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On Seeing Amen House Demolished

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On Seeing Amen House Demolished

Abstract

(For Charles Williams)

EXCERPTS FROM A LETTER ABOUT CHARLES WILLIAMS

by Mary McDermott Shideler

No, I'm not surprised that you've just now heard of Charles Williams. His books haven't made the kind of splash that Tolkien's have - anyway, not yet - and most of the word about him has spread by personal contacts. The academicians, indeed, have taken him up as a subject for numerous dissertations and books, but that doesn't help much to increase his general popularity. It even tends to generate the impression that CW's writings - even his novels! - are "difficult."

You ask who CW was. He was an editor of the Oxford University Press in London and, during World War II, in Oxford. As a writer and a person he influenced C.S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Christopher Fry, "Edmund Crispin" (Bruce Montgomery), and a number of other notables - but not, apparently, J.R.R. Tolkien, although they knew each other as members of a group called the Inklings, which met weekly for several years to discuss literary and other matters, and to read aloud from whatever they were then working on.

What should you read by CW to start with? Take your pick: novels, poetry, plays, histories, biographies, literary criticism, essays, book reviews, introductions. His bibliography is formidable. The seven novels are the most easily available and they're all out in paperback (only please don't begin with the first one, *Shadows of Ecstasy*). I'm not going to tell you about them: you should have the fun of discovering them for yourself. And they are fun, which his students sometimes forget and certain of his critics seem not to have noticed. As straight adventure stories, laced with fantasy and witchcraft and visions and supernatural beings and things, they're so absorbing that one critic has warned against reading them on the subway, lest the book carry you past your destination. I beg you, read them for their high entertainment before you begin worrying about their Significance (if any), just as you would with science fiction or a detective story.

If you don't like whichever book you begin on, for heaven's sake don't feel embarrassed about your reaction, and get all apologetic or defensive, any more than you would (or should) about not liking bananas. And just as nobody can tell whether he will like bananas without trying them, you won't know whether you have a taste for CW without reading some of his work. You can't trust anyone else's recommendation, and it doesn't follow that because you dote on Tolkien and Lewis, you will find CW appealing. This can be said of any writer, I suppose, but with CW it's true to an extreme degree for a reason that I'd like to go into here, although probably I shouldn't even bring this up until you have read at least one of his novels or other major works for yourself.

A friend of mine once returned a book about CW that she had borrowed from me, with the comment, "While I was reading it, it seemed perfectly clear and wonderfully convincing. But when anybody asked me about it, I discovered that I couldn't explain what was clear, or why I was convinced, or even what it was about." I answered, in effect, "Of course. Williams doesn't give you ideas that you can fit into your ordinary understanding of the world. He's showing you a whole new world. So your old language and concepts just aren't adequate when it comes to talking about his work."

Williams' novels opened to my friend an entirely new life - as they did to me (the story of that is in my new book, *Consciousness of Battle*.) Wouldn't you say that one of the essential functions of literature, and perhaps of any art, is to perform that sort of revelatory act - to open windows, raise curtains, tear down walls, transmit a spark from the writer to the reader?

But the spark doesn't always jump the gap. You don't see the new world at all. Or you see it and don't like it. Or you like it and try to fit it into your old world, only to find that the two won't mesh. That is one of the troubles which Christians are likely to have with this Christian writer - I've been tempted once or twice to write an article on the thesis that in his novels, CW is not talking about Christianity at all. He's demonstrating what it is like to live in a world where there is no antagonism between mind and body, intellect and emotion, "nature" and "supernature," but instead a system of interdependent functions whose ultimate purpose is joy.

Joy doesn't mean - for CW - happiness or pleasure or comfort, but something at once classic and romantic, highly disciplined and utterly free. All the horror and pain in the world, all its powers and fragile loveliness, belong in the end to joy and can be transmuted into joy because all that exists in the universe belongs to "the order of the Co-inherence," which CW analyzes in terms of exchange. Each thing has its being - at every level of inorganic, organic, psychological, psychic, and spiritual life - by giving and receiving, ingesting and egesting, blessing and being blessed. And as one of his protagonists says, "There's no need to introduce Christ unless you wish. It's a fact of experience."

