

Charles Williams and his Contemporaries

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Edited by

Suzanne Bray and Richard Sturch

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Dedicated to the memory of

GEORGETTE VERSINGER

Agrégée d'anglais

Ancienne élève de l'École Normale Supérieure

Maître des Conférences des Universités

and author of

Charles Williams, sa vie, son œuvre

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PREFACE

RICHARD STURCH

The Charles Williams Society, besides its ordinary meetings and the publication of its *Quarterly*, from time to time holds residential conferences. In preparation for one to be held in 2008, a formal Call for Papers was issued for the first time, evoking an excellent response. The present volume contains papers which were accepted and delivered at the conference, which was held at St Hilda's College, Oxford, from July 4th to July 6th, 2008.

The general title for the conference was given, of set purpose, as "Charles Williams and his Contemporaries". This may need explanation. There has in recent years been a notable revival of interest in Williams and his work. Not so long ago it was hard to get hold of a copy of any of his writings except second-hand. Now nearly all his books are back in print, chiefly in the United States and Canada; indeed, new material has appeared, hitherto unpublished, in the form of two collections of his letters (one set written to Lois Lang-Sims, the other to his wife during their wartime separation) and a number of his earlier Arthurian poems.

There have also been a number of scholarly studies of Williams. Full-scale books on him which have appeared in the past thirty years include Glen Cavaliero's *Charles Williams, Poet of Theology*; Thomas Howard's *The Novels of Charles Williams*, Roma King's *The Pattern in the Web*, the symposium *The Rhetoric of Vision* (edited by Charles Huttar and Peter Shackel), Gavin Ashenden's *Charles Williams: Alchemy and Integration*, and Georgette Versinger's *Charles Williams, sa vie et son oeuvre*, besides numerous articles - many, of course, in the Society's own *Quarterly* and its *Newsletter* predecessor. He has also figured in studies of fantasy literature, of religious drama, and of the "Inklings", the Oxford literary circle of which he was a leading member during the last years of his life.

But nearly all these concentrated on studying Williams's work in detail, or comparing him to other writers such as Tolkien or C. S. Lewis. Yet Williams, both through personal links and through his work as an editor for the Oxford University Press, was in constant contact with a wide range of other writers, scholars and thinkers. It was the aim of the conference to

explore some of these links. Williams's was an extraordinarily versatile mind, and as a result the papers which follow cover a great variety of subjects.

The book opens, as did the conference, with a wide-ranging survey by Professor Grevel Lindop, at present working on what will surely be the definitive biography of Charles Williams. This has led him to a great deal of material of which even enthusiastic admirers of Williams were unaware (such as his appearance, under pseudonyms, as a character in detective-stories!).

The next section of the book might seem at first to wander from the general theme, since it concerns people who by no stretch of the imagination could be called contemporaries of Williams, such as Kierkegaard, whom he was instrumental in getting published in English, and Dante, on whom he wrote a classic study, *The Figure of Beatrice*. It could be argued that Williams did in fact do a great deal to make these figures from the past into our own "contemporaries"; but that is not really why these papers were included. Rather, the point lies in what might be called three-way connexions, between Williams, the writers of the past, and contemporaries who were also involved with these writers - whether translators (as with Dr Paulus' paper on the publishing of Kierkegaard) or Roman Catholic theologians (including a future Pope), as with Dr Blair's paper on Williams, Dante and nuptial love.

The third section moves into territory that may be slightly more familiar to readers of Williams - the circle of his friends and associates. Many who know little of Williams's writings know of him as a leading figure among the "Inklings". Dr Ashenden considers his links with Owen Barfield, himself an occasional Inkling. Flora Liénard compares his and Tolkien's attitudes towards city and countryside. Richard Jeffery not only relates the tribute paid to him by C. S. Lewis in his work on Milton, but also draws attention to Lewis's strong disagreement with some aspects of at least Williams's earlier writings on Milton. But Williams's literary friendships were not limited to the Inklings, and so we have Professor Bray on Dorothy L. Sayers as friend, disciple, interpreter and advocate of Williams.

Lastly, by happy coincidence two papers were offered dealing with the same individual book by Williams - his novel *The Place of the Lion*. Dr MacCoull was unfortunately unable to be present at the conference itself, but her paper was read for her; it investigates the way Williams uses an (imaginary) book-within-a-book. As she says, "sometimes we learn more from an authorial fiction (or metafiction) than if the pseudepigraphon had actually existed." Professor Abrahamson discusses the different ways in

which we can read a text - such as *The Place of the Lion* - and illustrates this by way of the characters in the book itself.

One feature of the conference which does not appear in this book was the presence of a contingent from France (apart, that is, from the two contributors working there, Professor Bray and Mlle Liénard). Interest in Williams in France has been stimulated by the work of the late Professor Georgette Versinger, whose sister was present at the conference, as was her friend Professor Arlette Sancéry, who described her life and work for those members who had not known her personally.

One of this contingent, Flora Liénard, not only contributed to the conference but went on to render further service to the production of this book by formatting the text, for which the editors are very grateful.

