



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 29
Number 3

Article 6

4-15-2011

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Recommended Citation

Milburn, Michael (2011) "Art According to Romantic Theology: Charles Williams's Analysis of Dante Reapplied to J.R.R. Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle"," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 29: No. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol29/iss3/6>

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Art According to Romantic Theology: Charles Williams's Analysis of Dante Reapplied to J.R.R. Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle"

Abstract

Provides a grounding in Charles Williams's "romantic theology," which was heavily indebted to his reading of Dante, and the application of romantic theology to art, which Milburn demonstrates by examining Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle" through this lens. Winner of the Alexei Kondratiev Award at Mythcon 41.

Additional Keywords

Romantic theology; Tolkien, J.R.R. "Leaf by Niggle"; Williams, Charles—Romantic theology; Williams, Charles. Religion and Love in Dante: The Theology of Romantic Love; Creative process; Creativity and religion; Creativity in J.R.R. Tolkien; Dante—Influence on Charles Williams



ART ACCORDING TO ROMANTIC THEOLOGY:
CHARLES WILLIAMS'S ANALYSIS
OF DANTE REAPPLIED
TO J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S "LEAF BY NIGGLE"

MICHAEL DILBURN

THE AESTHETICIST CREDO "ART FOR ART'S SAKE" has often been dismissed as a vicious circle. But even if we take these words to mean what they surely must—art for the sake of beauty *and nothing more*—something "vicious" seems to remain. The world has so many pressing needs, and the aestheticist, it seems, would prefer to ignore them. The many political schools of criticism, however, that have risen to power by challenging the formalist preoccupation with aesthetics give voice to a profound impulse to relate art to social justice and the common good. But in their own preoccupation with politics, these approaches sometimes risk leaving beauty behind altogether. Many artists and theorists, in fact, call quite loudly for its desertion. Others will suffer it to remain, but not without reducing it to the secondary role of a means to some more pragmatic end.

But from a Christian theological perspective, the dichotomy between beauty and social justice assumed by aestheticist and utilitarian alike is a false one. For beauty, social justice, and the common good are all related to *caritas*, or "charity," as in "*Deus Caritas Est*"—"God is Love" (1 John 4.16). When God communicates his love to human beings and we, in turn, pass it on to one another, we are able to act with extraordinary courage and selflessness for the sake of social justice and the common good. And through the relationship of beauty to *caritas*, art is able to engage social concerns without abandoning beauty as its proper end. I am speaking both of "art for art's sake" *and* art for the sake of social justice and the common good: art for the sake of love itself.

In order to demonstrate this relationship between beauty and *caritas*, I will be turning to the romantic theology of Charles Williams. Now, Williams himself was always quick to point out that the term "romantic theology" is not meant to imply some particularly sentimental approach to theological questions (*Outlines of Romantic Theology* [ORT] 7),¹ that is, a theology not so much on one's

¹ Throughout the following, I will be drawing on works by Williams composed as early as 1924 and published as late as 1943, including (in chronological order): *Outlines of Romantic*

knees as with tears in one's eyes and sighs upon one's lips. Rather, romantic theology is as serious as any other branch of the discipline (7), but where mystical theology, for example, concerns itself with mystical experiences, romantic theology takes for its subject those experiences which have come to be labeled "romantic" (*Figure of Beatrice* [FB] 29; *ORT* 7). According to Williams, the foremost of these romantic experiences, or "occupations" as he also calls them (*ORT* 67), is indeed romantic love: *eros* as opposed to *agape* or *caritas* (7). Williams developed this branch of romantic theology through his analysis of the work of Dante Alighieri, and it remained the branch that he most fully developed, to the point that he often used the term romantic theology as a synecdoche for his theology of romantic love, with others following his example.² But art, that is, the creation and appreciation of artistic works of all kinds, is another occupation with which romantic theology is concerned (70).³

One of the reasons I have chosen to work with romantic theology as opposed to the many other theological approaches to art that are available is the emphasis Williams places on *caritas*. Many of these other approaches tend to emphasize what C.S. Lewis called Need-love—the desire for happiness—at the expense of what he called Gift-love—that is, *caritas* (1). Romantic theology, on the other hand, is unusually balanced in its incorporation of both these aspects of love, and it makes the relationship between them unusually explicit.

I will begin with an overview of romantic theology, summarizing Williams's theology of romantic love. Then I will examine his work on the branch of romantic theology concerned with art and consider to what extent this branch can be developed more fully without straying from his original principles. J.R.R.

Theology (written in 1924, not published until after his death; see *ORT* x-xiii), an unpublished lecture entitled "Christianity and Romantic Love" (see Ridler xlii), *He Came Down from Heaven* (1938), "The Image of the City in English Verse" (1940), *Religion and Love in Dante: The Theology of Romantic Love* (1941), and *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (1943). While these works were written over a period of almost twenty years, Williams's thinking on romantic theology remains remarkably consistent, and I have been careful to avoid anything in an earlier work that could be seen to have been contradicted by something in a later one.

² See, for example, Anne Ridler's introduction to *The Image of the City*: "Later, he drafted a book on the theology of romantic love (or Romantic Theology, as he was accustomed to call it)" (xlii).

³ Williams first makes this point in *ORT* (70). As if worried, however, that he might be offering his readers too much to consider all at once, he suggests that his speculation on the romantic experiences other than love need not be treated as "an essential part" of the book's thesis (72). Nevertheless, he continues to speculate along the same lines about art and the other romantic occupations in works such as *He Came Down from Heaven* (65) and *The Figure of Beatrice*; see especially *FB* 14, 16, 29, and 63, as well as the discussion of Virgil below and note 1 above.

