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The Jewels Of Messiah: Images of Judaism and Antisemitism in the Novels of Charles Williams

Abstract

Reviews Williams's portrayal of Jews in his novels and some of the erroneous notions of Jewish mysticism that may have influenced him. Expresses concern over the anti-Semitism expressed in these portrayals.

Additional Keywords

Anti-Semitism in Charles Williams; Jews in Charles Williams's novels; Williams, Charles—Antisemitism; Williams, Charles—Characters—Jews; John Pivovarnick; Mary Jane Johnson; Valerie Protopapas

THE JEWELS OF MESSIAS:

Images of Judaism and Antisemitism

in the Novels of Charles Williams

by Nancy-Lou Patterson

In the novels of Dorothy L. Sayers, Jews are depicted for the most part as private persons going about their business; social and economic beings, rather than religious.¹ But in the novels of Charles Williams, the man whom Sayers called "the dead Master," it is their religious identity which is emphasized. In his essay, "The Jews," he speaks of the "Jewish mystery," and of that extreme courtesy with which [Christians] should carry themselves towards Jews, especially towards orthodox Jews." As to the unorthodox (as well as for unorthodox Christians), "it is a matter of merely behaving as decently as possible."² In his description of the relations between Jews and Christians, Williams says, the Jew sees "a preposterous blasphemy," which is "fundamentally from his own people," while the "Christian is confronted by the rejection of the Faith by that from which the Faith sprang." The matter is one "between fathers and children." It is a "mystery of radical exchange."

In a comment which may be used to judge both Sayers and Williams, Joshua Trachtenberg wrote in 1939:

...where Jews are concerned...the vision of the world has been obscured by darkly bias-tinted spectacles. If, on the one hand, Christological and anti-Semitic prejudices have revealed only an infamous horde of blasphemers and parasites, on the other, a historical perspective limited by Scripture has disclosed an exalted band of prophets, hounded and persecuted as prophets must be for their vision and temerity. Between these two extremes -- which have alike doomed Jews to the unhappiest of extremes -- a normal people, with all the faults and virtues of humanity, has pursued its normal course through history, however abnormal were the conditions against which it struggled.³

In addition to the "normal" pursuits of daily life, normal Jewish religious activity has included both synagogue and home. In addition, the "folk religion" of Judaism has included, in the two thousand years since New Testament times, "on the periphery of the religious life, the practices of magic, which never broke completely with the tenets of the faith, yet stretched them almost to the breaking point," (*Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii) Trachtenberg says. These practices, which emerge in his study of *Jewish Magic and Superstition* as remarkably innocent and benign, were, of course, railed against by the rabbis. Nonetheless, as Trachtenberg says, "many medieval Christians looked upon the Jew as the magician *par excellence*." (*Ibid.*, p. 1) As he says, "the striking feature of Jewish sorcery is that it adhered not to specific Jews...but to the entire people, *en masse*. Consequently, every innocent Jewish act which by its strangeness laid itself open to suspicion was considered a diabolical device for working magic against Christians." (*Ibid.*, p. 2) Ritual hand-washing, casting a clod of earth at funerals, hunting for leaven on the eve of Passover: all these benign little ceremonies were seen as evil magic. The blessed wine of

Sabbath was considered to have occult powers. The *mezuzah* was of course both feared and desired. Jewish doctors were thought to have special talent in magic healing, (*Ibid.*, p. 4) and Jewish druggists were seen as purveyors of magic potions and poisons. (*Ibid.*, p. 5) Trachtenberg points out the survival into the twentieth century of these notions and of their ugliest form -- the suspicion of ritual murder -- so that Montague Summers could write of "the dark and hideous sorceries of Hebrew magic...[in which] the blood of the victim...was used for magical purposes." As this grotesque idea continued in the modern era, it stretched back into the past: "a host of popular magical works was attributed to Solomon and other fabled Jewish masters. Juvenal's jibe that the Appian Way swarmed with fortune-telling Jewesses who would sell you any sort of dream at out prices, was the kind of information that was bound to make and retain its impression," (*Ibid.*, p. 9) Trachtenberg writes.

