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The
**Charles
Williams**
Society



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Newsletter

No. 114 Spring 2005

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 The Centre for Medieval Studies in Oxford.

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Reading groups

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



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From the Editor

This issue contains the second of the papers given at the 2004 conference in which Dr Suzanne Bray discusses the immediate post-mortem state that Williams dealt with at length in his fiction. Apart from the more ordinary writers of horror stories I think CW to be one of the few who have seriously considered what one's experiences in this completely discontinuous state may be.

Perhaps we would all do well to think about the intermediate state. Is it my imagination, or have disaster movies stepped up a notch? Going back a few years a disaster movie meant a ship sinking or a building burning down. Now it seems invariably to involve the destruction of the whole world. Should we be worried? seriously - if only from the point of view of what such a trend says about our psyches?

Enjoy your meditations.

Edward Gauntlett

Society News & Notes

New Members

A warm welcome is extended to the following new members of the Society:

Mr Michael Alexander, 31 Keble Park Crescent, Bishopthorpe, York YO23 2SY.

D P E Smart, 21 Well Street, Ruthin, Denbighshire.

Roger Rowe, Arborfield, West Hill Road, West Hill, Ottery St Mary, East Devon, EX11 1UZ

Humphrey Carpenter

We were sorry to hear of the death of Humphrey Carpenter, a longstanding member of the Society and author of *The Inklings* amongst other titles.

CW Plays in 1958

Bill North has written to say that “at a meeting of the Charles Williams Society in Oxford two or three years ago the question arose as to when and where some of his plays were performed.” He has kindly supplied a photocopy of the Student Christian Movement Congress Handbook for the Edinburgh 1958 congress. The program includes the following:

The Plays. “Each performance will consist of two short plays by Charles Williams: *The House by the Stable* and *Grab and Grace*. The first was written as ‘a Christmas Play’, and the second as a sequel; they are studded with humour and show Williams’ keen perception of the difficulties of the Christian life, but together they make up a modern drama of the redemption of man. Williams died in 1945.

“The players are The Company of the Way, a group of students or ex-students based on the Church of St. Mary Lowgate, Hull. The producer is the Rev. Frank Glendenning.”

Charles Williams Society Meetings

◆ **Saturday 2 April 2005**

Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Shoe Lane, Oxford OX1 2DP (the entrance to Shoe Lane is opposite the gates of St Peter's College and it runs parallel to Michael Street – see map below). The meeting begins at 11.30, though members may arrive from 11.00 am onwards. There will be a visit to the Reference Library collection and, in the afternoon, a reading of *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*. Members are asked to bring copies of the play if they have them.

◆ **Saturday 8 October 2005**

Royal Foundation of St Katharine, 2 Butcher Row, London E14. Details have yet to be finalised but this will be an all day meeting and incorporate the AGM.

Council Meeting Report

The Council of the Charles Williams Society met on Thursday 20 January 2005 at Dr Horne's home.

The Chairman noted that the new edition of *The Image of the City* not yet appeared.

The Secretary said that he had that he was experiencing some difficulty in contacting the relevant officer of the Tolkien Society in connection with their conference at Birmingham in August 2005, but that he would persevere.

The Treasurer reported that we had £99.73 in our current account and £8,356.72 in the reserve.

The Librarian was going to the Oxford Centre to discuss both the Reference Library and the April meeting. It was agreed that the morning part of the latter be concerned chiefly with the Centre and perhaps some informal discussion; the reading of *Cranmer* would begin at 2pm.

It was agreed that Dr Horne would take over the Chair of the Council on a temporary basis. It was noted that there is a vacancy on the Council and that members should be asked for nominations.

It was agreed that no decision be taken over meetings for 2006 until after the April meeting, but it was mooted that there be one Oxford and one London meeting with an emphasis on participatory elements. It was suggested that members be encouraged to bring friends to meetings.

Elisabeth Bell

With the sad death of Elisabeth Bell the Society has lost one of its longest standing members. She joined in 1976 and, until ill health stopped her in recent years, was a most faithful attender at Society meetings.

She was quiet and would never push herself forward; it was probably in the smaller gatherings of the London Reading Group that her wide-ranging knowledge of Charles Williams's writings became apparent. Whether in discussion of Arthurian poetry, novels or plays she would often produce some intelligent, helpful comment or enlighten us with particular insights.

Elisabeth recalled enjoying singing "The Moon" (words by CW – so delightfully sung for us at the Conference last summer) when at school. Later, an essay by her about John Stanley, the renowned blind 18th century composer and organist, was used in a learned work of reference. Her working days were in the Tate Gallery library.

She was introduced to the Charles Williams Society by Alice Mary Hadfield; they met while singing in a church choir. So Elisabeth was a link with the very beginnings; her coming was an example of infectious enthusiasm bearing good fruit. Her quiet, humorous presence will be missed.