Tolkien's artistically themed short story "Leaf by Niggle" will prove useful here for its structural parallels to the work of Dante and its thematic parallels with Williams's own work on romantic theology. What this implies about Williams and Tolkien's relationship will also be considered briefly. Finally, I will conclude by reflecting on the significance of romantic theology for artists, critics, educators, and the public.

Williams's theology of romantic love begins with the experience commonly referred to as "falling in love" (*He Came Down from Heaven* [HCDH] 65). According to Williams, this experience can certainly include a sexual aspect but is not limited to it. When Dante falls in love with Beatrice⁴ in the *Vita Nuova*, his "natural spirit" (5), which Williams points out was associated with sex, is "disturbed," as Williams translates it (*Religion and Love in Dante* [RLD] 94). But Dante's "vital spirit" (*Vita Nuova* [VN] 3), which Williams associates with the emotions (*FB* 19-20), and his "animal spirit" (*VN* 5), which Okey glosses as "the faculty for sense perception" (Alighieri, *VN* 326), are also affected. Dante's "animal spirit" goes so far as to announce, "Now your beatitude has appeared to you" (qtd. in Williams, *RLD* 93-94). Indeed, Williams likens this moment of falling in love to "a state of adoration" (*HCDH* 65), in which the lover "contemplates" his lady as the most perfect of all creatures (*ORT* 16). "Here then," the lover might say to himself, "is this supreme woman; here is this supreme experience." For the glorious vision of Beatrice immediately sets itself up as "the center of life," reorganizing other concerns around it so as to render to them more worthwhile (*ORT* 17).

But for Williams, the important question is whether or not this vision is true (*HCDH* 66). Is Beatrice's glory real? Is she in fact beatific? Is Dante seeing her as she really is, or does he deceive himself? Williams would answer that Dante *is* seeing Beatrice as she really is, but he is seeing her "as she is 'in heaven'—that is, as God chose her, unfallen, original; or (if better) redeemed; but at least, either way, celestial" (*FB* 27). In other words, when Dante falls in love with Beatrice in Florence, he sees her as she appears in the earthly paradise at the end of the *Purgatorio* (Alighieri, *Comedy* [C] 2: 30.31-48). He sees her "in something of her

⁴ Because of his focus on Dante (and, no doubt, because of his own experience, as well), Williams tends to present his theology of romantic love from the perspective of a man falling in love with a woman. However, he does not only have the man in mind: "anything that is postulated of his experiences is postulated also of the woman's." Williams leaves consideration of the differences between these "rival and correlated experiences" to future students of the discipline (*ORT* 12-13). Ridler, who was a disciple of Williams, claims that he would also have approved the application of the principles of romantic theology to same-sex attraction, though he would have called for chastity as the proper condition of this form of love; see Ridler xliii, xxvi-xxvii.

true celestial state," wherein she is, according to Christian teaching, nothing less than what he sees her as (*FB* 30).

Such a vision is made possible by the Incarnation of God as man in Christ, which "opened all potentialities of the knowledge of the kingdom of heaven in and through matter" (*HCDH* 74). The Incarnation involves not only Christ but all the members of his body, that is, the members of the Church and in a broader sense the entire human family: "The Body of Christ is, in a hidden but assured way, one with the bodies of his saints [...]. But this is in eternity, and it is with eternity that the body of [the lover's] lady is seen to be illustrious" (*ORT* 37). Williams associates the beloved with one saint in particular: Mary, the immaculate Mother of God.⁵

If "God is love"—*Deus caritas est*—then just as Mary became the mother of *caritas* for all mankind, so in "an incomparable and yet comparable manner" does Beatrice become the "Mother of Love—of *caritas*" for Dante (*HCDH* 71; *FB* 30). Dante observes in the *Vita* that whenever he beholds Beatrice, he is possessed by "a flame of [*caritas*]" that clothes him in humility and causes him to pardon anyone who has offended him (26-27). Williams describes this flame of *caritas* as "a leaping momentary fire of pure love" (*HCDH* 72) and claims that in such moments, Dante becomes completely disposed towards the good of others (*FB* 22); he becomes the perfection he has seen in Beatrice (*RLD* 95). The glorious vision of Beatrice communicates humility to Dante because only the self-forgetfulness of humility makes adoration possible (*HCDH* 71). Thus, the pardon Dante offers in such moments is far from being "a cold superior thing"; rather, it flows naturally and inevitably out of the flame of *caritas* that has possessed him (*HCDH* 72). Through such flames, "Beauty" becomes "the mother of love" (*Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind* [*RBPM*] 84), *eros* becomes *agape*, and Need-love, or perhaps more precisely what Lewis called Appreciative love (16-17), becomes Gift-love. Moreover, Williams claims that *eros* "is often our salvation from a false *agape*" (*FB* 182), that is, the "cold superior thing" which Beatrice allows Dante to avoid.

It must be said, however, that while the glory Dante glimpses in Beatrice may itself be eternal, it is not eternally visible through her (*HCDH* 79). This aspect of Williams's theology of romantic love is expressed through his analysis of the death of Beatrice. While for Dante, the death of Beatrice in the *Vita* (109-11) probably meant simply the actual death of Beatrice (or whoever she was supposed to represent), it has taken on an added significance and appears to us now not only in this literal form, but as a symbolic "vanishing of Perfection" (*RLD* 96). It is the moment when Beatrice no longer seems so "heavenly." It can be brought on by an offense, the discovery of some fault, or simply custom and

⁵ See, for example, *ORT* 15-17.

"that normal human relapse and boredom which follows swiftly on any high experience" (ORT 19).

