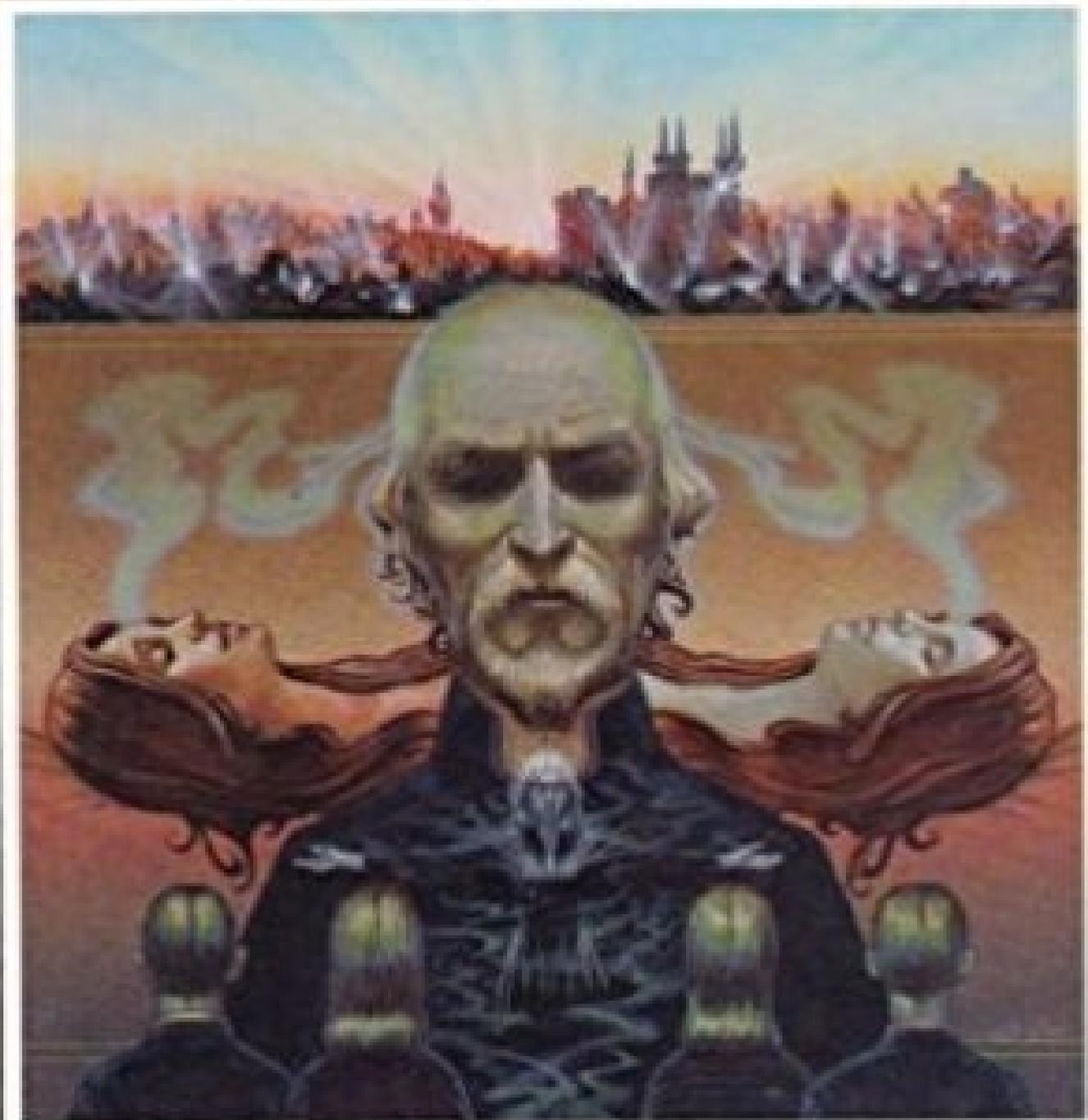


Introduction by T. S. Eliot

ALL HALLOWS' EVE

Charles Williams



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**Introduction to
Charles Williams'
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INTRODUCTION

