

and was called whimsical. When I was at college, thoughtful people expressed belief in the Resurrection "in a spiritual sense," and were called advanced (any other kind of belief was called obsolete, and its professors were held to be simple-minded). When I was middle-aged, a number of lay persons, including some poets and writers of popular fiction, put forward rational arguments for the Resurrection, and were called courageous. Today, any lay apologist for Christianity, who is not a clergyman and whose works are sold and read, is likely to be abused in no uncertain terms as a mountebank, a reactionary, a tool of the Inquisition, a spiritual snob, an intellectual bully, an escapist, an obstructionist, a psychopathic introvert, an insensitive extrovert, and an enemy of society. The charges are not always mutually compatible, but the common animus behind them is unmistakable, and its name is fear. Writers who attack these domineering Christians are called courageous.

The wheel, it would appear, has come full circle. But in fact the situation is very different from what it was in my childhood. Then, the heretical bishops and the laymen whose lead they were in fact following were thought of as attacking a kind of bastille of inert and outworn tyranny; the exponent of contemporary anti-Christian polemic is felt, on the contrary, to be standing in the breach against the threat of an invading, or at least of a revolutionary, army, possibly, as we shall see later, of a gang of jailbreakers. It is true that every effort is made to represent Christian affirmations as a mere attempt to reimpose the cold, dead hand of the past. Phrases such as "dogmatic," "scholastic," "medieval," "unscientific," "mystical obscurantism," "return to the Dark Ages," "conventional orthodoxy," "taboo," "authoritarian," and so on are bandied about freely in a pejorative sense, and often without any very clear notion of their meaning, but the tone of voice is a new one.

It is perhaps significant that, in this country, the peculiar acrimony of the "scientific humanists," as they like, I think, to call themselves, is seldom directed toward the Church of

Dante and Charles Williams

WHEN EDWARD FITZGERALD scribbled to a friend, "Mrs. Browning is dead; we shall have no more *Aurora Leighs*, thank God!" he was only being flippant in a deplorably tasteless way. But when certain academic persons, "whom by ear and eye he never knew," expressed a similar relief at the passing of Charles Williams, they probably meant rather more by it, and expressed, unintentionally, a very much higher tribute to the dead. A chronic irritation had been removed from the intellectual atmosphere, and they breathed more freely.

Few things are more striking than the change that has taken place during my own lifetime in the attitude of the intelligentsia toward the spokesmen of Christian opinion. When I was a child, bishops expressed doubts about the Resurrection, and were called courageous. When I was a girl, G. K. Chesterton professed belief in the Resurrection,

Rome. There, if anywhere, one would think, the grip of the medieval mortmain should be observable. But it is not so. Only Protestants trouble their heads about Rome. From the harrow of scientific humanism, Mr. Evelyn Waugh and Mr. Graham Greene slip out almost untouched by the teeth. For so long as I remember, Romans have always received special treatment. They believe things because they have to; kindly people are careful not to offend their susceptibilities; anybody who goes over to Rome is philosophically written off, as though he or she had adopted an alien nationality; Romans do as Rome does, and nobody is surprised or aggrieved. The indignation is reserved for a small group of Anglicans, such as Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis (the special "Cambridge" number of *The Twentieth Century* was a monument to the irritant properties of Christian intellectualism in that university), and, of course, T. S. Eliot, whose so-called retreat into Anglicanism has exposed him to critical savagery that sometimes oversteps the limits not only of charity but also of decency. In the critical attacks on these men, there is, quite plainly discernible, a note of hysteria. The accents are not those of a man liberating a dog from a confined and unwholesome kennel; they are those of a child, who, picking up in the garden a dull and inoffensive-looking stone, sees it stretch forth a leg and wink a knowing eye: "Ugh! it's alive!"

Now, it is precisely this power of evoking a very present and demanding life from that which might be supposed dead and sterilized that characterizes all Charles Williams's literary criticism, and more especially, his critical interpretation of Dante—to which, I promise you, I will eventually come. His genius moved him to make contact with the essential life in every work he handled; it was this which made him so inspiring a master to his students in London and Oxford, and this which explains the suspicion, and the occasional antagonism, which his whole method arouses in certain academic circles today. For he did, in a measure, run counter to the modern trend in criticism.

Perhaps the clearest way to put the matter briefly is to say that his judgments were as free as any modern man's judgments could be from what we call a "sense of period." It would not be altogether untrue to say that in this respect he was "medieval"—provided we add that "classical" or "Renaissance" would be an equally appropriate epithet. For period-sense is a thing of very recent origin—it scarcely begins to exist before the closing years of the eighteenth century. We may see this very vividly illustrated in the history of theatrical costume. Right down to Garrick's time, nobody thought it odd to play Coriolanus or Macbeth in a periwig, and all the classical heroines in panniers and powdered hair, any more than Shakespeare had boggled about making his Roman conspirators pull their hats about their brows, or giving Brutus a pocket in his gown. No doubt everybody knew that the custom worn in past ages was different from their own—they knew, but they did not feel that it mattered. They felt that the play was dealing with human beings in a human situation—not with historical personages conditioned by a historical environment. And this was a reflection of their whole attitude to the writers of the past—they judged them as though they were contemporaries, bringing their opinions to the bar of absolute, rather than of relative, truth.

