

Preface
to
Essays
Presented to
Charles Williams

C. S. Lewis

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PREFACE

In this book the reader is offered the work of one professional author, two dons, a solicitor, a friar, and a retired army officer; if he feels disposed to complain of hotch-potch (which incidentally is an excellent dish; consult the *Noctes Ambrosianae*) I must reply that the variety displayed by this little group is far too small to represent the width of Charles Williams's friendships. Nor are we claiming to represent it. Voices from many parts of England—voices of people often very different from ourselves—would justly rebuke our presumption if we did. We know that he was as much theirs as ours: not only, nor even chiefly, because of his range and versatility, great though these were, but because, in every circle that he entered, he gave the whole man. I had almost said that he was at everyone's disposal, but those words would imply a passivity on his part, and all who knew him would find the implication ludicrous. You might as well say that an Atlantic breaker on a Cornish beach is 'at the disposal' of all whom it sweeps off their feet. If the authors of this book were to put forward any claim, it would be, and that shyly, that they were for the last few years of his life a fairly permanent nucleus among his *literary* friends. He read us his manuscripts and we read him ours: we smoked, talked, argued, and drank together (I must confess that with Miss Dorothy Sayers I have seen him drink only tea: but that was neither his fault nor hers).

Of many such talks this collection is not unrepresentative. The first three essays are all on literature, and even on one aspect of literature, the narrative art. That is natural enough. His *All Hallows' Eve* and my own *Perelandra* (as well as Professor

Tolkien's unfinished sequel to the *Hobbit*) had all been read aloud, each chapter as it was written. They owe a good deal to the hard-hitting criticism of the circle. The problems of narrative as such—seldom heard of in modern critical writings—were constantly before our minds. The last two essays are historical. Father Mathew's bears on an aspect of the Middle Ages which always seemed to Williams of deep significance and which had, indeed, been the common interest that first brought him and me together. The final essay carries us to seventeenth-century France. My brother's lifelong interest in the reign of Louis XIV was a bond between Williams and him which no one had foreseen when they first met. Those two, and Mr. H. V. D. Dyson of Merton, could often be heard in a corner talking about Versailles, *intendants*, and the *maison du roy*, in a fashion with which the rest of us could not compete. Between the literary and the historical essays stands Mr. Barfield's work, which is literary and historical at once. We had hoped to offer the whole collection to Williams as what the Germans call a *Festschrift* when peace would recall him from Oxford to London. Death forestalled us; we now offer as a memorial what had been devised as a greeting.

Something must here be said to those who may ask 'Who was Charles Williams?' He had spent most of his life in the service of the Oxford University Press at Amen House, Warwick Square, London. He was a novelist, a poet, a dramatist, a biographer, a critic, and a theologian: a 'romantic theologian' in the technical sense which he himself invented for those words. A romantic theologian does not mean one who is romantic about theology but one who is theological about romance, one who considers the theological implications of those experiences which are called romantic. The belief that the most serious and

ecstatic experiences either of human love or of imaginative literature have such theological implications, and that they can be healthy and fruitful only if the implications are diligently thought out and severely lived, is the root principle of all his work. His relation to the modern literary current was thus thoroughly 'ambivalent'. He could be grouped with the counter-romantics in so far as he believed untheologized romanticism (like Plato's 'unexamined life') to be sterile and mythological. On the other hand, he could be treated as the head of the resistance against the moderns in so far as he believed the romanticism which they were rejecting as senile to be really immature, and looked for a coming of age where they were huddling up a hasty and not very generous funeral. He will not fit into a pigeon-hole.