However, the vanishing of the glory does not necessarily imply that it was false (HCDH 78). Williams elaborates:

It has been, through all time, part of the monotonous admonition of the old to the young that such rapt visions do not last, and far too often the discouraged old have implied that the mere fact of the quick passage of the vision means that it was in some sense unreliable, untrustworthy, valueless. It is false; no second experience can, of itself, destroy the value of a first experience. (RLD 96)

The idea of two equally valid, contradictory experiences figures importantly in Williams's literary criticism. Two books, *The English Poetic Mind* and *Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind*, both revolve around it, especially as expressed by Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida* when Troilus discovers Cressida's infidelity: "Bi-fold authority [...] This is and is not Cressid" (5.2.151, 153). Williams explains that Troilus's simultaneous awareness of Cressida's fidelity and infidelity renders the woman he fell in love at once both present and absent to him (FB 89). Therefore, the glorious vision that Dante has had of Beatrice is real but "not 'realer' than the actual Beatrice, who, no doubt, had many serious faults, but it is as real. Both Beatrices are aspects of one Beatrice" (FB 27). And this "double nature" means that the lover can have a "double sight" (HCDH 78). The reason that Beatrice's imperfection does not invalidate the perfection Dante has glimpsed in her is because her glory was never her own to begin with, but derived from God all along: "The vision of the perfection arises independently of the imperfection; it shines through her body whatever she makes of her body. Thus chastity is exhibited in the lecherous, and industry in the lazy, and humility in the proud, and truth in the false" (FB 63-64; see also ORT 16).

Whatever may lie behind the death of Beatrice, the disappearance of her glory has a distinct purpose in Williams's theology of romantic love (FB 37). Once the vision that has inspired the "flame of *caritas*" is gone, the lover must become that *caritas* through his own will (RLD 97). Beatrice does not suddenly advance Dante to the fullness of his moral development, but provides a momentary inspiration that he must follow through on (HCDH 72-73). This has been the purpose of the vision all along: "To be in love must be followed by the will to *be* love; to be love to the beloved, to be love to all" (HCDH 81). After the death of Beatrice, the lover must fall back on the certainty of what he has already seen and the freedom to remain faithful to it (FB 37-38). Recollection can help: "The recollection of her moves the rational part, even if she no more affects the sensitive, and this rational part can, to a certain extent, still loose her image on

the sensitive." Through such recollection, the lover hastens on his way to becoming the flame of *caritas* that once possessed him (FB 38).

It is this development of *caritas* towards all and not marriage per se which is the true end of Williams's theology of romantic love (FB 15), though of course marriage will, in many cases, be desirable. The fact that it is not necessary, however, lends his theology of romantic love a surprising universality: it is not only of use to those who will marry, but also to those who, for whatever reason, will not. That being said, Williams is by no means suggesting that marriage should be reduced to the elements of *caritas* it has in common with celibacy: "Eros need not for ever be on his knees to Agape; he has a right to his delights." It is not a matter of fleshly *eros* versus spiritual *agape*, but a love that either "sinks into hell" or "rises" into heaven (RLD 111).

In *The Figure of Beatrice*, Williams traces the ascent of earthly *eros* into the *agape* of heaven in his analysis of the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso* (145-223). But he also examines the experience of love that "sinks into hell" in his analysis of the *Inferno*; "falling in love" can lead the lover through sin into perdition when the lover makes an idol of his vision of the beloved, treating it as an end in itself, something to be possessed and controlled, instead of allowing *eros* to blossom into *agape* towards the beloved and towards all (107-144). Williams is not so naïve as to suggest that beauty can make a lover grow in charity without the cooperation of his will, and *eros* will often require purification through renunciation and self-denial before it can become *agape*.

These, then, are the main ideas of Williams's theology of romantic love. But as it turns out, his usage of "romantic love" thus far has been, like "romantic theology" itself, a synecdoche; when Williams defines *eros* in its more complete sense, it emerges as a broader concept of which "sexual love" is merely one example (FB 14). Williams's more comprehensive definition of "romantic love" is "any relation of man into which the element of sincere and simple attraction enters" (ORT 70). And, as Williams makes explicit, any genuine "love of art" is just such a relation; "sincere and simple attraction" is what it has in common with "sexual love" as a "romantic" occupation. It is something they have in common with a great many other experiences, as well, some of which we may be used to thinking of as romantic, such as "love of nature" and "love of learning" (ORT 70-71), some of which we may not, such as sports and even—unlikely as it may seem—stamp-collecting. Williams explains:

Of these we are generally willing to admit that love of learning, art, nature [...] has something divine about it. We are not perhaps so willing to admit football or stamp-collecting. Yet it is difficult to see why the division should be made. If the astronomer is recognized as partaking in the Morning Joy with which the redeemed contemplate God in His Creation,

may not the stamp-collector share it likewise? Any occupation exercising itself with passion, with self-oblivion, with devotion, towards an end other than itself, is a gateway to divine things. (*ORT* 70)

Williams does admit that it would be more difficult to put into practice the branch of romantic theology concerned with philately because of the greater ease with which one becomes possessive and makes an idol of the object; spouses tend to be more resistant to such treatment than stamps (*ORT* 70-71). However, it is due to the difficulty of such an approach and not because of a difference of kind that the love of art or nature or learning commands greater respect: "In all of these there is a certain 'opposition' in the object which, while making the love a more difficult task, makes it in its greatest practitioners more obviously holy" (*ORT* 71). Williams's broadening of his definition of romantic love clearly demonstrates that he invited the application of his theology of romantic love to other romantic occupations, including that of art: "Beatrice is not only a type of the love-relationship; she is a type of every relationship" (*FB* 190).⁶