The period-sense, and the dynamic philosophy of history to which it belongs, is, of course, an admirable thing, quickening our understanding of the past and displaying all social and historical changes as movements in a great process of becoming. But if it is insisted upon too much, it may defeat itself. It may end by actually destroying all contact, all sympathy between us and our forebears, and even that very awareness of continuity that it ought to foster. If we look upon Dante (for example) as a man totally explicable in terms of a vanished period, we may succeed in forgetting that he is a man like ourselves. If we account for everything that he said by the consideration that, being born when he was, there was nothing else he could very well say, we shall

have provided ourselves with an excellent excuse for not applying what he said to ourselves: it performed a function in history, and there its interest ends. The period-sense may, that is, be used as a defense mechanism against any categorical imperative that we may feel to be inconvenient. So long as we can look upon it as a mere incident in a historical pattern, our resistance remains unaffected.

In this matter, as in so many others, Christianity displays its usual propensity for making everything as awkward as possible. It outrages the tidy-minded by occupying a paradoxical position. On the one hand, it made modern science and the modern views of history possible by insisting that the pattern of events was not (as the Greek philosophers thought) static or cyclic, but a progression in time from a beginning to an end. On the other, it tiresomely maintains that at every point in the developing temporal process, the conditioned truths are preferable to an extratemporal standard of absolute truth, before which all souls enjoy complete equality, no aristocratic privilege being attached to the accident of later birth.

To Williams, this spiritual equality of past and present was axiomatic; it was part of the coinherence. For him, the solidarity of human society lay visibly extended, not only in space, but also in time. He was, of course, aware that periods had succeeded one another—a book such as *The Descent of the Dove* bears witness to his strong awareness of historical process—but for him periods constituted no barriers. With precisely the same conviction that a modern Communist will assert the bond of fraternity between workers in China and workers in Whitechapel, Williams asserted (or to speak more exactly, took for granted) the bond of fraternity between a poet in the twentieth century and a poet in the Middle Ages. He was thus never content with knowing under what pressure of social conditions a poet came to say what he did; he felt that this did not exhaust the subject or explain the poem away. He always went on to ask, "Did the poet speak truth? and if so, what ought we to do about

it?" That is why I said that the life he evoked in his critical judgments was "present and demanding." He vivified the past; he did not "revivify" it, in the sense of conscientiously reconstructing it against its period decor. He was as ready as Sophocles or Shakespeare to see the whole drama of history performed in modern dress.

Thus he came to Dante prepared to hail him across the negligible gap of six centuries as a fellow-poet, a fellow-lover, and a fellow-Christian. In the first paragraph of *The Figure of Beatrice*, he observes, "Dante is one of those poets who begin their work with what is declared to be an intense personal experience." In that seemingly casual phrase, he sweeps Dante into the same trawl with all the other odd fish who swim in the "great sea of being"—"one of those poets"—"intense personal experience." It is related of Charles Williams that on one occasion he was having his hair cut and at the same time lending a sympathetic ear to the history of the barber's love affair. "When my girl's about," said the barber, "I'm that happy I don't feel as if I had an enemy in the world—I'd forgive anybody anything."

"My dear man," cried Charles, leaping up and wringing the barber's hand enthusiastically, "my dear man, that's exactly what Dante said."

So it was; and no medieval theory of courtly love had to be invoked to account for it. In the theology of romantic love the liturgy is all of one tradition.

It was not from Dante that Williams learned the theology of romantic love; he learned it from his own experience. But when he encountered it in Dante, he recognized it immediately and knew that Dante and he were living within the same tradition. I have seen a letter of his (written, I think, to the late J. D. Sinclair, but I have unfortunately lost the reference) in which he protests that what he is trying to impress upon all the learned commentators of Dante is that "the thing does happen." Whatever symbolism the interpreters, or Dante himself, may build upon it, the basis of the

whole towering structure is the living experienced fact. His own first introduction to the *Commedia* took place, he told me, when he was hurriedly correcting the proofs of Cary's translation for the Oxford University Press, and his immediate reaction was, "But this is true." By this simple affirmation he opened up a road that had been closed for at least a century; or perhaps it was a road that had never before been driven through precisely that part of the forest. For Dante's position has always been curiously isolated. He has been treated as a theologian, as a moralist, as a political satirist, as a manufacturer of "wild Gothick fancies," as a repository of curious historical allusions, and, occasionally, as a mystic of a rather irregular kind, but very seldom as a poet among poets, creating after the manner of his kind "an accurate image of actual experience." Those are Williams's words,* and they define as nearly as possible what he looked for in all poets, and found in Dante as in any other poet. The Pre-Raphaelites had perhaps come nearest to thus including Dante in the free commonwealth of poets; but their attention was almost exclusively directed to the *Vita Nuova*—for the universalizing of the first human vision into the great divine vision of fulfillment their undisciplined minds could find no use. The great nineteenth-century Dan- tists had the merit of taking the substance of the poem seriously, but their approach tended to be rather too narrowly ethical, and suggestive of an intelligent but critical congregation listening to an instruction from the pulpit. The early twentieth century endeavored, with no very striking success, to divorce the form from the content, and to save Dante's reputation as a poet by considering "the poetry" in abstraction from the religious experience—which they did not recognize as an experience, or at least not as a poetic experience. But Williams's approach, to Dante as to everybody else, was existential. He recognized in the *Comedy*, not merely the doctrine of hell, purgatory, and heaven,

* *Love and Religion in Dante* (Dacre Press).

but the experience of those states, expressed in the movements of the images—those creatures of true flesh and blood that, like the matter of a sacrament, are that which they symbolize. It is easy to see why, the poem being such as it is, this approach should be found disquieting. If the thing that happened to Dante in thirteenth-century Florence is identical with what happens today to a barber in Fleet Street, then the whole experience might happen to any of us at any time, and nobody can feel safe.

