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So You've Always Wanted to Read Charles Williams?

‘Heaven and Hell Under Every Bush!’
The Novel “War in Heaven” as an Introduction to His Prose

Susan Wendling

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So You've Always Wanted to Read Charles Williams? "Heaven and Hell Under Every Bush!": The Novel *War in Heaven* as an Introduction to His Prose

Susan Wendling, New York C.S. Lewis Society

This extended session is provided to give attendees at this Colloquium some sparks to ignite the fire of interest in reading Charles Williams, the so-called "Third Inkling" (after the better known Inklings, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien). While my colleagues in this session are outlining some basic themes in C.W. (his affectionate nickname) and illustrating them with selected poetry and drama, my task is to introduce you to C.W.'s novels. Although you may already be aware that C.W. wrote several theological treatises, biographies, and book-length works of literary criticism, all containing his key ideas of Co-inherence, Substitution and the Ways of Exchange, I am limiting my time here to only one of his seven novels, *War in Heaven*.

As the February issue of "Mythprint" notes, the theme for the July MythCon 41 is "War in Heaven," especially significant as 2010 marks the 80th anniversary of the 1930 publication of Williams' early novel, *War in Heaven*. Many have noted that this first published romance is in many ways "his simplest and most accessible structurally, thematically, and symbolically. Here the romance pattern emerges unambiguously for the first time: the very title suggests the facing-off of opposing forces in a moral conflict, while the Graal is a symbol so familiar that most readers can provide a whole network of associations--both religious and mythic--with little prompting from Williams." (1) (As an aside, in another session of this conference, I will be presenting a detailed examination of the fundamental importance of the quest for the Holy Grail in Williams' life and thought.) Not only is *War in Heaven* C.W.'s simplest and most accessible novel, we have the word on "where to start reading Williams" directly from his dear friend, C.S. Lewis, who states in his Preface to "Essays Presented to Charles Williams" that "those who find the poetry too difficult would be much better advised to turn to the novels." (2)

Before I tip you off about the beauties and dangers of the world found in *War in Heaven*, let me share a brief testimonial! I first discovered Williams in the library of Houghton College as a sophomore English major. I checked out *War in Heaven* and started it in the early evening. I was immediately sucked in to the "cops and robbers" back and forth of the good guys-bad guys plot and was transfixed by the juxtaposition of its realistic setting with its mystical and occult occurrences. In other words, as a novel, the work is flawed but gripping. I couldn't sleep until I had finished reading it! I now know that I am not the only one to have had this experience, for Naomi Mitchison wrote in *Time and Tide* that it was "the sort of book one must read in a day, for it is unbearable to go to sleep before it is finished!" (3)

Critics have all said that Williams's form is "artificial and stylized" and "lacks realism." Further, according to John Heath-Stubbs, there is also and especially in the earlier novels "a certain tawdriness in the presentation of evil." (4) Heath-Stubbs continues: "the underlying theme of all his novels is the quest for some symbol of spiritual power. The good characters learn to humble themselves before it, submitting themselves to it, while others seek to pervert it to personal and selfish ends. This theme is presented most simply in *War in Heaven* which, though not the best, is in many ways

the easiest to understand of Charles Williams's works. The quest is the traditional one for the Holy Grail; but the setting is contemporary England. The Grail is a chalice in a country church, outwardly indistinguishable from any other chalice. The seekers include, on the one hand, an ordinary English archdeacon, a young poet, and the Duke of the North Ridings, a romantic Roman Catholic aristocrat; and on the other, a group of occultists, and Sir Giles Tumulty who represents the modern 'Faustian' intellect." (5) At the risk of revealing too many details of this book, let me read you C.W.'s biographer's summary of the plot:

In the novel, an old silver cup rests unguarded in a cupboard in the Fardles village church. Sir Giles Tumulty, archaeologist and expert in folklore, Gregory Persimmons, retired publisher and man of occult knowledge, whose son now runs a publishing firm in considerable dread of his father, and a Levantine who keeps a chemist's shop in a poor part of London, have all traced the history of the Grail to modern times and the possibility that it is in Fardles church. The rector, Archdeacon Julian Davenant, himself then picks up the trail from a manuscript in Persimmons's office, where at the book's opening a body has just been found, apparently murdered.