The fullest and most brilliant expression of his outlook is to be found in his mature poetry, and especially in *Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*. As I have in preparation a much longer study of these works, I must here content myself with saying that they seem to me, both for the soaring and gorgeous novelty of their technique and for their profound wisdom, to be among the two or three most valuable books of verse produced in the century. Their outstanding quality is what I would call glory or splendour; a heraldic brightness of colour, a marble firmness of line, and an arduous exaltation. The note struck is very unlike that of the Nineteenth Century, and equally unlike that of most moderns. It is the work of a man who has learned much from Dante (the Dante of the *Paradiso*) and who might be supposed (though in fact he had not) to have learned much from Pindar. If its extreme difficulty does not kill it, this work ought to count for much in the coming years. I am speaking only of his mature work. He

found himself late as a poet and in his earlier poems I, for one, do not see any promise of what he finally became.

He is best known by his criticism. I have learned much from it—particularly from *The Figure of Beatrice* and *Poetry at Present*. But it is distressing that many people, on hearing the name Williams, should think chiefly or only of *The English Poetic Mind*, or even of his criticism at all, for it is probably the least valuable part of his work. Those who find the poetry too difficult would be much better advised to turn to the novels.

The Greater Trumps, *War in Heaven*, *Many Dimensions*, *The Place of the Lion*, *Descent into Hell*, and *All Hallows' Eve* present, under the form of exciting fantasy, some of the most important things Williams had to say. They have, I think, been little understood. The frank supernaturalism and the frankly bloodcurdling episodes have deceived readers who were accustomed to seeing such 'machines' used as toys and who supposed that what was serious must be naturalistic—or, worse still, that what was serious could not be gay. And in the earlier stories, it must be allowed, there were technical defects which stand between us and the author's meaning. There was a good deal of over-writing, of excess in the descriptions and, in dialogue, of a false brilliance. But this was overcome in the later work and in this respect the distance between *War in Heaven* and the sobriety and strength of the *Descent* and the *Eve* is a remarkable witness to his continually growing, self-correcting art. But the imagination and the spiritual insight had been there from the beginning; and it is these that always justify both the infernal and the paradisaical turns of the story. They are never in excess of what the author most seriously intends. Hence the cathartic value of these fantasies. We are not likely in real

life to meet an objective *succubus* as Wentworth does in *Descent into Hell*, nor to be haunted by a pterodactyl as Damaris Tighe is haunted in *The Place of the Lion*. But those who, like Wentworth, are following what seems to be love into the abyss of self-love will know in the end what the *succubus* means; and the frivolously academic who ‘do research’ into archetypal ideas without suspecting that these were ever anything more than raw material for doctorate theses, may one day awake, like Damaris, to find that they are infinitely mistaken. [vi]

I first heard of Charles Williams a great many years ago when a man who was sitting next to me at dinner (Dr. R. W. Chapman) asked me if I had read any of his novels. He described them as ‘spiritual shockers’. I was interested and made a mental note that this was an author to be looked into, but did nothing about it. A few years later I spent an evening at Exeter College in the rooms of Mr. N. K. Coghill. He was full of a book he had just read called *The Place of the Lion*, by Charles Williams. No man whom I have ever met describes another man’s work better than Mr. Coghill (his descriptions of Kafka always seemed to me better even than Kafka himself) and I went home with his copy of *The Place of the Lion*. Twenty-four hours later I found myself, for the first time in my life, writing to an author I had never met to congratulate him on his book. By return of post I had an answer from Williams, who had received my letter when he was on the point of writing a similar letter to me about my *Allegory of Love*. After this, as may be supposed, we soon met and our friendship rapidly grew inward to the bone.

