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Keynote Address

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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Upland, Indiana

Charles Williams, the 'Other' Inkling

Thomas Howard

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Charles Williams, the “Other” Inkling

Thomas Howard

Charles Williams is a strange figure among twentieth-century writers. His work is hard to classify since it will not fit any category of modern criticism. Is he a writer on the occult? Has he chosen worn-out themes for his poetry? May we call his narratives novels?

Lists of major British writers of this century will probably never include Williams's name. T.S. Eliot may have touched on at least part of the reason for this in his introduction to Williams's last novel, *All Hallows' Eve* (1944).

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 . . . 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. (AHE, Introd., xi, xiii, New York, 1963).

If we find here a hint as to why Williams's work will never be included among the major works of our century, we may also have the key to its appeal. It was primarily something imaginative. Williams has nothing strictly new to say; but then neither did Dante or Shakespeare or Milton. What all poets do is to take what Eliot called “the permanent things” and, by discovering fresh images for them, or by refurbishing the old images and setting them out freshly, wake the rest of us up once more to the tang and bite of human experience just when we had slumped into ennui and

torpor. In this connection we may recall that imagination, which is the poet's province, does not supply us with any fresh data. The poet's appeal, unlike the scientist's or the explorer's, can never rest on his bringing exciting new facts to light.

The subject of this speech, however, is Williams's prose fiction, since that is the area of his work most likely to be attempted by readers new to his writing. He wrote seven novels during the 1930's and 40's. He is primarily interested in heaven and hell actually; that is to say, he is interested in human behavior. This way of putting it raises the obvious question: are you saying that heaven and hell are the same thing as human behavior? If this is what Williams really thinks, then his imagination must be very far-fetched.

It is. It is far-fetched in the sense that all true poetic and prophetic imagination is, in that it is fetched from afar. The noblest poetic imaginations have persisted in seeing the commonplace routines of our mortal experience against an immense backdrop. Eliot spoke of “the fear in a handful of dust,” referring to the enormous and alarming significance lying just under the surface of even the most ordinary things. Scientists likewise see one aspect of this when they tell us about the subatomic activity raging and swirling about in the merest handkerchief. Prophets see that modest items like casual oaths and cutting remarks and icy silences will damn us to hell if we persist in that sort of thing. Poets see the whole Fall in a field mouse's scampering away from a farmer's plough, or in the fur trim on a monk's cuffs.

Everything nudges our elbow. Heaven and hell seem to lurk under every bush. The sarcastic lift of an eyebrow carries the seed of murder since it bespeaks my wish to diminish someone else's existence. The prophets and poets have to pluck our sleeves or knock us on the head, not to tell us anything new but simply to hail us with what is there.

If anyone ever saw the fear in a handful of dust it was Williams. There was no detail of everyday life, no bodily function, no chance word, no bird or bush, no kiss or shaken fist, that did not adumbrate heaven and hell for him. Like all poets, he saw a correspondence between commonplace things and ultimate things.

Williams saw these commonplaces as *images*, that is clues to what everything is about. This habit of his recalls C.S. Lewis’s remark that “everything is always thickening and hardening and coming to a point.” Mao Tse-tung was an irascible boy. That apparently minor fault thickened and hardened and came to the point of seventy million Chinese being slaughtered by him before he was through. At the opposite pole, God himself, being infinite Love, brought things to a point in the final image, the Incarnation. Christ was the image of God. A body here in the visible world manifested something beyond what you could see. Christians see this same principle at work in the Sacraments: bread and wine and water become signs and bearers of Grace, which is invisible. In the Incarnation and the Sacraments we have, not a disruption of Nature but a knitting back up of the seamless fabric of Creation which was ripped by us when we made our grab in Eden. Christians believe that it will be knit up again at the end of time, and that this knitting up has been begun in the Incarnation and is pledged and kept before us in the Sacraments. Hence, for a Christian imagination like Williams’s, we will find that imagery is more than a matter of powerful fancy: it is very close to theology. We cannot read very far in Williams without becoming aware that almost every line summons the whole universe, so to speak. In this he has forerunners in St. Augustine, Dante, Milton, and Blake.