BETWEEN DEATH & PARADISE :
CHARLES WILLIAMS AND THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

By Suzanne Bray

This paper was read to the Society at the 2004 Conference

You and I
... may very likely meet again
In our wanderings in the neutral territories between two worlds.
T.S. Eliot¹

As an introduction to this subject of Charles Williams and the intermediate state it would seem appropriate to offer a few words of explanation. It is safe to assume that those who read this newsletter have all heard of Charles Williams. It remains to provide some sort of definition of the intermediate state.

For the purposes of this study, we shall understand the term as referring to the present situation of those who have died between the Fall and the parousia. From a Christian point of view, the Church is waiting for the return of Jesus Christ, for a new heaven and a new earth to be revealed, a new creation where justice and peace shall prevail. She is waiting for the resurrection of the body, the last judgement, the new Jerusalem, where those who love God shall live forever in his presence and death shall be no more. Image or literal reality, this vision of the future is magnificent, inspiring believers with both hope and fear. Yet, it also raises questions for the thinking Christian : What happens to those who die in faith before the end ? What about those who die without ever hearing the Good News of God's love and Man's salvation ? What is the fate of the lukewarm, those who more or less believe and have, to a certain extent, chosen good above evil, but who die in a state which is far from the purity of heart which the Scriptures claim is essential for those who will see God ? These are the problems of the intermediate state.

So is the intermediate state the same thing as purgatory ? Not exactly. Purgatory is one possible intermediate state among others. Limbo, the bosom of Abraham, the earthly paradise, the Greek *Hades* and the Hebrew *Sheol* can all be considered as intermediate states too. Nevertheless, purgatory is probably the best known and, in western Europe at least, the most popular. According to the *Dictionary of Spirituality*:

Purgatory... is the intermediate state occupied by the souls of those people who died in a state which was itself intermediate : they do not deserve to go to hell because they were not enemies of God when they died; however they do not deserve to go to heaven either, because they did not die in a state of perfect love. They therefore need to be purged, to be completely and permanently purified so as to be worthy to receive the vision of the one most holy God.²

Or, more simply, in the words of Jean Guitton, purgatory is "... an intermediate state between what we are and what we shall become"³

It is important to remember that purgatory is not a second chance. In an officially recognised Roman Catholic catechism about the last things, Bernard Sesboüe declares :

... individual judgement is nothing more than the final declaration of the basic orientation of the judged person's life. If he is saved, his soul alone, after the necessary purifications, is allowed into the presence of God, while his body rots in the tomb waiting for the resurrection at Christ's return.⁴

Throughout Christian history there have been two general attitudes to purgatory among those who have believed in it at all : those who like Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher have seen it as a place of horrible torment, a kind of temporary hell, and those, like St Catherine of Genoa and, more recently, Cardinal Newman, who have considered that purgatory is a joyful place where the forgiven sinner willingly undergoes the necessary cleansing so that he can be admitted into the presence of God without feeling ashamed.

The main difference between purgatory and the pre-Christian intermediate states like *Hades* or *Sheol* is found in the type of life which can be found there. The souls in purgatory are seen as entirely human, alive and conscious. On the other hand, in Homer's *Odyssey*, Hades is where "the dead live on without their wits as disembodied ghosts"⁵. They are not at all happy to be there and would rather return to earth. The Jewish *Sheol* is equally depressing. In the book of Proverbs it is the final destination of the seductress's victims and, in Isaiah, it is the dwelling place of "the spirits of the departed", who have "become weak" and suffer "in the depths of the pit"⁶.

So now, why Charles Williams? What is his connection with the intermediate state? Surprisingly enough, the Catholic theologian Robert Ombres in his *Theology of Purgatory* quotes only two authors from the modern period, and both of them were Anglicans. He states that: "In our time C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams have given imaginative, poetic renderings of purgatorial experience"⁷.

The two friends were by no means the only ones to touch on this theme during the period leading up to and during the second world war. Sebastian Knowles' work *The Purgatorial Flame*⁸ mentions many others including Evelyn Waugh, J.R.R. Tolkien, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot and Louis MacNeice. However, Williams and Lewis, with perhaps Eliot, seem to have been able to do, to a lesser degree, what Dante did in his generation: use their imagination to make life beyond death credible in the light of world events. What they offer us is more than a theology; it is a vision. The eschatology of the New Testament comes to us, for the most part, via the images of the Book of Revelation. Nowadays, these images may still speak to us, although the average reader cannot understand them without a certain amount of study. However, for the reader of the time, they were clear; they presented the supernatural world to his imagination and, as a result, strengthened his faith. This was Williams' method. According to T.S. Eliot:

What it is essentially, that he had to say, comes near to defying definition. It was not simply a theology or a set of ideas: it was primarily something imaginative.⁹

In order to try to grasp Williams' vision of the intermediate state, we shall

examine his own approach to the world of the dead and see how he managed to communicate this in his works of imagination. The question must be asked as to how far Williams' vision is in harmony with traditional Christian theology and to what extent it is peculiarly his own.