It was in the late 'twenties, I think, that I first met Charles Williams; and it was through the friend who first called my attention to his work that the introduction was effected. A woman with a notable flair for literary talent, who liked to bring together the authors whose work interested her, and who was in a position to do so, made me read Williams's two first novels, *War in Heaven* and *The Place of the Lion*, and at the same time, or a little later, invited me to tea to meet him. I remember a man in spectacles, who appeared to combine a frail physique with exceptional vitality; whose features could be described as "homely"—meaning by that word a face which is immediately attractive and subsequently remembered, without one's being able to explain either the attraction or the persistence of the impression. He appeared completely at ease in surroundings with which he was not yet familiar, and which had intimidated many; and at the same time was modest and unassuming to the point of humility: that unconscious humility, one discovered later, was in him a natural quality, one he possessed to a degree which made one, in time, feel very humble oneself in his presence. He talked easily and volubly, yet never imposed his talk; for he appeared always to be at the same time preoccupied with the subject of conversation, and interested in and aware of, the personalities of those to whom he was talking. One retained the impression that he was pleased and grateful for the opportunity of meeting the company, and yet that it was he who had conferred a favor—more than a favor, a kind of benediction, by coming.

From that time, I read all of Charles Williams's novels as they were published; and I saw him, from that time, at the same house and elsewhere. It was not, however, until the middle 'thirties that I much improved the acquaintance. My play *Murder in the Cathedral* was produced at the Canterbury Festival in 1935; Williams's *Cranmer* was the play for the following year, and I went down with a party of mutual friends to see the first performance. Thereafter I saw Williams more and more frequently until the outbreak of war. He was a member of the staff of the London office of the Oxford University Press, which, when the war came, was removed to Oxford. He was rarely free to come to London. I saw him only on my own occasional visits to Oxford, where he cheerfully carried on his official duties in a converted bath-room in which the tub had been provided with a cover to make an improvised table. In May of 1945 I went over to Paris to give a lecture. I returned late in the afternoon to my office in London, to find a message that Sir Humphrey Milford wanted me to telephone him at once in Oxford. It was too late to get through to the University Press; so it was not until the next morning that I learned that Charles Williams had died in hospital in Oxford the day before, after an operation which had not been expected to be critical. He died only a few days after the capitulation of Germany.

Such is the outline of an acquaintance of some twenty years, which I am proud to think became a friendship—though I was only one of an increasing circle of friends, and though, in his last years, there were others who saw much more of him. There are some writers who are best known through their books, and who, in their personal relations, have little to give beyond what more commonplace, uncreative minds can give; there are others whose writings are only the shadow of what the men have given in direct intercourse. Some men are less than their works, some are more. Charles Williams cannot be placed in either class. To have known the man would have been enough; to know his books is enough; but no one who has known both the man and his works would have willingly foregone either experience. I can think of no writer who was more wholly the same man in his life and in his writings. What he had to say was beyond his resources, and probably beyond the resources of language, to say once for all through any one medium of expression. Hence, probably, the variety of forms in which he wrote: the play, the poem, the literary or philosophical essay, and the novel. Conversation was for him one more channel of communication. And just as his books attract and hold the reader's interest from the start, but have a great deal in them which only reveals itself on re-reading, so the man himself had an immediate charm and likeability, a radiation of benevolence and amiability which, while it concealed nothing, yet left the best of him to disclose itself gradually on better acquaintance.

As I have already suggested, Williams never appeared to wish to impress, still less to dominate; he talked with a kind of modest and retiring loquacity. His conversation was so easy and informal, taking its start from the ordinary trifles and humorous small-talk of the occasion; it passed so quickly and naturally to and fro between the commonplace and the original, between the superficial and the profound; it was so delightfully volatile, that one was not aware, until after several meetings, of any exceptional quality about it; and appreciation of its value came all the more slowly because of his quickness to defer and to listen. There was also a deceptive gaiety in his treatment of the most serious subjects: I remember a bewildering and almost hilarious discussion in which we considered the notion,

propounded by some early Christian heretics, that the world had been created at the Nativity. (It was characteristic of his adventurous imagination, that he should like to put himself at the point of view from which a doctrine was held, before rejecting it.) Amongst a small group of friends, on a leisurely evening over beer or port, his talk would flash from one level to another, never apparently leading the thought of his companions, but seeming rather to respond instantly to the mood or tone of the last speaker. When it was pertinent to the matter in hand, he could declaim long quotations from one or another of his favorite poets, for his memory for poetry was prodigious and accurate. He was, furthermore, a very successful lecturer. His means were always straitened; for many years he supplemented his income by conducting evening classes; and in his pupils he aroused, not only a warm devotion to himself, but an excited interest in the literature to which he introduced them. After his removal to Oxford, he lectured to undergraduates with, I believe, the same success. As a platform speaker, he was certainly unusual, and had, to an exaggerated degree, some of those mannerisms which uninspired speakers should most sedulously avoid. He was never still: he writhed and swayed; he jingled coins in his pocket; he sat on the edge of the table swinging his leg; in a torrent of speech he appeared to be saying whatever came into his head from one moment to the next. But what would have been the ruin of another lecturer contributed to Williams's success; he held his audience in rapt attention, and left with them the contagion of his own enthusiastic curiosity.