Until 1939 that friendship had to subsist on occasional meetings, though, even thus, he had already become as dear to all my

Oxford friends as he was to me. There were many meetings both in my rooms at Magdalen and in Williams's tiny office at Amen House. Neither Mr. Dyson nor my brother, Major W. H. Lewis, will forget a certain immortal lunch at Shirreff's in 1938 (he gave me a copy of *He Came Down From Heaven* and we ate kidneys 'enclosed', like the wicked man, 'in their own fat') nor the almost Platonic discussion which followed for about two hours in St. Paul's churchyard. But in 1939 the Oxford University Press, and he with it, was evacuated to Oxford. From that time until his death we met one another about twice a week, sometimes more: nearly always on Thursday evenings in my rooms and on Tuesday mornings in the best of all public-houses for draught cider, whose name it would be madness to reveal. The removal to Oxford also produced other changes. The English Faculty was depleted by war and Williams was soon making an Oxford reputation both as a lecturer and as a private tutor. He became an honorary M.A. It grew continually harder to remember that he had not always been at Oxford. I am afraid that in our pride we half-imagined that we must be the friends whom he had been in search of all his life. Only since his death have we fully realized what a small and late addition we were to the company of those who loved him, and whom he loved.

In appearance he was tall, slim, and straight as a boy, though grey-haired. His face we thought ugly: I am not sure that the word 'monkey' has not been murmured in this context. But the moment he spoke it became, as was also said, like the face of an angel—not a feminine angel in the debased tradition of some religious art, but a masculine angel, a spirit burning with intelligence and charity. He was nervous (not shy) to judge by the trembling of his fingers. One of the most characteristic things

about him was his walk. I have often, from the top of a bus, seen him walking below me. The face and hair being then invisible, he might have passed for a boy in the early twenties, and perhaps a boy of some period when swords were worn. There was something of recklessness, something even of *panache*, in his gait. He did not in the least swagger: but if a clumsier man, like myself, had tried to imitate it a swagger would probably have been the result. To complete the picture you must add a little bundle under his left arm which was quite invariable. It usually consisted of a few proofs with a copy of *Time and Tide* folded round them. He always carried his head in the air. When he lectured, wearing his gown, his presence was one of the stateliest I have ever seen.

No man whom I have known was at the same time less affected and more flamboyant in his manners: and also more playful. The thing is very difficult to describe, partly because it is so seldom seen. Perhaps it will be best imagined if I track it to its sources, which were two. Firstly, he was a man fitted by temperament to live in an age of more elaborate courtesy than our own. He was nothing if not a ritualist. Had modern society permitted it he would equally have enjoyed kneeling and being knelt to, kissing hands and extending his hand to be kissed. Burke's 'unbought grace of life' was in him. But secondly, even while enjoying such high pomps, he would have been aware of them as a game: not a silly game, to be laid aside in private, but a glorious game, well worth the playing. This two-edged attitude, banked down under the deliberate casualness of the modern fashion, produced his actual manners, which were liked by most, extremely disliked by a few. The highest compliment I ever heard paid to them was by a nun. She said that Mr. Williams's manners implied a complete *offer* of intimacy

without the slightest *imposition* of intimacy. He threw down all his own barriers without even implying that you should lower yours.

But here one of my collaborators breaks in upon me to say that this is not, after all, the true picture; that he, for his part, always found Williams a reserved man, one in whom, after years of friendship, there remained something elusive and incalculable. And that also seems to be true, though I doubt whether 'reserved' is the right name for it. I said before that he gave to every circle the whole man: all his attention, knowledge, courtesy, charity, were placed at your disposal. It was a natural result of this that you did not find out much about *him*—certainly not about those parts of him which your own needs or interests did not call into play. A selfless character, perhaps, always has this mysteriousness: and much more so when it is that of a man of genius.

This total offer of himself, but without that tacit claim which so often accompanies such offers, made his friendship the least exacting in the world, and explains the surprising width of his contacts. One kept on discovering that the most unlikely people loved him as well as we did. He was extremely attractive to young women and (what is rare) none of his male friends ever wondered why: nor did it ever do a young woman anything but immense good to be attracted by Charles Williams. Yet, on the other hand, all my memories of him are in bachelor surroundings where he was so at home—and to us speedily so indispensable—that you might have thought them the only surroundings he knew. That face—angel's or monkey's—comes back to me most often seen through clouds of tobacco smoke and above a pint mug, distorted into helpless laughter at some innocently broad

buffoonery or eagerly stretched forward in the cut and parry of prolonged, fierce, masculine argument and ‘the rigour of the game’.