It is part of Williams’s achievement that he made fiction go to work on a task usually undertaken only by certain kinds of poetry. The stories he wrote are bona fide stories, and you can put your feet up in front of the fire and enjoy one of these novels without having studied much theology or poetry. On the other hand, if you are reading with the smallest rag of attention, you may be inclined before very long to leap from your chair in terror or excitement. In that sense, Williams’s fiction does not make for a quiet evening by the fire.

In one tale, for example, you find a chase for the Holy Grail across fields of Hertfordshire, and in another a blizzard stirred up by the Tarot cards, and in another the great Platonic archetypes in the shape of lions and butterflies appearing in the countryside. There are satanists and doppelgangers and succubi and wizards all rubbing shoulders with clerks and publishers and housewives. The topic in all of Williams’s works is order versus chaos, which is to say, heaven versus hell. In every one of his novels the evil that appears entails an attempt on someone’s part to short-circuit the given pattern of things, defying the rules, like a man cutting into line, or a child at a party who grabs all the best pieces of cake. Both are violating the rule of courtesy.

Both are cads, and caddishness is an early straw in the wind blowing from hell. All of Williams’s villains are busy making a grab for knowledge, power, or ecstasy, and the rest of you be damned. The trouble here is that the moral law of the universe is at stake. The irony is that knowledge, power, and ecstasy are the very rewards that stand at the far end of this mortal pilgrimage of ours—but only for those, let it be urged here, who have obeyed the rules. These rewards are the fruition of humility, purity, faith, courage, and generosity—of virtue, in other words. We are made for that fruition. But the way towards it is a steep and narrow one, and you have to go along the appointed way. The Beatific Vision is for the pure in heart, not for the clever, the Machiavellian, or the lucky.

Modern novels ordinarily explore human behavior in terms of manners as did Jane Austen or Henry James; or by social protest, which is what we find in Dickens; or by satire, in the manner of Swift or George Orwell; or psychological exploration, as in James Joyce. Williams, like Dante, tried to carry the exploration further in order to see what the end of it all might be, and in that end he saw only two alternatives: salvation or damnation.

It is Williams’s particular strategy that arouses the consternation among hopeful readers. It all seems to sail very near the occult wind. But Williams was not primarily interested in the occult; and certainly not in the occult as any sort of end in itself. His imagination, to be sure, was aroused by various ideas that crop up in occult lore, but he remained a plain Anglican churchman all of his life. After some early forays that took him, for example, close to the Order of the Golden Dawn (the Rosicrucians), he eschewed the occult. He accepted the taboos that rule out such forays for Christians. He wrote an entire book on witchcraft, but you can learn nothing from it about how to say the Black Mass, or to conjure or put a hex on somebody.

It might be helpful here to squeak in a thumbnail biography of Williams, for what that is worth. He was born in 1886, in London. He had one sister, Edith, whom I met in her old age, and it came as a surprise to her to learn that her brother was an author of some note. The family was always in the most perilous financial waters, and Williams was never able to complete his university studies for this reason. This is a pertinent point here, since he was thereby forced to become self-educated. C.S. Lewis remarked on this once, to the effect that Williams lacked that particular cast of mind that is formed in the give and take of lectures and tutorials. His mind tended to scamper. He reminds me somewhat of a hummingbird in the morning glories, although his omnivorous reading did, in fact, furnish his darting mind with an enormous freight of sheer information, especially theological, literary, and historical.

In 1908, Williams went to work at the Oxford University Press as a proofreader, and stayed there until

his death in 1945. Amen House, the office of the Press in London, became one of the “precincts” (a favorite word of his) of his imagination, for he found there a company of people in whom he chose to see an idealized society in which obedience to the order of Charity results in joy. (I have often wished I could have chatted with some of the other proofreaders, editors, and secretaries there, to see if they all had quite the same exalted vision of things at the office.) He wrote poems and little masques and pageants in which his colleagues show up as paragons of virtue and chivalry. He eventually dedicated one of his books “To H.M. [Sir Humphrey Milford, the publisher of the OUP] under whom we observed an appearance of Byzantium,” by which he meant that the atmosphere of order and harmony in the office under a good man is a case in point of the order and harmony that might be fancied as having been at work at least in the ideal, of not the reality, of the Byzantine Empire.

