gollancz asked her to write a Christmas message for the nation. He may have wanted only a pamphlet. She wrote him a book of 160 pages - *Begin Here*. The years 1940 - 41 saw the consummation of her new creative powers and the production of two of her greatest works: *The Mind of the Maker* and the twelve radio plays on the life of Christ, *The Man Born to be King*, which made broadcasting history.

The two friends were in touch while she was writing *The Zeal of Thy House* and she showed him the typescript. She has left an amusing account of a conversation over lunch at Simpsons in the Strand. Writing to the producer of *Zeal*, Laurence Irving, on 26 February 1937, she discusses the question of the pride of the architect and his blasphemous self-sufficiency.

You should have heard Charles Williams reading this passage aloud in Simpsons, bouncing a great deal upon his chair and saying "Of course, you know it is all quite true" - here the waiter brought us cold lobster - "Ah! now it really is blasphemy!" - much to my embarrassment.

The second of the three crucial interventions occurred as follows. In 1943 Charles Williams published *The Figure of Beatrice*. It was reviewed by Desmond McCarthy in the *Sunday Times* and Dorothy Sayers bought it, not because she was interested in Dante (she had then not read the *Divine Comedy*, except for a few fragments) but because she was interested in the writings of Charles Williams. She read *The Figure of Beatrice*, resolved that she must one day read

Dante right through, but let a year go by before she began. Then, on 11 August, an air raid warning sounded and she and her husband entered their shelter in the back garden. Dorothy took with her the Temple Classics edition of *Inferno* which she had set aside handy in case the mood to read it took her, and to while away the waiting she idly opened it at the first canto. From that moment her creative life was once more changed. And once more the change was due to Charles Williams.

The third intervention occurred on 13 August 1943. On that day Charles Williams wrote a letter to Dorothy Sayers which had profound consequences for her both spiritually and creatively. It led to the writing of what she considered her best work, *The Just Vengeance*.

Before discussing this, it may be useful to try to account for her admiration for *The Figure of Beatrice*. Here is what she says about it in a letter to a Mr Jules Menken, dated 18 June 1951:

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your letter. I am glad you like my translation of the *Inferno*, and gladder still that you enjoyed Charles Williams's *Figure of Beatrice*, which is, I think, one of the most vital interpretations of Dante published in our time - or perhaps in any time...

This is an amazing statement, the strongest expression I have found of her opinion of the book. What was it she so considered so "vital", so illuminating about it?

I have tried to answer this in my book *The Passionate Intellect: Dorothy L. Sayers' Encounter with Dante*.¹ There are many layers to this question. First there is Williams's interpretation of Dante's allegorical meaning. Dorothy Sayers herself says in her Introduction to her translation:

I must not... fail to acknowledge my debt to Charles Williams's study *The Figure of Beatrice*, which lays down the lines along which, I believe, the allegory can be most fruitfully interpreted to present-day readers.

To realise the full significance of this it is necessary to remember that the major part of Dante's allegory is not the traditional allegory of personification. The figures in his poem are not what Sayers called "perambulating labels". They are actual persons who signify meanings beyond themselves while losing nothing of their human reality. Virgil, Beatrice, the sinners in Hell and Purgatory, the blessed in heaven, all with names, addresses and dates. Charles Williams called them Images. This is close to what Coleridge required of a symbol, namely that it should exist of itself. Charles Williams says:

I have preferred the word image to the word symbol, because it seems to me doubtful if the word symbol nowadays sufficiently expresses the vivid individual existence of the lesser thing.

Beatrice was, in her degree, an image of nobility, of virtue, of the Redeemed Life, and in some sense of Almighty God himself. But she also remained Beatrice right to the end.²

This is the key to the sections of Sayers's Commentary which appear after every canto under the heading of "The Images".