I do not propose to examine in detail the contents of *The Figure of Beatrice*. I should only be repeating much that I have said elsewhere, and in any case the book itself is its own best commentary and should offer no very great difficulty to anybody who is at all familiar with the body of Williams's work as a whole. All his books illuminate one another, for the same master themes govern them all, so that it is impossible to confine any one theme to a single book. For example, his most impressive commentary on Dante's dream of the siren is to be found, not in *The Figure of Beatrice*, but in those chapters of *Descent into Hell* that deal with Mrs. Sammitile and the Succubus; and to read that novel along with the chapters on the *Inferno* is to enrich one's understanding of the whole conception of hell, both in Williams and in Dante. The mystical theology of the affirmative way needs to be studied in *The Place of the Lion* and in the *Talesin* poems, and its imaginative treatment there compared with its more formal exposition in the Dante volume. And so on. It will be enough to mention briefly some of the points at which the minds of the two poets touch each other most closely. To do more would be impossible, for they start up correspondences everywhere, so that it is possible to say that there is scarcely anything explicit in Williams that is not also explicit or implicit in Dante.

Mr. John Heath-Stubbs, in his admirable booklet on Charles Williams, tells us of a lecture delivered by Williams at Oxford, in which he enumerated the "five principal modes of the Romantic experience, or great images, which

occur in poetry." They are: the religious experience itself; the image of woman; the image of nature; the image of the city; and the experience of great art. Of these, four at least he found (whether in the sense of discovering or recognizing them) already manifest in Dante. The religious experience itself is the theme of Dante's work, from first to last, beginning with a conversion on the lower plane, followed by loss of faith, backsliding and the vision of hell, and proceeding through a reeducation on the intellectual level to a second conversion of the higher plane, and so to the ascent of vision. The pattern is a familiar one up to a point, its powerful individuality lying in the tenacity with which the validity of the images is affirmed from first to last.

The image of woman is, of course, asserted in Beatrice, about whose person the theology of romantic love is assembled and displayed. I am not sure that Williams, in calling it "the image of woman," was doing full justice to himself or Dante. The image is not of femaleness as such—the *ewig Weibliches* about which Goethe and D. H. Lawrence and others, have made so much to-do. It is a personal relationship of adoration, and Williams himself was the first to insist that the adoration need not be (though in literature it most frequently is) that of a man for a woman. It might, in the exchange of hierarchies, be that of a woman for a man; if, he would say, Beatrice had written her version of the *Commedia*, Dante himself might have figured in it as the "God-bearing image." Or the element of sex might not enter it at all. But in one way or other, the image is that of the God-bearing person, whose earthly archetype is Mary, and whose heavenly archetype is Christ.

For Dante, the image of the city is personified in Vergil and his Rome. But it exists also for Dante in Florence, as for Williams in London; and also in his dream of the just empire, corresponding to Vergil's dream of that perfected Augustan Empire, of which the reality fell so far short. Finally, it is manifested directly in the heavenly city of the

paradise, and also negatively in the perversions of the city of Dis.

The experience of great art is also there—in Vergil, in the great poets encountered at various stages on the way, in Dante's vivid consciousness of his own poetic calling. But its greatest image is the poem itself, to which, as Dante says, "Heaven and earth have set hand." Immanent in him, but also transcending him, his own art is more than himself—like Beatrice, like city and empire, it is a symbol subdued to the greater thing it symbolizes.

The image of nature, which Williams perceived most clearly and powerfully in Wordsworth, is not so distinctly present in Dante. Neither, for that matter, was it very observable in Charles Williams: "In his poetry," says Mr. Heath-Stubbs, "nature as such has hardly any part to play. His poetry lacks particularity of observation." One might say the same of Dante, for though his treatment of animals and especially birds shows some "particularity of observation," it remains true of him as of Williams that his "landscapes are always emblematic of states of mind." We may, if we like, here refresh ourselves with a little "sense of period." Medieval poets are very seldom nature worshippers, in the sense in which we moderns think of nature. Bad roads, difficulties of transport, the uncertainties of a local and primitive agriculture, and relentless exposure at all times to the vagaries of the weather made their relation to mist and mountains, crops and forests, heat, flood and tempest a grim and practical one. The image of the forest, in particular, is always slightly uncanny—Williams was in tune with them when he took that image (Broceliande, the Dark Wood, the Forest of Arden) as a symbol of the subconscious. Medieval man preferred his nature tamed and made orderly in gardens. Even here, his observation was seldom very particular: "red and yellow flowers," the rose, the lily, the violet, the daisy; the oak, the thorn, the beech, the poplar. "Small fowls making melody," with an occasional

