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## The Image of the Library in the Life and Work of Charles Williams

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# The Image of the Library in the Life and Work of Charles Williams

by Michael J. Paulus, Jr.

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## BEYOND THE BOOK

In her review of Grevel Lindop's biography *Charles Williams: The Third Inkling*, Sørina Higgins commends how well Lindop tells the tale of Williams's life. With Lindop's acute poetic sensibilities and extensive archival research, his book does indeed present a very well told tale. But as Higgins points out, this "is the tale of a life cut short."<sup>1</sup> The premature end of Williams's life and work—with moral failures unresolved, and promising books unwritten—highlights the limits of the traditional biographical form when a life's narrative arc is arrested. When I came to the end of Lindop's book, I was left wanting not just more—such as information about the reception of Williams's works—but something beyond the limits of any single book: something atemporal, or at least nonlinear, beyond the reductive trajectory of time's arrow. To gain a deeper and broader perspective on Williams, in this paper I will explore a concept suggested by Williams's own life and work: the image of the library.

The Church, Williams said, does not look forward: it "looks centrally . . . at that which is not to be defined in terms of place and time."<sup>2</sup> The central "point out of time" that marks the beginning of the Church in Jerusalem also inaugurates its destiny in the New Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> "We operate, mostly, in sequence," Williams said, "but sequence is not all." Life in the City now and yet to come is a life of

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1 Sørina Higgins, "Decidedly Odd," *Books & Culture*, March/April, 2016, 30.

2 Charles Williams, "The Church Looks Forward," quoted in *The Image of the City and Other Essays* (Berkeley, Calif.: The Apocryphile Press, 2007), 154.

3 Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 1, cf. 15.

interdependence and exchange: “The past and the future are subject to interchange, and the present with both, the dead with the living, the living with the dead.”<sup>4</sup> This is how Williams described the eternal pattern of what he called the co-inherent life.

A book, or even a world full of books, as the fourth gospel concedes, cannot fully represent the reality of the co-inherent life. But when a book is in communication or communion with other books, a deeper center and a larger narrative emerges. What seems fleeting becomes more permanent, and what is fragmentary becomes more unified. The fourth gospel “of John,” which Williams said “comes neare[est] to describing the unity of the new thing in the world and soul,” is itself extended through intertextual exchange with other books.<sup>5</sup> Some of these were selected with it for inclusion in the canonical collection that Jerome called a *bibliotheca*—i.e., a library—which inspired a “literary movement” that created a broader library.<sup>6</sup> Williams actively engaged with and contributed to this broader library, participating in its material reality of divine and human communication.

Books were Williams’s vocation. He authored over thirty books—poetry, plays, literary criticism, novels, biographies, theology—and spent most of his professional life working as an editor for Oxford University Press (OUP). As a reader and a writer, he appreciated books with meaningful content. But as a publisher, he understood the importance of books as material containers. Like a human being, a book has a body as well as a soul; and it is through the physical form of a book that one encounters a text incarnate. The book was also a preternatural object for Williams. In his novel *Shadows of Ecstasy*, a character imagines books, nicely shelved in a bookcase, coming to life and releasing something powerful, ecstatic, and transformative.<sup>7</sup> Williams agreed with Milton, who said: “Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet every book Williams read, discussed, wrote, or published was a compromise—of meaning, form, or craft—reaching the limits of

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4 Charles Williams, *He Came Down from Heaven*, quoted in *Charles Williams: Essential Writings in Spirituality and Theology*, ed. Charles Hefling (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1993), 228.

5 *Ibid.*, 43.

6 Williams, *The Descent of the Dove*, 22.

7 Charles Williams, *Shadows of Ecstasy* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 47.

8 John Milton, *Areopagitica*, ed. J. W. Hales (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), 5.

his understanding, expression, and time. When pressed to write for money, he looked for greater depth in his subject. When pressed for time, he hoped for future opportunities for publication. And as he approached his intellectual and physical limits, he sought occult aids that were physically and spiritually destructive. In the end, he left a collection of works incomplete in itself. Beyond work left unfinished, the limits of Williams's extant collection are evident. T. S. Eliot observed that, "what he had to say was beyond his resources, and probably beyond the resources of language." But Williams's collection *is* important for the content and connections within it. All his books," Dorothy Sayers observed, "illuminate one another . . . it is impossible to confine any one theme to a single book."<sup>9</sup> His collection is also important for the connections beyond it, with the works that inspired him and the works he inspired by Eliot, Sayers, C. S. Lewis, W. H. Auden, and many others.

