

Charles Williams and his Imagery

Renée Haynes

Based on a talk given in London in 1986 to mark the centenary of the birth of Charles Williams, the theological writer and poet.

I knew Charles Williams off and on from 1938 (when we met at a party for contributors to a number of books in a series called *I Believe*, edited by Ellis Roberts) until he died—during the war, in 1945—in Oxford, where he had gone with the London branch of the Oxford University Press, for which he worked.

It is very odd that, in the case of someone for whom image and reality were so essentially related, I cannot accurately recall his physical presence. The curious quivering of his hands—also recorded by C.S. Lewis—yes. This reinforced the impression of a self like a bright candle flame flickering in still air. His Londoner's voice, yes—and the vivid current of what it said, whether speaking in public, engaged in ordinary talk, or reciting large chunks of *Paradise Lost* over lunch in a Bloomsbury café. But the impact of someone moving about, standing, sitting, no—and hardly a visual memory except for one occasion when, after a metaphysical discussion over a meal, he rushed to help a woman get her baby in its pushcart down the stone steps of an Underground station.

What remains—and that most clearly—is recollection of his skilled, startling, and unpremeditated use of words, not only on paper, but in living speech. I cannot hope to emulate him but I hope to do justice to his memory.

He had an accurate and passionate concern with *words*, and never, as far as I know, fell back (as did one speaker at a conference I once attended) on saying at inordinate length—or on saying at all—that words could not express feelings which were 'ineffable'. I emerged from the infinite boredom of that hour, convinced that the first duty of all speakers was precisely to *be* effable; to communicate with their hearers 'in a language understood of the people'. Music, dancing, the visual arts, telepathy may be as ineffable as you like, but, I repeat, speakers and writers *must* be effable.

May I stress once more Charles Williams' work with words; not just for statement, logical presentation, argument, but as flaming darts to fire the imagination or to set the memory glowing; as rhythms, sounds, echoes,

lightning reflected from over the edge of the world. May I quote from another language, another culture, an example of what I mean; it is a sentence from a French poem, Alfred de Vigny's 'Le Cor',: and it runs 'Dieu! que le son du cor est triste au fond des bois!' It may be translated, quite inadequately: 'God, How sad the sound of the horn deep in the woods'.

That he was also aware of the difficulties, the brutal failure of some attempts to handle words, appeared when he described with wry laughter, one day, the dilemma faced by a group of conscientious persons trying to translate the Scriptures into some South Sea Island language that had no word for *lamb* because even sheep were unknown there. In the end, he said, they had to settle for a term meaning 'small, woolly pig'.

In this brief discussion of his imagery I shall say little about his able literary criticism and nothing about his novels; partly because I find them so hard to read. They give me what I can only call 'cerebral creeps'; and probably derived their horror of what he called 'goetry' (from the medieval *goetia* 'organised sorcery') from the brief time in which, like Evelyn Underhill, W.B. Yeats, and more sinister figures, he was a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn, with its frightening sunset.

It is in his poetical work, in his essays, and in his theological studies that his imagery is most clearly to be seen. He renewed the recognition of what earlier writers studying human approaches to God had called the *Via Affirmativa* and the *Via Negativa*, translating them as the Way of the Affirmation of Images and the Way of the Rejection of Images.

Each is probably congenial to a different human temperament, that of the visualizer and that of the non-visualizer; types differentiated in other contexts by the 19th-century scientist Galton, who remarked that though many people habitually thought more or less in pictures, most scientists and most Quakers did not. In our own time, the late Dr. Grey Walter, of the University of Bristol, took note of this again, and urged that educationalists and teachers should recognise the contribution made by both modes of thought, and that each kind of thinker should acknowledge the value of the other approach.

Of course, a whole gradual spectrum stretches between the two extremes. One feels that perhaps Henry Vaughan's poem 'The Night' comes half way:

'There is in God—some say—
A deep but dazzling darkness...
O for that night, where I in Him
Might live invisible and dim!

The senses are still here, but do not know the day.

Like Dr. Grey Walter, Charles Williams wished the followers of each way to acknowledge the merits of the other; but his own attraction was toward that of the Affirmation, rejoicing in the images of things, both in

themselves as parts of the living creation to which we all belong, and as objects that can be charged with intense meaning, with what Roger Fry, an art critic of the past, called 'significant form'. This could convey either something of the divine mystery, or, again, the sense of that object's own identity. This was said to have been achieved sometimes in traditional Chinese art, when a painter after a lifetime of effort, managed to portray, say, a quintessential goldfish in a quintessential stream.