How, with his exacting daily work in a publisher's office, with his evening lectures and with his economic anxieties, he managed to write so much and so well as he did, remains incomprehensible to me. Some of his books—such as his *Life of Henry VII*—were frankly pot-boilers; but he always boiled an honest pot. And besides what could be considered (if it had been less well done) merely hack-work, and besides the financial lash on his back in writing even what he wanted to write, much of his work, especially for the theatre, was done without expectation of adequate remuneration and often without expectation of payment at all. He would respond to almost any appeal, and produce a masque or play for a particular occasion for some obscure group of amateurs. Yet he left behind him a considerable number of books which should endure, because there is nothing else that is like them or could take their place.

I have already tried to indicate the unity between the man and the work; and it follows that there is a unity between his works of very different kinds. Much of his work may appear to realize its form only imperfectly; but it is also true in a measure to say that Williams invented his own forms—or to say that no form, if he had obeyed all its conventional laws, could have been satisfactory for what he wanted to say. What it is, essentially, that he had to say, comes near to defying definition. It was not simply a philosophy, a theology, or a set of ideas: it was primarily something imaginative. Perhaps I can give some hint of it by returning for a moment to the man. I have said that Williams seemed equally at ease among every sort and condition of men, naturally and unconsciously, without envy or contempt, without subservience or condescension. I have always believed that he would have been equally at ease in every kind of supernatural company; that he would never have been surprised or disconcerted by the intrusion of any visitor from another world, whether kindly or malevolent; and that he would have shown exactly the same natural ease and courtesy, with an exact awareness of how one should behave, to an angel, a demon, a human ghost, or an elemental. For him there was no frontier between the material and the spiritual world. Had I ever had to spend a night in a haunted house, I should have felt secure with Williams in my company: he was somehow protected from evil, and was himself a protection. He could have joked with the devil and turned the joke against him. To him the supernatural was perfectly natural, and the natural was also supernatural. And this peculiarity gave him that profound insight into Good and Evil, into the heights of Heaven and the depths of Hell, which provides both the immediate thrill, and the permanent message of novels.

While this theme runs through all of Williams's best work, it is made most apprehensible in this series of novels, from *War in Heaven* to *All Hallows' Eve*. Not having known him in his earlier years, I do not know what literary influences were strongest upon him at the beginning. I suspect some influence from Chesterton, and especially, in connection with the novels, an influence of *The Man Who Was Thursday*. If this influence is present, it is most present in the first novel, *War in Heaven*, and becomes fainter in the later work. (Chesterton may also have influenced the early verse; Williams's poetry became more and more modern and original in form.) But I suggest a derivation only to point a difference. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* is an allegory; it has a meaning which is meant to be discovered at the end; while we can enjoy it in reading, simply because of the swiftly moving plot and the periodic surprises, it is intended to convey a definite moral and religious point expressible in intellectual terms. It gives you *ideas*, rather than *feelings*, of another world. Williams has no such "palpable design" upon his reader. His aim is to make you partake of a kind of experience that he has had, rather than to make you accept some dogmatic belief. This gives him an affinity with writers of an entirely different type of supernatural thriller from

Chesterton's: with writers as different as Poe, Walter de la Mare, Montague James, Le Fanu and Arthur Machen. But the danger of this second type of story is that its thrills are apt to turn into pure sensationalism. If Poe, at his best, as in *The Fall of the House of Usher* or *Ligeia*, escapes this accusation, it is because the symbolism of nightmare has its reference in the psychological ailment of Poe, which is itself a serious matter. If De la Mare escapes it, at his best, it is because he gives you a perception of something which you can interpret as you please. But with inferior stories of supernatural horror of this type, you feel that the supernatural world is not really believed in, but is merely being exploited for an immediate but very transient effect upon the reader. The nearest approximation to Williams's effects that I can think of, is given by Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; and even here, I feel that the literary craftsman is too obviously the manipulator of the scene.