When Dorothy Sayers saw a chance that her translation of Dante might be included in the newly created series of Penguin Classics, she asked Williams if he would write the Introduction and the Notes. She considered he was the only person who understood the allegory and said so to E. V. Rieu, the Editor. He re-

plied, "But will anyone understand Mr Williams?" Williams himself seems to have hesitated about it. He did not reply to her request for some time. Finally on 24 April 1945 he wrote:

I should be very glad indeed to be allowed to write a short preliminary chat to your translation if you did me the honour of asking me. You should tell me any points that you would particularly like brought out, and I will bring them out with enthusiasm.

"A short preliminary chat" - this was a good deal less than Dorothy Sayers had in mind. Nevertheless, she accepted his agreement with joy and in her reply on 9 May she sketched out the partnership as she envisaged it. She was confident that she would persuade him to provide notes and explanations, such as she had heard him provide for the adult students who attended his lectures in London before the war. It is doubtful that Williams would have had the time and energy, given all the claims upon him in war-time Oxford. However, we shall never know how much he would have contributed. Six days after Dorothy's letter of the 9th of May, Charles Williams was dead.

He died unexpectedly after an abdominal operation. His friends did not know he was seriously ill and the shock was very great. Margaret Douglas, a colleague, wrote at once to let Dorothy know and she replied:

This is very grievous news. Charles Williams was unique in his work and his personality; there is nobody who can take his place. It comes as a great blow to me personally. I was very fond of him and proud of his friendship; and especially at this moment, the work I am trying to do owed so much to him and to his encouragement and inspiration that I feel as though the whole direction of it had been cut off.

The “inspiration” had come originally from *The Figure of Beatrice*, but Williams’s encouragement was more direct and even more influential. As soon as she began to read Dante she poured out all her surprise and excitement in amazing letters to him, some of them taking days to compose. She hoped, she said, that he did not find them platitudinous or boring.

Williams’s response was crucial at this point. If he had said, or implied, that he was not really interested, or too busy to pay attention to them, her enthusiasm might well have shrivelled there and then and we might never have had the Penguin Dante. On the contrary, he was warmly enthusiastic. He replied to her first letter on 24 August 1944:

My dear Dorothy, I have only one regret about your letter. Something in me yearns to sit down and answer it at much fuller length, and something else says to me, “Charles, you know you won’t”... But put out of your mind at once... the idea that it was boring, or platitudinous or anything... but quite exceptionally delightful, amusing and very interesting.

He adds that he looks forward to hearing what she thinks of Dante’s view of Beatrice and signs his letter “Always yours adoringly”.

So she went on, writing pages and pages of comment as she read. In 21 days she finished the entire *Divine Comedy*. Williams was amazed at her speed but said he considered that was the right way to begin. Then he made an extraordinary suggestion: would she allow him to edit her letters for publication? Busy as he is he wants to make them available to the general reader:

I do very much want people to get all you say about the laughter and lightness and fun of Dante. We want to break up the hideous monstrosity of the catholic mystical poet which they envisage as part of their solemn culture.

I find these words of Williams surprising. Who are “they”, whose “solemn culture” he so dislikes, who make of Dante a “hideous monstrosity of a catholic mystical poet”? He had recently been elected a member of the Oxford Dante Society, a learned and most venerable body founded in the 19th century. Can he mean them? Who else can “they” be?

On 13 September he wrote again:

I am convinced (and this seriously) that they [i.e. Dorothy Sayers’s letters to him] might be of great use to a large and probably innocent public of whom a certain few might read (a) them and (b) Dante. And they might have their whole consciousness of Dante altered by reading you, and turned into a much happier and more truthful apprehension.

These words of Williams are in fact prophetic. When the Sayers translation of *Inferno* was eventually published, in November 1949, both her rendering and her comments were a revelation to what he calls an “innocent public”, namely the general reading public, for whom the new Penguin Classics were intended. And it is true to say that since then general readers, over a million and a quarter in the English-speaking world, have had their consciousness of Dante altered, from the traditional mediaeval figure, great, but remote and unattainable, locked in the culture of the past, to a poet who speaks to our condition here and now.