Charles Williams was as deeply impressed by the more abstract imagery of mathematics as many other thinkers have been; from the ancient Greeks to Pascal; and the English scientist who affirmed that God is a mathematician, the French poet Valéry, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and the Hungarian Arthur Koestler who, facing death by a firing squad in the Spanish Civil War, worked out with a pencil on the whitewashed wall of his cell the proof of a mathematical theorem and realised with a sense of profound peace that this was something given to the human mind—discovered, not invented—a true revelation of the nature of things. This theme echoes through Williams' writing of 'the bright mathematics of heaven', 'the wheels and rings and lightnings of Isaiah and Ezekiel', 'the doctrine of Euclidian love', and 'geometry breathing geography, the double-fledged Logos'.

It should be noted that this awareness of 'mathematical glory' has, like all awareness of imagery, the possibility of a decline into incredible mental tangles and oddities. Witness on the one hand those early Fathers of the Church who affirmed that, as the sphere is the most perfect of mathematical forms, the virtuous will all arise as spheres on the last day (all right for St. Thomas Aquinas!), and, on the other, the superstitious mazes of 'numerology', intricate as the paths of cheese mites and clothes moth caterpillars eating their corruptive and disruptive way through the matter of thought. All imagery, of course, is subject to the possibility of degradation; all images may become labels, illuminated buttons to provoke reflex emotions, reverential habits; or, worse still, may be thought holy in themselves, idols.

George Herbert wrote of stained-glass windows on which 'a man may stay his eye / or look right through'. If the observer does 'stay his eye', the imagery can become opaque, screening off light instead of admitting it, can imprison the mind and finally bring about an explosion of fierce iconoclasm. More mildly, the images may become the tedious matter of allegory, pictures deliberately labelled with explanations of what they are intended to indicate. (Of course, the *Via Negativa* has its incorruptibility too. Withdrawal of attention from created things and their images can slide into gnosticism, the belief that the Creation was the same thing as the Fall, that matter is inherently evil, and that man's most urgent need is to withdraw from it.)

Williams, like all poets, worked with images drawn from the natural

world: mountains, seas, wolves, wreathing octopods; from the human body; from human relationships—as citizens, as warriors, as lovers; from mythology (though not the mythology of Freud, or, more surprisingly, Jung); and from the theology of those who believe in Christ's Incarnation and all that it implies. He will probably be remembered most vividly in this connection for his use of two main groups of light-transmitting images. They interlock in much of his work, but it is easier and clearer to look at them separately. One group is concerned with the mainly temporal adventures of the Arthurian legend. The other involves the interaction between romantic love and the Beatific Vision.

The Arthurian legend is part of European tradition in general and Britain's heritage in particular. Stories about that gallant king from the Dark Ages echo from Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh to Tintagel Castle in Cornwall, from Glastonbury to the wildest hills of Wales—where the Tudor dynasty claimed him as an ancestor. From ancient chroniclers to Malory's *Morte d' Arthur*, from Elizabeth I's alchemist Dr. Dee to Tennyson, from the Pre-Raphaelites to the recent musical *Camelot*, the fable of Arthur *rex quondam, rex futurus* and his ultimate return has been a numinous background, a golden glow in our history. Children hear tales of the Round Table, of its chivalrous knights—Sir Galahad, Sir Lancelot—of the sword Excalibur drawn from the depths of a lake, and of strange Merlin the magician (recently discussed by Nikolai Tolstoy in terms of a shaman, but traced, nevertheless, to the ruins of a Welsh mountain shrine).

Williams did in fact write part of a fascinating historical and literary study, a fragment called *The Figure of Arthur*, which was published after his death with notes and a very perceptive commentary by C.S. Lewis. But this, I think, should be read *after* the mysterious, lively, lyrical *Taliessin Through Logres*, the first collection of the author's verses on this theme. The legend is still so much a part of our lives that these significant poems have an immediate impact on the mind even though we do not necessarily realise what all the references indicate.

Consider in this connection an Irish song from another context, Thomas Moore's 'Let Erin Remember the Days of Old':

On Lough Neagh's bank, where the fisherman strays,
When the clear cold eve's declining,
He sees the round towers of other days
In the wave beneath him shining.

Consider also the tales of bells said to chime on the verge of human hearing from the city of Lyonesse, lost under the sea. Such experiences are more moving than historical and archaeological studies mapping out the town plans, dates and architecture of those buildings—valuable and even exciting as such studies may be later on, and much as they may contribute to a re-reading of the original work. To the second volume of Williams'

Arthurian cycle—*The Region of the Summer Stars*, which I personally find less inspired—this careful structure can be more relevant. It is useful to know that Logres is Britain, that Taliessin was a Welsh bard, that Nimue is equivalent to Nature, and that the forest of Broceliande is what some early writers called ‘the ancient wood’ and others have later compared with the jungles of the collective unconscious. (But I cannot forget, driving through Brittany in a bus—years ago now, with two small sons—a signpost pointing the way through the woods to Broceliande).