There was, in fact, a Jewish magical tradition. In the period when Jewish mysticism took shape, partly under the influence of Hellenistic gnosticism, theosophical ideas developed which Trachtenberg described in terms that Williams himself might have used:

Searching out the secret springs of the universe, the mystic brings to light awesome and puissant truths, which his more practical and profane confidants feel promptly impelled to profane for their own greater glory and might. (*Ibid.*, p. 12)

Jewish medieval writings of course include references to events like those that Christian writers attribute to witches. They shared the common European heritage. Thus Menahem Ziyuni wrote in 1430 "There are men and women...who possess demonic attributes; they smear their bodies with a secret oil...and instantly fly off like the eagle." (*Ibid.*, p. 14) But this is not specifically Jewish magic. Rather, "the primary principle of medieval Jewish magic was an implicit reliance upon the Powers of Good, which were invoked by calling upon their names, the holy Names of God and His angels." (*Ibid.*, p. 19) This calling upon the Name is the central act in several of Williams' novels.

Magical power required that one read and pronounce the sacred words, letters, and numbers, and for the most part the powers called upon were benign, divine, and not malignant. In other words, Jewish magic consisted in invoking power, a practice only a hair removed from actual prayer, rather than in commanding or wielding it oneself. As said above, these practices of folk religion were continually preached against by the rabbis of the period, not because they thought that devils were being contacted (as the Christian clergy believed) but because they recognized the dilution and attenuation of genuine religious life such activities represented. Needless to say, their efforts went unrewarded, and wonder-working was attributed to rabbis and to holy men in the folk tales of Eastern European Judaism -- for instance, in the stories of the Golem -- as well as by Christian writers.



fred's dream

They are strict Jews, living in London because they are too poor to return to Jerusalem. They live in London and they abominate the Gentiles of London. They are fanatically -- insanely, you would say -- devoted to the tradition of Israel. They live almost without food...studying the Law and nourished by the Law. (*Ibid.*, p. 33)

Asked if the jewels are important to "Israel," Considine continues,

...it was a Jew who saw the foundation of the Holy City splendid with a beauty for which the names of the jewels were the only comparison. We think of jewels chiefly as wealth, but I doubt if John of the Apocalypse did, and I doubt if the Rosenbergs will. Perhaps he saw them as mirrors and shells of original color. (*Ibid.*)

There is general public unrest over the situation. "No one could believe that the two aged and devoted students of Kabbalistic doctrine were fit persons to control the vast interests of the Rosenberg estate." (*Ibid.*, p. 55) Williams well depicts the ugliness of a crowd gathered outside their lodgings in London:

He caught fragments of talk: "Say they're going to bribe the negroes"; "know all about those bloody niggers"; "great jewels like turnips -- been buying them for months"; "lousy old Jews"; "Christ Almighty"; "bloody Jews." (*Ibid.*, p. 160)

The mood grows uglier still:

Another call went up: "Come out, you bloody Jews!"; "Come out and bring us the jewels!"; "Come out and we'll show you what we'll do to the niggers!"; "...A woman of sixty nearby said with a sensuous shudder to her neighbour, "They do say that Jews eat babies." "Ah," said the neighbour, "foreigners'll do anything." (*Ibid.*, pp. 160-161)

The gentle old scholars grow stern under this assault. Nehemiah Rosenberg confronts his persecutors: "Sons of abomination, what have we to do with you? Defilers of yourselves, who are you to come against the Holy One of Israel?" (*Ibid.*, p. 161)

There is stone-throwing: Nehemiah is killed. Ezekiel turns to the body; Williams says "he intoned over it a Hebrew prayer." (*Ibid.*, p. 165) Taken under the protection of Considine (who has his own malignant intentions toward him), "Ezekiel still sat, lost in meditation in antique words...brooding over the manner in which the High and Holy One had in the secret story of Joseph or of David, in the hidden sayings of Ruth or Esther, signified the return of Israel to His pardon." (*Ibid.*, p. 226) He, too, is killed. "He was dragged violently from his chair, but he clung to the sacred treasure...His face, as he lifted it, was full of a scorn deeper than time, the scorn of his God for the spoilers of the holy places. He saw the distorted face of a greedy Gentile above him, and before the bullet searched his brain he spat at it once." (*Ibid.*, p. 247)