Attempts begin to buy, exchange or steal the chalice. Strangers break into the church. Gregory Persimmons tries to become intimate with the Archdeacon. He lends a holiday cottage to Rackstraw, a member of his son's staff [at the publishing office], with his wife and small son. A Roman Catholic Duke and a poet from Persimmons's staff come on the scene, and Tumulty has business with the chemist's shop. The chalice is stolen, the Archdeacon steals it back, and a car chase through the country ends in victory by a margin of minutes at the Duke's London house.

Gregory Persimmons wants a child as much as the Grail, and delights Rackstraw's small son by 'playing games' of seeing distant places and events in liquor held in the cup. Were Rackstraw's wife to be killed or paralyzed, Rackstraw would leave the boy with Gregory for a time--an opportunity for experiments with the power of the cup.

Every character in the book becomes included in the struggle for the Grail. As each person becomes more involved, his desires and instincts become stronger and clearer to him--to worship, use, possess, protect, or destroy. Only the Archdeacon more and more desires to serve the Grail in the Grail's own way of life. Police and local authorities join in. Persimmons has earlier annoyed the police, and an inspector now links his activities at Fardles with the dead man found in his son's office. The story moves to a climax in the chemist's shop, where 'everything makes haste to its doom', and the Grail's consummation in love at the celebration of Communion in Fardles with the church Grail. (6)

This accounting of the surface plot neglects to mention the key role played by the mythical character and guardian of the Grail, Prester John. Just when the Archdeacon tracks down the Grail to the Greek, the Jew and Persimmons, who have recaptured the Grail from the Archdeacon and the Duke, the reader is transfixed by the horror of evil, for this trio of evil men want to use the Archdeacon as a human "altar" to assist in bringing

about Persimmons' vision of Adrian as a demonic sacrifice. The Archdeacon is tied down on the floor, and the Grail is filled with blood and placed on his chest. In this setting, the other three men summon the souls of Adrian [the little boy], the murdered Pattison [the corpse under Adrian's father's desk in the first scene of the book], and Kenneth Mornington, the poet.

At this point, according to Dennis Weeks:

Williams uses a rather clumsy *deus ex machina* to stop Persimmons's perverted mass, and, as his gothic nature comes to the surface, Williams describes a "faint glow round the [Grail]" that fades and seems to concentrate as if a "heart were beating" inside the cup. Suddenly there is a "terrific and golden light" with "blast upon blast of trumpets." (244) Simultaneously, a figure appears from the turmoil and fiercely announces: "I am John, . . .and I am the prophecy of the things that are to be and are" (245-6) The true keeper of the Grail, as tradition would have us believe, is Prester John, a mythical priest-king. It is Prester John who saves the Grail from becoming a vehicle for Persimmons's vision to succeed. With Prester John's arrival, both groups of characters are placed in a true relationship to the Grail. They are now seen as either their brother's keepers or not, depending, of course, upon their affirmation or negation of images as the paths of Coinherence dictate. . . . Adrian, the young boy who has not been seduced by Persimmons's failed mass, is restored to his parents when he recognizes Prester John's goodness and purity. . . . Adrian's Coinherence is brought about by the act of Substitution. . . . Prester John takes the Chalice and returns to heaven with the Cup. The Archdeacon falls dead on the steps of the altar, perhaps consumed by the passion of the mass and his own Coinherence. . . . Both figures have proved that they are, in fact and deed, their brother's keepers. The final summation of *War in Heaven* is that by acts of Substitution, keeping our brother, we move closer to Coinherence. Williams has used the convention of an occult murder mystery with an eerie supernatural ointment scene and black mass to present his second step [towards actualizing Coinherence]. (7)

Occult murder mystery? Black mass and supernatural ointments painstakingly applied in dark rituals? Why in the world are we recommending that those interested in reading Charles Williams begin with this novel? The answer lies in the awareness of Williams' radical vision of unity "Under the Mercy." Yes, there is indisputable evidence that C.W. belonged to the secret Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, an offshoot of the more disreputable Order of the Golden Dawn. Williams came under the influence of the Catholic mystic and occultist, Arthur Edward Waite, and as a young man deeply studied Waite's "The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal" (1909) and "The Secret Doctrine of Israel" (1913). However, although Huw Mordecai quotes Francis King as stating that Waite's "heterodox version of the Golden Dawn system is the key without which the deepest and inmost meaningfulness of Williams can never be unlocked," he goes on to say that such a conclusion "needs to be treated with caution." (8) Although it is plain that the central symbols of several of C.W.'s novels, as well as certain arcane terms like *arch-natural*, *the Omnipotence*, *Messias*, derive directly from A.E. Waite, Mordecai points out that the way Williams handles these symbols reveals "that he takes great care not to

attach too much importance to them in and of themselves." (9) This is seen overwhelmingly in Williams' portrayal of the character of the Archdeacon.