In looking back at the conference, tribute has to be paid above all to the Chairman of the Society, Dr Brian Horne, who led the original planning, was one of the panel choosing the speakers, and did virtually all the organizing. With him, the conference was a real success; without him there would have been no conference at all.

Milton Keynes, December 2008.

PART I:
GENERAL SURVEY

CHARLES WILLIAMS AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

GREVEL LINDOP

Every great writer is, in a sense, our contemporary; and there can be little doubt that Charles Williams was, on occasion, and above all in his late poetry, a great writer. Until recently, however, there would have seemed little call to begin a discussion of his literary relationships with a glance at his impact on our own contemporaries at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For the last thirty years or so, it has been a commonplace that Williams has been unjustly ‘neglected’ and ‘overlooked’. Yet it seems the year 2008 has seen something of a turning-point in the fortunes of Williams’s reputation. Not only has this year seen by far the most substantial international academic conference on Williams; but it has also seen the publication of the *Collected Critical Writings* of Geoffrey Hill. The volume incorporates, under the title ‘Alienated Majesty’, Geoffrey Hill’s 2005 Empson Lectures, delivered at Cambridge, in which Hill – speaking, significantly, on ‘Eros in F.H. Bradley and T.S. Eliot’ – quotes extensively from *The English Poetic Mind* and expresses the considered opinion that ‘Williams was a good theologian and, at his best, a great critic both formally and informally of English poetry’.¹ Hill tells us that Williams ‘would have understood the fundamental dilemma of the poetic craft – that it is simultaneously an intimation of the divine fiat and an act of enormous self-will’, refers to Williams’s ‘profound... aphorisms’ and calls *The English Poetic Mind* Williams’s ‘critical masterpiece’. He also contrasts – and not in Eliot’s favour – ‘the almost complete obscurity into which *The English Poetic Mind* fell in 1932...to the celebrity that was primed and waiting to receive *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*’ in 1933.

This rediscovery, by the most respected British poet-critic of our times, of Williams’s brilliant critical and theoretical book, surely marks an epoch. It will simply be impossible for Williams to remain in the degree of

¹ Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 562.

obscurity he has recently suffered now that Hill has so emphatically drawn attention to his work. Hill's discussion seems an indication that Williams's time is once again coming. And before leaving the subject of Geoffrey Hill, let us recall that he entered Keble College Oxford in 1950, just five years after Williams's death. The reverberations of Williams and his work in Oxford must still have been potent. One looks again at Hill's marvellous early poems and notices the date '1953' at the foot of his beautifully evocative poem 'Merlin'. 1953 was the year Hill left Oxford. Surely in 'Merlin' we have a trace of the influence of Williams's Arthurian cycle on a fine poet who missed by a very small margin being in a real sense a literary contemporary of Williams.

From Hill's beginnings, let us move back to Williams's own. Williams's first literary companions, though not his contemporaries in the chronological sense, were members of his own family. In her biographies, Alice Mary Hadfield has given the impression that Williams grew up in a family where certain members dabbled amateurishly in writing, largely for their own amusement or vanity. Whether this reflects an impression given by Williams himself, or whether, like certain other things in her book, it is a product of publishing snobbery, it is actually false. Williams grew up in a literary family, where authorship and publishing were quite normal. His father, R.W.S. Williams (1848-1929), was a regular and valued contributor of verse, stories and articles to an enormous range of popular magazines. Hundreds of his contributions survive, and whilst their literary value would now be regarded as close to zero, they represent a steady, well-judged and thoroughly professional contribution to a popular literary market. When he died, the local paper described him as, amongst other things, a 'journalist'. Charles Williams's uncle, J. Charles Wall (1860-1943), was an author, artist and antiquarian, well-read in the Church Fathers, and an expert on the architecture of churches, earthworks and castles. A Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, he contributed scholarly chapters to the *Victoria County Histories*, published over a dozen books with a range of publishers, edited a not-very-successful Anglo-Catholic periodical called *Credo* (it was much preoccupied with the revival of the pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham), and in the 1920s and '30s ran a publishing house, Talbot and Co, whose offices were little more than a block away from the OUP building in Warwick Square.

Hadfield's condescension to Charles Wall is amusing. In his time he was a much more significant author than Hadfield in hers. Some of his books are still standard scholarly references. Charles Wall seems to have acted as something of a mentor to Williams. When John Pellow in 1924 states bluntly 'C.W. is an Anglo-Catholic', adding that Williams had

published poetry in the journal *Blackfriars* and that a visiting Dominican friar had been astonished to see two volumes of Aquinas on his shelves, I think we can detect the influence of Charles Wall. We may add one final detail: in 1933 Wall established The Antiquarian Association of the British Isles; the Association's President was none other than Charles W. Stansby Williams.

