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The Ways of the Images in Charles Williams' *The Place of the Lion*

Abstract

Notes the importance of imagery to Williams, and shows how *The Place of the Lion* presents “three basic ways of how imagery is used and various examples of each way”: perversion, affirmation, and rejection. Charts.

Additional Keywords

Affirmation of images in Charles Williams; Rejection of images in Charles Williams; Williams, Charles—Imagery; Williams, Charles. *The Place of the Lion*

The Ways of the Images in Charles Williams' *The Place of the Lion*

Barry B. Doyle

There is a subtle danger in reducing Charles Williams' works to a reasoned analysis. The overexplication of his motives or themes can distort and diminish the vitality with which he writes. He gives to us, and exposes for our perusal in the space of a few minutes or a few lines, the emotions, intuitions and secret thoughts that we of mere mortal minds spend our lives working out. And in that existential moment of self awareness we must gratefully acknowledge the energy and force of a master. The experience of this communion with us is unique and our response to him, then, is also unique and existential. This analysis can therefore be nothing more than personal impressions, since there is no one that can really be "an expert on Charles Williams." For as many of those who read Williams, there will be as many individual experiences with perhaps no two alike.

This singularity of experience is found in Charles Williams because of his use of imagery. And to Williams, imagery is not just a preoccupation or a hobby, it is a way of life and a whole mode of perception that vitalizes our being and quickens our knowledge of That to which the images point. He presents to us, in *The Place of the Lion*, three basic ways of how imagery is used and various examples of each way. An introduction to the Way of Affirmation, the Way of Rejection and the Perversion of Images would be helpful before proceeding with *The Place of the Lion*.

The Way of Affirmation is for those who use images as a means of coming to know That which is beyond the image. The heavens, for example, declare the glory of God and the firmament indeed shows His handiwork. He discloses His nature in all creation and one might see, because of the beauty of nature, the Creator of nature. Specific and particular sensed beauty exhibits and points to the ultimate and spiritual beauty. And for the romantic imagists, human love manifests and images divine love. We can quite easily think of a varied and emotional lot who would fill this category. One of the most pleasing example would be Gerard Manley Hopkins (even though he did once burn his poetry in a fit of asceticism) and especially in his poem "The Wind-Hover." Dante saw in Beatrice the love that images That from which all love has come. Men who seek God in such manner are rare; rarer still is the man who can recognize that the Way of Rejection of Images is as valid a mode of perception as the Way of Affirmation. Charles Williams gives us insight into that other way as well.

Historically, the Way of Rejection has received more attention than the Way of Affirmation. The history of the

church is crowded with ascetics who have cried out that the flesh hinders the spirit, that beauty perceived hides the ultimate beauty, and that human love veils divine love. To these men, all images conceal God; images need not be inherently evil, but because they are finite and corporeal, they hide the infinite and the spiritual. Examples of how the mystics acted and reacted in a world so dependent upon its senses can be seen, for example, in Dionysius the Areopagite, St. John of the Cross and *The Cloud of Unknowing*.¹ Even Martin Luther would beat his body until he could only lie senseless in his cell at the monastery. The father of Heloise, a church canon, gave instructions to have Abelard castrated, thereby hopefully removing the temptation of the flesh that hinders "the flight of the alone to the Alone." It should be remembered, however, that in spite of such extreme and radical examples, that by rejecting images, one is not necessarily rejecting God. By the abstraction of oneself continually from sense and thought, the nothingness that is left is the proper mode of realizing God, as He is That who alone is absolute and beyond any corruptible and tangible image.

Williams sees the perversion of images as the misdirection and failure of reason, intellect and the purpose of knowledge. There are basically four ways this perversion takes place, and the characters in *The Place of the Lion* who pervert imagery usually do so with one or more of the following: 1) by abandoning the referent entirely and concentrating wholly upon the image, which is idolatry and leads to the sterility of materialism (the referent is that to which the image refers); 2) by denying that the image exists in any real sense, which leads to a futile skepticism about the nature of matter and the existence of matter, or gnosticism; 3) by identifying the image wholly with its referent, which is pantheism; or 4) by denying to the image its true nature, that is, when an imagist insists upon seeing in the image only what he wishes to see.² The perversion of images is usually the result of pride; that is, instead of bringing glory to God, one seeks the glorification of self.

Let's examine how the characters pervert, reject and/or affirm the images that appear in *The Place of the Lion*. One note is essential before the classification of characters, and that is how the referents and principles of images and symbols become corporeal and subject to the external senses in Williams' novel.