The letters were never published because Williams died before his plan could be carried out. They are now published, after more than half a century, in the 3rd volume of the Sayers letters which I am editing.³ Portions of them were already available in *The Passionate Intellect*. A substantial amount of the material was used by Sayers in her first article on Dante, “...And Telling you a Story”, published in the volume which C.S. Lewis edited, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*.⁴ Still more was used for her notes to *Inferno*.

Sayers dedicated *Inferno* and *Purgatory* to the memory of Williams and would also have dedicated *Paradise*, had she lived to complete it. It was in any case her intention to dedicate them to him if he had lived. The words of her dedication are as follows:

To the Dead Master of the Affirmations

This may have puzzled quite a few readers, but there is an explanation.

On 19 March 1946 she wrote to Philip Mairet, the editor of the *New English Weekly*, to ask a favour:

One of your contributors... in a review either of *The House of the Octopus* or of some other book appearing shortly after Charles Williams's death referred to Charles Williams as "the Dead Master of the Affirmations".

This seems to me a most admirable title for him; and I am writing to ask whether I may use it in dedicating to him (as I should in any case have done had he lived) my Penguin translation of *The Divine Comedy*. I do not much like "to the beloved memory of..." and that sort of thing; but

The dead Master
of the Affirmations
CHARLES WILLIAMS

(followed by a suitable quotation) seems to have just the right look about it.

Permission was granted, although Philip Mairet was unable to find the name of the originator of the phrase.⁵

The dedication is related to a profound layer of meaning which Sayers perceived in *The Figure of Beatrice*, the recognition that Dante's use of images, rather than personification, showed him to be a poet of the Affirmative Way, as

was Charles Williams himself. She discussed this in her lecture, "The Poetry of the Image in Dante and Charles Williams", given to the Chelmsford Arts Association in 1952, and published in *Further Papers on Dante*⁶. In chapter 11 of my book *The Passionate Intellect*, I attempt to explain what Dorothy Sayers understood by the Affirmative Way in relation to the artist and the poet. She admitted that she could not go every step of the way in this with Williams. As she wrote to Professor Geoffrey L. Bickersteth on 12 June 1957:

I can enter into Charles's type of mind to some extent, by imagination, and look through its windows, as it were, into places where I cannot myself walk. He was, up to a certain point, I think, a practising mystic; from that point of view I am a complete moron, being almost wholly without intuitions of any kind. I can only apprehend intellectually what the mystics grasp directly.

In *The Passionate Intellect* I also undertake to explain another connection she perceived between Dante and Williams, namely the doctrine of the hierarchy of love, a system for which Williams renewed the term "co-inherence". A poem Sayers wrote on this theme: "To Timothy, in the Co-inherence", one of her love-liest, appropriately concludes the collection of her poetry chosen and edited by her biographer Ralph E. Hone.⁷

I now move to the third connection between Sayers and Williams which relates to her drama *The Just Vengeance*. In the Spring of 1944 the Dean of Lichfield, Dr F. A. Iremonger, wrote to invite Dorothy Sayers to write a play as part of the celebration of the 750th anniversary of the Cathedral. At that period she was much troubled by the bombing of German cities, particularly Frankfurt, where her old piano teacher, Fräulein Fehmer, was living. The thought of her sufferings inspired the poem "Target Area". Though addressed to Miss Fehmer, the poem powerfully transcends the personal, dwelling especially on our common guilt:

This I write

with the same hand that wrote the books I sent you,
knowing that we are responsible for what we do,
knowing that all men stand convicted of blood
in the High Court, the judge with the accused.
The solidarity of mankind is a solidarity in guilt,
and all our virtues stand in need of forgiveness,
being deadly.