With a father and uncle so deeply involved in authorship and publishing it is hardly surprising that Charles Williams should have gravitated to the literary world. Once promoted from proof-reading to work in the editorial department at the Oxford University Press, Williams was of course at the centre of literary life and in some sort of contact with an enormous range of contemporary figures. It may, however, be worth mentioning in passing that on his way there, taking his courses at University College London for the matriculation exam – the equivalent of present-day 'A' levels – he attended the Latin classes of A.E. Housman – something he never mentions afterwards, even when writing to Housman himself. But the evidence is there in the archives of UCL, which also show that he studied English Literature with W.P. Ker, the famous author of *Epic and Romance*. The student body was an impressive one: Ker was also teaching an Icelandic class which contained just two students, both mature: they were Ananda K. Coomarasawamy and Caroline Spurgeon, later author of the classic study of *Shakespeare's Imagery*. There is, sadly, no evidence that Williams ever met either of them.

Once we move beyond Williams's family and education we come up against the real issues. The question of Williams's relation with his contemporaries is problematic, I think, chiefly because until his connections were established, relatively late in life, with Eliot, Auden and the 'Inklings', the writers with whom Williams chiefly associated - the near-contemporaries whose influence he most acknowledged - were mostly ones who are now regarded, rightly or wrongly, as negligible. Williams's own impact on other writers is obvious and fairly well-documented, though biographers often seem not to know what to do with it. Has any biographer of Eliot, for example, really explored the relationship of the two men, or searched archives such as those in the Bodleian which would fill out the picture? Did any Eliot scholar, when that was still possible, interview those – such as Anne Ridler – who could have informed them properly? Apparently not. But whilst Williams's influence on others is often clear and obvious, the sources of his own literary models and enthusiasms are much harder to trace.

Partly this may be because there is something of the autodidact about him. Autodidacts read books which are not on the syllabus. They read the

books which they can borrow, or buy cheaply. Williams did not read Frazer's *Golden Bough* in his youth because it was available only in a large and expensive edition; but he read G.R.S. Mead's *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* because, as John Pellow said, he had been able to pick it up for ninepence.² One thinks, inevitably, of another autodidact, Blake, whose sources are all the more fascinating for being off not only present-day reading-lists but also off the respectable reading-lists of his own day. The combination of Williams's own evening lecturing and his daytime work at the publishing-house which since 1906 had produced *The World's Classics* series naturally led Williams to fill any conceivable gap in his reading. But still his view of poetry was not ours, nor was it the one we have been taught.

Take the contemporaries and near-contemporaries whom he recognized as related to his own work – Coventry Patmore, Alice Meynell, even Robert Bridges. To the reader of today, even the poetry-reader, this is a catalogue of unknowns. There is no evidence of Williams attending readings at the Poetry Bookshop, or hobnobbing with the Imagists at the Eiffel Tower Café. I do not remember coming across the name of Edward Thomas anywhere in his works. His context and influences (a term he disliked, as we shall see) are strange to us and we are not sure what to make of them. We lack a sense of what must have been an identifiable poetic atmosphere.

One thing that is evident is that the work of those we now label the 'Modernists' made little or no impact on him until the free-verse 'Experiments' of *Divorce*, published in 1920, which look as if they may carry the influence of T.E. Hulme. Even then, the 'Experiments' are pretty unsuccessful, and we have to wait for 'Meeting Shakespeare' in *Windows of Night* (1925) for a generally satisfying free verse poem – albeit an isolated one, and certainly no masterpiece. In general Williams appears to see himself writing in a line which descends direct and unbroken from Tennyson and Swinburne by way of Patmore and Meynell. Yet the line, to us, seems badly broken. Yeats was, after all, in some ways the heir of Swinburne as well as of Shelley. We know Williams admired his work enough to join his standing ovation at the Coronet Theatre in Notting Hill³ and to quote *The Shadowy Waters* on the title-page of *The Silver Stair*. Yet Yeats seems not obviously to have influenced his poetry before the stage of the mature Taliessin poems. Perhaps Williams felt himself ethnically disqualified from joining the Celtic twilight; yet he could imagine himself

² John Pellow's Diary, Bodleian Ms Facs. c .134, 3 May 1924.

³ Charles Williams, *Poetry at Present*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1930, 56.

Celtic enough to contribute an Arthurian poem to the Welsh National Eisteddfod in 1913.⁴

It's perhaps less surprising that here is no sign of the Decadents, whose fire was spent before Williams reached his teens. No doubt the Williams family preferred to give them a miss for social and religious reasons, though one might have expected Uncle Charles Wall, who after all had been an art student in Paris and wore a floppy black velvet bow tie, to have some interest in them. Perhaps he kept Wilde and Beardsley on a high shelf, spines against the wall. When Williams does turn to expressing a grim and somewhat paranoid vision in the 1925 *Windows of Night*, the idiom is not indebted to the Decadents but to such late Victorian exemplars as James Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night*.

Williams's tendency to work in a late-Victorian idiom was surely strengthened by his friendship with Alice Meynell. It was Williams's friend Frederick Page who introduced him, apparently in 1911, to the Meynells, who would become in a sense his first patrons. Alice Meynell, then in her mid-sixties, was of course a living, breathing and writing Victorian poet, and her work will have done nothing to change Williams's elaborate and stylised poetic manner. Williams's friendship with Alice and Wilfrid Meynell is at present one of the great lacunae in our knowledge of Williams's life. Hadfield gives only the thinnest outline of the relationship and uses it largely as a source for quoting letters from Williams about other things. The only biography of Alice Meynell, June Badeni's *The Slender Tree*, makes no mention of Williams. The passages Hadfield quotes from Williams's letters to Alice Meynell make it clear that there was a copious correspondence on all kinds of matters. As yet it has not proved possible to fill this gap, so it must simply be noted.

