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Cavalier Treatment: A Column

Additional Keywords
Patrick Wynne
The gnostic tendency accompanies all religious and metaphysical systems, though early Christian writers, I believe, alone in designating its Gnostics as a heretical body. The mark of the gnostic is the principle that knowledge is superior to faith. Only an insight discovered in practice and experimentally repeatable, or conveyed to an initiate from a source very near to the original discovery or revelation may be relied upon as an aid in spiritual progress.

For reasons that cannot be explored here (for lack of space and because I am not equipped to do so), gnosticism appears to be a profound temptation to high church Anglicans, especially those of a literary bent, and to some bookish Roman Catholics (of other classic heretical forms, Arianism will always beckon to the liberal Christian and Manicheism constantly shadows the Evangelical). Ultimately, the Christian insistence upon faith as a primary virtue will force the issue and if the decision is to be made to believe without undeniable demonstrations or privileged access to supernal secrets, then the gnostic temptation will have been overcome. Such at least is the Christian perspective. The gnostic view of such cases is that another coward has abandoned the quest and its rigor and delivered himself over to clerical sootheings. It is from the latter viewpoint that Ithell Colquhoun regards Charles Williams.

Her book, Sword of Wisdom, is not only an unqualified homage to the mastership of MacGregor Mathers, founder of the Golden Dawn, it has also a summary critique of some who betrayed or abandoned Mathers or his path. Williams is described among the Order's "Bend Sinister Issue" along with, among others, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, E. Nesbit, Evelyn Underhill and A. E. Waite.

Williams apparently never knew Mathers, but was active for a while in a Golden Dawn offshoot led by Waite. This activity, concurrent, we may assume, with private reading on occult themes, colored Williams deeply but the period remains poorly documented in his life and we can only understand it from what embedded in his writings. It was all before Lewis and the Inklings, and Colquhoun suggests that perhaps some Golden Dawn concepts filtered through Williams to his friends. Her argument is persuasive, I think, that That Hideous Strength, the most Williamesque of Lewis's books, bears such an imprint; something of the secret lodge does permeate St. Anne's, the citadel of Ransom's Logres. But The Lord of the Rings has less occult affinities than does The Silmarillion and I take it that most of the latter work was drafted before Tolkien knew Williams.

In any case, Colquhoun does not like Williams's friends: "Both Tolkien and Lewis claim to be combating Satanic forces but the ethos they propose instead is scarcely acceptable. To ignore for the moment their considerable literary merits, and concentrate on their metaphysical implications, I see them as worse than merely dissident [from the Golden Dawn] for their talents distort the world view of the genuine GD while retaining some of its trappings. Both of them loathe and despise women; this bias emerges indirectly from Tolkien through the farness and insipidity of his women characters, but blatantly in Lewis's sado-masochistic doctrines, which Mr. Fishering implants in his disciples in lieu of occult teaching and by the misuse of his personal magnetism. If these are 'the Goodies', give me Satan."

Whew! The charge of misogyny is scarcely new, but seldom so warlike. Still, it's hard to imagine what victories for Sauron or the NICE would have contributed to the Status of Women.

Her judgment of Williams is more measured, partly, one assumes, because of the number of heroines in his novels. Indeed she urges that he has "Neither as a poet nor playwright... yet received his due," and she holds his occult "disidcence" largely blameless since Mathers was out of the picture when Williams joined Waite's lodge. But even unintentional dissidence is dissidence still.

Colquhoun is not opposed to Christianity - in its place. After all, her hero Mathers may have turned Catholic in his obscure last years in France. She only wants religion to be a flavoring, permitted to be distinctive, but always to be subordinate to the main business of life, occult study. Her reaction to those who turned their backs on the Dawn is not grand remonstrance nor thundering anathema, but petty malice: "Something amounting to a cult of Williams had sprung up .... Others, more critical, were inclined to gossip bitchily about his domestic problems: it was said that when he begun (sic) to suffer from the "cosiness" of her approach.

If the gossip was "bitchy", how shall we characterize its publication? (For those who must know all about this sort of thing, the uncomfortable story of Williams and Phyllis Jones is given, unbitchily, in Carpenter's The Inklings.) These little jabs punctuate other "Bend Sinister" portraits. She saw Waite lecture "about 1929 and there was current gossip that he had already taken to the bottle." Evelyn Underhill's spiritual counsel suffered from the "cosiness" of her approach.

This cattiness, which permeates the book, may be her personal quirk, but I think not. It seems to me implicit in the enterprise. A central seer, mage or guru can only offend so many places close to him; some envy and jockeying must surround him. We are dealing here with spiritual superiority directly equated with access to information, and levels of initiation conferred or refused without appeal. Competition for the master's ear will inevitably lack scruple. It cannot be proven, but I nonetheless hold as true that the "study group" in The Place of the Lion reflects Williams's memory of the Golden Dawn.

If only he and the others had been true to Mathers, Colquhoun mourns, "a powerful network - the more effec- continued on page 44
flesh, and the devil." (p. 110)

Concluding, Panek writes:

Sayers felt that she had to move to more practical and honest ways of coping with the world than the detective story offered, so she directed herself exclusively to theological writing and mainstream literary scholarship. She was, however, I think, wrong about herself and her detective books: The Wimsey stories have more to do with life than any other writer's detective books. They confront problems and do not give easy answers. They may be, in fact, Sayers' best pieces of theology. (p. 110)

Although Dorothy L. Sayers is not mentioned in Eric S. Rabkind's study of The Fantastic in Literature (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), detective fiction is. And it is discussed in the context, and as a part of, fantasy; so eminent a writer as W.H. Auden is quoted to point out that the underlying myth of detective fiction is the Garden of Eden. Detective fiction in fact grew out of the same garden as other nineteenth century fantasy: that plantation of post-romantic forms which includes the gothic novel, the thriller, and the tale of horror, as well as the mythopoeic fantasies of George MacDonald and the medievalizing tales of William Morris, both of which directly influenced Lewis and Tolkien. Charles Williams's works can scarcely be understood without reference to the former tradition; they are detective/thriller/mythopoëic all at the same time, beginning with the corpse in War in Heaven. His arch conversations, heightened style, and "clotted" plots owe their tone to detective thrillers, and are not only alien but incomprehensible without an understanding of the other genre.

On such a basis, discussion of Sayers's works belongs in Mythlore, and indeed, four essays and a poem have been printed here (see below) along with book reviews of studies of her biography and works. But Sayers is qualified for inclusion in another way: not that she was an Inklings, as some writers have naively and erroneously supposed. She was associated with Lewis in the more formal Oxford Society, the Socratic Club, and Joe R. Christopher has shown that her friendships included Lewis and Williams, though Tolkien disliked both Peter and Harriet. Her qualifications, however, surpass her association with the Mythopoeic Triumvirate. She is the other British writer whose works range from popular fiction to scholarly discussion to Christian apologetics, and whose work is, throughout, a seamless whole of orthodox Christian doctrine (with an Anglican colouration, pace Tolkien).

If I may skirt blasphemy, I am reminded of Jung's joy when he perceived that the Dogma of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary raised the Feminine Principle to convert the Trinity into a quadrupartite whole. What reads as richly masculine in Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams, reads as richly feminine in Sayers, without the slightest waver of orthodoxy or power.