However, one could argue that Dante's exclusion of Virgil from the *Paradiso* implies otherwise. Apparently, Beatrice, as romantic love, can make it to heaven, but Virgil, as poetry, cannot (*C* 1: 118-126). But Williams explicitly denies this view, insisting that Beatrice herself provides sufficient evidence of Dante's commitment to the limitless potential for development in all earthly matters. However, Dante needed to illustrate the renunciation necessary for the purification of Appreciative love, and to exclude Beatrice from heaven would have been too much, since romantic love was the subject of his poem. Both Virgil and poetry proved convenient for this role, for Dante believed that Virgil could not make it to heaven because he had not been baptized and that poetry could not make it to heaven because, unlike the object of romantic love, it was not a person at all: "Poetry cannot possess charity; it cannot be humble" (*FB* 111). This does not mean, however, that poetry cannot inspire humility and produce flames of charity in the one who reads it, for Beatrice did not inspire Dante through her own virtue but through the glory that shone through her body regardless of what she made of it; thus can humility be exhibited even in the proud. Ultimately, Dante needed to keep Virgil out of heaven in order to keep the subject of his poem clear: "It is a part of the poem that Virgil should lack grace; did he not, he would be too like Beatrice herself" (*FB* 112).

Dante's exclusion of Virgil from heaven does, however, pose a problem, for the subject of Dante's poem has in part determined the branch of romantic theology that Williams most fully developed. Williams focused on romantic love

⁶ The word "relationship" should not mislead; in the immediate context, Williams does not only have relationships between human beings in mind, but also relationships between human beings and "everything else" (*FB* 190).

at the expense of the love of art not only because he believed it to be a more universal experience, but also because, "owing to the chance of genius," Dante had provided him with good source material (*HCDH* 65). What is needed in order to develop more fully the branch of romantic theology concerned with art is a source text comparable to the work of Dante that takes for its subject art rather than romantic love. In a 1943 lecture, Williams reportedly compared Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as an expression of the romantic experience of art to the work of Dante as an expression of the experience of romantic love, but whereas Dante's expression had been more or less complete, Keats's was somehow only partial (qtd. in Heath-Stubbs 18).

To call Keats's "Urn" a *partial* expression of the romantic experience of art is to make a positive claim, as well as a negative one. There is something that Williams believes Keats got right about this experience, but there are also things that he believes Keats left out. In the first few stanzas after the opening of the poem, Keats's vision of the unchanging world of the urn does seem, like Dante's vision of Beatrice, to exist outside of time (lines 15-27, 38-40). Truly, the urn doth "tease" him "out of thought / As doth eternity [...]" (44-45). But even if we take what is here the most convenient reading of the much-disputed last two lines and assume that both of them can be completely attributed to the urn addressing us "on earth" (49-50),⁷ could this really imply that the urn is, like Beatrice, in heaven? What Williams most considered the poem to be lacking, however, was some analog to the death of Beatrice. Keats's poem may declare, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty [...]" (49), but it stops short of the moment when beauty no longer seems like truth. Williams explicitly expresses this view in his literary criticism, where he compares the "Urn" to *Troilus and Cressida*: "Beauty is, quite finally for Troilus, not truth" (*RBPM* 87), for "neither Troilus nor Cressida had been imagined as carved upon an urn" (*RBPM* 85). The "Beauty" of Keats's poem, therefore, remains "uninvestigated Beauty" (*FB* 150), as if instead of having "double sight," the lover were to remain ignorant of the beloved's imperfections. In choosing this blissful ignorance, Keats was, according to Williams, attempting to leave out "earthly suffering" (*RBPM* 89), but Williams contends that we must have the courage to face the death of Beatrice regardless of the suffering involved: "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'—no doubt. Ever since Keats said it, we have all fallen for it. And after having taken up our cross daily over those lines, we may have some right to believe it" (*English Poetic Mind [EPM]* 174). Most importantly, however, Keats's poem lacks any mention of *caritas* whatsoever; Appreciative love abounds, but there is no sign of it becoming Gift-love.

⁷ There is evidence that Williams himself considered the last two lines to be addressed to us, but it is unclear whether he attributes them entirely to the urn or also in some part to the speaker of the poem (*RBPM* 77).

What is really needed, then, in order to develop more fully the branch of romantic theology concerned with art is a source text that not only takes art for its subject but locates the vision of great art in the afterlife with Beatrice, includes an experience analogous to the death of Beatrice, and explores the relationship between artistic beauty and *caritas*. Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle" is just such a text. It is largely allegorical, despite Tolkien's famous distaste for allegory,⁸ and even Tolkien himself admits as much in a 1954 letter (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* [L] 195), although he does go on to deny it in a letter written in 1962: "It is not really or properly an 'allegory' so much as 'mythical.' For Niggle is meant to be a real mixed-quality *person* and not an 'allegory' of any single vice or virtue" (320-21). But if we allow that in the medieval drama *Everyman*, it is not only characters like Knowledge and Discretion who are allegorical but that Everyman himself is an allegory of every man, then Niggle is allegorical, too, and not only as an allegory for Tolkien himself, as the usual interpretation goes,⁹ but as—well—if not every man then every artist,¹⁰ just as Dante in the *Commedia* remains Dante but becomes, in Williams's hands, an allegory for every lover. The "journey" on which Niggle must go is an allegory for death ("Leaf by Niggle" [LN] 102-103); the "Workhouse" he arrives at is an allegory for purgatory (103-08).