There are certainly elements in Alice Meynell's poetry which give one a sense of why she might have admired Williams's work. She enjoyed intricate verse forms; the relationship between love and theology is central to her vision; and poems such as 'To the Body' and especially 'Advent Meditation', which reflects on the physical gestation of the child Jesus, as 'Slow Nature's days followed each other/To form the Saviour from His Mother', indicate that the sacramental emphasis of their thinking was probably very close.

It is perhaps worth mentioning also that the Meynells are first of a small series of figures who can reasonably be seen as Williams's patrons: the others being, successively, Sir Humphrey Milford and C.S. Lewis.

⁴ See Roger Simpson, 'Arthurian Pageants in Twentieth-Century Britain', *Arthuriana*, April 2008.

Each helped Williams to overcome what were effectively class obstacles: namely, those posed by his relatively humble social status and consequent lack of both funds and a university degree. Milford helped Williams to publication, promotion at the Press, and an honorary degree. Lewis, also instrumental in the awarding of the degree, was the prime mover in recruiting Williams as a wartime lecturer for the Oxford English Faculty.

Work at the Press naturally put Williams in touch with an immense number of authors. His work on *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* in 1917 brought him into close contact with the editors, Arthur Hugh Evelyn Lee (known to his friends as 'Henry', and thus in name at least the original of Henry Lee in *The Greater Trumps*) and Daniel H. S. Nicholson. Lee and Nicholson became close friends of Williams, and for a time formed a group of scholarly, humorous, literary-minded male friends which interestingly foreshadows the more famous but actually perhaps less influential 'Inklings' of Williams's later Oxford period. (In his *Church Times* obituary for Lee, Williams indicates that he spent an evening with a group of friends at Lee's rectory roughly once a fortnight for some twenty years.)⁵ A liking for such groups was an aspect of Williams's personality, and even during his wartime Oxford period the Inklings were not the only such group he frequented. He was a regular at another pub in the Oxford city centre every Thursday for literary lunchtimes with Gerry Hopkins from the Press, Basil Blackwell, owner of the famous family bookshop, and the playwright Christopher Fry, who was then directing at the Oxford Playhouse.⁶ Social contact with writers was just as important to Williams as reading their books, and at times more so.

To return to the *Oxford Book of Mystical Verse*, the records at the OUP show that in 1917 Williams was set the task of clearing the permissions for the anthology - in those deferential days, the editors merely had to list the items for inclusion, secure in the knowledge that a dogsbody at the press, in this case Williams, would do the rest! The file at the OUP shows Williams writing to most of the living contributors to the *Mystical Verse* anthology. The names and addresses are there in Williams's hand, including Evelyn Underhill (Mrs S[tuart] M[oore], 50 Campden Hill Square), W.B. Yeats (18 Woburn Buildings, [London] W.C.), and Aleister Crowley (care of the Society for the Propagation of Religious Truth). Sadly, the letters and their replies have not survived, though they were probably uninteresting business letters of the kind Williams spent much of his day producing. Such letter-writing at the OUP often circulated

⁵ Charles Williams, obituary for A.H.E. Lee, *Church Times* 29.12.42.

⁶ Fry interview.

indifferently between Gerry Hopkins, Fred Page and Williams, so that a correspondent might get letters from any one, two or all three in a single sequence. They might also deputise for the head of the Press: sometimes Miss Peacock's typed references at the head of a letter show that Williams, for example, has actually written a letter signed as Sir Humphrey Milford's. Here again, in an unexpected way, we have Williams functioning as part of a group. There was no demarcation or job-description at this level of the office. Everyone did everything. And this group in turn acted as the nucleus from which Williams developed the vision expressed in the *Masques of Amen House*.

It was in 1930 – significantly, the same year as the publication of *Heroes and Kings* – that Williams tackled his poetic contemporaries, as it were, head-on. It seems important that Williams's three major critical works – *Poetry at Present* and the two books on the *Poetic Mind* – should have been written in the interval between this and his mature Taliessin poems. It was evidently a period when Williams was thinking even more intensely than usual about poetry; and this major critical output coincided with work towards the transformation of his poetic style.

The poets discussed in *Poetry at Present* show a resolutely conservative taste starting to crack under the strain of Williams's own emotional experience. What we think of as Modernism in Britain came, largely, from the United States. Three years earlier Robert Graves and Laura Riding had published a broadly comparable critical book surveying the contemporary scene. But for Graves, a poet who in so many ways had so much in common with Williams and who would cross his path again fatefully in 1942, Laura Riding had acted as both messenger and critic in very much the same way as Ezra Pound had done for Yeats. Under her tutelage, the former Georgian Graves was heading for a modified version of Modernism. Accordingly Graves and Riding's *Survey of Modernist Poetry* gives plentiful space to [an upper-case] E.E. Cummings, to H.D., to T.S. Eliot, the Imagists, T.E. Hulme, Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, John Crowe Ransom, Isaac Rosenberg, the Sitwells, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, Allen Tate, and William Carlos Williams. Graves and Riding's treatment is not always favourable by any means, but these poets are all there, and discussed at some length. And most of them are American.