Such society, unless all its members happen to be of one trade, makes heavy demands on a man’s versatility. And we were by no means of one trade. The talk might turn in almost any direction, and certainly skipped ‘from grave to gay, from lively to severe’: but wherever it went, Williams was ready for it. He seemed to have no ‘pet subject’. Though he talked copiously one never felt that he had dominated the evening. Nor did one easily remember particular ‘good things’ that he had said: the importance of his presence was, indeed, chiefly made clear by the gap which was left on the rare occasions when he did not turn up. It then became clear that some principle of liveliness and cohesion had been withdrawn from the whole party: lacking him, we did not completely possess one another. He was (in the Coleridgian language) an ‘esemplastic’ force. He was also, though not a professional scholar, one of the best informed of us all and will always stand in my mind as a cheering proof of how far a man can go with few languages and imperfect schooling. On the ancients and on the early Middle Ages there were one or two present with whom he could not compete, nor had he an exact knowledge of any of the great philosophers: but in history, theology, legend, comparative religion, and (above all) English literature from Shakespeare down, his knowledge was surprising. Malory, Shakespeare, Milton, Johnson, Scott, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Patmore, and Chesterton he seemed to have at his fingers’ ends. Before he came I had passed for our best conduit of quotations: but he easily outstripped me. He delighted to repeat favourite passages, and nearly always both his voice and the context got something new out of them. He

excelled at showing you the little grain of truth or felicity in some passage generally quoted for ridicule, while at the same time he fully enjoyed the absurdity: or, contrariwise, at detecting the little falsity or dash of silliness in a passage which you, and he also, admired. He was both a ‘debunker’ and (if I may coin the word) a ‘rebunker’. *Fidelia vulnera amantis*.

This double-sidedness was the most strongly developed character of his mind. He might have appropriated Kipling’s thanks

to Allah who gave me two separate sides to my head,

except that he would have had to omit the word *separate*. [x]
The duality was much subtler than Kipling’s, who in that poem really (I am afraid) intends little more than a repetition of Montaigne’s *Que sçais-je?* In Williams the two sides lived in a perpetual dance or lovers’ quarrel of mutual mockery. In most minds, and in his, the lower mocks at the higher; but in his the higher also mocked at the lower.

Thus on the one hand there lived in Williams a sceptic and even a pessimist. No man—and least of all the common run of antitheists—could have written a better attack on Christianity than he. He used to say that if he were rich enough to build a church he would dedicate it to St. Thomas Didymus Sceptic. He toyed with the idea that he and I should collaborate in a book of animal stories from the Bible, told by the animals concerned—the story of Jonah told by the whale or that of Elisha told by the two she-bears. The bears were to be convinced that God exists and is good by their sudden meal of children. He maintained that the prayer in which we give thanks ‘for our creation’ could be

joined in only by an act of wholly supernatural faith. ‘Thanks!’ he would say, and then followed an eloquent pause. He was ready to accept as a revealed doctrine the proposition that existence is good: but added that it would never have occurred to him, unaided, to suspect this. He vehemently denied that he had any natural desire for life after death. In one of his earlier poems the man who is made ruler of three cities says

I bore the labour, Lord,
But cannot stomach the reward.

He even said, mocking himself while he said it, that if he were saved, the acceptance of eternal life would be not so much the guerdon as the final act of obedience. He also said that when young people came to us with their troubles and discontents, the worst thing we could do was to tell them that they were not so unhappy as they thought. Our reply ought rather to begin, ‘But *of course*. . . .’ For young people usually are unhappy, and the plain truth is often the greatest relief we can give them. The world is painful in any case: but it is quite unbearable if everyone gives us the idea that we are meant to be liking it. Half the trouble is over when that monstrous demand is withdrawn. What is unforgivable if judged as an hotel may be very tolerable as a reformatory. It is one of the many paradoxes in Williams that while no man’s conversation was less gloomy in *tone*—it was, indeed, a continual flow of gaiety, enthusiasm, and high spirits—no man at times said darker things. He never forgot the infinite menaces of life, the unremitted possibility of torture, maiming, madness, bereavement, and (over all) that economic insecurity which, as he said in *War in Heaven*, poisons our sorrows as well as modifying our joys.