nightingale, is about as far as most of his poems go. But there is one remarkable exception. If where we are particular they were vague and generalized, yet where we are usually most vague and generalized they were particular, and moreover felt all that numinous awe that we reserve for the terrestrial phenomena of nature. Better than the earth at their feet they knew and loved the visible heavens. They knew the way of the sun among the houses of the zodiac as intimately and lovingly as we know the face of the landscape from our own windows; and they did not, like some modern novelists, carelessly indulge themselves with two full moons in a fortnight. When we talk of nature, we think of land and water, plants, and animals; we have almost forgotten that the heavens too are nature. But the medieval did not, and when Dante is awestruck by nature it is almost always in the face of the turning of the great wheels—the army of unalterable law. The visible heavens are, for him and his like, the image of mathematical order. It is perhaps a little surprising that Williams did not list this image with the others, for mathematical order meant much to him and supplied him with many of his most pregnant poetical images, particularly in the *Tallessin* poems.

The theme of the sanctity of the flesh is, of course, common to both poets, as it in reason ought to be to all those who acknowledge the Incarnation, and as it must necessarily be to all followers of the affirmative way. For that way begins always with the intuitive perception of the divine image in the material creation—not displacing but informing it, as Moses beheld God in the burning bush, "and the bush was not consumed"; and if pursued to the end, it leads to the illuminative vision of the image of the created manhood in the uncreated image of the glory. Dante, beholding in the flesh-and-blood Florentine girl the appearance of the in-godded Beatrice in her unfallen nature, and Pauline Anstruther, brought face to face with her own "body of glory" in the moment when she willingly takes to herself her ancestor's burden of fear, are variations upon

this theme of the "holy and glorious flesh—*la santa e gloriosa carne*."

The doctrine of substitution is not found very explicitly, I think, in Dante; except, of course, insofar as it is implied in the great passage on the atonement in the seventh canto of the *Paradiso*, and I will not therefore deal with it here. Characteristic of both poets is the great attention they give to the "knowledge of good and evil"—that is, the knowledge of the good in its opposite identity of evil. Williams, in his chapter on the *Inferno*, speaks of the soul being "here drawn down the *perverted way of affirmation*"; and in *He Came Down from Heaven* he has brilliantly expounded the legend of the Fall in this sense: "The Adam . . . knew good, they wished to know good and evil. Since there was not—since there was not and never has been and never will be—anything else than the good to know, they knew good as antagonism." Dante, in a series of carefully contrasted images, shows in hell the perverted experience of those goodnesses that are seen exalted in heaven. Paolo and Francesca, Ulysses and Diomedes, Ugolino and Ruggieri are, at different levels, the perverted images of that mutuality that is the life of those blessed who make up the body of the eagle in the heaven of justice and "when they think we, say I," because they are members of one another. The angelic glory that, on the cornices of purgatory, is light and song and courtesy, is known in hell only as an appearance of terror and judgment. In *The Place of the Lion*, the eagle, which is here the principle of knowledge, appears to Damaris Tighe as a horrible pterodactyl, stinking of decay because she has perverted the good of knowledge to her own selfish uses. "They know evil; that is, they know the good of fact as repugnant to them." Even so, the Lady Julian of Norwich averred that she "saw no hell but sin"; and St. Catherine of Genoa said that the eternal fires were no other than the light of God, seen by those who rejected it.

In pointing out parallels of this kind, I do not mean to suggest that Charles Williams got his ideas out of Dante.

That is a very crude and popular way of putting it. It is also a manner of speech far too common among the Danmaris Tighes of scholarship, who tend to see everything in terms of sources and influences. That poets derive from other poets in the same tradition is true, and they have never been ashamed to acknowledge their debt to one another; neither was such borrowing ever thought dishonorable until we decided to make a fetish out of the word *originality*. But sources and influences and borrowings are not the whole story; the coinherence found among the practitioners of the grand art is not of this simple kind. We may say that, for example, the theology of romantic love would not have existed in Williams, or not in that particular mode, if Dante had never written; but we may also say that it did not exist after that mode in Dante until Williams found it there. In the tradition—which means the handing over—of the symbols of art, time's arrow flies both ways. That which was always potentially in the earlier poet may be actualized in the later poet, and, once it has been actualized it becomes and remains actual in the poet of its origin. In a letter that the late J. D. Sinclair was kind enough to show me, Williams wrote (apropos of the allegory of the Beatrician Pageant in *Purgatory*, xxix-xxx), "My chief point, though I should be cautious how I made it to the world in general, is that poets think of something that they then discover to have relevance all-around. It is perhaps a little unfortunate that they so rarely bother to explain all the relevance. This has caused lesser poets than Dante to be called obscure."

Since Williams was cautious of disclosing this fact about poets, it is perhaps a little treacherous of me to do so behind, as it were, his back; but I will hope that he does not regard you as "the world in general." What he says is exceedingly true, as I myself can bear witness. A poet creates a character, a situation, a phrase for a particular purpose and, after having done so, realizes that he has created a universal symbol, applicable in a far wider sense than that which he immediately intended. Thenceforth he uses it,

with or without bothering to explain all its relevance, in the wider context to which he has found it applicable. But it sometimes happens that it is not the poet himself, but another, who discovers the wider relevance. If so, he is justified in so interpreting it in the place where he finds it; for the relevance was always potentially there, and once seen and recognized it is actually there forever. This does not, of course, mean that we can read into poets anything that we jolly well like; any significance that contradicts the whole tenor of their work is obviously suspect. But it means that in a very real sense poets do sometimes write more greatly than they know; and it also means that every poet's work enriches not only those to whom he transmits the tradition, but also all those from whom he himself derived it.