The presence of purgatory is important, because what really enables "Leaf by Niggle" to function as a source text for romantic theology is its parallels with the work of Dante; these parallels make it possible to adapt Williams's own analysis of Dante's writing to Tolkien's text, allowing the branch of romantic theology concerned with art to develop according to the same principles with which Williams originally developed his theology of romantic love. Some of the parallels between "Leaf by Niggle" and the *Purgatorio* in particular have already been acknowledged by other scholars. In fact, Deborah and Ivor Rogers have gone so far as to call the story "Tolkien's little *Purgatorio*" (57). More concretely, Sebastian Knowles has demonstrated that it shares the *Purgatorio*'s structural pattern, for the place that Niggle comes to after he is allowed to leave the workhouse corresponds to the earthly paradise that Dante comes to at the end of the *Purgatorio*. For both Tolkien and Dante, the earthly paradise is the site of one last purification necessary to the attainment of paradise (Knowles 140). Before he can journey to the mountains, an allegory for heaven, Niggle has to drink from the waters of a certain spring, just as Dante must drink from the streams of Lethe

⁸ See, for example, his foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (Prologue.xxiv).

⁹ See, for example, Shippey 267-68.

¹⁰ This interpretation has been offered by Richard Purtill (20). In the passage referred to in note 11, Shippey explicitly states that "Niggle should be equated not with Everyman but with Tolkien," ignoring Purtill's third alternative (268).

and Eunoë before he can proceed to the world of the *Paradiso* (Knowles 140; Tolkien, LN 115-16, 113; Alighieri, C 2:31.94-105, 33.112-145).

“Leaf by Niggle” would not work as a source text for romantic theology, however, if it were not also for the affinities that will emerge between the thought of Williams and Tolkien. It is possible, as Colin Duriez has suggested, that Williams influenced Tolkien in the writing of “Leaf by Niggle” (Duriez 121). They were, after all, in the same writing group. However, referring to Williams in a 1955 letter, Tolkien claimed (or rather ex-claimed), “I do not think we influenced one another at all!” (L 209). In a 1965 letter, he even insisted that they simply “had nothing to say to one another at deeper (or higher) levels” (361-62). But these statements were made years after “Leaf by Niggle” was written—Scully and Hammond have recently dated its composition to 1942, three years after Williams joined the Inklings and one year before the last book he wrote on romantic theology was published.¹¹ In a more contemporary text of Tolkien’s, a poem he wrote about Williams sometime during World War II (Carpenter, *Inklings* 123), we catch a glimpse of an attitude that is considerably more “complex,” as biographer Humphrey Carpenter put it (*J.R.R. Tolkien*, 154). On the one hand, Tolkien is already expressing in much of the poem his inability to understand or sympathize with most of Williams’s work (qtd. in Carpenter, *Inklings* 123-26), but on the other hand, he admits to Williams, “When your fag is wagging and spectacles are twinkling, / when tea is brewing or the glasses tinkling, / then of your meaning often I’ve an inkling” (126), evoking with the references to smoke and drink the atmosphere of the writing group’s meetings before punning on its name to express his budding grasp of Williams’s thought. More importantly, Tolkien singles out Williams’s analysis of Dante—that is, romantic theology itself—for praise: “But heavenly footsteps, too, can Williams trace, / and after Dante, plunging, soaring, race / up to the threshold of Eternal Grace” (123).¹² It seems that just as “Leaf by Niggle” is exceptional among Tolkien’s works for being allegorical, it may also be exceptional for having been

¹¹ See Glycer 16 and note 1 above.

¹² Tolkien’s attitude towards Dante himself was as complicated as his attitude at this time towards Williams. Tolkien once claimed in an interview that Dante didn’t “attract” him: “He’s full of spite and malice. I don’t care for his petty relations with petty people in petty cities” (qtd. in L 377). However, upon reviewing these comments, Tolkien dismissed them as “outrageous” and called Dante “a supreme poet.” But there was one part of his criticism that Tolkien did not retract: “It remains true that I found the ‘pettiness’ that I spoke of a sad blemish in places” (L 377). Merlin DeTardo speculates that in this charge of “pettiness,” Tolkien might have had in mind Dante’s attacks on his political enemies or his placement of several Popes in hell. Tolkien and Lewis used to read Dante aloud to each other (L 377), and Tolkien was, like Lewis and Williams, a member of the Oxford Dante Society, to which he gave at least one talk (DeTardo).

significantly influenced by Williams. At the very least, what follows should challenge Tolkien's later claim that he and Williams had so little in common as to have "nothing to say to one another" about something as serious as romantic theology, an assumption Inklings scholars have often accepted.¹³

At the beginning of "Leaf by Niggle," Niggle is described as "the sort of painter who can paint leaves better than trees," but there is one picture of a tree that he simply cannot let go of:

It had begun with a leaf caught in the wind, and it became a tree; and the tree grew, sending out innumerable branches, and thrusting out the most fantastic roots. Strange birds came and settled on the twigs and had to be attended to. Then all round the Tree, and behind it, through the gaps in the leaves and boughs, a country began to open out; and there were glimpses of a forest marching over the land, and of mountains tipped with snow. Niggle lost interest in his other pictures; or else he took them and tacked them on to the edges of his great picture. (94)

It is his one "real picture"; at one point, it seems to him "the only really beautiful picture in the world" (95). Niggle's vision of the tree he wants to paint corresponds to Dante's vision of Beatrice when he falls in love with her. Each experience is a "relation of man into which the element of sincere and simple attraction enters," and both involve the intuition of perfection; if Dante can say, "Here then is this supreme woman; here is this supreme experience," then Niggle can say, "Here is this supreme painting." For both experiences do indeed establish themselves "as the centre of life," and this can be seen most clearly in Niggle's habit of arranging his other pictures around this one by tacking them on to its edges.