Charles Williams was preoccupied by death from an early age. Even as a schoolboy, he adapted and staged Longfellow's *The Golden Legend*, a story of human sacrifice.

During the First World War, Williams was declared unfit for service on account of his shortsightedness. However, two of his closest friends, Harold Eyers and Ernest Nottingham, were killed by the Germans. Williams felt guilty, as if the two young men had given their lives for him, and he was haunted by nightmares and strange visions :

Because of his growing habit of ignoring conventional distinctions of time and space he could not feel that their deaths were something which had happened elsewhere and in the past, and were now over. To him the whole thing was constantly happening. The clink of teacups at his own breakfast table seemed to him to be the tin mugs passing from hand to hand while dying men were crying out for drink in no-man's land ... Such was his imagination that he could feel it acutely.¹⁰

Such painful experiences gave Williams the impression that the border between the living and the dead was not as solid as was generally believed and also helped him to understand the doctrine of the communion of saints. He came to believe that all those who believed in Christ, in any place and at any time since the Resurrection, were permanently joined together :

This is because we ought to be 'members one of another' – **membra**, limbs, not members of the same society. Christians are not members of a club, they are 'members' of the Church, which is not a club.¹¹

This unity was involuntary from the human point of view, but came from the di-

vine vision of Man, first of all as in Adam and then in Christ. Williams liked to quote Julian of Norwich : “In the sight of God all man is one man and one man is all man.”¹²

In order to explain this unity, Williams unearthed the old theological term “co-inherence”, which was originally used to explain the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. He widened the word’s meaning to include “our Lord’s relations with his Church : ‘we in him and he in us’”¹³, claiming that it could also be applied to the way “the Church itself in-lived its children”, making them “members one of another”. Williams also tried to live out his beliefs in the fraternity he created, “The Companions of the Co-inherence”, which was dedicated to Christian contemplation and the living out of the doctrine of co-inherence by, among other things, bearing the burdens of others in their daily lives. He made it clear that the solidarity which was a natural result of the doctrine did not apply only to the living :

The vicarious life of the Kingdom is not necessarily confined to sequence even among human members of the Kingdom. The past and the future are subject to interchange, as the present with both, the dead with the living and the living with the dead.¹⁴

On the other hand, some passages in *Descent into Hell* indicate that Williams did not think that all contact between the living and the dead was desirable and that prayer for the souls of the dead could be born as much from “a fear for the living”, who prefer them to keep their distance, as from “charity for the departed”¹⁵. This was the context in which he understood the liturgical prayer : “Grant to them eternal rest, O Lord. And let light eternal shine upon them.”¹⁶

For many who knew Williams, the difference between his belief and theirs could be found in his actual experience of the doctrines he professed. For T.S. Eliot, for example :

He knew and could put into words, states of consciousness of a mystical kind, and the sort of elusive experience which many people have once or twice in a lifetime.¹⁷

The charter of The Company of the Co-inherence, drawn up in 1939, celebrated four Christian feast days, two of which are connected with the intermediate state : the Feast of the Transfiguration and the commemoration of All Souls.¹⁸ For Williams and his friends, All Souls' Day in particular was an opportunity to acknowledge their unity with those who had preceded them in the faith and to express their solidarity with them. Although Williams never wrote explicitly in his published work that he personally prayed for the dead, all the evidence would lead us to believe that he did so. He admired those religious orders who dedicated themselves to intercession and the invocation of the saints, declaring that "the invocation of the saints is the union of earth and heaven in the same labour"¹⁹. He was also impressed by Evelyn Underhill's novel, *A Column of Dust*, published in 1908, in which the author invented a community of intercession for the souls of the dead called "The Helpers of the Holy Souls". Williams quoted with appreciation one of the "poignant ceremonies"²⁰ of this community in his introduction to Evelyn Underhill's letters. He also, more controversially, spoke positively of the early Church's practice of baptising the dead²¹ and of the pre-Reformation sale of indulgences for the souls of the dead, claiming that :

In the miracle of co-inherence there is no reason to suppose that the Indulgences were not effectual for all the glad and aspiring ghosts to whom they were offered.²²