It is here that we find ourselves returning, by a slightly different road, to that sense of poetic timelessness that enabled Williams to break down Dante's isolation and treat him quite freely and naturally as a poet among other poets. I do not think that this had ever been done for Dante in quite the same way before. His debts to earlier poets have, indeed, been thoroughly investigated—verbal borrowings from Vergil and Ovid, Statius, Boethius, and the Scriptures, parallels from Guido Guinelli, Guido Cavalcanti, and other lyricists of the *dolce stil nuovo* allusions to the *Song of Roland* and the Romance writers of the Arthurian cycle, affinities with the troubadors of Provence, and all the rest of it. His philosophy and theology have been tracked to their sources in Aristotle, Aquinas, St. Bernard, the Victorines, in the Gnostic pseudo-Scriptures of the second century, and in the Jewish Cabbala. All this is the daily bread of research scholarship; and very exciting it can be, especially when it is carried out with sympathetic understanding of the workings of the poetic mind, as was done by John Livingston Lowes for Coleridge in that astonishing book *The Road to Xanadu*.

Equally, of course, the influence of Dante upon later poets has been duly noted—the quotations, the borrowings, the overt repudiations, denunciations, and eulogies. There

have also been some sporadic attempts to compare—rather externally and superficially—Dante's hell with Milton's, of his Satan with Goethe's Mephistopheles. But it is only Williams who, in discussing Dante's poetic theme and treatment, will readily, and, as it were, casually, bring in Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Bernard Shaw, Coventry Patmore, George Fox, Sir Thomas Browne, Spenser, Keats, Kierkegaard, Raymond Lully, and Christopher Marlowe, to exchange ideas with him as though they were all democratic citizens of one and the same poetic Athens. I have taken these names from *The Figure of Beatrice*, in which they all appear; in conversation, Williams was equally ready to illuminate any passage in Dante from Browning, Tennyson, or Gerard Manley Hopkins, and for aught I know, he would have been prepared to illustrate him from Kafka, James Joyce, or Dylan Thomas, or then from Dante, had the occasion arisen. We are accustomed to deal thus with our own poets—Shakespeare is not too great for such treatment, nor Chaucer too remote; but believe me, it is rare to find any critic of Dante using this pleasant familiarity with him. "It might not be unwise," says Charles Williams, speaking of the perils of the Beatrician way, "to point to a few extracts from Mr. Shaw's *Arms and the Man* . . . in every edition of the *Commedia*." Others have solemnly warned us of these perils, but who except Williams would ever have proposed such a prophylactic?

The death of Beatrice is the figure of a spiritual disillusionment: "This state," he adds, "has been put to us most clearly in two places in English verse; the first is in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*; the second in Wordsworth's *Prelude*." Or again: "The forest itself has different names in different tongues—Westermain, Arden, Birnam, Broceliande." Meredith, too, drops in to the poetic party, adds a word to the discussion, and drops out again. Across the centuries, the poets hold communication.

In the same way, and quite apart from formal criticism, we find Dante discoursing with his fellows in the body of

Williams's tales and poems. Here, for example, is a short passage from *The Calling of Taliesin*. Merlin and his sister Brisen, the figures of time and space, are beginning the magical operation that is to call in the spiritual powers to the founding of the kingdom of Logres in Britain.

The cone's shadow of earth fell into space,
and into (other than space) the third heaven.

In the third heaven are the living unwritten truths,
climax tranquil in Venus, Merlin, and Brisen
heard, as in faint bee-like humming

round the cone's point, the feeling intellect hasten
to fasten on the earth's image; in the third heaven
the stones of the waste glimmered like summer stars.

Between wood and waste the yoked children of Nimue
opened the rite; they invoked the third heaven,
heard in the far humming of the spiritual intellect,
to the building of Logres and the coming of the Land of the Trinity
which is called Sarra in maps of the soul.

For the full elucidation of this beautiful and complex image I must refer you to C. S. Lewis in *Arthurian Torso*. Briefly, as he says, "we are in fact watching the impregnation of Nimue by her pattern"—that is, of the earthly ectype by its heavenly principle. We know the heavenly principles—the Platonic ideas; we have met them in *The Place of the Lion*, there called down wrongly for selfish ends and in their own naked power; here invoked to a right end and in the right way, that is, through the earthly ectype. The earth's shadow—"as we all know," says Lewis, though perhaps he flatters us—is a cone of darkness, extending through outer space and touching with its apex the third heaven, the sphere of Venus. We have met that shadowy cone in the *Paradiso*, though it there fulfils a different symbolic function. The third heaven in the *Paradiso* is that heaven of love and poetry and therefore a very suitable source for this poetic image of the impregnation of matter by form—"matter yearns toward form as a woman yearns

toward a man," according to the saying of the Schoolmen.