In August 1944 she began reading Dante and this new experience took possession of her mind. Nevertheless ideas for the play were "on the back burner". The main theme was to be solidarity of both guilt and glory. As she read *Paradiso* for the first time, something caught her eye and she mentioned it to Charles Williams: something "extraordinarily interesting", certain lines which "seem to get down to something central". They are lines in canto VII (40 - 45) in which Beatrice formulates the God-Man relationship of the Crucifixion. Dante is puzzled by what the soul of Justinian has said in the preceding canto about the "just vengeance" of the Crucifixion being "justly avenged" by the destruction of Jerusalem. In reply to his question Beatrice expounds the doctrine of the Fall and the Redemption. Dorothy Sayers was later to call this canto "one of the noblest statements of Atonement doctrine ever uttered".

As she continued reading and translating Dante, ideas for her play took shape. World events played an important part in its formation: the war, the occupation of Europe, the Blitz, reports of concentration camps and prisoner-of-war camps, saturation bombing, the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. All this clamoured for an answer. In *The Just Vengeance* she undertook the dramatisation of enormous themes: original sin, inherited guilt, shared responsibility, the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, Atonement, the Redemption.

In choosing these themes she confronted herself with a daunting challenge and one which involved her own spiritual commitment. Why did she do so? The answer to this lies once again in the influence of Williams.

On 13 August 1943 he had written to her:

Moved by a sentence in your letter which you will remember, I permit myself to say again that I feel that this matter which we were discussing is very serious indeed. There is a point at which you and I will no longer be able to get away with an explanation of how admirable we think the pattern is, and I do think that point is very near for both of us. I know as well as you do the byways of the literary mind, but I do not feel they are going to be of much use. There are awful moments when I think that perhaps it is precisely people like us, who are enthralled by the idea and stop there, who are really responsible for a great deal of the incapacity and the harm.

In *The Just Vengeance* she does not “stop there”. Like the Airman in the play, she moved from the image, to which she had long given intellectual assent, to the reality. In this respect *The Just Vengeance* can be seen as her memorial to Charles Williams. She acknowledges in her Introduction that there are echoes in it of his writings, as well as of those of Eliot and, of course, of Dante. But it is more than a question of echoes. The play is an answer, a year after his death, to a challenge he had made to her in August 1943, a challenge she is bound to have taken deeply to heart, given the admiration and indebtedness she felt towards him.

A few days after his death she wrote in a letter to her friend Muriel St. Clare Byrne:

Charles was a darling - a saint without being a prig or an embarrassment, which is so rare; the sort of person who makes the idea of going to Heaven attractive - one so often feels one would dislike the rest of the population.

His death robbed her of an important intellectual friendship but she retained much that was of value to her in the continuation of her work. Without doubt he was the inspiration which led to one of the most important cultural events of this century - the Sayers translation of the *Divina Commedia*, of which the first volume, *Hell*, was published fifty years ago.

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Footnotes

1. Kent State University Press, 1989. Now obtainable direct from the author, 220 Milton Road, Cambridge, CB4 1 LQ, price £10, plus postage.
 2. *The Figure of Beatrice*, pp. 77-78.
 3. Obtainable from Carole Green Publishing, 2-4 Station Road, Swavesey, Cambridge, CB4 5QJ, £25 plus £3.50 for postage and packaging.
 4. Oxford University Press, 1947.
 5. It occurred in a review of Ronald Duncan's play, *This Way to the Tomb* (*New English Weekly*, 25th October 1945).
 6. Methuen, 1957, pp. 183-204.
 7. *Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers*, published by the Dorothy L. Sayers Society in association with the Marion E. Wade Center, 1996.
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The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers

Volume 3

1944-1950: A Noble Daring

Chosen and edited by Barbara Reynolds.

Stephen Barber reviews this third volume.