As most people who accept the effectiveness of indulgences believe that the souls they are helping are in purgatory, we could infer that Williams himself accepted this doctrine too. However, as Huw Mordecai has affirmed : "Unlike Lewis, Williams never explicitly declared a belief in purgatory"²³. This in itself is not conclusive as Williams very rarely made an explicit statement of his personal doctrinal beliefs, unless he was trying to present a relatively unknown or neglected point of view to a wider public. Except when analysing Dante's *Divine Comedy*, he mentioned purgatory in print just four or five times, and then only briefly. He clearly states the traditional catholic position that purgatory is not a second chance, but a process of purification for those who are already saved : "they are pardoned before they are in purgatory; it is why they are in purgatory"²⁴. In general, he seems to put forward Catherine of Genoa's vision of purgatory, referring to "the great purgatorial doctrine by which man is said, being

pardoned, to desire the penalty”²⁵. He takes this approach further in his short theological work, *The Forgiveness of Sins* :

In the Church ... there is no punishment except through and because of pardon. There indeed the holy soul, aware at once of pardon and celestial vengeance, may sigh : Both ! both ! – too far beyond our vision to be more than momentarily comprehensible, and only at moments desirable.²⁶

In order to present this state of mind more clearly, Williams uses the example of Angelo in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, who is so ashamed of his misdeeds that he asks to be punished for them, even when the Duke is prepared to grant him a free pardon. In this context Williams also quotes Dante, saying that “the mountain of purgatory... shakes when some soul feels herself cleansed and free to rise and mount”.²⁷ The important point for Williams is that it is the individual soul who acknowledges that it is now free from sin and ready to enter the presence of God.

Dante’s beloved Beatrice finds her way into many of Williams’ works, sometimes in a surprising context. This is true for his understanding of purgatory. In the chapter on *Il Purgatorio* in Williams’ *The Figure of Beatrice*, Beatrice is once again the primary focus, being not only the vision of beatitude which leads Dante on, but also, herself, an agent of divine cleansing :

Beatrice is herself the mountain. She is, as so many of her sisters have been to their lovers, the means by which purification takes place.²⁸

Human love then, which for Williams was already a source of salvation in *La Vita Nuova*, becomes the purifying force in purgatory. He explains the process by which this occurs :

It is clearer now what that Mount is; it is the purgatorial ascent of love; the nature from which Dante was triply driven back by the beasts, especially by the rabid she-wolf, the chaotic cravings for secondary things.²⁹

However, if the mountain of purgatory, in Williams' thinking, is a mountain of love, it is also a mountain of joy and liberty. He explains in *The Descent of the Dove* that the souls in purgatory...

... skirr up the Mountain which is the cause and occasion of all joy, and is found to be the Mount of Repentance and Purgation – that is, of freedom, for the declaration of Christendom is that Repentance is Freedom, not only in the present and the future but also in the very past of which the soul repents.³⁰

Nevertheless, in order to fully grasp Williams' understanding of the intermediate state, his non-fiction works are insufficient, as the references are too few and too fragmentary. The vision can be much more fully grasped in Williams' imaginative, literary works. However, a certain prudence is necessary. In his fiction Williams is a novelist and not a systematic theologian. Moreover, his stories are not allegories. A balance has to be found, as T.S. Eliot warned his readers in the introduction to *All Hallows Eve* :

When I say that we are persuaded to believe in the supernatural world of Charles Williams, I do not mean that we necessarily give complete credence to all the apparatus of magic, white or black, that he employs. There is much that he has invented, or borrowed from the literature of the occult, merely for the sake of telling a good story.³¹

Bearing this warning in mind, we may still hope to discover Williams' conception of the world of the dead in his works, if not in the technical details, at least in the spiritual principles. The voyage of discovery will include a series of poems, *The Prayers of the Pope*, a short story, *Et in Sempiternum Pereant*, and two novels, *Descent into Hell* and *All Hallows Eve*.

In *The Prayers of the Pope*, there is a macabre passage where the powers of outer darkness (P'o-l'u) use black magic to bring the dead out of their tombs. Williams explains that the dead people in question are unhappy pagans and not those who died in Christ. The act of necromancy reunites the bodies and souls which were separated at the moment of death. This is not a form of resurrection

as the corpses remain in their rotting flesh and the souls resemble Homer's Greek lifeless souls in *Hades*. They are "bloodless, automatized", "too-veritable ghosts"³².

In this poem Williams seems to adopt the theory which his friend C.S. Lewis would later present in his *Reflections on the Psalms* that ...

... the merely natural fate of ... unredeemed humanity is just this – to disintegrate in soul as in body, to be a witless, psychic sediment. If so, Homer's idea that only a drink of sacrificial blood can restore a ghost to rationality would be one of the most striking among many pagan anticipations of the truth.³³

Williams explains that the events in the poem occur during the present age in salvation history, "after the conversion of the Empire to Christianity but during the expectation of the return of our Lord"³⁴. He insists that the parousia will be "the Redemption made manifest" and that only then will death and its effects be finally conquered.