But the parallel with the death of Beatrice lies close at hand, for Niggle's view of his picture as "the only really beautiful picture in the world" is actually part of a larger, more complicated observation: "One day, Niggle stood a little way off from his picture and considered it with unusual attention and detachment. He could not make up his mind what he thought about it [...]. Actually it seemed to him wholly unsatisfactory, and yet very lovely, the only really beautiful picture in the world" (95). The moment when "the only really beautiful picture in the world" seems "wholly unsatisfactory" corresponds quite clearly to the vanishing of the glory in the death of Beatrice, and Niggle's

¹³ Even John D. Rateliff, whose superb 1986 study "And Something Yet Remains to Be Said: Tolkien and Williams" challenged Carpenter's portrayal of Tolkien's supposed jealousy of Williams's friendship with Lewis (Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien* 154; *Inklings* 120), nevertheless finds "convincing" Tolkien's views on the mutual lack of influence and common ground in the relationship (Rateliff 51).

observation as a whole suggests very much the “double sight” of the lover. The death of Beatrice in the romantic occupation of art, then, is that all-too-familiar moment when what has been written on the page does not live up to the vision the writer had in mind when he wrote it, a moment with which Tolkien himself was preoccupied. The immortal elves in *The Lord of the Rings* are “deathless” in this sense, as well, as Tolkien once pointed out, for their art is “delivered from many of its human limitations: more effortless, more quick, more complete (product, and vision in unflawed correspondence)” (L 146). In this artistic parallel to the death of Beatrice, the “‘opposition’ in the object” that raises art above stamp-collecting certainly manifests itself.

However, just as in Williams’s theology of romantic love, the vanishing of the glory does not mean that it was false. While not eternally visible, the glory Dante saw in Beatrice was itself eternal, for he had seen her as she would appear in the earthly paradise at the end of the *Purgatorio*. In perhaps the most striking parallel with Dante’s work, Niggle, too, encounters the perfection of his vision in the earthly paradise:

Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a Tree that was alive, its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and had so often failed to catch. [...] All the leaves he had ever laboured at were there, as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them; and there were others that had only budded in his mind, and many that might have budded, if only he had had time. (109-10)

It should be noted that this passage does not represent some mere literary conceit. While the idea that art could somehow continue beyond this life is not perhaps as conventional as the Christian belief in the afterlife, Tolkien took it seriously as a real possibility. And he once claimed that this assumption of art, or “subcreation” into creation itself “in some plane” was precisely what he wanted to illustrate in “Leaf by Niggle” (L 195). In his essay “On Fairy-stories,” which was eventually coupled with “Leaf by Niggle” to form the volume *Tree and Leaf*, Tolkien offers his clearest exposition of this view:

The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body [...] but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed. So great is the bounty with which he has been treated that he may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation. All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know. (73)

The vision of Niggle's tree is possible because the "potentialities of the knowledge of the kingdom of heaven" that are opened up by the Incarnation are not limited to human beings as members of Christ's body, but are available, as well, to all matter, and this can perhaps be seen most clearly in the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which, as both Tolkien as a Roman Catholic and Williams as an Anglo-Catholic understood it, mere bread becomes the body of Christ.¹⁴

It is not clear, however, to what degree Williams shared Tolkien's view of art in the afterlife, but in his literary criticism, he does affirm that the word "beatitude," which Dante used to describe the coming of Beatrice, can also be applied to great art. Williams believed that whenever Wordsworth spoke of "the soul" in *The Prelude*, he was also speaking of poetry, including the reference to

the soul
[.....]
 blest in thoughts
That are their own perfection and reward,
Strong in herself and in beatitude
That hides her [...] (VI.609-614)¹⁵

And Williams takes the testimony of Wordsworth as seriously as he took that of Dante: "In the great poets it is probably true—for Wordsworth said so—that the coming of the 'perfection and reward' is beatitude" (*EPM* 21). The presence of Niggle's tree in the earthly paradise simply serves to justify Wordsworth's usage of the word "beatitude" according to the same principles of romantic theology that Williams used to justify Dante's. For his part, even Dante allows Virgil to enter the earthly paradise (*C* 2:29.55-57).

It is nowhere explicitly stated in "Leaf by Niggle" that the ultimate end of Niggle's vision is *caritas*, but the story is built around precisely this idea. Niggle has a neighbor. His name is Parish, and while Tolkien claimed that Parish's name had no "special significance" (*L* 321), he once used a phrase that suggests otherwise; in an essay where he defines "Faery" as imagination, he also describes it as the recognition "of a limitless world outside our domestic *parish*" (*Smith of Wootton Major* 101; emphasis added). Parish is the parochial man with limited imagination and little interest in art (*LN* 97). He is lame in one leg and so places many demands on Niggle throughout the story (93, 96-99). Niggle complies with these demands, but with a begrudging heart, that is, without *caritas*, because he sees them as "interruptions" getting in the way of his art (93,

¹⁴ For a discussion by Williams of the role of the Eucharist in romantic theology, see *ORT* 36-37, 43-47.

¹⁵ See Williams, *EPM* 210. The quotation is from the 1850 version of *The Prelude*; see Wordsworth 217, 219.

96-99, 106). It is because he fails to make the connection between his vision and *caritas* and instead sees them as being at odds with each other that Niggle ends up in purgatory. Art is neither better nor worse than romantic love: it can lead either to idolatry and hell or *caritas* and heaven.