When considering Williams's thoroughly literary life, it is easy to miss the centrality of a literary institution that was significant throughout it: the library. Williams was always in libraries, which mediated access to a cultural, canonical collection that was open to him and his contributions. The importance of the library in Williams's life and work is most evident in his *Masques of Amen House*, a trilogy of plays set in the library of the OUP London office. Though he would have suppressed any references to these midlife masques in a biography, because of his relationship with the figure of the librarian, the central hopes and struggles of Williams's life are found in these plays. Also found in this hidden center of his life is the image of the library, both real and mythical, which is a mechanism for enabling a book—like a life—to participate in the hope of redemption and reconciliation through its connections, communion, and co-inherence with other books.

### THE LIBRARY AND A LIBRARY USER

Before turning to the masques, it is important to define what "a library" is. The library is among civilization's oldest institutions, appearing after the emergence of cities and writing some five millennia ago. Three elements have consistently characterized libraries throughout history and across diverse cultures. First, a library is an intention to configure a culture represented by fixed expressions of

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9 Quoted in "Introduction: The Pattern of Glory," *Charles Williams: Essential Writings in Spirituality and Theology*, 1f.

knowledge such as books. Second, a library is a collection created through selection, a process that creates a canonical and coherent context for discovery. Third, a library socially and technologically mediates a collection for a community so that its members may actively shape the culture that is shaping them and the library.<sup>10</sup> It is inevitable that mediation includes the creation of writers such as Williams, whose works will be included in libraries when communities favor them.

After his death in 1945, Williams's OUP colleague Gerry Hopkins submitted an entry for the *Dictionary of National Biography*. It is a curious biographical summary, citing "private information" and "personal knowledge," and Hopkins seems skeptical about the canonical value of any of Williams's works. "Many of Williams's contemporaries found him difficult and obscure," Hopkins claimed, and "to be fully equipped for the task of following the thought of any one of his volumes" it is necessary "to have spent many talkative hours in his company." "The art of conversation and the craft of lecturing," Hopkins asserts, "were his two most brilliant, provocative, and fruitful methods of communication."<sup>11</sup>

In spite of the difficulty of Williams's works, and in the absence of further oral encounters with him, many continued to find William's *written* communications of enduring value. Many of William's readers and interpreters would agree with his friend and sometimes publisher T. S. Eliot, who admitted that Williams work "has an importance of a kind not easy to describe."<sup>12</sup> Others may be waiting for the fulfillment of the prophecy of William's employer and sometimes publisher Humphrey Milford, who promised Williams "a reputation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>13</sup> Regardless, Williams's books continue to be read, republished, written about, and collected as his impact on English literature and Christian theology continues to be assessed. For now and the foreseeable future, Williams holds a place in the library. This seems a just end for a library user such as Williams, but also for a

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10 See Lee Too, *The Idea of the Library in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4-5.

11 "Williams, Charles Walter Stansby," *Dictionary of National Biography: 1941-1950*, ed. L. G. Wickham Legg and E. T. Williams (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 958f.

12 Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Group, 2015), 221.

13 Grevel Lindop, *Charles Williams: The Third Inklings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 107.

writer such as Williams—a writer who appreciated how books are always in communication with other books.

### THE AUTHOR AND PUBLISHER IN THE LIBRARY

Were Williams's life adapted for a dramatic form, it could be divided into three acts: Act I, early life in St. Albans; Act II, literary life in London; Act III, dislocated wartime life in Oxford. Multiple scenes would be set in libraries: at the St. Albans Grammar School, at University College London, at the British Museum, at the Bodleian Library, and in other public and private libraries. But a simplified dramatization could collapse Williams's whole life into one act, set in one library—the library in Amen House. From this middle point of Williams's life, it would be possible to look back to the past, present through memory, and forward to the future, present through expectation.

Later in life, when Williams prepared an outline of his life for a prospective biographer, he found it centered on a “paradox”: his illicit love for his London colleague, OUP librarian Phyllis Jones. This midlife office affair was a source of great inspiration for Williams, but is also created a great amount of pain for him, his wife, and his son. Williams said no mention of or allusion to Phyllis should appear, “and any reference to the Masques should be small.”<sup>14</sup> These masques had been initially for and about them, the author and the librarian, and the quest for an impossible union. But as with the *Divine Comedy*, the masques were also about much more. Commenting on Dante's own midlife journey into a dark wood at the beginning of the *Inferno*, Williams acknowledged that “the unifying of our imagination is an arduous business.”<sup>15</sup> Williams probably anticipated a period of retirement from employed work, when he could work to understand backwards a life lived forwards, as Kierkegaard put it, but he died within six months of musing about such a time in Hoxton in a letter to Kierkegaard translator Walter Lowrie.<sup>16</sup> If Williams had taken that look backwards, it likely would have included a return to the library at Amen House.