Williams's *Poetry at Present*, though it has full chapters on Eliot and the Sitwells, as well as on (the pre-Riding) Graves, is both very English and very conservative. The poets it deals with, besides Hardy, who died whilst it was in preparation, are Bridges, Housman, Kipling, Yeats, W.H. Davies, Walter de la Mare, Chesterton, Masfield, Ralph Hodgson, Wilfred Gibson, Abercrombie, Eliot, the Sitwells and Edmund Blunden.

The choice may be accounted for to some extent by the fact that it was written, to judge from the Preface, partly as a companion to various OUP anthologies ‘containing modern verse’ – though one wonders how far this statement represents simply a trace of an argument Williams used to get it past the Delegates of the Press. It is also true that at one stage its projected title was *Modern English Poets*, though this did not stop an American, Eliot, from getting in. *Poetry at Present* has many fascinating aspects. One is that Williams makes his criterion for selection that those included shall be they only who ‘have, to however small an extent, enlarged the boundaries of English verse’.⁷ To Williams, this is not a mere technical criterion to do with such things as verse-form. It means, rather, that they shall for the first time have expressed some aspect of human sensibility or consciousness. There must be in their work a mood, feeling or sense of existence which has not been previously expressed. And whilst the Preface expresses vast admiration for Robert Bridges’s *Testament of Beauty*, offering a typically intricate compliment by saying that ‘Had Wordsworth published the *Prelude* while he held the office [of Laureate], the later poem would have had a rival as a Laureate’s work’, perhaps the most striking thing about the book is the troubled admiration it reveals for Eliot.

Where Graves and Riding adopt the stance of intellectuals, advising the reader on how to read and interpret *The Waste Land*, Williams takes the role, almost, of the common reader, apologising to Eliot ‘for whose work I profess a sincere and profound respect, though I fail to understand it.’⁸ And when we read Williams’s comments on Eliot’s work, it is impossible not to link them to the sense of domestic horror expressed again and again in his 1925 volume *Windows of Night*. Williams compares Eliot to a gadfly, and his work to a maze. He confesses to being troubled by Eliot’s poetry, and to being impressed by it against his will: ‘If only we could neglect it,’ he says, ‘and go back to our sound traditional versifiers. They do not plague us with learned allusions. We know what they have to say, and that they have nothing to say is merely a proof of it.’⁹ What really interests him about Eliot’s work is its expression of the horror of a particular kind of emotional bleakness. Commenting on the ‘eternal footman’ passage in ‘Prufrock’, Williams identifies it as ‘the experience, so common and detestable, when the whole universe seems to be sniggering at one behind its hand, and at the same time obsequiously assisting the exhibition one is making of oneself.’ He goes on, ‘Mr Eliot’s poetic experience of life would seem to be Hell varied by intense poetry. It

⁷ Williams, *Poetry at Present*, vii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

is also, largely, our experience.¹⁰ Williams indicates that this Hell will be in future a little more bearable because we shall be able to recognise in our own experiences those states which Eliot describes. He picks out certain images – the smile that ‘falls heavily among the bric-à-brac’, the ancient fuel-gathering women, the ‘pair of ragged claws’. ‘All these,’ says Williams, ‘express in their different ways a common experience, a comment upon phenomena, a passive endurance of it, if nothing so violent as a repulsion from it. ...Against the hollowness of our own self-knowledge the hollowness of an immenser unknowing universe booms’. He praises Eliot’s adaptation of Oliver Goldsmith and comments, ‘The relief of it! the pleasure with which we hear Oliver rebuked, or at least passed by; ..How much more satisfactory, to us who live in it, is the recognition of the way things happen in this almost automatic hell, than any attempt to impose morality on it and to wring significance from it.’¹¹ For all its obscurity and its formal strangeness, Williams recognises in Eliot’s work the peculiar horrors that beset his own daily life. The chapter represents just one stage in the prolonged negotiation which Williams was to make with Eliot and his work.

That he regarded Eliot as an important matter to tackle is clear from a note on a letter to Olive Willis of 23 December 1925, shortly therefore before he began work on *Poetry at Present*. ‘The T.S. Eliot is with my love,’ he writes. ‘I bought two: one for you one for me. Let us taste him and compare.’¹² The volume was, most likely, a newly-published *Poems 1909-1925*, officially listed as published in 1926 but quite possibly available at the very end of the previous year.

The two men had, of course, a great deal in common – both poet-publishers with a commitment to Christian mysticism enriched by a knowledge of other mysticisms; both with experience of difficult marriages. Yet temperamentally they were very different. Eliot’s mandarin approach to literature, a product of his affluent family background and patrician education, was very much at odds with the plebeian traditions through which Williams had ascended, the traditions of popular magazine-writing, adult evening-classes, and the unglamorous work of the book trade as parcel-packer and proof-reader. Though Williams’s critical and poetic styles would become every bit as difficult and demanding as those of Eliot, it was for very different reasons. Where Eliot was concerned with subtleties of sensibility and with consequently oblique and suggestive ways of writing, Williams was concerned with myth as a means of

¹⁰ Ibid., 166.