An intersection of the physical and spiritual worlds takes place near the mystic Mr. Berringer's house. We are not told exactly how it happens since the characters' reactions to the results of the intersection are more important

than the fact of its existence. The breach is not, as one would assume, the usual science-fiction writer's invention that makes extraterrestrial travel convenient. Because the non-terrestrial and terrestrial are connected, there is a danger that the corporeal world will lose its reality as it is necessarily consumed by its ethereal counterpart. When one thinks of Plato, the explanation should be easier. Plato (and some medievals like Anselm, Abelard and William of Occum) believed that the things we perceive in this world are images of the one reality of that particular image; for example, there are lions and lionesses in the world, but they are images of their own reality in the one Idea of the Lion. Now the danger exists in Williams' novel because as each Idea enters the physical world through the breach, the images of that Idea rush to their own unity. So, when Anthony and Quentin suddenly see a larger-than-life Lion near where the breach takes place, what they do not understand until much later is that the lioness they were hiding from was absorbed into its own reality. Later, Mr. Tighe, along with Anthony, is a spectator to the vision of the butterflies being absorbed by the one Idea of the Butterfly. The chart depicts the separation of these two worlds.

The Angelic Majesties referred to in the chart could be described as the archetypes of creation. They exist in and of themselves in their own ethereal world, but to mortal eyes they take the appearance of animals. A few of the more obvious Celestials are the Lion, which represents power; the Serpent, which images subtlety; the Eagle, which symbolizes a balanced intellect; and the Butterfly, which is the Idea of beauty. The nature of these Celestials is manifested according to the nature of the character's heart, as we shall now see in part by examining the perversion of the images.

The Perversion of Images

Doris Wilmot and Mr. Foster

There are those in the novel who desire "the Power of the Immortals, the virtue of the things they sought, not for that virtue's sake," not even for the sake of fresh and greater experiences, but merely that their old experiences might be more satisfactory to them in their increased intensity and repetition.

Mr. Foster wanted to be stronger than those with whom he came in contact; he had made himself a place for the lion and it seemed the lion was taking possession of its habitation. (p.148)³

Mr. Foster's first name is never mentioned. This gives a hint of the image of his character. He wants to be a figure of power and authority. He is fierce in his arrogance, and vehemently hates remarks and insinuations that threaten his idea of his own position and power. (pp.28, 41)

It is his desire for power that perverts his belief in images, for he does not believe in images and "That which is behind them" (p.53). He affirms that the world in which the Powers (the Angelic Majesties) are archetypes of creation is a real world. -To see it is a very difficult and

dangerous thing, but our Master held that it could be done ... he did this, and I, as much as I can, have done it." (p.53) But Foster's error is in his motive; he believed in That which is behind the image to serve his own purposes. He wanted Power; he wanted the strength needed to dominate those around him. According to his beliefs and wishes, Power became incarnate within him. He gave himself up to the image of the Lion, which is the manifestation of Power. The penalty that he had to pay, however, was that his nature became more and more akin to the mere animality of the image.

That which had once been the intelligent and respected Mr. Foster struggled to control the strength which he could no longer control. For a few days he had, even with the Idea, exercised some control upon the Idea, but as the earth, and he with it, slipped more deeply into that other state of being, his poor personal desire could no longer govern or separate. That which was in him rushed to mingle with that which was without. (p.177)

Foster became more and more like a groveling poor imitation of a lion. Foster's and Miss Wilmot's wishes just happen to fit in with the nature of the Principles entering the world; they did not anticipate that the natures of the Angelic Majesties would overwhelm their wishes. They deliberately abandoned themselves to their own desires instead of the passion for truth and reality (p.155).

Doris Wilmot also wanted power, but of a different sort than Foster; she wanted the intellectual subtlety of a sharp and vicious mind that gave her an advantage over her friends. She commits herself to this end and is granted her wish. Her nature takes the form of a Serpent, the Celestial that enters the world after the Lion. The Serpent is the image of subtlety and knowledge. But when knowledge and subtlety are tempered with wisdom and not used as a means to their own end, the Serpent is a beautiful image of the result of such an unselfish use of knowledge. However, the Serpent can also be an ugly and fetid manifestation when the desire for knowledge and subtlety is intended for the preeminence of the self. Richardson, the bookshop assistant, went to Miss Wilmot to show her that she still had the chance of choosing either the way to the Maker of the gods or the strength and subtlety and self-consumption of her own viciousness. Doris Wilmot made room in her heart for only that Celestial representation of subtle intellect and she remained with that choice; that choice transmogrified her body and soul into the image of the Serpent (p.149, 150).