But that was only one side of him. This scepticism and pessimism were the expression of his feelings. High above them, overarching them like a sky, were the things he believed, and they were wholly optimistic. They did not negate the feelings: they mocked them. To the Williams who had accepted the fruition of Deity itself as the true goal of man, and who deeply believed that the sufferings of this present time were as nothing in comparison, the other Williams, the Williams who wished to be annihilated, who would rather not have been born, was in the last resort a comic figure. He did not struggle to crush it as many religious people would have done. He saw its point of view. All that it said was, on a certain level, so very reasonable. He did not believe that God Himself wanted that frightened, indignant, and voluble creature to be annihilated; or even silenced. If it wanted to carry its hot complaints to the very Throne, even that, he felt, would be a permitted absurdity. For was not that very much what Job had done? It was true, Williams added, that the Divine answer had taken the surprising form of inviting Job to study the hippopotamus and the crocodile. But Job's impatience had been approved. His apparent blasphemies had been accepted. The weight of the divine displeasure had been reserved for the 'comforters', the self-appointed advocates on God's side, the people who tried to show that all was well—'the sort of people', he said, immeasurably dropping his lower jaw and fixing me with his eyes—'the sort of people who wrote books on the Problem of Pain'.

I have heard (from a lady) that he himself, before he went into hospital, had some expectation that he was going there to die. We, his male friends at Oxford, had had no notion that he was even ill until we heard that he was in the Radcliffe Infirmary;

nor did we then suspect that the trouble was serious. I heard of his death at the Infirmary itself, having walked up there [xi] with a book I wanted to lend him, expecting this news that day as little (almost) as I expected to die that day myself. It was a Tuesday morning, one of our times of meeting. I thought he would have given me messages to take on to the others. When I joined them with my actual message—it was only a few minutes' walk from the Infirmary but, I remember, the very streets looked different—I had some difficulty in making them believe or even understand what had happened. The world seemed to us at that moment primarily a *strange* one.

That sense of strangeness continued with a force which sorrow itself has never quite swallowed up. This experience of loss (the greatest I have yet known) was wholly unlike what I should have expected. We now verified for ourselves what so many bereaved people have reported; the ubiquitous presence of a dead man, as if he had ceased to meet us in particular places in order to meet us everywhere. It is not in the least like a haunting. It is not in the least like the bitter-sweet experiences of memory. It is vital and bracing; it is even, however the word may be misunderstood and derided, exciting. A lady, writing to me after his death, used the word *stupor* (in its Latin sense) to describe the feeling which Williams had produced on a certain circle in London; it would almost describe the feeling he produced on us after he had died. There is, I dare say, no empirical proof that such an experience is more than subjective. But for those who accept on other grounds the Christian faith, I suggest that it is best understood in the light of some words that one of his friends said to me as we sat in Addison's Walk just after the funeral. 'Our Lord told the disciples it was expedient for them that He should go away for otherwise the Comforter would not

come to them. I do not think it blasphemous to suppose that what was true archetypally, and in eminence, of His death may, in the appropriate degree, be true of the deaths of all His followers.’

So, at any rate, many of us felt it to be. No event has so corroborated my faith in the next world as Williams did simply by dying. When the idea of death and the idea of Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that was changed.

He was buried in St. Cross churchyard, where lie also the bodies of Kenneth Grahame and of P. V. M. Benecke.

C. S. L.

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[The end of *Preface to Essays presented to Charles Williams*
by C.S. Lewis]