¹¹ Ibid., 169.

¹² Bodleian E Martin Browne Material, Box 4.

conveying ideas so fundamental and challenging that they required a basic re-thinking or re-imagining of the world and the human place in it. Eliot's critical discourse dominated the academic world throughout the forties, fifties and sixties; Williams had the misfortune to anticipate, and transcend, the postmodern critical theories of the last quarter of the twentieth century and to be thus so far ahead of his time that he remained almost unread.

Williams and Eliot circled around each other, then, somewhat cautiously. Eliot was unstinting in his praise of Williams as a man, though it is noticeable that he avoids the reverential language into which W.H. Auden later ventured when writing about him. He published Williams's fiction through Faber and Faber as well as *The Figure of Beatrice*, and even commissioned *Witchcraft*. Yet Hadfield points out that while Eliot told Williams he 'must not let anything stand in the way of the Taliessin poems,'¹³ Faber – which would have been their natural home – did not publish them, even when OUP failed to bring out *The Region of the Summer Stars*, and it had to go to Tambimuttu's fragile *Poetry London* instead. The two men saw each other frequently in the late 1930s. Williams's letters are dotted with brief references to meetings with Eliot, often with a slightly ironic note to them: in November 1937 he tells Phyllis Potter, 'I have been distracted by our Mr Eliot at lunch defining morality to me.'¹⁴ There are clear signs of a professional rivalry too. In an undated letter (perhaps of 1935) he tells Phyllis Jones, 'As for T.S.E....I don't think I like his verse *more* because I like him... Did I tell you James Stephens said to me of one of my poems [probably 'The Crowning of Arthur'] - 'How paltry the whole of Eliot seems in comparison with *that!*' Upon which I looked coy & made noises, but he swept the noises aside - 'Yes, it does, & you know it does.' Which, in effect, I *didn't*... I asked Mary Butts *what* had put T.S.E. over so well, & she said, besides his real capacity, he had an instinctive, utterly unconscious, & New Englandy capacity for publicity...The other day Anderson produced a copy of T.S.E.'s *Thoughts on Lambeth*...& I re-read it; liking it for its sheer intelligent earnestness. But the English poets have not waited for T.S.E. to tell us about the *Waste Land*, nor English Christendom to learn its theology from him - not that he thinks so.'¹⁵

And in 1936, he writes to Olive Wilson, who has invited him to speak on modern verse at her school, Downe House, 'I break down before a good deal of modern verse – though when I say so the young always say:

¹³ Alice Mary Hadfield, *Charles Williams: An Exploration of his Life and Work*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, 197-8.

¹⁴ Bodleian MS Res c.58.

¹⁵ undated letter, Bodleian Ms Res.c.321 364 e-f .

O Charles, you don't? which, however beautiful, is a lie. But I could talk about the Break-up, and T.S. Eliot - & how we should have done it all without him, anyhow, however good he is - & I can *allude* to others.¹⁶ I presume that 'the Break-up' here is the breaking of the regular, traditional verse forms. The jealousy in those phrases - 'we should have done it all without him, anyhow, however good he is' - is palpable and almost childlike.

But Williams also comes to recognize a kinship with Eliot and to see him as a useful professional collaborator. Discussing potential radio programmes for the BBC in 1941, he remarks, 'I do think that three or four of us - Lewis, and perhaps Eliot and so on let loose on the question of what Love is for twenty minutes each would be amusing.'¹⁷ By November 1943 it even seemed possible to Williams that Eliot might join the Companions of the Coinherence. On All Souls' day in that year, he writes, 'I dine with Eliot tomorrow night; if he says anything about the *Dove* I shall try & find an opportunity to tell him that the Order exists & is at work.'¹⁸ Whether such a conversation ever took place, we do not know. In a wonderful undated verse letter of around 1940 to Anne Renwick, Williams discusses the kinship of his own work with Blake's *Prophetic Books* (on which he hoped that Anne would herself write a book), and advises her:

If anyone says (as, God knows, they may -
some people will say anything) on a day
in the future that I was inspired by the *Prophetic Books*,
turn on them one of your darker looks
(it will probably be a her - I am sorry, but it will:
or perhaps not; everyone has a damnable skill
in Influences - & Eliot and Hopkins & Blake
are going to be mine, in those pages where a cornrake
discusses the corn. I forgive them.)¹⁹

And that, of course, is what we do tend to say, most of us.

The relationship with Eliot may be taken as a kind of case study in the complexity of Williams's relation with an important contemporary. What makes it so fascinating, and so difficult, is that given Williams's central

¹⁶ Bodleian E Martin Browne Material Box 4.

¹⁷ Idem.

¹⁸ Charles Williams to Joan Wallis, 28 Oct 1939, letter in Marion E Wade Center, Wheaton College.