Quentin Sabot

Quentin did not want to affirm images; he did not want to admit to anything he could not know in and of himself. Neither did he know the what or how for the Way of Rejection, nor had the need to pervert images in the manner of Mr. Foster and Miss Wilmot. He simply refused to allow for the existence of That which is beyond images.

Quentin refused to grant to the image of the Lion its true nature. He violates his own perception and intellect by allowing himself to be trapped in his own paradigm. The Lion was ten and fifteen yards in front of him, and

when the danger had passed, he said to Anthony, "Of course it wasn't a lion ... What d'ya mean lion?" (p.18). Quentin is stuck in the middle; he is afraid of affirming what he saw because he fears That which must be beyond what he saw. He is afraid of that confrontation that would bring him to the realization that he must look beyond the image. Thus, he denies that he even saw the Lion in Berringer's garden. He perverts images because he doesn't want to believe that they exist, but the mere refusing to believe does not affect the referent and its images' integrity; they exist in spite of his disbelief. "How can it be? There isn't any — there never was any. I don't believe in these things. There's London and us and the things we know" (p.48).

In spite of his disbelief, Quentin met the Lion, and because it was the only recourse he left for himself, he nearly lost his mind in fear. He ran and hid. But a friend was searching for him, and in Love took his fears upon herself. Quentin accepted her help and that act was the beginning of his salvation. He retraced his steps from his flight; he did his best to get along and it was accounted unto him as righteousness.

Damaris Tighe

Damaris was most concerned about her doctorate of philosophy. Her subject, Abelard, "seemed to have been left to her to do to death" (p.19), and is an accurate picture of the way in which she used her intellect. Damaris thought that theories that were interesting in Plato and Abelard became silly when regarded as having anything to do with actual occurrences. Philosophy was merely a subject — her subject; and it would have been ridiculous to think of her subject as getting out of hand.

Abelard was not real to her. Of Abelard's life and her father's "avocation" she thought, "Religion and butterflies are necessary hobbies, no doubt," and therefore, she very naturally left them out of her life (pp.19-21). This is the perversion of the Way of the Rejection of Images; she is saying that the elements and the object of religion, with which Abelard was somewhat concerned, and the Image of the beauty of the butterflies, with which her father was concerned, do not exist. Damaris is being intellectually ascetic without recognizing the occasion, purpose or usefulness of being severe with oneself.

Again, Abelard was not real to her; he was an image without a referent and as such her knowledge of him was futile. Abelard as an image represented That to which he pointed. Damaris saw vaguely that which was beyond him was a principle, at best a system of knowledge, with knowledge existing for its own sake. Damaris mistakenly thought she could know that mode of perception by cataloguing the description of his perception without knowing the object and purpose of his knowledge. She refused to see that reality of That to which Abelard pointed as an image in his philosophy and system of thought. God was not real to her and therefore Abelard, in spite of what he thought of himself, was not real to her. Abelard was primarily the means by which she would bring glory to

herself, whereas if she had known his reality the glory would have been rightly directed upon the path of which Abelard himself was a directional image (pp.132 f.).

Damaris' work is imaged by the pterodactyl and its stench. The knowledge that Damaris had was only for herself, and locked within the selfish confines of her brain that knowledge festered. The pterodactyl, as an image of this, stank. Even though Damaris would tell herself and others that what she was doing was for the public, however limited and intelligent a public, her main motivation was for herself. The type of essays she wanted published were similar to the one entitled *Platonic Tradition at the Court of Charlemagne*; she could not see, as Anthony could, that her real subject was *Damaristic Tradition at the Court of Damaris* (p.122).

It was the pterodactyl that brought Damaris to the point where she could realize her knowledge was dead and that she needed help. Abelard appeared to her and she recognized who he was, but at the same time she saw the pterodactyl flying above him. Williams then gives us an image of her knowledge:

Against that angry sky he came on, in that empty land his voice rang out ... and she tried to move; she ran a few steps forward and made an effort to speak. Her voice failed; she heard herself making grotesque noises in her throat, and suddenly over him there fell the ominous shadow of the pterodactyl. Only for a few seconds, then it passed on and he emerged from it, and his face was towards her, but now it had changed. Now it was like a vile corpse and yet it was still uttering things: it croaked at her in answer to her own croakings, strange and meaningless words (pp.132, 133).

The pterodactyl was the image of knowledge for its own sake and its own end. In sharp contrast to this, the eagle symbolized wisdom and knowledge in virtue.