In the first-published of his novels, *War in Heaven*, a less benign, but equally fanatical, view of Jewish religious behavior is given. Sir Giles Tumulty is advising Gregory Persimmons on the use of a magic ointment: "A Jew in Beyrout tried it and didn't get back. Filthy beast he looked, all naked and screaming that he couldn't find his way."⁸ Persimmons pursues the inquiry; he finds the shop and the ointment. On his first visit he is served by "a Greek of sorts," but on his second visit, there is a "new-comer." He "was smaller than the Greek, and much smaller than Gregory; his movements were swift and his repose alert. His bearded face was that of a Jew." (*Ibid.*, p. 143)

The novel concerns the Holy Grail (the Cup of the Last Supper): when Persimmons asks the intentions of

Probably the direct route from all this to the fantasies of Charles Williams is through the person of Eliphas Zahed Levi (whose real name was Alphonse Louis Constant). Born in Paris in 1810, he was not a Jew; he studied for the Roman Catholic priesthood and became a deacon. He was, Francis King suggests, "a convert to the half-religious, half-political doctrines of that lunatic fringe of extremist 'French royalism'"⁴ -- after he had worked out his own version of the doctrines of these groups, he "completely romanticised the whole magical and alchemical tradition, the interpretation of the tarot cards, and what little he knew of the Hebrew Qabalah." (*Ibid.*, p. 23)

His writings, which King calls "nineteenth century Gothic," made him "responsible for the surfacing...of the whole underground magical tradition." The spirit of Levi imbues the whole nineteenth and early twentieth century development of magical thought and practice. The Order of the Golden Dawn, which profoundly influenced Charles Williams was, in a sense, his spiritual child.

The fact that none of this is actually Jewish, let alone Jewish magic, must not be forgotten, but the followers of these groups often were not aware of it. Some of them became passable students of Jewish mysticism. Anne Ridler tells us in her introduction to *The Image of The City of Williams' admiration for Arthur E. Waite's The Secret Doctrine in Israel*, which she calls "a study of a Jewish mystical work, the Zohar [which] includes much of the lore which is found in the Golden Dawn teachings."⁵ Gershom G. Scholem refers to the "brilliant misunderstandings and misrepresentations of...Eliphas Levi" which form part of what he calls the "most eccentric and fantastic statements" which have been made about Kabbalism.⁶ In his view, Arthur E. Waite had a "fine philosophical and natural grasp" of the Kabbalah, but "lacked all critical sense as to historical and philological data in this field." (*Ibid.*) Charles Williams, who was quite enraptured by it all, seems to have accepted everything into his passionate mind and from it fashioned high fantasies of his own, in a sort of "twentieth century Gothic" style, as we shall see.

In the first-written (but much later published) novel of his series of fantasy thrillers, *Shadows of Ecstasy*, there is found dead, presumably of suicide, "a certain Simon Rosenberg who, among his interests in railways and periodicals and fisheries and dyeworks, in South African diamonds and Persians oils and Chinese silks, in textiles and cereals and patent medicines, rubber and coffee and wood..."⁷ had included a profound devotion to his wife, recently dead. "He'd developed a mania for making [for her to wear] the most marvellous collection of jewels in the world." (*Ibid.*, p. 26) Someone who had known her says, "she looked not merely like the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars..." but "She was a magnificent creature, tall and rather large and dark," so that in her jewels, she resembled "the New Jerusalem turned upside down so that the foundations showed." (*Ibid.*)

Rosenberg has relatives who inherit this treasure. The character Considine (who is the villain in the novel) says of them:

these two toward it, "The others looked over at him, the Jew scornfully, the other with a faint amusement. The Greek said, 'Manasseh and I are going to destroy the Cup.'" Asked why, he learns, "'Because it has power,' the Jew answered, leaning over the counter and whispering fiercely, 'it must be destroyed. Don't you understand that yet? They build and we destroy.'" (*Ibid.*, p. 144) Later in the novel there is another exchange over this motif:

"Praise to our Lord," Gregory said. But Manasseh smiled and shook his head. "He is the last mystery," he murmured, "and all destruction is his own destroying of himself." (*Ibid.*, p. 188)

Ultimately there is a terrible psychic conflict in which the would-be protectors and would-be destroyers of the Cup contend. The Cup is rescued by Prester John, and its temporary holder, the Archdeacon, dies.