¹⁹ Charles Williams to Anne Renwick, undated (c. 1940), Bodleian MS. Eng. Lett. d. 452.ff 102-3.

position in the publishing world, his literary relationships were bound to be personal ones. As the comments on Eliot make very clear, his response to an author was nearly always a complicated blend of views about the writing, and a relationship with a person.

One quality in Williams revealed by the comments on Eliot is also brought out by the very odd structure of *Poetry at Present*. Each chapter of that book ends with a poem, or at least a piece of verse, relating to the poet just discussed. Not exactly imitation, not exactly parody, the verses are apparently attempts to write from the viewpoint of the poet just discussed and to sum up, or at least hint at, his world-view as understood by Williams. One is struck by the incredible cheek of this. The risk of offending the poets, or of inviting their ridicule or disdain, would seem to be obvious. How Williams got it through the Press – especially in a book written not for the London, text-book end of the business but for the grandly dignified Clarendon Press imprint itself, one can only speculate. Williams had about him, especially in his youth, a quality of bumptiousness, of irrepressible and rather noisy audacity, which the somewhat reverential posthumous accounts of him fail to convey. It is evident in John Pellow's diary entries and sometimes in Williams's own letters, as we've seen. It's also perceptible in several of the fictional accounts of Williams written by his contemporaries.

Williams's personal impact, as all know, was very considerable. He impressed people so forcefully as a 'character' that he figures in a number of minor contemporary novels. Bruce Montgomery, writing as Edmund Crispin, gives one of the more muted portraits in *The Case of the Gilded Fly*, introducing him as the playwright Robert Warner, something of a womanizer who brings his mistress, Rachel West, to Oxford when he arrives to rehearse his latest play there. Robert has 'rather coarse black hair...[and] heavy horn-rimmed spectacles shielding alert, intelligent eyes', he is 'tall, rather lanky and dressed inconspicuously in a dark lounge suit. But there was a certain authority in his bearing and an impression of severity, almost of asceticism in his movements.' Asked by the detective, Gervase Fen, why he writes, Robert answers 'For money – and for the sake of showing off. I think that's why most men, even the very greatest, have written. The Creation of Art' – he succeeded in making the capitals articulate – 'is an object which seldom enters into their calculations.... That presumably is a sort of incidental occurrence, like the pearl in an oyster.'²⁰

²⁰ 'Edmund Crispin' [*i.e.* Bruce Montgomery], *The Case of the Gilded Fly*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971 (first published 1944), 13-14, 145.

Agatha Christie, in the last of her collection of stories *The Mysterious Mr Quin*, first published in 1930, gives a far more hostile but uncomfortably recognizable portrait of Williams as Claude Wickham – note the ‘CW’ initials. The setting of the story, ‘Harlequin’s Lane’, is the rehearsal of an opera at a large house in a semi-rural district some thirty miles from London. It is, indeed, curiously similar to that of *Descent into Hell* with its St Albans country-house setting and its play-rehearsals. This time the Williams character is a composer rather than a dramatist. Claude Wickham is introduced at tea with his patrons, ‘cramming his mouth indiscriminately with anything handy, talking rapidly, and waving long white hands that had a double-jointed appearance. His short-sighted eyes peered through large horn-rimmed spectacles.’ After an interruption in the conversation, ‘Claude Wickham, who liked the sound of his own voice, began all over again. “Russia,” he said, “that was the only country in the world worth being interested in. They experimented. With lives, if you like, but still they experimented. Magnificent! He crammed a sandwich into his mouth with one hand, and added a bite of the chocolate éclair he was waving about in the other...’²¹

This is, of course, a crude caricature clearly motivated in part by snobbery. But it has points of interest. Is it possible that Williams at times enjoyed provoking pompous gatherings with praise of Soviet Russia? One recalls *Poems of Conformity* with its republicanism and praise of the February Revolution of 1917; and the imagery of hammer and sickle, mallet and scythe much later in the Taliessin poems. In DHS Nicholson’s 1924 novel *The Marriage-Craft*, Williams figures as Ronald, whom we first glimpse in a train, elaborating his theories about sex to the narrator in a third-class smoking carriage on the way to Rickmansworth. ‘He had been quite ingenious and quite audible – and quite undismayed by the cavernous silence of the carriage. After a more than usually improbably remark – something, I think, to the effect that there should be a law forbidding married couples to live together for more than six months of the year – he had looked round innocently when a loud snort had broken the silence of his unwilling audience.’ Ronald proposes, and in fact carries out, a plan to bring together a group of people with different views to debate the nature of marriage. One of his suggestions, abandoned on mature consideration, is to complete the spectrum of opinion by including a prostitute. ‘The Piccadilly element...Could we, do you think? The real professional? She’s a type right enough, if we could get hold of her. The

²¹ Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Mr Quin*, London: Harper Collins, 2003 (first published 1930), 368-9.

late Empire Promenade kind of lady...'²² (The Empire Promenade was the gallery of the Empire Theatre, Leicester Square, notorious as a haunt of high-class prostitutes until it was closed down in 1916, eight years before the publication of Nicholson's novel.) There was also, of course, Williams's appearance in Gerard Hopkins's 1933 novel, *Nor Fish nor Flesh*,²³ based on the love-triangle in which the two men had been embroiled with Phyllis Jones. It seems that Williams's larger-than-life, somewhat theatrical presence lent itself naturally to fiction.