Anthony confronts her with her own mistaken knowledge:

"It's the thing that matters; the truth is in the thing ... the things you study are true, and the philosophers you read know it. The universals are abroad in the world, and what are you going to do about it, besides write about them?" (p.106)

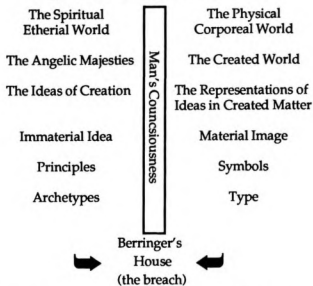
Damaris, for the first time in her life, is not thinking about herself. The beginning of her salvation is in the misery she felt for leaving Quentin alone and unaided. The hunting for Quentin can be seen as the working out of her salvation. She goes out to look and perhaps to help because she feels she ought to go. Williams tells us that "in loving others, or seeking to love others, the great Angelicals took her in their charge" (p.173).

The Rejection of Images

Richardson

Richardson is one of the few who find themselves in a position where they can go either the Way of Affirmation or the Way of Rejection and still retain their integrity and honesty in whatever choice they make. It is, finally, in the

Fig. I The Two Worlds and the Breach



nature of his habits and the mode of perception to which he was accustomed that he makes his choice for the Way that seeks God in spite of images. He says to Anthony in the throes of his decision: "So far as man chooses. There is another way. I believe you've seen something. But for myself I will go straight to the end" (p.95). After he made his decision, he sighed and turned and went back to his rooms, while his own thoughts went out again in a perpetual aspiration beyond even the Celestials to That which created the Celestials. He longed to reach the End with the speed of the horses he had seen in the vision, but to

such an approach the intoxication was alien to him. He subdued himself. Visions and auditions have nothing to do with the final surrender, which was — for him — a thing to be achieved wholly in itself and (it seemed) without reference to any natural or supernatural event ... not by books or by phrases, not images or symbols or myths, did he himself follow it. He abstracted himself continually from sense and from thought, attempting always a return to an interior nothingness when that which is itself no thing might communicate its sole essential being ... [Richardson] concentrated on the Nothing of his desires (p.139).

Richardson was truly in a tragic and tormented position. Those things that existed in and of themselves, and perhaps existed in the same or similar mode as He that created them, were abroad in the world. His intense desire was to know that existence and it was so very near. Imagery and

all that sort of thing was very well for the minds that could use it; he couldn't use it ... But no doubt this was proper to them — if it increased their speed upon the Way. Speed, speed, and always speed! (p.142)

The breach at Berringer's house goes up in flames as a new Celestial enters the physical world; and it is a fire from that other world. Richardson, in his speed to That which is behind all, sees a way that will speed him to that end:

"If the fire that will destroy the world is here already it

isn't that I will keep from it ... all I know is that I must make for the End as soon as I see it." (p.194)

And Anthony, to whom he was talking, was filled with remorse. But Anthony would not hold him back, not even for the sake of the friendship they could have had, but commended his soul to the Maker and Destroyer of images.

The Affirmation of Images

Mr. Tighe

Because of the breach between the two worlds, Mr. Tighe was allowed to see the Idea of beauty in the form of the archetypal Butterfly. The idea of the butterfly in all its august brilliance consumed and absorbed the representations of it that existed in the physical world. The Idea was calling its images back into himself. Mr. Tighe's whole being was concentrated upon the perfect symbol of his daily concern. Even though he was an entomologist, his scientific preoccupation was more than a vocation or an avocation. He saw in the created beauty of the butterfly that Beauty which had created it.

He was standing at the edge of Berringer's garden when he saw the vision. He was

almost hanging on the gate, his hands clutching frenziedly to the topmost bar, his jaws working. Noises were coming from his mouth; the sweat stood in the creases in his face. He gobbled at the soft-glowing vision: he uttered little cries and pressed himself against the bars, his knees were wedged between them, his feet drawn from the ground in the intensity of his apprehension ... "O glory, glory," Mr. Tighe said, "O glory everlasting!" (p.42)

The vision represented to him the kingdom and the power and the glory and the beauty of God. He said to Anthony, "You see, it proved they were real, and I always believed that."

Anthony is confused about what to make of the vision and he asks Mr. Tighe to explain: "Well, as to explaining," he said doubtfully, "I couldn't tell you anything you don't know" (p.43).

Anthony Durrant

Anthony Durrant is the kind of person who perceives his world by means of images. He sees a road map, for example, as an image of one's mind,

with the chief towns marked and the arterial roads he was constructing from one idea to another, and all the lonely and abandoned by-lanes that he never went down because the farms they led to were empty (p.9).