In the poem, the pope is horrified by the blasphemous act of bringing the corpses to life and starts to pray. He evokes the events of Holy Saturday, the harrying of hell, when Christ is said to have gone down into the Limbo of the Patriarchs to liberate the souls of the just. Having established the basis of his faith and hope, the pope starts to pray for the dead in order to restore them to the peace of the grave. He considers he has this right because of the co-inherence of all mankind. He celebrates the Eucharist and offers his own life as a sacrifice for the living dead. As a result of his prayer Christ intervenes, the corpses are stopped short as they march forward and disintegrate into dust.

We can note here some similarities between the intermediate state as it is portrayed in this poem and the eleventh chapter of the novel *Descent into Hell*, entitled "The Opening of the Graves". This chapter shows us, in a modern context, the same phenomenon of living corpses that we saw in *The Prayers of the Pope*. As in the poem, all the dead do not come to life. Margaret Anstruther and those like her are, immediately on death, "carried ... over the bare mountain"³⁵ of purgatory. This world only retains the souls of "the people of infinite illusion",

those who are still attached to earthly things and are not ready to face ultimate reality. According to Williams, those who came out of their graves had, during this life, been blinded by “religion or art, civic sense or sensual drive”.

In the same chapter, Williams mentions another kind of dead people. These were, at the time of death, no more ready than the living ghosts to ascend the mountain and enter heaven. Yet they were no longer attached to earth either. Williams talks of caves in the mountainside where such people can be happy, at least temporarily. For these “happy souls restored out of substitution”³⁶, the mountain provides an opportunity for salvation.

The very title of Charles Williams’ short story *Et in Sempiternum Pereant* speaks to us of death. It is a curse, meaning “May they perish for all eternity!”

The story takes place in a world outside time. Lord Arglay’s watch stops working as the elderly judge realises that he is approaching death. Unintentionally he has crossed a supernatural frontier into a mysterious place where “things lasted ... This was a new experience; it was lastingness – almost, he could have believed, everlastingness”³⁷. In this timeless world, Lord Arglay walks up to a house. A pillar of black smoke is drifting out of the chimney. It is a negation of the pillar of cloud which guided the children of Israel in the desert and indicates the absence of God. The reader learns that this halfway house is situated between the infernal cavern containing “a concentration of dank and deadly heat”³⁸, usually known as hell, and the pathway to heaven. Williams echoes Bunyan, saying that “from every gate of hell there was a way to heaven, yes, and in every way to heaven there was a gate to deeper hell”³⁹.

In the house Lord Arglay encounters a starving, suffering human shade, of the same type as those we have seen in *The Prayers of the Pope* and “The Opening of the Graves”. It has practically no more flesh on its bones, and is so hungry that it eats itself. Lord Arglay has to resist the double temptation of hate and despair, but finally decides to help the shade. The believing judge offers “to make a ladder of himself, if that should be desired, by which it might mount perhaps from the nature of the lost, from the dereliction of all minds that refuse living and learning”⁴⁰, and so be saved. The shade accepts the offer and travels through

Lord Arglay's body, leaping into new life on the road to heaven. Once the transaction is complete, the judge can hear a great multitude of lost souls lamenting the loss of the one who has just escaped. Lord Arglay quickly leaves the house and, as he does so, sees another living ghost enter by the back door.

In this story Williams portrays immortal souls in real danger of eternal damnation. They are conscious of their state and suffer because of it, each soul being "hard with everlasting time; each driven by his own hunger, and each alone"⁴¹. Their suffering comes from their sins, "their greedy loves and greedy hates"⁴². When it meets Lord Arglay, the shade is on the road to damnation and incapable of saving itself. What Williams shows us is an act of intercession. Lord Arglay is alive, just and a believer. With God's help, he has already overcome temptation. He offers his life in exchange for the salvation of the shade and the substitution works.

The brevity of the story does however raise certain questions. The rescued shade has definitely been dead for a while, as he has eaten away most of his flesh. Yet his eternal destiny seems not yet to have been decided. Does this intercession provide the shade with a second chance after death or does his willingness to accept Lord Arglay's offer imply that he was open to salvation before death, but just didn't find the way?

It is however in Williams' two last novels, *Descent into Hell* and *All Hallows Eve* that the most detailed portraits of the intermediate state are presented to the reader and we are able to see things from the point of view of the dead person.

In *Descent into Hell*, Williams portrays the spiritual pilgrimage of a very mediocre, anonymous dead man. Before committing suicide, the man had been unemployed, unhappy and incompetent. Once dead, he found himself on a hill which Williams calls "the supernatural mountain"⁴³, and which represents, among other things, the mountain of purgatory. This hill is dominated by a dingy permanent twilight, like Lewis's grey town in *The Great Divorce* and the pagan *Hades*. The dead man feels nothing and "the silence of the dead was about him"⁴⁴. During his life he had often wished to be left alone. Here he has his wish

in the calm of the hill.