Lewis adds that "Williams is here (perhaps unconsciously) reproducing the doctrine of the Renaissance Platonists that Venus—celestial love and beauty—was the pattern or model after which God created the material universe." But "what resides in the third heaven . . . is called by [Williams] 'the feeling intellect' or *mens sensitiva*. The expression 'feeling intellect' is borrowed from Wordsworth's *Prelude* (xiv. 226), and the whole passage in which it occurs is a comment on the later poet's meaning." (I am still quoting from Lewis.) Plato, Dante, the Renaissance Platonists, and Wordsworth have thus all contributed to the passage, while Merlin, Taliesin himself, and the phrase "the summer stars" belong to the ancient poems of the Arthurian cycle. And we might add two further points. First, about the "feeling intellect," which a few lines later is called the "spiritual intellect," Lewis notes that "the important difference between the two poets is that where Wordsworth is thinking of a subjective state in human minds, Williams is thinking of an objective celestial fact."

And here we can scarcely help remembering—as Williams can scarcely have helped remembering—how Dante speaks of the tenth heaven, the empyrean or heaven of God's presence, from which all the other heavens derive their being, as "pure intellectual light fulfilled with love"—"*Ince intellectual piena d'amore*." This intellectual love or loving intellect is the ultimate objective celestial fact—a greater thing than Wordsworth's "feeling intellect" and incomparably greater than the *mens sensitiva*. Secondly, we shall recall the combination of intellect that love in the opening line of Dante's great ode addressed to the celestial intelligences: "You that by *understanding* move the third heaven—*Voi che intendendo il terzo ciel movete*"; and perhaps also that of the still more famous sonnet "*Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*—Ladies that have *intelligence* in love." The words *source* and *borrowing* are inadequate for this close fusion of poetic images, gathered over twenty-one centuries from

Greece and Italy, Wales, and England. It is nothing in itself unusual; it is the way in which the poet's mind habitually deals with images, and the process is partly conscious and partly subconscious.

The point that I am trying to make is that Williams's critical approach to Dante is of precisely the same kind as his poetic approach—and the same, no doubt, holds true of all the books listed in his biography as "literary criticism." It is not a scholarly approach at all, and it is not the kind of thing that has any real place in a history of literature. It is a poet's approach: creative, vital, existential, seminal, timeless—and therefore, in a sense, without perspective. For this reason it is always, quite understandably, a little suspect by purely academic standards, and received with some reserve by those whose view is powerfully influenced by that awareness of historic perspective to which we have grown accustomed. And where Dante is concerned, it is (very naturally) vigorously repudiated by those who are only too anxious to have Dante's experience thrust firmly back into those remote Middle Ages to which they feel it should belong.

Williams's approach to Dante was able to be thus peculiarly intimate because he shared with him certain kinds of experience—a poetic experience, an experience of romantic love, and (so far as one can tell with either man) a mystical experience of the affirmative way—in addition to sharing with him a common religious faith. That combination of shared experience is rare among Dante's interpreters—in fact, I will venture to call it unique. He also shared with him something else, namely, a temperament capable of the experience of heaven and hell. It is well to say a few words about this because it is a matter very [open] to misconception. The capacity for joy and the capacity for something like despair tend to be found together; sometimes, as in Williams or Blake, joy appears to predominate and to communicate itself the more readily to the outside world; in others, as in Hopkins or T. S. Eliot, we receive on the whole

a stronger impression of the suffering than of the joy. In a few men, as Traherne on the one hand, and James Thomson of *The City of the Dreadful Night*, either the hellish or the heavenly element seems to be almost entirely absent.

In Dante's writing, the balance inclines to the side of joy (all the rubbish about the grimness and cruelty and "the poet of hell" is a piece of Gothic fancy inherited from the eighteenth century); though in his private life one gathers that he was rather reserved and severe except among his intimate friends. Or perhaps he was merely absent-minded, like a good many other people given to very close mental concentration. In general it remains true that a very strong awareness of horror attends upon any very strong awareness of joy. Note that I say *joy* and not *happiness*—they are by no means the same thing. Indeed it would scarcely be untrue to say that people of a happy temperament are seldom capable of joy—they are insufficiently sensitive. The word *joy* is a favorite word with Williams, as the word *gioia* with Dante; beneath the coruscations of that joy, the blackness and squalor of the pit open and run down to the center.

This tension between joy and the opposite of joy is, once again, something that is viewed with a certain distrust by an age committed to the pursuit of happiness. It can be readily pigeonholed as lack of adjustment or, in severe cases, as a psychosis. In very severe cases it may indeed be a psychosis. But we must not disguise from ourselves that happiness is a gift of the heathen gods, whereas joy is a Christian duty. It was, I think, L. P. Jacks who pointed out that the word *happiness* does not occur in the Gospels; the word *joy*, on the other hand, occurs frequently—and so do the name and image of hell. The command is to rejoice, not to display a placid contentment or a stoic fortitude. "Call no man happy until he is dead," said the Greek philosopher; and happiness, whether applied to a man's fortunes or his disposition, is the assessment of something extended in time along his whole career. But joy (except for those saints

who live continually in the presence of God) is of its nature brief and almost instantaneous; it is an apprehension of the eternal moment. And as such, it is the great invading adversary that can break open the gates of hell. In *Descent into Hell* there are two moments when Wentworth might have saved his soul by accepting what one might call a Dantean vision. The first is a Beatrician moment, the vision of joy.