In contrast to Gregory Persimmons, who seeks the Grail in order to exercise power over other people, the Archdeacon has taught himself to relinquish his private will and his private desires and to move instead to the will of God. He believes his business is not "to display activity, but to wait on the Mover of all things" (Ch. 17) So profound is his acceptance of this controlling will that, when in the chemist's shop he feels himself abandoned by that power, he merely says to himself again, "as he so often said, 'This also is Thou,' for desolation as well as abundance was but a means of knowing that which was All." (Ch. 17) This is a recurring "maxim" in Charles Williams, the statement "This also is Thou; neither is this Thou"--a compact formulation of the affirmation that all images show forth something of the Godhead but that trying to contain God in any earthly image is mere idolatry. Applied to the Grail itself, Williams draws interesting contrasts between the Archdeacon, Mornington the poet, and the Catholic Duke.

Kathleen Spencer draws out these intriguing comparisons:

If the Archdeacon is the accomplished man of God, the saint and mystic, the Duke with his ancient family loyalties to the Roman Catholic Church represents religion as tradition, and Mornington represents religion as high romance. Thus the Duke not only sees the Graal as the holiest of relics, but also associates it with the whole embattled and glorious history of his family as Roman Catholic nobility in England who, since the days of the Tudors, have been perpetually suspect and out of favor. Mornington, on the other hand, associates the Graal with visions of great poetry (both liturgical and romantic), Arthur's chivalry, and the Prince Immanuel--"a grave young God communicating to a rapt companionship the mysterious symbol of unity . . . The single tidings came to him across romantic hills; he answered with the devotion of a romantic and abandoned heart" (Ch. 10) (10)

Through the character of the Archdeacon, who is a contemplative mystic, Williams is able to transcend the philosophical dualism usually found in "supernatural thrillers." According to Gavin Ashenden, the Archdeacon fulfills his function, which is to "redraw conventional religious lines of dualism, in a variety of exchanges." (11) He quotes the following as a notable example of the "put-down" of evil:

"Sorry?" the Duke cried. "After that vile blasphemy? I wish I could have got near enough to have torn his throat out."

"Oh, really, really," the Archdeacon protested. "Let us leave that kind of thing to Mr. Persimmons."

"To insult God--" the Duke began.

"How can you insult God?" the Archdeacon asked. "About as much as you can pull His nose." (12)

The moral here is that "evil has no being in itself, no separate and opposite status. . . here he draws in the whole of magic into the economy of the monist metaphysic." (13) Besides the mystical unitive vision of the Archdeacon, Williams expresses his unitive

theology through the figure of Prester John. He is, according to Ashenden, "only a messenger and yet the effective conduit of all magic and holiness. He identifies himself by stating, 'I am the messenger only, . . . [b]ut I am the precursor of things that are to be. I am John, I am Galahad, and I am Mary; I am the Bearer of the Holy One, the Grail, and the keeper of the Grail . . . [*All magic and holiness is through me.*]" [italics added] (14) The further consequence of this unitive theology is that Williams confronts the fact of evil and God's supposed permission of it. Listen carefully to the following discussion among the three protectors of the Graal:

"There is no use in thinking of it and weighing one thing against the other. When the time comes, He shall dispose as He will, or rather He shall be as He will, as He is."

"Does He will Gregory Persimmons?" Kenneth asked wryly.

"Certainly He wills him," the Archdeacon said. "Since He wills that Persimmons shall be whatever he seems to choose. That is not technically correct perhaps, but it is that which I believe and feel and know."

"He wills evil, then?" Kenneth said.

"Shall there be evil in the city and I the Lord have not done it?" the Archdeacon quoted. (14)

This issue of how Williams "integrates" the problem of evil into his unitive metaphysic is explored by his introducing the mystical theology of Mother Julian of Norwich through the Archdeacon's devotional reading. Williams was familiar with the *Revelations of Divine Love*, or *Showings* of Mother Julian and refers to them in an essay entitled "Sensuality and Substance," written for the journal *Theology*. (15) Gavin Ashenden explains the link further:

If there is an integration between body and soul, then there may also be some integration between what we understand as good and evil. This integration is one of the more powerful aspects of Julian's visions. Williams would have had this in mind as he created a clear link between the Archdeacon and Mother Julian. He has him turn to her mystical visions as he prepares for his own death: "The Archdeacon had left off looking out of his window and was reading the Revelation of Lady Julian close by it." The descent into darkness that threatens to overwhelm and destroy him is similar to the experience of utter darkness and paralysis that preceded Julian's visions.