I do not want to devalue Charles Williams’ *Figure of Arthur* or C.S. Lewis’ admirable commentary (which seems to have been written partly because he feared that disputes about the meaning of the Arthurian poems might become as irritant and barren as disputes about Blake’s ‘prophetic books’). Charles Williams was after all a literary critic and a historian—witness his life of Bacon—with a sensitive scholarly conscience. It is fascinating to find an account of the early ‘histories’ chronicling how Arthur was crowned at 15 years old in Caerleon; how he fought the invading Saxons; how he killed a giant at St. Michael’s Mount; how he died in the year 542. It is fascinating to have notes that, nearly 600 years later, there was a current belief that he would return. It is fascinating to discover some of the 12th-century sources of Malory’s legend, sources compiled and written up at a time when that legend (linked with the belief in the Holy Grail) was as living, exciting, and topical a subject as science fiction has been in our own day.

The Middle Ages, which developed the Grail cult concurrently with the Arthurian legend, were also to bring into formal flower the poetic aspects of feudalism, notably by way of the Provençal Courts of Love which established an almost theological etiquette of expressing the ‘verray parfit gentil’ knight’s devotion to his lady. This crystallized the feeling that falling in love was akin to a religious experience—to quote Williams, ‘a kind of adoration’—in which the ‘sight of the beloved arouses a sense of intense significance, a sense that an explanation of the whole universe is being offered’. This is most vividly stated later in time by Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and the theme of Beatrice seen in herself as a given revelation of beatitude became one of Charles Williams’ favourite themes.

C.S. Lewis, writing of the tradition to which it gave rise, hazarded that, long as this had lasted, it might yet fade. It may well be on the way out, speeded off by the hygienic reductionism of sex education in schools on the one hand, and, on the other, by the kind of feminism that works for the recognition of women as ordinary human beings, with ordinary civic rights and duties. Williams would not of course have denied or opposed this recognition; what concerned him was the experience itself. (I wonder how much, in his lifetime, that experience had become a peculiarly English one.) What might be called Dantean mythology, or again the theology of romantic love, became for Charles Williams and some of his

contemporaries, notably Dorothy Sayers, a lasting inspiration. He wrote indeed a whole book on *The Figure of Beatrice* (whose very name is surely significant) and showed most clearly, there and elsewhere, how the sighting of such a figure in ordinary life could illuminate the seer with 'wonder, love, and praise' of God and good will, *caritas*, to his fellow men.

I do not know whether he, or any of his followers, ever realised what a heavy burden was being put upon the person so adored—called upon to fulfil the function of that stained-glass window 'whereon a man may stay his eye, / Or look right through'. Stained-glass windows are not conscious selves, liable to lose their beauty, liable to pain, misunderstanding, wrongdoing, even frivolity. If 'the eye stays' upon their human counterparts, a process of idolatry, disillusion, disgust and, worst of all, boredom may set in. If the eye 'looks right through' they are forgotten as human identities, fallible, loving, suffering, needing personal warmth. The position of a woman here is almost as painful as that of Milton's ideal husband worshipped in ignorance by a spouse who accepts the axiom 'he for God only, she for God in him'.

Williams did not forget the complexities of revelation by way of Beatrice in continuing daily life. Indeed, he spent much time in considering them, in pointing out that that revelation was incomplete, a matter of flashes rather than an enduring light, and that it would be fulfilled and surpassed in the eternity of the Beatific Vision. But he still stresses the original, transfiguring experience. Perhaps, for some of us, Beatrice should be 'a lady passing by', a stranger rather than someone known: a dazzlingly beautiful girl in a bus queue, a man all sculptured strength as he reins back the horse pulling his laden haycart, an exquisite child laughing. But he would, I know, have insisted that these contained a theological—as well as an aesthetic—glory.

I end, as I began, by stressing Charles Williams' employment of words to startle and inspire the mind to wonder—his use of 'the Omnipotence' and 'the I Am' as names for God, and of 'Co-inherence' and 'Exchange' to indicate the unity and diversity of Christians, at once members of a living organism and selves who each plays an individual part in bearing one another's burdens; and, finally, in what he said (in *He Came Down from Heaven*, Heinemann 1948) about the Lord's Prayer and 'the three changes of the great transmutation': ' "thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory"—the web, and the operation down all the threads of the web, and the eternal splendour of threads and web at once.'