There was presented to him at once and clearly an opportunity for joy—casual, accidental joy, but joy. If he could not manage joy, at least he might have managed the intention of joy, or (if that were also too much) an effort toward the intention of joy. The infinity of grace could have been contented and invoked by a mere mental refusal of anything but such an effort. . . . He could enjoy; at least he could refuse not to enjoy. He could refuse and reject damnation.

With a perfectly clear, if instantaneous, knowledge of what he did, he rejected joy instead. He instantaneously preferred anger, and at once it came; he invoked envy, and it obliged him.

The second moment is when Wentworth is almost arrested at a much later and lower stage of his descent into the hell of self-absorption by the simple appeal to his professional integrity. This is the vision of Vergil.

All this may be read, and was perhaps intended by Williams himself, as an imaginative gloss upon two incidents in the *Commedia*. The first is Beatrice's mission to Vergil described in the second canto of the *Inferno*, where she says, "Dante has sunk so far in sin that he can no longer hear my voice—do you go and recall him." Later on she says in Dante's own presence:

"With inspirations, prayer-wrung for his sake,
Vainly in dreams and other ways as well,
I called him home; so little did he reck"—

and therefore, she says, she was obliged to send Vergil. These correspond to the two offers of possible salvation, by the way of spiritual joy, and by the way of natural duty. The other incident is the dream of the siren, in which

Dante's fascinated gaze upon "that ancient witch," who is Lilith and the succubus, is broken by the discreet lady, calling upon Vergil to unmask the siren and show her for the hell-born obscenity that she is.

And along with the two passages of the *Commedia*, and the two passages from *Descent into Hell*, we may set the critical comment on the siren in *The Figure of Beatrice*—Beatrice known in her opposite identity of hell: "If sloth overtakes Love, Beatrice is lost in the Siren, the romantic Image in the pseudoromantic mirage." He goes on:

She [the siren] has been called the image of sensual pleasure, but this (it would seem) need not be the whole significance. She is as much—let us say—ideal gratification, all the sighs that lament the imperfection of a man's actual mistress, the verses that sweetly moan over her failure to live up to his dreams (or the other way round), the self-condolences, the "disillusions"—all these are the siren's song. She takes flesh and color and music within the night reveries of laziness; she is then—what? what we want; and that is? we do not rightly know, but certainly a siren and a song.

The siren is, therefore, the image of the false joy, and it is significant that in *Descent into Hell* the succubus appears to Wentworth immediately after his deliberate rejection of the true joy.

We may be inclined to ask: "But is that really what Dante meant? One sees what Williams meant, and one can see how he contrived to extract it from Dante's words. But is not this merely a reading into the text subtleties that a medieval poet could never have thought of?" The only answer we can well make is something that Williams himself saw and pointed out: the appearance of the siren and the opening words of her song are a deliberate echo, and almost a parody, of the subsequent appearance and words of Beatrice. In the dream, Dante gazes upon the siren until she becomes beautiful and "puts on the hues of love," and then she sings: "*To son, io son, dolce sirena—I am, I am, the sweet siren.*" Beatrice, appearing, veiled, to Dante in the sacred

forest, addresses him: "*Guardaci ben—ben sem, ben sem Beatrice*—Look on us well, we are, we are Beatrice." Once again we have Dante's trick of the corresponding and contrasting images. We must be prepared, I think, to believe that supreme artists do not produce these elaborate symmetries by accident.

Thus we return to the point from which we set out—the peculiar quality of Williams's interpretation of Dante and the reason why it offends some people as much as it delights others. To say that it offends by being Christian is a great part of the truth, but it is not the whole truth.

You will perhaps have noticed that criticism today tends to divide itself into two schools, which (as usually happens in such cases) diverge as they develop. One, of which we have already spoken, may be called the historical school; and its attitude may be roughly but not altogether unfairly summed up by saying that it considers a poet's meaning to have been important in his own day, but to be of no importance to us except as a part of the historical perspective. This is the more academic and scholarly kind of criticism; and its great virtue is that it does oblige us to consider what the poet's language actually meant to himself and his contemporaries.

There is, however, another school, which may be called the school of interpretative criticism. This pays little attention to what the poet himself, or his contemporary readers, may have thought he meant; it is almost exclusively concerned with the psychological symbolisms and overtones that we can contrive to extract from it. The great virtue of this school is that it does demand some kind of contemporary relevance and so keeps the work of the past present to us as a living force; its weakness is that its interpretations become purely arbitrary—they cease, as C. S. Lewis has said, to be right or wrong and become more or less brilliant executive performances: variations, so to speak, upon a theme suggested by the poet's words. This kind of interpretation is by no means new; it is in fact almost exactly the

way in which the allegorists used to treat biblical texts. What Isaiah or Daniel intended to say about contemporary Israel was discarded or ignored in favor of the mystical or moral significations that might be put upon it for the purposes of Christian devotion.