Williams' use of Jewish characters in these two novels may be compared not only with Sayers' use, but with others. A totally negative image of a Jew in a shop, used for no reason except coloration, may be found in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, where "We found Hildesheim in his office, a Hebrew of rather the Adelphi Theatre type, with a nose like a sheep, and a fez. His arguments were pointed with specie -- we doing the punctuation -- and with a little bargaining he told us what he knew."⁹ The scorn attributed to the Rosenberg brothers resembles that which C. S. Lewis thought he saw in the Old Testament *Psalms*, which he discusses in "The Cursings," a chapter in *Reflections on the Psalms*:

One's first impression is that the Jews were much more vindictive and vitriolic than the pagans.

If we are not Christians we shall dismiss this with the old gibe "How odd of God to choose the Jews". That is impossible for us who believe that God chose that race for the vehicle of His own Incarnation, and who are indebted to Israel beyond all possible repayment.¹⁰

He concludes:

If the Jews cursed more bitterly than the Pagans this was, I think, at least in part because they took right and wrong more seriously. For if we look at their railings we find they are usually angry not simply because things have been done to them but because these things are manifestly wrong, are hateful to God as well as to the victim. (*Ibid.*, p. 30)

Jews in relation to religion, mysticism, and magic, continued to form part of Williams' novels; in *The Place of the Lion*, there is a mysterious language heard: "Hebrew it might have been or something older than Hebrew, some incantation whereby prediluvian magicians had controlled contentions among spirits or the language in which our father Adam named the beasts in the garden."¹¹ In *Many Dimensions*, Prince Ali is meditating as he drives through London in search of the mislaid Tetragrammaton, a sacred stone which, having the Hebrew letters of the Divine Name inscribed upon it, is capable of teleportation. He muses:

Suleiman ben Daood, he knew, was a historic figure -- the ruler of a small nation which, in the momentary decrease of its two neighbours, Egypt and Assyria, had attained an unstable pre-eminence. But Suleiman was also one of the four great world-shakers before the Prophet, a commander of the faithful, peculiarly favoured by Allah. He had been a Jew, but the Jews in those days were the only witness to the Unity.¹²

The stone had been set in a crown, and the Prince, speaking of it, tells the Persian ambassador to the Court of St. James, "It is undoubtedly the Crown." "'The Crown of a Jew?' the Ambassador murmured." The Ambassador, too,

muses on the idea: "'It might perhaps be held that the Christians derive as much from Judah as we,' he said." (*Ibid.*, p. 14)

The frequent association by occultists of the Tarot with the Kabbalah was accepted by Williams. In *The Greater Trumps*, Henry is gazing at the dancing golden images which are the prototypes, in the novel, for the original Tarot deck he now holds in his hands. He says to his fiancée Nancy:

"But once," he went on, "--some say in Egypt long before the Pharaoh heard of Yussuf Ben-Yakoob, and some in Europe while dreaming rabbis whispered in the walled ghetto over fables of unspeakable words, and some in the hidden covens of doctrine which the Church called witchcraft -- once a dancer talked of the dance, not with words, but with images; once a mind knew it to the seventy-eighth degree of discovery, and not only knew it, but knew how it knew it, so beautifully in one secret corner the dance doubled and redoubled on itself."¹³

The idea that the Tarot emerged in Egypt and was carried from thence by the Jews is not original with Eliphas Levi but he gave it the most vivid expression, and even hoped to find a "Jewish Tarot" someday. The Yussuf Ben-Yakoob of the above passage is Joseph, son of Jacob. The rabbis are here listed as representative of secret doctrine; kabbalistic magic as Levi and even Waite imagined it to be. Henry's father Aaron meditates on the Tarot too:

...his hidden secret of the gipsies had been borne about the world, covered by wrappings and disguises...one band of all those restless companies possessed the mystery which long since some wise adept of philosophical truths had made in the lands of the east or the secret houses of Europe: Egyptian or Jew or Christian heretic --