Williams was physically disqualified for military service during the 1914-18 War. This forced him to mull over an idea which was to become central in all of his later work. He realized that the peace and well-being he enjoyed in England were due to the sacrifices being made by the young men in the trenches of France. In fact, everyone in England owed his life to these men who were laying down theirs.

To Williams, the significance of this seemed obvious. Everyone, all of the time, owes his life to others. It is not only in war that this is true. We cannot eat breakfast without being nourished by some life that has been laid down. If our breakfast is cereal or toast, then it is the life of grains of wheat that have gone into the ground and died that we might have food. If it is bacon, then the blood of some pig has been shed for the sake of my nourishment. All day long I reckon on this web of exchange. Some farmer’s labor has produced this wheat and someone else’s has brought it to market and so on. These people in turn receive the fruit of my work when I pay for the product. Money is the token and medium of the exchange that takes place: here is the fruit of my labor, which you need, and with this I purchase the fruit of your labor, which I need. It becomes impossible to keep all of this very sharply in focus in a complex technological society where face-to-face transactions rarely occur. But the principle of exchange is at work in international commerce as well as in the village farmers’ market. It is just harder to see.

Williams coupled this idea of exchange with two other ideas, namely, “substitution” and “co-inherence.” They all come to the same thing, actually. There is no such thing as life that does not owe itself to the life and labor of someone else. Even a tree is a debtor to earth and air and water, and to fire, actually, since without the sun’s fire, no life at all is possible. It is true all the way up and down the scale of life, from our conception which owes itself to the self-giving of a man and a woman to each other; through my daily life where I find

courtesies such as a door held open for me if I have an armload of groceries (this asks someone else’s time, which itself is a momentary case in point of self-giving), to the humdrum business of traffic lights. Here we have Charity (“my life for yours”) forced on us, since we haven’t made it to the City of God yet, where mutual self-giving is a form of bliss. No. Here, I am obliged by law to wait (to give up a minute of my precious time) while you go; and then vice-versa. This choreography, if we may call it that, obtains all the way through to the highest realm, where a Life is offered so that we all may enjoy eternal life.

If I loathe, or refuse, the choreography, I cannot thereby change it. It presides over the whole universe so that to resist or deny it is to have refused sheer Fact. For Williams, hell is the place where such a denial leads eventually. My refusal of the delicate choreography, or “web” as Williams liked to call this rich mesh of co-inherence, is to steer towards solitude, impotence, wrath, illusion, and inanity. I will have reaped the harvest I have sown by my selfishness and vanity. I will have got what I wanted. I will be a damned soul.

On the other hand, the City of God is the place where we see co-inherence brought to blissful fruition. What we encountered in this mortal life as mere genetics, say, in our conception, or as agriculture in the bread we eat, or as law with its traffic lights and yellow lines down the road, or as courtesy with doors being held open, or as economics with its buying and selling, or as theology with Christ’s sacrifice—all of this is unfurled in the dazzling light of the City of God. Saints experience as bliss the very same thing that damned souls loathe. Vexing necessities like waiting at red lights turn out to have been kindergarten lessons in joy. For Williams, joy is the final fact (and fact is a big word for him). It is the way things are, whereas hell is the way things aren’t.

If, for example, I can just try getting this cup of water in the middle of the night for my spouse who is thirsty, even though God knows I am too sleepy to budge, I will have learned a very small lesson in Charity, which is the name given to this principle of exchange and co-inherence when we find it at work in an intelligent creature exercising his free will, as opposed, say, to a corn of wheat which has no such choice. I may, of course, refuse, in which case I will have missed one lesson. The difficulty here is that this refusal turns out to be more serious than my merely having missed a lesson. I have *lost* ground. I am not where I was. I have stepped back from felicity. I am now less prepared to pass the next lesson since I have contributed by my refusal to an inclination, already too strong in me, to pass up lessons. It is so much easier just to stay in bed here. It is much, much nicer. How comfortable and warm it is here. Let my spouse fend for herself. I’ll just doze a bit more . . .