Now, both these methods of criticism are perfectly legitimate, and indeed indispensable, so far as they go. But you will have noticed that they have one thing in common: Both alike, although for quite opposite reasons, dispense us from any obligation to take the poet's meaning seriously. If his language is sufficiently ambiguous to mean almost anything, we can give it our own meaning, and this does not matter. If his language, like Dante's, makes his meaning as unambiguous as it is unwelcome, we can shut him up firmly in the prison of the past, and because it is of the past his meaning does not matter.

Now, to my mind—and I am not alone—any critical method that altogether nullifies the poet's belief and intention is bad for criticism and bad for poetry. A writer in the *Sunday Times*, in reviewing Stephen Spender's *The Making of a Poem*, has observed: "Despite the blandishments of Dr. I. A. Richards, poets can neither regard the beliefs of dead poets as pseudostatements, nor themselves exist on psychologically valuable delusions." Poets themselves desire and need a different kind of criticism, which shall allow them not only, in Middleton Murry's words, "to mean what they say," but to go on meaning it.

Charles Williams's criticism is of this kind. He is a poet in criticism—a poet's critic. Of this kind of critic Dante has hitherto had too few; and that is why *The Figure of Beatrice* and the other books seem to me to usher in a new era of Dante criticism. But since this kind of criticism undermines the assumptions of both the fashionable schools of criticism, we can scarcely be surprised if it is received in some quarters with hostility and contempt. And all the more so because the meaning that it thus drags out to confront us from the cage of the past and the decent mufflings of psychologically valuable delusion is a Christian meaning. For

Christianity also rests upon the assumption that the Word uttered in the past meant something then and means the same thing now. There is an unseemliness about the Easter appearances of something that has no business to be alive. We cannot really be surprised if some people find it more comfortable to sit down to a quiet, objective, laboratory examination of the grave clothes.

STEPHEN SPENDER: *THE MAKING OF A POEM*

If you have not as yet read this book of Spender's, I most strongly urge you to do so. The first two essays in particular throw a most revealing light upon the situation of the poet in the contemporary world, and are curiously tinged with resentment against the advanced type of critic, hailing (this is Spender's identification, not mine) from "Cambridge, Eng. and Mass."

I can only quote now a few short passages that bear more or less directly upon our subject. His thesis is summed up in this reaction to I. A. Richards's statement that modern poetry must learn to exist "in a complete severance from all beliefs":

When the poet abandons the belief which connects visible with invisible worlds, he is left with nothing but a problem of adjustment through poetry to the situation of man in the surroundings of alien nature. He is in a cage with bars that are mirrors reflecting only himself, and there is no possibility of entering through the imagination into the factual realities outside.

In other words, Spender sees the poet shut up with the siren—the projection of his own desires. And here we may remember Vergil's dry little scholastic statement, in the *Discourse on Love in Purgatorio* xviii, that love is excited "by the apprehension of some real fact"—it is directed, that is, to something actually existing outside the self—to a real other. In the absence of the real other, there is only the projected image, the mirror-bars of the cage.

Spender notes "the attempts of the poets, in the cage, to

find—even within the cage—an *unconditioned center*." He adds:

After the collapse of the attempts to put poetry back into the symbolism of creeds or politics, and even make it an alternative religion or way of life, we now find poets accepting the idea that the imagination has no autonomy, is completely conditioned by circumstances. Writing and criticism have become closed systems, and it is considered bad taste to relate the work that is written back to the view of life from which the writer's attitude derives. Yet unless the questions and answers on which the present attitude is based are reopened, poetry will not find a way out of its cage.

He goes on to speak of poets such as Blake, Wordsworth, and Yeats, "who expressed in their poetry mystical experiences which they believed to be true and to which they bore witness":

Now to accept or interpret all such statements as being only "psychologically true" is to understand them in a sense the opposite of that in which they were intended. The effect of this kind of acceptance of the past on terms which those who lived then would regard as their rejection, may be justified by science, but to the poetic mind, which has its own kind of literalness, it is an extremely dubious proceeding. There is always the danger of turning the present into a kind of prison of our own, science and ideologies and analyses where every idea that enters from outside is doctored and treated with our modern machine that renders it—in its own, historic terms—meaningless. . . .

Thus the situation envisaged by I. A. Richards is one in which the poet finds himself shut out from God and the past, and inside the cage of contemporary attitudes.

In another paragraph, Spender is in almost exact agreement with C. S. Lewis in his Cambridge inaugural: "The really important distinction today is not between different creeds but believing and not believing."

This testimony seems to be extremely important, and especially because nobody can dismiss it as Christian propaganda.

The Writing and Reading of Allegory

ALLEGORY, of late years, has been suffering from what is popularly known as a bad press. Almost any reference to it in contemporary critical writing tends to be both slighting and superficial and to use such expressions as "artificiality," "chilly abstractions," "frigid allegorical conceits," "tedious didacticism," "conventional and bloodless personifications." Still more significantly, the term itself is often used as a mere pejorative; thus, a reviewer may say: "The book never degenerates into allegory, but is, on the contrary, a rich and evocative work of the imagination." Or finally, the word may be applied, quite at random, to something that is not allegory at all, but which happens to contain some religious or moral teaching that the critic dislikes or fails to understand. When C. S. Lewis published his novel *Perelandra* (since reissued under the title *Voyage to Venus*), which is a fantasy of the kind we now call "space