As Williams found in Mother Julian both inspiration for his Archdeacon's trial by occult fire . . . and an endorsement for the conjunction of sensuality and substance, so he also drew from her *Showings* an eschatological determinism by which evil and good are reconciled. She asks in her *Showings* the same question that Mornington and the Duke ask of the Archdeacon: "And so in my folly I often wondered why, through the great prescient wisdom of God, the beginning of sin was not prevented. For then it seemed to me all would have been well . . . [J]esus answered in these words and said: "Sin is necessary but all will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well." (16)

Indeed, the restoration and consummation of all things is gloriously portrayed at the end of this novel when all the main characters go to church at Fardles. Prester John is the celebrant at the Mass and Adrian the child serves. His mother, Barbara Rackstraw, hears at the end of the Gospel reading the promise of our Lord, "Behold, I make all things new," which readers recognize as one of Williams' favorite Biblical texts. The Archdeacon, having just gone through a horrific assault of evil, experiences the knitting up of all things--"rite and reality, word and sacrament, vision and act--as a unity, or *the* Unity, rather," as Tom Howard so eloquently details. (17) Howard continues, movingly:

It is as though the Cloud of Glory, like the cloud that accompanied Israel in the wilderness, has come very close to the characters in this tale and then has passed on its way, leaving them chastened, sobered, even transfigured. And this, of course, is exactly what any experience ought to be to us in any case, Williams always implies. The Mass, since it is the exact diagram of how that Glory touches our ordinary experience, is an appropriate climax to the events we have witnessed in *War in Heaven*. (18)

I hope these bits and pieces of my personal experience reading Charles Williams, as well as the insights I have shared from various critics, will serve to persuade you that the universe of C.W. is worth exploring. In *War in Heaven* Williams experiments with certain elements that he does not repeat again. As Kathleen Spencer concludes:

Never again, for instance, will we find so much explicitly Christian, let alone Anglican, material: no other important characters are clergymen, no other church service is presented except the Christmas Day service in *The Greater Trumps*. Also abandoned is the explicit detective story element: we find no more policemen or detectable public crimes like murder. From here on, when we meet these elements, they will be in more subtle forms and more complex narrative surroundings. (19)

So hesitate no more! Read *War in Heaven* and be plunged into a metaphysical experience like no other. As you acquire a taste for Charles Williams, you will discover his other novels, his plays, and, if you persevere, the "clotted glory" of his Arthurian poetry.

Notes

1. Kathleen Spencer, *Charles Williams* (Mercer Island, Washington: Starmont House, Starmont Reader's Guide 25, 1986), p. 45.
2. C.S. Lewis, "Preface," in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966 pb), p. vii.
3. Quoted in Alice Mary Hadfield, *Charles Williams: An Exploration of his Life and Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 96.
4. John Heath-Stubbs, *Charles Williams* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1973), p. 28.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

6. Alice Mary Hadfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-96.
7. Dennis Weeks, *Steps Toward Salvation: An Examination of Coinherence and Substitution in the Seven Novels of Charles Williams* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1991), pp. 37-38.
8. Huw Mordecai, "Charles Williams and the Occult," in *Charles Williams: A Celebration*, edited by Brian Horne (Herefordshire, England: Gracewing/Fowler Wright Books, 1995), pp. 268-269.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
10. Kathleen Spencer, *op. cit.*, p.47.
11. Gavin Ashenden, *Charles Williams: Alchemy and Integration* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2008), p. 100.
12. Charles Williams, *War in Heaven* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), p. 135.
13. Gavin Ashenden, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
14. Charles Williams, *War in Heaven*, *op. cit.*, p. 204.
15. *Theology* (May, 1939), reprinted in *Charles Williams: The Image of the City and Other Essays*, selected by Anne Ridler with a Critical Introduction (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 68-75.
16. Gavin Ashenden, *op. cit.*, p. 103.
17. Thomas Howard, *The Novels of Charles Williams* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, reprinted in 1991), p. 107.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
19. Kathleen Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 49.