14 Ibid., 324.

15 Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (Berkeley, Calif.: The Apocryphile Press, 2005), 107f.

16 Quoted in Michael J. Paulus, Jr., “From a Publisher's Point of View: Charles Williams's Role in Publishing Kierkegaard in English,” in *Charles Williams and His Contemporaries*, ed. Suzanne Bray and Richard Sturch (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 38.

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Williams joined the London branch of OUP in 1908 “and never left.”<sup>17</sup> During his time at the press, Williams was responsible for a number of important acquisitions, editions, anthologies, series, and other projects. In 1924, the London office moved into more spacious quarters in Amen House. The new office included “a long, wide library,” beautifully furnished, in which “All the productions of the mighty Oxford University Press from past ages still in print were on the shelves.”<sup>18</sup> This dignified reference library was at once showroom, workroom, and common room—a place of inspiration, creativity, and fellowship. This had much to do with the presence of a new “blonde, pretty, lively, and twenty-two[-year] old” librarian Phyllis Jones, who became enamored of Williams, comparing him to “a perfect, heavenly sort of” library.<sup>19</sup>

Inspired by this new central figure in his life and the fellowship that surrounded her, Williams created a dramatization of the work of the press set in the library. A unique blend of Williams’s mythic poetry, theological convictions, and esoteric practices, the *Masques of Amen House* show how the stages of publishing correspond with and manifest the stages of “the re-union of man and God.” The first masque, “The Masque of the Manuscript,” concerns the “Way of Purgation”; the second, “The Masque of Perusal,” concerns the “Way of Illumination”; the third, “The Masque of the Termination of Copyright,” concerns the “Way of Union.”<sup>20</sup>

“The Masque of the Manuscript,” written in 1926 and performed the next year, begins with a song linking the creators of books with the new creation, the “peace and perfect end” “Seen by the seekers of truth.” The curtain rises to reveal the Librarian Phillida (i.e., Phyllis) in the library, which is described as an ancient site of revelation where “treasures of words and lives” are preserved against “the dark of future and the void.” But the keeper of this accumulated wisdom, caught up in “search on search” with her authors in the movement of time, confesses that her collection is incomplete: “I learn that man only and ever strives; / Nor hath his riddle any answer fair.”<sup>21</sup> The library is a work of time, it is also a negation of time, and it points to something

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17 Alice Mary Hadfield, *Charles Williams: An Exploration of His Life and Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 13.

18 *Ibid.*, 47.

19 Lindop, *Charles Williams*, 123, 136.

20 *Ibid.*, 153f.

21 Charles Williams, “The Masque of the Manuscript,” in *The Masques of Amen House*, ed. David Bratman (Altadena, Calif.: The Mythopoeic Press, 2000), 37f.

beyond time.

A Manuscript, a *Short Treatise on Syrian Nouns*, enters the library and asks:

Is this the place of achievement, the end of the waiting,  
 The portal of freedom, the high city's final un gating?  
 Am I come at the last to the house of all holy indwelling . . . ?<sup>22</sup>

Before being admitted to the library, which the Manuscript mistakes for the New Jerusalem, the Manuscript must suffer death and be reborn as the Book: "Nothing at all can live except it die," Phillida announces.<sup>23</sup> Only after the purification of publishing may she be shelved in the place chosen for her and enter the communion of books in the library. The library is not quite Paradise, but the way of purgation that produces the glorious Book marks the beginning of a new creation.

The redemptive work of the first masque continues in the second, "The Masque of Perusal," written in 1928 and performed the following year. Now the Book must "go forth unto its sale," find its way into a "reader's mind," and participate in the creation of another book. As the unread Book observes the publishing staff busy at work, she asks why—after a year on the shelf, untouched—was she ever "brought to be"? Is the library merely a "sepulcher," a "void" of "all that has been," a "great naught"?<sup>24</sup>

The librarian has no words of comfort, but Thyrsis, "an author and a publisher," arrives and desires to share "A wisdom so far hidden." For this he needs knowledge ancient enough to have been found in the library of Ashurbanipal: "a book upon the Syrian noun." He is brought to the librarian with the promise that she "will give such information as is wanted." As Thyrsis is shown the books on the shelves, in what Williams described as "a slow and conventionalized ritual," the actors sing how "The Keeper offers help of every kind" as she "lets her information flow."<sup>25</sup>

Thyrsis leaves with the Book, reads it, and it enters his mind and demands "a newer life."<sup>26</sup> Thyrsis then has a vision of the publishing process *as* and *in* the Procession of the Graal. The Graal, Williams wrote, is "communion with God" and its procession is "the visible

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22 Ibid., 38.