Dorothy Sayers read *The Figure of Beatrice* soon after its publication in 1943, not because it was about Dante, whom she had not yet read, but because it was by Charles Williams. This determined her to read Dante properly for herself; she started doing so in August 1944. She found herself enraptured: Dante was unlike anything she had been led to expect, and on completing the *Inferno* she poured out her enthusiasm in a long letter to Williams. This became the first of several. For his part, he was so taken with her letters that he suggested editing them for publication. This was not to be, since Williams died in May 1945, but now, over half a century later, here they are.

Much in them is not in fact new. Sayers herself drew on them for her article "...And telling you a story", first published in *Essays presented to Charles Williams* in 1947. And she developed her understanding in her two collections of papers on Dante, both unhappily long out of print, and in her translation of the *Divine Comedy* for Penguin Classics, dedicated to Williams and happily still available. The story of her involvement with Dante, and of Williams's influence on her has already been told by Barbara Reynolds in her book, *The Passionate Intellect*¹ But it is well worth having the original letters. C. S. Lewis once wrote to her: "you are one of the great English letter writers. (Awful vision for you: 'It is often forgotten that Miss Sayers was known in her own days as an Author. We, who have been familiar from childhood with her letters can hardly realise. ...')"
He may have been only half-serious, but it is perfectly true: she was a marvellous

letter writer: direct, well-reasoned and funny.

Here she is in her first letter to Williams, having just read the *Inferno*, in a passage not used later: "The whole affair is extremely monotonous - and, as you point out, *meant* to be an unrelieved monotony of grimth - everybody, except Francesca and Ugolino, has much the same remarks to make, and there is not much to choose between a bath of boiling blood and a bath of boiling mud; and still the thing is exciting. To anybody who can write 34 cantos of about 140 lines apiece on a subject like that and keep you worked up all the time I take off 34 hats one after the other" (48).

And here is her tribute to *The Figure of Beatrice*, written after Williams's death to Brother George Every: "It fulfils that first main duty of criticism - It sends people away from itself to read the book it's about. That is the first and great commandment. And it does another thing: it deals not only with what the book meant to the author then, but with what it means now and always. On those two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Without them, all the rest is dust and ashes." (3 10).

The letters to Williams cover a period of nine months, about a third of this book. After the first rapture, she set herself to translate the *Divine Comedy*. In Williams's terms, she had set herself to examine the pattern of the glory. Her first idea had been for Williams to write an introduction. E. V. Rieu had gently remonstrated: "But will anybody understand Mr Williams?" but his death put an end to that idea. She did not ask anyone else, but wrote the introductions and notes herself. These draw out the ideas of *The Figure of Beatrice* in detail and systematically, and they remain an absolute model of their kind. Personally, though I have also used Bickersteth's translation and Sinclair's notes (Sayers corresponded with both of them, and Williams also admired Sinclair), and also Singleton's massive commentary, I keep coming back to Sayers's notes as providing the exact, the relevant information in the briefest and most memorable way.

This is partly because she does not only understand Dante: she also understands Christian doctrine. By this period she was already well informed as a

Christian apologist, and her radio plays *The Man Born to be King* were enjoying a great reputation. She had taught herself Christian theology and developed a vigorous, controversial and expository style. It has often struck me that her approach to Dante is very similar to that of C. S. Lewis, and that if he had written notes to the *Divine Comedy* (he did write two essays and some scattered observations), they would have been very similar to hers. This would be due to similarity of temperament rather than through the shared influence of Williams on both of them. Indeed, Williams is much more sinuous in his thought than Sayers or Lewis, though I would not agree with Stephen Medcalf, who once² argued that they misrepresented him.

There are several letters to C. S. Lewis in this collection, with whom she seems to have been on friendly but not intimate terms. They shared a taste for controversy and frequently disagreed. She had suggested that Dante's style was lucid, which prompted the retort: "Whose style would you call obscure I'd like to know." She insists that Dante's style is indeed lucid, and it is his allusions that make him obscure, comparing him with other poets, including Williams in *Taliesin through Logres*. She writes to Lewis very firmly about the importance of not compromising artistic standards for religious motives (252). She refuses to support Lewis's opposition to the idea of women priests (387), and to other correspondents expresses reservations about Lewis's controversial style (314) and says "he is apt to write shocking nonsense about women and marriage" (375).