. . . and wake up in hell, says Williams. Not that he supposes I will be damned on the basis of a single

failure like this. On that fierce accounting we are all lost. Rather, it is a matter of realizing that whatever I do is going to nourish either selfishness or charity in me. And Williams, in his darting way, usually adds a lovely salting here: I may also learn to get the water in such a way that my spouse will conclude that it is no trouble at all for me. A small self-deprecating jest goes a long way here. I may discover, in such a minuscule exchange as this, one of the keys to joy. Selfishness and sloth, on the other hand, cannot even imagine, much less want, this joy. And Williams goes on in a hundred vignettes in his novels, to suggest that yet another lesson here might very well be my own learning to *receive* such a cup of water. Charity does not fuss and protest. The giving and receiving fall into place, like the advancing and retreating steps in good ballroom dancing.

In 1939 the OUP was moved from London to Oxford in order to escape the blitz. Here Williams became a lively member of the Inklings. The pub keeper at the Eagle and Child later recalled Williams dashing in and out of the side room where they all met, fetching more and more ale and beer from the bar. Clouds of pipe and cigarette smoke rolled from the room. Lewis and Tolkien eventually managed to secure an Oxford M.A. for Williams, and a lectureship in English. T.S. Eliot describes Williams perching on the desk during his lectures, looking a bit like a monkey, jingling change in his pockets and hopping about in his excitement over English poetry. His lectures were vastly popular, and he seemed to know everything by heart.

Books had been pouring out from Williams’s desk during the 1930’s: five novels, two theological works, six biographies, three critical works, and the first volume of his *Arthuriad*. In his highly idiosyncratic church history, *The Descent of the Dove*, Williams sees the Church as the embodiment here on earth of what is true outside of time. In this visible body of people, the world may see the adumbration of holiness, the paradox being that holiness glimmers through somehow, no matter how poor a showing this body of people makes.

You could shout at him until you were purple in the face about the atrocities of which the church as been guilty and he would insist, “Nonetheless Christ calls her holy.” Or you could flap the hair-raising pages of Byzantine court history under his nose for as long as you wished, and he would say, “Quite so. Quite so. But nonetheless the real thing was there at the heart of all that perfidy. They ruined things, to be sure; but that does not ruin my metaphor. I am talking about Byzantium as an image, not Byzantium as history.”

We have to run hard to keep abreast of this capering, scampering imagination of Williams. A policeman shows up in his novel, *The Greater Trumps*: we must not balk if we hear a character say, “Behold the Emperor.” As far as Williams is concerned, a policeman and an emperor are both cases in point of vested authority. Each must carry his appointed burden

of answerability, the policeman for this crossroads here, the emperor for the empire. Both are uniformed, or vested, if we will, and those vestments, whether they are made of blue drill or cloth of gold, bespeak the office which the mere man happens to be charged with, in the same way that priestly vestments on a man bespeak Christ’s priesthood, sparing us all from the vagaries of Mr. Jones up front here with his penchant for bow ties and brown and white wingtips.

This is crucial to Williams’s whole vision. He saw that the task or office was bigger than the man who held it. The crown is there before King Arthur puts it on. Prophecy is there before Elisha receives the mantle. Poetry is there before Dante picks up his pen. Fatherhood is there before I take my son in my lap. I had better pay attention to the rubric that governs the office, for I have been asked to serve *it*. It is not there to serve me. “More than the voice is the vision, the kingdom than the king,” Williams has his poet Taliessin say. The point for the poet or the prophet is not his own voice, much less his personality, preferences, inclinations, fears, rights, or anything else. The vision burns all to ashes. He must forget himself. There is nothing for it but the complete immolation of himself. That is the way it is. So also for the king.

The paradox here is that this immolation is the very thing that discloses the man himself in all of his dignity. If he had tried to preserve some modicum of himself lest it get lost in the shuffle, he would have ended up with just that modicum.