In *The Figure of Beatrice*, Williams suggests that there is but one wood in all of European literature and that Dante in the beginning of the *Commedia*; Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, and *Macbeth*; and Milton in *Comus* are all writing about different parts of the same great forest: "The use of such an extended image is to allow the verse of those various 'parts of the wood' to point distantly towards each other, without the danger of too hasty comparisons" (107-08). If, for a moment, we were to treat purgatory in the same way and attempt to locate Niggle within Dante's *Purgatorio*, then I do not think it would be too hasty a comparison to say that Niggle appears to be on the first terrace, where those guilty of the sin of pride are purged (C 2:10.17-12.99). The means of purgation on this terrace is manual labor (10.130-139), and this is precisely what Niggle is assigned in "the Workhouse" (Tolkien, LN 103-05). One of the supernaturally lifelike sculptures on this terrace depicts a poor widow beseeching the emperor Trajan for justice (C 2:10.73-84). He says that he will help her when he gets back from the war (10.85-86). She asks what will happen if he does not come back (10.86-88). In that case, his heir will help her (10.88-89). But then she asks him what use another's charitable deed will be to him if he cannot be charitable himself (10.89-90). He puts off going to war in order to help her right then and there (10.91-93). Commenting on this episode, Williams writes, "The glorious duties of office are to be postponed till after the duller; this is the humility of the imperial function, and of all functions" (FB 158). The artistic function is included; while Niggle does not consider himself a very good artist and is not in that sense prideful, he does consider himself an artist, and it is because his duties towards Parish are not art that he sees them as "dull" and not "glorious" and looks down at them as "interruptions," though in his heart he knows that being an artist does not provide him with an excuse to neglect his neighbor (LN 106). Fittingly, Williams observes, "There is no room on this terrace for the 'artistic temperament'; no place for the neglect of decent manners, let alone of morals (but they are one)" (FB 158). Niggle is not able to leave purgatory and move on to the earthly paradise until he shows of his own volition a genuine concern for Parish's well-being (LN 107-08).

Williams is quite explicit when speaking of romantic love in the broader sense that the "beloved—person or thing—becomes the Mother of Love" (HCDH 81). Thus, while the love of art may appear "a useless and wandering love," it produces "secret and holy states of consciousness" (ORT 72), that is, flames of *caritas*. Like Dante, Niggle is called upon to become the perfection he has seen and through the same methods of recollection and the free will. While analyzing

the examples of art found throughout the *Purgatorio*, Williams claims that their purpose is to speed men on towards the *caritas* of heaven but "not necessarily by their moral advice" (FB 177); rather, it is through the flames of *caritas* which they produce in men, and this also is the purpose of Niggle's tree in the earthly paradise, which without any moral advice whatsoever becomes for many "the best introduction to the Mountains" (LN 118).

However, just as *eros* in the narrower sense had a right to its delights, so art "need not for ever be on [its] knees to Agape." At one point in "Leaf by Niggle," Parish wants to use the canvas of Niggle's painting to repair his roof, but after he himself dies and makes it through purgatory into the earthly paradise, he is explicitly chastised for such an absurdly utilitarian view (98, 115). Nevertheless, Parish appears to have gotten his way back on earth after the death of Niggle, and only one small piece of Niggle's canvas escapes the fate of becoming part of his roof (117). Atkins, who is "nobody of importance, just a schoolmaster" (116), frames it and puts it in the town museum: the "Leaf" of the story's title (117-18). But the museum later burns down, and Niggle's art is lost to history (118). This eventual destruction of the museum is another way in which Tolkien's story, unlike Keats's poem, acknowledges the death of Beatrice.

But the utilitarian view is also represented in "Leaf by Niggle" by the character of Tompkins, who, in contrast to Atkins, is an important member of the town council. "Worthless" is what Tompkins calls Niggle after his death, "no use to Society at all." Atkins responds that it depends on what Tompkins means by "use." Tompkins clarifies that he has "practical or economic use" in mind. Atkins presses him: "Then you don't think painting is worth anything, not worth preserving, or improving, or even making use of?" (116). Tompkins's response abandons beauty in order to relate art to social justice and the common good through politics alone:

Of course, painting has uses. [...] But you couldn't make use of his painting. There is plenty of scope for bold young men not afraid of new ideas and new methods. None for this old-fashioned stuff. Private day-dreaming. He could not have designed a telling poster to save his life. Always fiddling with leaves and flowers. I asked him why, once. He said he thought they were pretty! Can you believe it? He said *pretty!* "What, digestive and genital organs of plants?" I said to him; and he had nothing to answer. Silly footer. (116-17)

Tompkins's attempt to replace beauty with social commentary and political propaganda ("a telling poster") is unfortunate because it abandons aesthetics for a vision of politics divorced from *caritas* (Tompkins is so uncharitable as to call for the execution of those he deems to be of "no use to Society" [116]). Such a view of art is therefore less effective even for the sake of

social justice and the common good. Under the influence of Marxism, exclusively political approaches to cultural issues are often openly hostile to the idea of *caritas* because their success hinges on the promise of a future revolution, which a charitable deed threatens to postpone by making the status quo seem that much more tolerable. But is it fair to sacrifice, for a future which may never be realized, those who are suffering now? The flames of *caritas* produced by beauty have no need to wait upon a revolution before they can make a difference.

This is not to say, however, that Williams saw politics and *caritas* as separate affairs. Quite the contrary: "Politics are, or should be, a part of *caritas*; they are the matter to which the form of *caritas* must be applied." Political concerns are therefore an essential component of romantic theology (*RLD* 97). In fact, Williams identifies politics as a branch of romantic theology in its own right (*ORT* 70; *HCDH* 65), where the lover gives way to the patriot (in the best sense of that word) and the vision of the beloved, to a vision of the *polis*, or city. This branch of romantic theology can even involve the kind of protest that might make it into one of Tompkins's posters; in the lecture where Williams compared Dante with Keats, he also mentioned modern poets as offering a kind of negative image of the city in their attentiveness to social injustice (Heath-Stubbs 18), though in taking such an indirect approach, they may have treated this branch of romantic theology "inadequately" ("The Image of the City in English Verse" [*IC*] 101), as Keats inadequately dealt with the experience of great art.