If it's not a fact of your experience, or if you aren't willing or able to suspend your disbelief temporarily, you will probably find CW's novels empty of meaning or uncomfortably disturbing. On the other hand, if through Sybil in *The Greater Tramp*, or Stanhope in *Descent into Hell*, or Chloe and Lord Arglay in *Many Dimensions*, you see what it might mean to live co-inherently, you will plunge into CW's world with delight, and also a kind of hunger.

To apply purely aesthetic or theological standards to CW is like evaluating the work of Hogarth, or of Picasso in *Guernica*, without reference to the world they were living in and what they were trying to say about it in their art. They are certainly not above technical criticism but neither

can they be judged by technical criteria alone. When you meet a saint, do you care whether he is bald, or her grammar is faulty? Thus CW's characterizations have been condemned roundly now and then, but never (so far as I have read the critics) by anyone who comprehended the manner in which he portrayed his characters. They are meant not as allegories or as realistic portraits, but as images, which means that by looking at them, you see through them into another dimension of being, and in that light their "natural" dimensions become solid and they take on personal reality. Similarly, a two-dimensional photograph of a sculpture will sometimes give no feeling for it, where a stereoscopic projection reveals its splendor. You can read Williams with one eye, or two. Or with more than two.

CW defines a myth as a story used as an image: we look at it in order to see through it. Myths are to be judged by whether they are transparent to the reality they are at once revealing and concealing, and this depends in part upon their literary merit. It also depends upon the receptivity of the reader both to myth as such, and to the particular reality that is being conveyed.

Here CW most notably differs from both Tolkien and Lewis, whose worlds are more nearly compatible with our contemporary world than CW's is. When we enter Middle-earth, or Malacandra and Perelandra, our links with our medieval and classical heritage are reformed, and thereby we respond with fresh insight and grace to the twentieth century. But CW's world has not yet been widely realized in any time. Only here and there in many times and places, individuals and small groups have lived or live co-inherently, some fully conscious of what they are doing and why, others intuitively following the Way of Exchange. CW's vision is profoundly at odds not only with our scientific-industrial, middle-class culture, but also with our psychedelic and hippie and ethnic sub-cultures - and not obviously different, but in ways that basically transform us. Accepting it, we live from a new root. We may continue to do the same things, but how and why we do them is radically changed.

The highest and most sensitive expression of the co-inherent life - according to CW - is Christianity when it is rightly understood and believed. The Incarnation is the epitome and fulfillment of all the exchanges, the archetype of the interactions among men, between God and man, and within the Godhead. Because exchange belongs to the essential nature of God, it is at once our grimmest necessity and our supreme delight. Because to love is to live co-inherently, to be in love is to be in some measure a saint - but don't let me start on CW and romantic love: the last time I let myself go on that subject, it took me five years and upwards of two hundred pages. Let me know if - and when I - you have any questions, after you've read something by CW - and if you do....

(Editor's Note: Mrs. Shideler has written a thorough study on the works of Charles Williams, *The Theology of Romantic Love*, published by Wm. B. Eerdmans.)

ON SEEING AMEN HOUSE DEMOLISHED* (For Charles Williams)

I walked gleefully toward Warwick
Square with a sense of pique;
Behind me flew the fetid perodactyl
Flapping wings to frighten motor-cars.

I had come only to see Abelard
At work: an Unicorn tipped his
Horn and told me he had stepped
Back into his books.

The House had now begun its
Final burn, butterflies were singing
And scattered, leaving open a pit
In which to transmute him home.

An Eagle hovered darkly near
Shading time with care;
The Lion roared within as
Ashes heaped up lost lore

Now become a public zoo.

— Glenn Edward Sadler

*For many years Charles Williams worked at Amen House, Oxford University Press. I have taken the symbol from Williams' *The Place of The Lion* to poetize on its demolition.

— G. E. S.