23 Ibid., 45.

24 Charles Williams, "The Masque of Perusal," in *The Masques of Amen House*, 54, 58, 62.

25 Ibid., 63f.

26 Ibid., 69.

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process of reconciliation,” promising ultimate union with God.<sup>27</sup> After this vocational vision, of internal love manifested in external labor, Thyrsis is called to feel “the communicating word” and write the book his vision saw.<sup>28</sup> He assents to participate in the pattern of human cooperation with the divine, the pattern of “birth—death—birth.”<sup>29</sup> The Manuscript, born to die and become the Book, has generated another book to be added to the library.

“The Masque of the Termination of Copyright,” which concerns the full redemption and reconciliation of the Book—reaching its perfect and peaceful end—was written in 1930 but never performed. It begins in heaven, where the Book has been declared immortal. The Book is sought out and found on earth, in a “wretched second-hand bookshop” (an infernal inversion of a library), and the Book is taken to the liminal place of the publishing house so that it may be reissued and return to the library. While the first masque inaugurates a joyful presentation of redemption, the third masque—never completed—ends where the quest began, in the library. We do not see the attainment of the Graal, which Williams said is found in reconciliation, when there is unity of internal love and external labor.<sup>30</sup>

Williams imagined his Canterbury Festival play “Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury,” preformed in 1936, as a substitute for the third “ineffective” masque of *Amen House*.<sup>31</sup> In this play, Cranmer follows the way of union through books. There are the Sacred books and the Book of Common Prayer; the books that bless in early life and the books that weary the eyes in later life; the books “we ever reform . . . and not ourselves”; the books whipped “from their shelves” by “the storm in the street”; the books recanted; the books reaffirmed; and the books that survive their authors and become witnesses themselves on the shelves of libraries.<sup>32</sup>

Here the image of the library is more subtle, but the Church’s library is shaping Cranmer and the Church, Cranmer and the Church are shaping it, and, beyond their confusions, it is being shaped by

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27 David Llewellyn Dodds, “General Introduction,” *Arthurian Poets: Charles Williams* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1991), 11; Charles Williams, *Arthurian Commonplace Book, 1912-1923*, transcribed by David Llewellyn Dodds, 71.

28 “The Masque of Perusal,” 73.

29 Williams, *Arthurian Commonplace Book*, 112.

30 *Ibid.*, 3.

31 Lindop, *Charles Williams*, 246.

32 Charles Williams, “Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury,” in *Collected Plays* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2005), 38.

the communicating word of God, “ripe for communion.”<sup>33</sup> The way of union passes through the library, which promises greater unity than its contributing authors know. As human and divine communications occur across time and throughout space, the library is an inevitable by-product reflecting the co-inherent nature of God in being and doing: the internal self-communicating love of the triune God manifested in the external self-communicating work of creation and the incarnation.

### BEYOND THE MASQUES

In spite of the substitution of “Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury” for “The Masque of the Termination of Copyright,” the third masque of Amen House, much like the third act of Williams’s life, leaves an incomplete narrative. Although Williams was ambivalent about eschatology, acknowledging that his commentary on the *Paradiso* was the weakest part of his book *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante*, he believed that in the end all would be known, reconciled, and unified.<sup>34</sup> Dante glimpsed this and attempted to articulate it at the end of the *Paradiso*:

In [eternal Light’s] depth I saw contained,  
by love into a single volume bound,  
the pages scattered through the universe:  
substances, accidents, and the interplay between them,  
as though they were conflated in such ways  
that what I tell is but a simple sight.<sup>35</sup>

Williams life was literally filled with scattered pages that he read, created, shared, edited, and published. And through all the consolations of a central faith, as well as the desolations of a central infidelity, the library was there providing pages to inspire him and collecting pages inspired by him—enabling him and his books to participate in the hope of reconciliation by bringing inchoate and incomplete communications into coherent and co-inherent communion with others and God.

In the Masques of Amen House, Williams presents images of the library along the way of purgation, illumination, and union. The library, reaching deep into and beyond time, has an integral role in the “one work” of “the re-union of man and God” that leads to the place sought by the Manuscript in the first masque: “the place of achievement, the end of the

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33 Ibid., 20.

34 Lindop, *Charles Williams*, 374.

35 Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, trans. Robert and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 915.

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waiting, / The portal of freedom, the high city” ungated, “the house of all holy indwelling”—the New Jerusalem.<sup>36</sup> The Apocalypse reveals that the City has no need of a Temple, but one might expect a Library.

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36 Lindop, *Charles Williams*, 153; “The Masque of the Manuscript,” 38.