Williams informs us that the dead man had never “effectively heard the inevitable gospel proclaimed”⁴⁵, was in ignorance of “the creed of Christendom”⁴⁶ and “had never had the opportunity to choose love”⁴⁷. He had killed himself, unaware that suicide was a sin. On account of his ignorance during life, Williams declares that the dead man was going to be offered the opportunity to receive the gospel of salvation in the intermediate state.

Gradually light begins to flood the hill. This is the light shining in the darkness, mentioned in John’s gospel⁴⁸. It shines in the darkness of the dead man’s past life and reveals his sin. It comes to the surface of his consciousness and both he and the reader can see that he had an imperfect attitude to the people he had known :

He did not exactly resent, in that quiet, anything that they had done – a foreman, a mate, a brother, a wife, but perhaps, as the unmeasured time did pass, he felt a little more strongly that he would enjoy his freedom more if he saw them defeated.⁴⁹

Despite the triviality of his sins, the dead man is at first tempted to run away from the light. He seems unable to trust it. He has a choice : to run eternally away from the light or to stop and let the light shine into his life. He chooses : “He dimly consented; he stood still”⁵⁰.

This one small gesture of trust and obedience is sufficient. As soon as he stops running, he sees the affectionate face of the saintly Margaret Anstruther, who is herself between life and death. She has already cut off the links which bound her to the world, but will not actually die until the following day. She sees the dead man and speaks to him with gentleness and compassion. He receives her words and attempts to respond : “He tried to thank her, to tell her more, to learn salvation from her”⁵¹. He does in fact find salvation in the dying woman’s face and words, which communicate love to him in a way he can understand. Margaret reveals to him first of all the love of God and then his own sin. The dead man knows that he needs to respond to this offer, but feels unable to do so until Margaret reassures him saying “It’s done already; you only have to look for it”⁵².

With these words Williams echoes Christ's "It is finished" on the cross. The dead man can find his salvation in the redemption already acquired on Golgotha. The mountain responds to the suicide's conversion. It shakes, indicating that his soul is now ready to rise up to salvation.

Williams ends his narration of the dead man's conversion back at the starting point. Like C.S. Lewis's pilgrim in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, the dead man has taken the long way round in order to come back to the place of his death :

He had come back from his own manner of time to the point in the general world from which he had fled, and he found it altered. The point of his return was not determined by himself, but by his salvation.⁵³

Descent into Hell was published in 1937. Williams referred to the book as his *Inferno* and hoped to write a sequel which would be a *Paradiso*. He started a new novel, but it greatly frustrated him and he never managed to finish it. Several years later, Williams at last found the inspiration for which he was looking, for a new book which would develop the main themes of *Descent into Hell*. Being unable to portray the beatific vision, Williams created instead his own personal *Purgatorio*, *All Hallows Eve*.

Williams' last novel recounts the spiritual pilgrimage of two dead women, Lester and Evelyn, who were killed when a plane crashed over London at the end of the war. The action takes place in two parallel locations : the London Williams knew, where Richard, Lester's widower, and all the other living characters reside and the supernatural London, an intermediate zone inhabited solely by the dead. This ghostly London resembles the hill in *Descent into Hell*, with the same permanent twilight and deathly silence.

At the beginning of his death experience the suicide in *Descent into Hell* received the peace he had been seeking in life. In a similar manner Lester can see clearly only the things and people which she had loved when she was alive. Everything else is blurred. At the beginning of the novel Lester is alone and Williams informs us that solitude is the usual state of the newly dead. Only the random fact that Lester and Evelyn died in the same place at exactly the same moment allows

them to see and speak to each other. The reader learns that the women no longer have solid bodies, they are literally shadows of their former selves. Lester realises that : “she herself would be ... if anything at all, only a dim shadow to Richard, a hallucination or a troubling apparition”⁵⁴. This separation of soul and body is a temporary state, while the souls are waiting for the resurrection of the body mentioned in the Christian creeds. According to Williams, they are conscious of this separation :

At first strangers in that other world, they may forget their bodies, but their bodies are their past and part of them and will not be forgotten. So that, sooner or later, these spiritual beings again strongly desire to be healed of their loss and be whole. But this they cannot be until the whole of time is known to be redeemed.⁵⁵

This nebulous, limbo-like London is for all. Even the mostly saintly souls have to travel through it. Ideally, Williams says, “men and women were never meant to dwell there long”⁵⁶, but to go straight on towards the presence of God. In spite of the silence, the atmosphere reacts to the words spoken by the dead. When Lester says “O God” or “O Hell !”, as she had frequently done during life, she is astonished to see the consequences of her exclamations :