The stories of Charles Williams, then, are not like those of Edgar Allan Poe, woven out of morbid psychology—I have never known a healthier-minded man than Williams. They are not like those of Chesterton, intended to teach the reader. And they are certainly not an exploitation of the supernatural for the sake of the immediate shudder. Williams is telling us about a world of experience known to him: he does not merely persuade us to believe in something, he communicates this experience that he has had. When I say that we are persuaded to believe in the super-natural 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 which he has invented, or borrowed from the literature of the occult, merely for the sake of telling a good story. In reading *All Hallows' Eve*, we can, if we like, believe that the methods of the magician Simon for controlling mysterious forces could all be used with success by anyone with suitable natural gifts and special training. We can, on the other hand, find the machinery of the story no more credible than that of any popular tale of vampires, werewolves, or demonic possession. But whether credulous or incredulous about the actual kinds of event in the story, we come to perceive that they are the vehicle for communicating a para-normal experience with which the author is familiar, for introducing us into a real world in which he is at home.

The conflict which is the theme of every one of Williams's novels, is not merely the conflict between good and bad men, in the usual sense. No one was less confined to conventional morality, in judging good and bad behavior, than Williams: his mortality is that of the Gospels. He sees the struggle between Good and Evil as carried on, more or less blindly, by men and women who are often only the instruments of higher or lower powers, but who always have the freedom to choose to which powers they will submit themselves. Simon, in this story, is a most austere ascetic, but he is evil; Evelyn is a woman who appears too insignificant, too petty in her faults, to be really "bad," but yet, just because she is no more than pettiness, she delivers herself willingly into the hand of evil. Her friend, who makes the other choice, is also a rather commonplace woman; but, having lived just well enough to be able to choose the good, she develops in the light of that good she follows, and learns the meaning of Love. Williams's understanding of Evil was profound. Had he himself not always seen Evil, unerringly, as the contrast to Good—had he understood Evil, so far as it can be understood, without knowing the Good—there are passages in this book, and in other books (notably in *Descent Into Hell*) which would only be outrageous and foul. He is concerned, not with the Evil of conventional morality and the ordinary manifestations by which we recognize it, but with the essence of Evil; it is therefore Evil which has no power to attract us, for we see it as the repulsive thing it is, and as the despair of the damned from which we recoil.

It would be easy, but not particularly profitable, to classify Williams as a "mystic." 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 life-time. (I am thinking of certain passages in *The Place of the Lion*, but there is no novel without them.) And if "mysticism" means a belief in the supernatural, and in its operation in the natural world, then Williams was a mystic: but that is only belief in what adherents of every religion in the world profess to believe. His is a mysticism, not of curiosity, or of the lust for power, but of Love; and Love, in the meaning which it had for Williams—as readers of his study of Dante, called *The Figure of Beatrice*, will know—is a deity of whom most human beings seldom see more than the shadow. But in his novels he is as much concerned with quite ordinary human beings, with their struggle among the shadows, their weaknesses and self-deceptions, their occasional moments of understanding, as with the Vision of Love towards which creation strives.

His personages have a reality, an existence in their own right, which differentiates them from the ordinary puppets of the usual adventure story. Only as much of the reality of each character is given as is relevant: the rest could be supplied. In *All Hallows' Eve*, we are given only enough of the characters of Richard Furnival and his friend Jonathan to establish their relations with Lester and Betty respectively; the character of Betty is necessarily

not more vivid than it is, because of the conditions of the twilight world in which her mother has kept her; and the mother herself is inevitably simplified in terms of the control over her exercised by the magician. And Simon himself is defined by his function of representing the single-minded lust for unlawful and unlimited power. It is to the two young women whose destinies are so different, Lester and Evelyn, that Williams devotes his analysis; and a study of these two figures will reveal his understanding of the depths and intricacies of human nature. And the delineation of the relationship between Lester and her husband, as seen by Lester after she has begun her journey towards enlightenment, shows great psychological insight.

I hesitated before writing this introduction, for the very fact of an introduction might, I felt, give a false impression of the book to be introduced. It might suggest that the book is hard reading, or that it is perhaps a book for some other type of reader than that to which the prospective reader belongs. So I want to make clear that these novels of Williams, including *All Hallows' Eve*, are first of all very good reading, say on a train journey or an air flight for which one buys a novel from a bookstall, perhaps without even noticing the name of the author. They are good reading even for those who never read a novel more than once, and who demand only that it should keep them interested for two or three hours. I believe that is how Williams himself would like them to be read, the first time; for he was a gay and simple man, with a keen sense of adventure, entertainment and drollery. The deeper things are there just because they belonged to the world he lived in, and he could not have kept them out. For the reader who can appreciate them, there are terrors in the pit of darkness into which he can make us look; but in the end, we are brought nearer to what another modern explorer of the darkness has called "the laughter at the heart of things."

T. S. ELIOT

London, August 14, 1948

[End of *Introduction to Charles Williams' All Hallows' Eve*, by T. S. Eliot]