All this is of interest because the reverential tone of much that was written about Williams after his death has obscured interesting sides of him. It seems likely that some of his impact came from an element of abrasive audacity – saying the things it was not quite 'nice' to say, even perhaps not being quite a gentleman – which gave him a certain freedom to speak out and to provoke.

Rather than catalogue yet again a series of famous writers well-known for their association with Williams – the likes of Dorothy L. Sayers, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, it seems worthwhile to look at one further example where we have largely unpublished record of Williams's own reactions; in this case, W.H. Auden. Auden contacted the OUP in 1936 with the suggestion of an *Oxford Book of Light Verse*. Interestingly Williams's first reaction was half-hearted about the project itself but completely professional and practical, in commercial terms, about the editor. As reported by Carpenter and Hadfield, Williams's comment in an internal memo was 'it would be quite a good idea to collect Auden's name. He is still generally regarded as the most important of the young poets at present, and likely to be more important if he develops.'²⁴ Auden's reverential comments after his very few meetings with Williams are well known and are often quoted alongside those of Eliot. But whereas Williams's comments on Eliot show him jockeying for position with a respected but cautiously-viewed fellow-poet, his references to Auden suggest something quite different. Perhaps because of Auden's youth, Williams seems to have felt that in a certain way his own ideas were being commandeered by an author with a greater flair than his own for exploiting them. The envy is more or less unconcealed: in 1940 he writes to Alice Mary Hadfield, 'Our Mr W.H.Auden has written again. He has written "a 1700 line poem which owes a great deal to the [*Descent of the Dove*]. It is part of a book I am doing with a title which you will recognize, *The Double Image*.'" It is to be out this summer, & everyone will say how

²² DHS Nicholson, *The Marriage-Craft*, London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1924, 7, 14.

²³ Gerard Hopkins, *Nor Fish Nor Flesh*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1933.

²⁴ Hadfield *Charles Williams: An Exploration of his Life and Work*, 141.

he has advanced! No; I am being nasty; pray for me. Auden & McD[ougall] dance a kind of saraband in my mind: be one with me and mock it.²⁵

McDougall had, of course, married Phyllis Jones. The linking of the two names seems highly significant. Around the same time Williams writes to Phyllis Potter: 'It will amuse you to know that W.H.Auden has been so moved by the *Dove* that he is writing a long poem which, he says, owes a great deal to it, and that he is calling his book *The Double Man*. I foresee that everyone will attribute the ideas to Mr. Auden. Adored in all ways be the Omnipotence!'²⁶ Later the same year, again to Alice Mary: 'Auden writes to say he is ineffectively trying to practise the Presence and he wishes I were there to help; it is his dream that I shall be moved to New York. And I wish you were; you would be more useful than I.'²⁷

Something about Auden evidently needled Williams's own sense that he was undervalued. Perhaps it was his youth: Eliot was approximately Williams's age, but Auden was twenty years younger. The impression may have been strengthened by the sense that Auden was sitting across the Atlantic in comfort whilst Williams and his family were frequently in danger from air raids. The letters quoted were, after all, written in 1940. There is also the point that whereas Williams sensed that Eliot had in his own life and work concerns inherently close to his own, in the case of Auden he sensed that the similarity came solely from Auden's adoption of his own ideas. Eliot, as it were, had brought a good deal to the table; Auden had merely taken.

Williams's contact with the younger writers who began to come to Oxford in wartime is well known. There were those who enjoyed his lectures and company but took on little of his ideas or technique, such as Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin (or at any rate, the Larkin of the volumes after *The North Ship*). And there were those, like Sidney Keyes and John Heath-Stubbs, who were took on something of both, and profoundly. Keyes, tragically, died in the war, leaving a remarkable body of poetry behind him. John Heath-Stubbs continued into a brilliant and respected poetic career.

And so we come round again to our starting-point, the generation which arrived at Oxford shortly after Williams's death, in time to feel the reverberations, though not to meet the man. One of these was Geoffrey Hill, whose work gives one some hope that far from being spent, the time

²⁵ Bodleian, Charles Williams Literary Papers, Box 2, K27.20.

²⁶ Charles Williams to Phyllis Potter, 19 July 1940, Bodleian MS Res. c.58.

²⁷ Charles Williams to Alice Mary Hadfield, 4 Sept 1940, Bodleian, Charles Williams Literary Papers, Box 2, K27.22.

of Williams's real force, in poetry at least, has not yet come. There is a sense in which we can stretch the idea of the contemporary, assigning it to those in whose period a writer's work has its main impact. We may recall that the classic *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936) began with Hopkins, chronologically a Victorian poet. We know that the greatest impact of Kierkegaard – publication of whose work was pioneered by Williams – was made in the twentieth century. In a sense, these writers were the intellectual contemporaries of the twentieth century. One would like to think that Williams is now approaching a similar rediscovery, and that his real intellectual contemporaries will turn out to be the poets, not of the twentieth, but of the twenty-first century.

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