The word ran away from her in all directions, as if a dozen small animals had been released and gone racing away. They fled up and down the street, beating out the echo of the word with their quick pattering feet, but the larger went for the house in front of them and disappeared into the porch. She saw them and was appalled.⁵⁷

Not only mild blasphemies but also lies take on an enhanced importance in this shadowy world. Evelyn lies, denying a fault she had committed, and Lester is shocked for lies have no more meaning in the intermediate state, where only truth and reality can exist. People can no longer hide behind their earthly masks, because their true nature is clearly apparent. Betty, the magician-antichrist’s daughter, is often sent by her father into this twilight world and is astonished to see how different her mother looks there :

She was ... always surprised at her mother, for she definitely remembered her as domineering and powerful, but whenever she saw her in this world there seemed to be something lacking; she looked so blank and purposeless and even miserable.⁵⁸

The Lady Wallingford of the intermediate zone is in fact the real woman. In everyday life she manages to hide her despair and emptiness because of her love for Simon. Once beyond the barrier of death, Betty sees her as she really is.

In the ghostly London the two women prepare for their eternal destiny. Lester will be saved and Evelyn damned. Is their fate inevitable ? John Heath Stubbs thinks it is. The two women's personalities do not change, but the spiritual consequences of their characters gradually become visible. Lester and Evelyn therefore "progress to sanctity or damnation in accordance with the laws of their own characters, formed during life"⁵⁹. T.S. Eliot, on the other hand, is not so sure and considers that some kind of spiritual development is possible after death :

Having lived just well enough to be able to choose the good, she [Lester] develops in the light of that good she follows, and learns the meaning of love.⁶⁰

Both women have to face up to the reality of their death and their sins. They have to choose whether to accept that reality or to live in a world of illusion. Evelyn refuses to accept death or to face up to her failings. Lester, however, has the courage to look herself, her faults and her selfish desires in the face. She realises that she is lost:

She saw it clearly – for an aeon; this was what she wanted; this was what she was. This was she, damned; yes, and she was damned; she, being that, was damned. There was no help, unless she could be something other ... she stood in a trance of horror at herself and at hell.⁶¹

Once she sees what she is really like, Lester is ready to undergo a process of purification and to accept supernatural help. God is present in the intermediate

state and the dead Lester hears a voice which Williams calls “the call from above”⁶². Lester responds and undertakes the work of God where she is in the intermediate state. In the struggle she must undergo to save Betty, Lester’s only support is the cross of Christ, which quite literally sustains her.

The supernatural aid which Lester receives is essential for her salvation, but it is not the only help she gets. Williams show us the communion of saints in all its power. The living and the dead rally around the new convert. Betty, although she is physically weak, is a baptised Christian and loves Lester. She can therefore become a mediator of the divine absolution for her dead friend. Betty hears Lester’s confession and forgives her. Lester can only see Betty, but God is behind Betty and speaks through her : “Everything depended on Betty, and Betty on – on nothing that Lester yet knew.”⁶³

At the same time, Jonathan, the only convinced and committed Christian among the main characters in the novel, is the divine instrument for the conversion of Richard, Lester’s widower. In this way the couple are reunited within the new life and, for that reason, able at last to let each other go.

It is interesting to notice that no physical contact is possible between the living and the dead. The profound discussions between Lester and Betty or Lester and Richard have to take place without any touch. Williams bases his ideas here on the behaviour of the risen Christ who did not allow Mary Magdalene to touch him : “The *Noli me tangere* of the City’s own Lord Mayor was, in their small degree, imposed on them”⁶⁴.

The dead saints also support Lester in her trials. The plot takes place at a precise moment of the liturgical calendar, All Hallows’ Eve, or Halloween, the night before All Saints’ Day. Williams evokes the vigil undertaken by the praying saints, living and dead, as they intercede for the city. At the end of the novel, Lester is ready to leave the twilight zone to find eternal salvation. The dead saints help her to accomplish this transition and welcome her into their company :

She stood, quiet and very real, before them; almost she shone on them; then the brightness quivered in the air, a gleam of brighter light than day, and in a flash traversed all the hall; the approach

of all the hallows possessed her, and she too, into the separations and unions which are indeed its approach, and into the end which it is itself an approach was wholly gone. The tremor of brightness received her.⁶⁵

It is important here to observe that, although Lester has found her place among the saints of God, she has not gone directly to heaven. She has gone to another intermediate zone to wait for the parousia. The end has not yet come, as Williams explains :

Lester was bound to pass more wholly into that other world which cannot catch its true and perfect union with this until the resurrection of all the past.⁶⁶