But it must be clear already that in pointing to "politics" as a branch of romantic theology, Williams meant more by the word than we normally do today. The city he has in mind is no mere governmental body, but can be defined broadly as "the sense of many relationships between men and women woven into a unity." Moreover, the "earthly city" is an image of "the heavenly City" (*IC* 92), just as Beatrice is an image of the heavenly Beatrice. The goal, therefore, is nothing less than "the continual interchange of courtesies of the spirit" (*IC* 101). Understood in these terms, Williams's vision of politics goes beyond political grandstanding to encompass anonymous acts of kindness and generosity. Addressing himself to the citizens of his own country, he is quick to clarify that *caritas* "does not mean a vague goodwill towards Chinamen, but a definite humility towards one's neighbour" (qtd. in Ridler xliii).¹⁶ Attempts to relate art to social justice without *caritas* tend too often to devolve into an ultimately self-righteous exercise in which artists, critics, teachers, and students express their indignation over issues that are really rather safe politically and over which they have, at any rate, little real control, at the risk of ignoring more immediate matters for which responsibility might, in fact, be taken. What Williams observed

¹⁶ This quotation is from "Christianity and Romantic Love." See note 1 above.

of romantic love in the more limited sense must surely apply to it in the broader sense, as well: "Eros is often our salvation from a false agape."

Romantic theology, then, has implications for those committed to the arts. For the artists themselves, as well as teachers and critics, it calls above all for a recovery of aesthetics. Rallying cries for a return to beauty always beg the question as to the definition of the term. But in this case, there is room for the old adage "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," for Williams's romantic theology does not describe a specific aesthetic idea but an experience. If someone claims that a work of art has provided him with the kind of experience that romantic theology describes and he is honestly speaking out of a "sincere and simple attraction" and not, for example, out of a desire to appear sophisticated by liking the "right" things, then to question the validity of the experience is about as appropriate as asking a fellow why he married *her*. As Williams observes, "It seems that no one yet discovered that light of glory in any woman or any man by hunting for it; it seems that it may exist where it is not wanted. It has its own methods; 'my ways are not your ways, saith the Lord'" (*HCDH* 69). But the fact that it is not up to us to decide who is "beautiful enough" to have someone fall in love with him or her does not prevent us from working to "beatify" the human form through fashion or to show it to best advantage through cosmetology. We may not be able to control when the experience described by either branch of romantic theology will happen, but we can make it more likely. So the discussion of aesthetics must go on, but it can be a genuine, open dialogue rooted in the experience of diverse individuals and peoples.

In addition to participating in this ongoing conversation, teachers and critics have another part to play. In "Leaf by Niggle," when Parish comes to the earthly paradise, what does he encounter but Niggle's tree. There he is able to do something that he failed to do on earth: he contemplates the beauty of Niggle's vision (112). He is surprised to learn from "the shepherd," the pastoral guide to the mountains (113), that what he has been contemplating is in fact Niggle's picture from long ago:

"But it did not look like this then, not *real*," said Parish.

"No, it was only a glimpse then," said the man; "but you might have caught the glimpse, if you had ever thought it worth while to try." (114-115)

Atkins, on the other hand, has seen Niggle's vision; he says of the corner of canvas he has preserved, "I can't get it out of my mind" (117). If only he had found a way to communicate his enthusiasm to Parish. This should be the goal of the teacher and the critic: to get Parish to see the beauty of Niggle's vision *before* he dies—and each of us is Parish in front of something. Teachers and critics are

especially needed when the beauty of a work of art has been obscured by time. Students and the rest of the public rely on the context and insight scholars can provide. Conversely, the defense of new beauty is also a major task of the critic. Remaining faithful to the vision, a critic can enable a public full of Parishes to overcome its own conservative prejudices in the face of artistic originality.

For the public, romantic theology proposes not so much a new way of “reading” as a new way of living. It is the public who above all must not take “art for art’s sake” too literally. Beauty becomes the mother of love—of *caritas*—and once beauty has disappeared, we are to become that *caritas* through our own free will. What is needed is not art for art’s sake or art for the sake of social justice and the common good but both: art for the sake of love.



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ELECTION OF STEWARDS



ALL OF 2011 MARKS THE END OF THE CURRENT THREE YEAR TERM for the Council of Stewards. All Stewards have indicated a willingness to continue in their current roles and, with the separation of Secretary for Mythopoeic Awards from Secretary for the Mythopoeic Press, David Oberhelman will continue as the Secretary for Mythopoeic Awards and Leslie Donovan has applied for and been appointed by the Council as Secretary for the Mythopoeic Press.

According to Section IV.2 of The Mythopoeic Society Bylaws, "The members of the Society shall, by ballot election, choose Stewards to serve for a term of three years. All terms of office are subject to death, resignation, failure to maintain dues-paying membership, or action by the members.

"Nominations to the Council of Stewards may be made by a supporting petition of at least five (5) per cent of the current members or by action of the Council of Stewards. Nominations shall be closed 120 days before the date of election."

In order to minimize election expenses, we plan to send an electronic ballot which you may return electronically, if you don't want to preserve your anonymity, OR you may follow the directions and mail it back. Those members who do not receive Mythprint electronically will receive the ballot by mail.

You may gather signatures to submit new names for the ballot through Mythcon 42; this will facilitate getting 5% of the membership to support a nomination, if you wish to run for one of the Stewards' offices. Petitions will be mailed to Society members with the electronic Annual Report, early in May. Petitions will need to be turned in to the Council of Stewards at the Members Meeting at the close of Mythcon 42.