This all hangs like a bright cloud over Williams’s characters, the way it hangs over all mortals. A man may either assent to it; or he may refuse it. Assent or refusal. Joy or wrath. Heaven or hell. A man must choose, alas. If it seems dreadful, we may recall similar teaching from the greatest of all teachers. Williams did not make it up.

The slogan, “This also is Thou; neither is this Thou,” catches for Williams the idea of things both cloaking and disclosing luminous realities. The policeman, for example, stands for much more than himself, but he is not synonymous with this “much more.” The image is flawed, of course, like all mere images. But if you follow the matter all the way to its source, you will find The One who is the fountainhead of all perfections—all authority, majesty, power, glory, honor, wisdom, venerability, holiness, or valor. Hence we may say of any true image, “This also is Thou,” inasmuch as the image does indeed adumbrate that “Thou,” but we must hurry in and declare “Neither is this Thou,” inasmuch as no image except for the Incarnate Word is equal to the Thou. That way lies idolatry.

We may utter this maxim when we encounter true romantic love (not to be confused with what is hawked by pop media in our time). Williams loved what he called the “theology” of romantic love. I have already touched on this earlier on. Self-giving turns out to be

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the very avatar of joy. No Christian can think about it for very long without murmuring, “This also is Thou; neither is this Thou.”

One temptation for lovers, of course, is to linger. But lingering can be lethal if it becomes an end in itself. This shows up in Williams’s best novel, *Descent into Hell*, as one of the doorways to hell. Lawrence Wentworth, the anti-hero of that book, supposes that he loves Adela Hunt, but since he is a wholly vain man, Adela can exist for him only as an adjunct to his vanity. Presently, therefore, he finds himself satisfied with a mere succubus—a travesty of Adela which he now prefers to the real Adela, since the real one, by being a real *other*, presents a threat to his vanity which, in the last resort, wishes to be the only person in the universe. Wentworth is very busy damning himself to hell.

We cannot quit this ever-so-hasty sketch of Charles Williams without mentioning his beloved “Beatrician vision.” He wrote a whole book entitled *The Figure of Beatrice*, which refers, of course, to the Florentine lady whom Dante saw and fell in love with when he was a boy. Although Dante married Gemma Donati, he placed Beatrice very near the summit of his entire poetic theology, only two steps below the Blessed Virgin herself. This was because he saw in her perfections an adumbration of the heavenly perfections. From the Christian point of view he was altogether on the mark here: what is beauty anyway, if not the very print of the Divine Beauty from which all lesser beauties derive?

And the corollary of the Beatrician vision is the Dantean phrase *la carne gloriosa e santa*: the holy and glorious flesh. Catholic piety and vision, from apostolic and patristic times on, was keenly aware of the mystery of the Incarnation and hence of the great mystery whereby Grace lifts our mortal flesh and glorifies it. All of the great events of Redemption occur in embarrassingly physical terms—an oddity that may at times be swept under the rug in non-Catholic piety and vision, where the mystery of redemption is spoken of in verbalist, propositionalist, cerebral, abstract terms like sovereignty, predestination, regeneration, election, and so forth. Catholics (and Williams was catholic with a small c) tend to focus on the Annunciation (a zygote was implanted in a uterine wall), the Visitation (two pregnant women), the Nativity (a parturition), the Presentation (a circumcision) and the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension, all entailing the Sacred Body of Our Lord. Hence, when Dante (and Williams in Dante’s retinue) speaks of “the holy and glorious flesh,” they are extolling the work of Grace whereby our mortal flesh is raised and made to reign with Christ. Icon #1 of this mystery, of course, is the Blessed Virgin who prophesied that “all generations shall call me blessed.” Williams was exquisitely aware that it is not the habit of Protestant Christians to do any such thing, but he loved to tweak everybody’s nose.

In any event, Williams, in very Williamsian fashion, fastened upon this phrase, and it may be hoist

as an ensign over all his work. I must end now by mentioning that Williams all his life flitted around the Roman Catholic Church (he stayed Anglican however). Whether he will have to give an accounting of this at the Trump of Doom, I do not know, since the only person I shall have to answer for, alas, is myself.