Evelyn, on the other hand, does not leave the ghostly city, but visibly decomposes more and more until she resembles the unhappy dead men of *The Prayers of the Pope* or Lily Sammille's macabre companions in the graveyard in *Descent into Hell*. She loses her true humanity, becoming "that contorted thing in the corner which, under those vivid and suffering intelligences, was now beginning to lose even the semblance of a woman"⁶⁷. She is condemned to wander unceasingly in the twilight zone, accompanied by those who, like herself, refuse to face the truth :

Other wanderers, as invisible to Evelyn as she to them, but of her kind ... - old men seeking lechery, young men seeking drunkenness, women making and believing malice, all harbourers in a lie.⁶⁸

A similar message may be found, although perhaps less clearly expressed, in Williams' first published novel, *War in Heaven*. Prester John informs the thoroughly unpleasant Sir Giles Tumulty that, although there is no possible deliverance for anyone so unrepentant and egotistical as he is, there is "a place in the pit where I shall be found"⁶⁹. As the pit in the Old Testament is a translation of the Hebrew word *בוֹר* (*bor*), which often signifies the tomb or the the grave, it appears that the mythical priest/king is claiming to provide help for some people after their death. In the novel this is particularly relevant to another unattractive char-

acter, Gregory Persimmons, who, in spite of committing murder, practising satanism and being prepared to sacrifice both an innocent woman and a child he is fond of to further his evil plans, can meet Prester John, confess and, through and after death, eventually find salvation, as he had sought to serve something other than himself. Although in Gregory there is less good material to work with than in Lester, there is something which Evelyn and Sir Giles lack, which finally leads him to respond to the light.

In his novels, Charles Williams divides humanity into two categories : the saved and the lost. There is no third group. However, there are intermediate states, which are like antechambers or waiting rooms where the consequences of human choices take on concrete form and the destiny of each soul is revealed. Either, like Lester, the souls will one day be admitted into the company of the redeemed or, like Evelyn, they will wander through the grey city until the last judgement. For Williams the process may last for centuries, but there are only two possible outcomes.

Although Charles Williams is unusual, as an Anglican writer committed to his church, in writing so much about the intermediate state, he did not consider that his ideas or preoccupations were original. As John Heath Stubbs put it, Williams “was a traditionalist, wishing to continue the great tradition of Dante, Milton and Wordsworth, but also of the Metaphysicals”⁷⁰. As can be seen in his history of the Christian Church, *The Descent of the Dove*, Williams also saw himself as part of Christian tradition throughout the centuries: the faith of Dante and the faith of Milton, as well as their literature, were part of his own spiritual history.

In spite of his attachment to the past, Williams was not cut off from the preoccupations of his own generation. His friends and fellow Inklings C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien both wrote books about the intermediate state during the time he knew them⁷¹. Williams was also friendly with T.S. Eliot, whose poems *The Hollow Men* and *East Coker*, among others, deal with this theme. We cannot overlook the fact that Williams was writing at a period when two world wars forced the population to look death in the face and worry about the fate of those who died either unexpectedly or while committing acts of war which were often morally hard to justify. Since the sixties the Church has lost this direct awareness

of death which, combined with movements like liberation theology or charismatic renewal which transfer much of the Christian hope to this life, may easily distract attention from the life to come. According to the theologian Pierre Miquel : “These developments have led to a loss of interest in the intermediate state of purgatory between heaven and hell”⁷².

What then was the importance of the intermediate state for Williams ? He talked about it, he believed it could exist, but what did it mean to him ? We have already seen that Williams accepted only two final destinations for the soul of man : salvation and damnation. The eternal fate of each human being depended on spiritual laws which each person was free to respect or reject. According to Chad Walsh, Williams “saw a world in which the Nicene Creed operated as surely in human affairs as the law of gravitation”⁷³. The intermediate state, like the earth, can therefore be perceived as one part of this universe subject to these spiritual laws. In this context, Lewis described Williams’ concept of purgatory as “ a process by which the work of redemption continues, and first perhaps begins to be noticeable after death”⁷⁴. Although there may seem for some to be a second chance involved, Williams makes it clear that this can only be the clear presentation of the means of salvation to those who did not hear it during life. The decision taken then will reflect the character already formed.

At the end of Lewis’s *The Great Divorce* the question is asked as to whether the decisions taken in the intermediate state “were ... only the mimicry of choices made long ago” or “anticipations of a choice to be made at the end of all things” ?⁷⁵ There is no possible answer. The same applies to Williams’ spiritual world.

Williams’ intermediate state is thus situated somewhere on the road between a state of mind and ultimate reality. It includes that shaking by which the mountain of purgatory acknowledges the soul’s accepting of the salvation which will become permanent reality at the last judgement. It is nothing more nor less than an incline on the pathway to heaven.

End Notes.

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