It is not only in writing to Lewis that she displays her skills in controversy. Many of the letters show her vigorously disposing of sloppy arguments, particularly by correspondents who have only an imperfect grasp or no grasp at all of Christian doctrine. And there are numerous good *aperçus* scattered throughout, such as "It is, of course, perfectly true that the mind of Christendom will not be fully expressed until Eastern as well as Western philosophy has been baptised into Christ" (278), or that the teaching of Latin should draw on post-classical and medieval Latin (297). She writes to E. V. Rieu after reading his translation of the *Iliad*: "What is terrifying is the whole Ancient set-up - the unsurprised acceptance of a universe without mercy and without remedy" (501). She suggests that

Milton both admired and resented Dante, and offers the first sensible reason I've seen for the badness of much of the last two books of *Paradise Lost*, namely that Milton's blindness led him to work on too large a scale and then to hurry (184).

As well as her intellectual occupations we hear about the hazards and privations of war. She refuses to regard flying bombs as uniquely wicked and justifying reprisals (43). She copes with the problems of rationing by keeping chickens and a pig, whose adventures we hear about. She sends money to her son and rebukes him soundly when he falls out with his wife: "Do try to remember that one can do without love, one can do without common interest, one can even, at a pinch, do without fidelity: but one cannot do without courtesy and consideration (403). We hear about her plays, and in particular *The Just Vengeance*, on a Dantean theme. There is less for Wimsey fans, as she gets tired of being badgered for more detective novels. And her *bête noire* is being asked to give improving talks instead of doing her proper work.

The letters have been admirably edited by Barbara Reynolds, whose own friendship with Sayers began during the period covered by this volume, and who is, therefore, one of the correspondents. The notes are useful and not intrusive, and there are two indices. I found only one slip: the logothetes running down the porphyry stair (310) come from "The Vision of the Empire" in *Taliessin through Logres*. Sometimes it is a bit frustrating not to be able to read the other side of the correspondence, particularly with Williams, C. S. Lewis, and T. S. Eliot, but it may be another fifty years before these are all available.

The first volume of these letters was published by Hodder, but the second and this third have been published directly by the Dorothy L. Sayers Society, though to the same high production standards. Perhaps there is a moral here for the Charles Williams Society? Anyway, we must hope that the DLS Society also see their way to publishing Sayers's unfinished novel on Dante and his daughter, tantalisingly described in Reynolds's *The Passionate Intellect*. This takes up the theme of *The Figure of Beatrice*, only this time the relation in which Beatrice Portinari stood to Dante, he finds he has in relation to his own daughter. It would also be good to have a complete collection of her papers on Dante; there are more

than in the two collections listed. Happily, her splendid essay on aesthetics in the light of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, *The Mind of the Maker*, has been reissued. Meanwhile, we have one more volume of letters to look forward to. Charles Williams enthusiasts should not hesitate to get this one: I've already started reading passages to my children.

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Footnotes

1. Kent state University Press 1989, but now available direct from the author.
2. He called it "misunderstanding by mistaken systemization" in "Objections to Charles Williams" in Brian Home (ed.): *Charles Williams: A Celebration*, Gracewing 1995. Medcalf's original essay dates from 1978.

The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, Volume 3, 1944-1950: *A Noble Daring* can be obtained from Carole Green Publishing, 2-4 Station Road, Swavesey, Cambridge CB4 5QG.

The cost is £25.00 plus £3.50 postage and packaging.

ISBN 0 9518005 1

Dr Barbara Reynolds informs us that Volume 4 of the letters of Dorothy L. Sayers will appear in January next year.

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