Paulician, Bogophil, or Nestorian -- or perhaps still further off in the desert circled empire of Abyssinia." (*Ibid.*, p. 152)

Aaron ponders "the dark fate that falls on all mystical presentations...the doom which struck Osiris in the secular memory of Egypt, and hushed the holy, sweet, and terrible Tetragrammaton in the ritual of Judah, and wounded the Keeper of the Grail in the Castle of the Grail, and by the hand of the blind Hoder pierced the loveliest of all the northern Gods..." (*Ibid.*, p. 153)

The most vivid and specific use of the idea of Jewish magic, however, appears in Charles Williams' last novel, *All Hallows Eve*. Richard describes one of the novel's main characters, the magus Simon Leclerc, to Jonathan, whose fiancée Betty is actually Leclerc's daughter. "We know... that his name is Simon Leclerc -- sometimes called Father Simon and sometimes Simon the Clerk. We gather he's a Jew by descent, though born in France, and brought up in America."¹⁴ Simon preaches "Love, with a hint of some secret behind, which Love no doubt could find out." (*Ibid.*, p. 36) The character of Simon is based upon Simon Magus, the magician of Acts 8:9-24, who is converted by Philip and then tries to buy the power of God with silver, earning a rebuke from Peter. When Clerk Simon enters the novel, Williams describes him:

He was a tall man, with a smooth mass of grey -- almost white -- hair; his head was large; his face thin, almost emaciated. The face had about it a hint of the Jew -- no more; so little indeed that Jonathan wondered if it were only Richard's account that caused him to think he saw it. But, considering more carefully, he saw it was there. The skin was dark... (*Ibid.*, p. 51)

The Clerk goes out through the streets of London, and "as he went the Jewish quality in his face seemed to deepen; the occasional policeman whom he saw thought he saw a Jew walking by night." Chesterton, Sayers, and Williams (to say nothing of Stoker) all accept the notion that Jews are: one, a race whose physiological traits are genetically "Jewish," and two, physically recognizable.

The following long passage contains the central motif of the novel, presenting, under the guise of a fantasy or thriller, Williams' own theological conceptions: as Christ is a Jew, so the Anti-Christ (Simon Leclerc) must be a Jew:

Indeed that august race had reached in this being its second climax. Two thousand years of its history were drawing to a close; until this thing had happened it could not be free. Its priesthood -- the priesthood of a nation -- had been since Abraham determined to one End. But when...that End had been born, they were not aware of that End. It had been proposed that their lofty tradition should be made almost unbearably august; that they should be made the blood-companions of their Maker, the own peculiar house and family of the Incarnation -- no more than the Gentiles in the free equality of souls, but much more in the single hierarchy of kindred flesh. But deception had taken them; they had, bidding a scaffold for the blasphemer, destroyed their predestined conclusion, and the race which had been set for the salvation of the world became a judgement and even a curse to the world and to themselves. Yet the oaths sworn in heaven remained. It had been a Jewish girl who, at the command of the Voice which sounded in her ears, in her heart, along her blood, and through the central cells of her body, had uttered everywhere in herself the perfect Tetragrammaton. What the high priest vicariously spoke among the secluded mysteries of the Temple, she substantially pronounced to God. Redeemed from all division in herself, whole and identical in body and soul and spirit, she uttered the Word and the Word became flesh in her. Would it have been received by her own people, the great Judean gate would have been opened for all peoples. It could not. They remained alien -- to It and to all, and all to them and -- too much! -- to It.

The Gentiles, summoned by that other Jew of Tarsus, could not bear their vicarious office. Bragging themselves to be the new Israel, they slandered and slew the old, and the old despised and hated the bragging new. (*Ibid.*, pp. 59-60)

In William's fantasy, a new man, for whom "Jew and Christian alike had waited" (*Ibid.*; p. 60) was born in Paris, "in one of those hiding-places of necromancy which all the energy of the Fourteenth Louis had not quite stamped out." He had been reared by "that small college" (*Ibid*) to the secrets of power which "were private to those who had the right by nature, as all art is, but especially to the high-priestly race. Only a Jew could utter the Jewish, which was the final, word of Power." (*Ibid.*, p. 61)