Anthony believes in the reality, the realness of ideas. Even before he sees the Angelic Majesties, he thinks that ideas are more dangerous than material things. When Quentin is apprehensive about running into a lioness that has escaped from a wild animal show, Anthony says, "All material danger is limited, whereas interior danger is unlimited" (p.12).

Of the breach and of the Lion in particular, Anthony, because of the honesty of his intellect, saw the necessity for

confrontation "because if it's true — we must meet it ... I can't entirely disbelieve in [the Lion] without refusing to believe in ideas" (p.63). After Anthony made this statement they saw the archetypal Lion; Quentin in desperation ran away, but Anthony went up the road to meet it, "or else I shall never be able to speak of ideas and truths again" (p.63). And because of his honesty and willingness to see what was beyond the unnatural phenomena, the Angelic Majesties were not a threat to his life. They gave him comfort, balance and peace to see his own salvation. In contrast to Damaris, who had the pterodactyl as the image of her unbalanced and misdirected intellect, Anthony sees the Eagle as an image that will grant him the knowledge of the Celestials in the place of the Celestials. The confines of a rotting cranium are juxtaposed to the abode of the origin of all Ideas.

As Mr. Foster gave himself up to the Lion to gain strength and power for himself, and as Doris Wilmot gave herself up to the Serpent to increase her power in subtlety of mind for evil purposes, so Anthony gave himself up to the Truth beyond the images. The Eagle symbolized the difference between Anthony and all the rest; it represents knowledge balanced with wisdom and became for Anthony the image of his salvation. (See chart II.)

Before the accusation comes that there seems to be too much emphasis placed on knowledge and reason for one's salvation, let us remember what St. Anselm said on this matter. Anselm said that man should not understand in order to believe, but he should believe in order to understand. Charles Williams said the same thing in different words: "Interpretation of the infinite by the finite is pretty certain to be wrong" (p.171). Anthony believed in the reality of what was behind the images before he came to the point where he could no longer deny their existence.

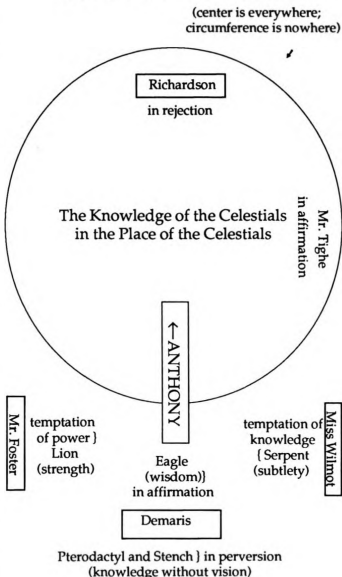
Because Anthony submitted himself to the Maker of all Images, that Maker made him an image of unfallen man, under whose dominion all creation rests. It was Anthony's office to close the breach. And as Adam had called and named the animals, giving them identity, the Creator gave Anthony authority over the Angelic Majesties and to call them by their names.

By the names that were the Ideas he called them, and the Ideas who are the principles of everlasting creation heard him ... In their animal manifestations duly obedient to the single animal who was lord of the animals, they came (p.202).

They returned, summoned by the authority he held, from the incursion in the world of men. The Lion was the last to go and Anthony bade the Angelicals to pass back and close the breach.

In this novel Williams presents to us a situation where the supernatural and natural worlds are juxtaposed and readily seen by those who would see it. Some are surprised and afraid; some try to use the supernatural as a means of increasing themselves; and some take it in stride as a possible result of their natural consciousness. What Charles Williams had written, for himself and many others, is

Fig. II The Celestials and Characters



not just confined to the possibilities of a supernatural thriller; the world he wrote about simply exists. The supernatural and the natural are juxtaposed and ready waiting for those who will see it. There is no difference between ourselves and Anthony, Damaris or Doris Wilmot. Ours does not yet have a breach but there will come a time very soon when that breach will occur. It is up to us to see what we will see.

Endnotes

1. Mary McDermot Shideler, *The Theology of Romantic Love*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1966, p. 25.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 27. The general theme for the perversion of images is Mrs. Shideler's; however, I have expanded and abridged her ideas to suit my understanding of Charles Williams. She knows Williams' work well; she has a very learned and enjoyable introduction to the Williams Arthurian as well as *The Theology of Romantic Love*. I have found, though, that I have had to be eclectic in my agreement with her arguments and presuppositions.
3. I have used the paperback 1965 Faber and Faber Limited edition for all page numbers.