Something of what he has come for, Simon recalls, has already been attempted. He meditates on his own version of the life of Christ, taught him by his magical training: for him, St. Joseph was a sorcerer, and Mary was deceived:

The sorcerer who had attempted it had also been a Jew, a descendant of the house of David, who clothed in angelic brilliance, had compelled a woman of the same house to utter the Name, and something more than mortal had been born. But in the end the operation had failed. Of the end of the sorcerer himself there were no records; Joseph ben David had vanished. The living thing that had been born of his feminine counterpart had perished miserably. (*Ibid.*, p. 62)

But Simon has "dared to risk the attempt again." His child, born to his own female accomplice, is Betty Wallingford. What the Clerk does not know is that Betty has been baptized by her nurse; set forever beyond his reach. Williams does not mean that she is beyond his reach because her baptism has made her no more a Jew; her gentile mother has made her that already. Williams means that Betty's baptism removes her from use as a magical instrument.

Toward the end of the novel, as Simon's efforts move toward their culmination, Williams explains the Clerk's weakness:

He had encouraged his mind into illusion. Illusion, to the magician as to the saint, is a great danger. But the master in Goetia has always at the centre of his heart a single tiny everlasting illusion; it may be long before that point infects him wholly, but sooner or later it is bound to do so. It was infecting Simon now. (*Ibid.*, p. 212)

In the end he is defeated in the act of trying to recall three apparitions of himself into one: a "heavenly rain" begins to fall.

It had been so when that other Jew ascended; such a cloud had risen from the opening of the new dimensions into which he physically passed, and the eyes of the disciples had not pierced it. But that Jew had gone up into the law and according to the law. Now the law was filling the breach in the law. (*Ibid.*, p. 232)

Overcome, he passes into imbecility and hell.

Nobody, to my knowledge, has called Williams anti-Semitic. Yet, is not his Simon Leclerc, of necessity a Jew, more terrible than all the epithets and thoughtless images in Sayers? When one's masters stumble, and that is what Sayers and Williams have been to me, it is presumption to go on oneself. But having raised the matter, I must discuss it. Williams' intention is more noble; his lapse is of necessity more terrible than Sayers'. We are talking here about psychic matters: the use of images to convey meaning. Williams seems to have been quite heedless of the human implications of his imagery; he made Hell "a negress" in one of his plays. Regarded as a saint by his friends, he would have been horrified or perhaps merely amused at the reading I have given to his last novel. But what can one make of the sentence "the race

which had been set for the salvation of the world became a judgement and even a curse to the world and to themselves"? It is likely that few readers even notice: Williams is "a thundering good read," most people gobble up his supernatural thrillers for the sake of the story, quite regardless of the theological or social implications. But the error is there.

The making of a person or of a whole people into "the other" -- the target against which to project the shadow of our own unacknowledged weaknesses: this is the pit continually set at the feet of writers who follow the Way of the Affirmation of Images. The powers with which writers of fantasy have to deal are real, but they are in each one of us. They should be evoked with caution, and they should never be attributed to anybody else.

¹ See Nancy-Lou Patterson, "Images of Judaism and Anti-Semitism in the Novels of Dorothy L. Sayers," *The Sayers Review* (June, 1978), Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 17-24.

² Charles Williams, "The Jews," *The Image of the City and Other Essays*, ed. by Anne Ridler (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 162.

³ Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), first published 1939, p. vii.

⁴ Francis King, *Ritual Magic in England* (London:

Neville Spearman, 1970), p. 22.

⁵ Anne Ridler, intro. to Charles Williams, *The Image of the City*, p. xxv.

⁶ Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941), p. 2.

⁷ Charles Williams, *Shadows of Ecstasy* (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1950), p. 21.

⁸ Charles Williams, *War in Heaven* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930), p. 64.

⁹ Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (New York: Modern Library, first published 1897), p. 386.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958), p. 28.

¹¹ Charles Williams, *The Place of the Lion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1931), pp. 198-99.

¹² Charles Williams, *Many Dimensions* (London: Faber and Faber, 1931), p. 13

¹³ Charles Williams, *The Greater Trumps* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), pp. 95-96.

¹⁴ Charles Williams, *All Hallows' Eve* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945), p. 35.

