CHARLES WILLIAMS
THE INCARNATIONAL THEOLOGY

OF

CHARLES WILLIAMS

By

RUTH NICHOLS, M. A.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

April 1976
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (1976) McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: The Incarnational Theology of Charles Williams

AUTHOR: Ruth Nichols, B. A. (University of British Columbia)

M. A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Ian G. Weeks

NUMBER OF PAGES: 207
ABSTRACT

Charles Williams (1886-1945) was an Anglican theologian who developed two main theological ideas, that of "Exchange" or "Substituted Love", and that of "the Beatrician Vision". These two formed aspects of what Williams called "Romantic theology"; the ideas are separate but complementary, as both spring from Williams' assumption of the reality of Incarnation.

Williams sought to rehabilitate the idea of Romanticism by giving the word his own definition: the perception of the Divine as it is present in and as it shines through created things. For Williams, the meaning of Incarnation is precisely this presence of the Divine in the created order, and the accessibility of God through created things and beings, which thus become revelations of Incarnation.

Since Williams holds Incarnation to be the constituent fact of human (i.e. redeemed) reality, he maintains that men have become in a literal though mysterious sense members of Christ and members of one another. This gives a profound efficacy to the acts we perform on behalf of others. This is
a brief description of the radical concept Williams called "Substituted Love" - the concept for which he is most widely known, and the one to which critics have devoted most attention.

My thesis is one of the few studies that have focused on Williams' second concept, the "Beatrician Moment" or "Beatrician Vision" (so named after Dante's beloved Beatrice). For Williams the Beatrician vision is sexual love personified for the lover in a particular person, who thus becomes a revelation or locus of Incarnation. One can be temperamentally disposed to this kind of revelation, but for those who are not, I have provided an exhaustive explanation of this idea. I then synthesize the relevant passages from Williams' theological works, examine and criticize in depth his attempt to rehabilitate the theology of sexual love, and his insistence that his idea is a legitimate development of the principle of Incarnation, which the Church has often betrayed by depreciating the body and sexuality. I also examine Williams' criteria for distinguishing between true and false or pseudo-Romanticism, and consider the possibility that Romantic adoration need not always occur in a sexual context.
I conclude that Williams' complaint about the Church's historical attitude to the redeemed body is justified, and that he has offered a valid alternative. After promulgating some criteria which help us to assess the genuineness of a religious vision, I conclude that Beatrician adoration as Williams develops it satisfies these criteria. Finally, I conclude that it is possible to experience the Beatrician Vision without feeling logically compelled to accept a Christian theological explanation, although one must still admire and profit by Williams' examination of Beatrician love.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Ian Weeks for his patient guidance; Dr. Louis Greenspan and Dr. Michael Ross; Dr. Cathleen Going and her discussion group at the Thomas More Institute; Mrs. Sheila Barr; and Mr. W. N. Houston for his unfailing support.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE vi

CHAPTER I
The Life and Thought of Charles Williams 1

CHAPTER II
Williams' Incarnational Theology 16

CHAPTER III
Substituted Love 90

CHAPTER IV
Problems of Methodology: Williams As an "Academic" Writer 101

CHAPTER V
The Problem of Experience and Interpretation 114

CHAPTER VI
Some Criteria of Genuine Religious Vision 145

CHAPTER VII
The Christian Orthodoxy of Charles Williams 173

CHAPTER VIII
Conclusion 193

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY
Primary Sources 202
Secondary Sources 203
Riguarda qual son io.
See what I am!

Dante
PREFACE

If one had asked Charles Williams to define his vocation, he would have answered without hesitation: "I am a poet." Of all the many trades he practised — for he was theologian, novelist, essayist and literary critic as well — poetry was Williams' first love.

He himself believed that his poetry was his most important and successful claim to the recognition of posterity; but in the thirty years that have passed since his death, critics have expressed a higher admiration for Williams' novels and for his theological works. Of the two groups, the novels are more widely known. However, the ideas they embody were also expressed with far greater directness in Williams' five books of theology: *He Came Down from Heaven*, *The Forgiveness of Sins*, *The Image of the City*, *The Descent of the Dove*, and *The Figure of Beatrice*. These five were written late in his life, and so represent his ultimate formulation of the intellelto d'amore — the intelligence in love — that, with faith, guided Williams as an artist and as a practising Christian.

For reasons I make clear (as far as such a preference
is susceptible of analysis in the course of this dissertation, I belong to the group who rate Williams' theology as his highest achievement. I initially sought him out because he is one of the few writers to offer a systematic explanation of an experience which has been important to me, an experience I now call by Williams' term, the Beatrician moment. However, I had known about him since childhood, when I first read his novels and the works of Williams' friend, C. S. Lewis. In addition to this initial familiarity, I have now spent four years' intensive work on his Romantic theology, and my appreciation of him is still, no less than at first, filled with delight and gratitude. Even at second remove, known only through his books, Williams is still a teacher of superlative ability. In personal encounters his talent in this respect was even more outstanding, as his students gratefully testify.¹

As a Christian thinker, Williams is capable of sustaining and rewarding intensive study. This in part explains why I have chosen to subject to academic investigation a theologian who was, by choice, not rigorously

academic according to the definition given below. Williams was self-educated, and was associated with no university until the war years, when Oxford awarded him an honorary M.A. In Chapter Five I discuss the problems the student encounters with his work; but one reason for its variable quality is that Williams, although he possessed the capacity for "academic" theology in the limited sense involving systematic, self-consistent examination of a problem, was largely uninterested in it.

For this there were several reasons. One, I believe, was economic. Williams had to earn his way in the world, and in doing this he encountered some measure of difficulty all his life. No university supported him: what he wrote, he had to sell. He had, therefore, to popularize to some extent for this reason, and for another: he knew his own capacity, and was eager for fame. He was an ambitious man; he wanted to reach out, to teach and to be recognized. That this type of theology was academically respectable in the English society of his day is witnessed by the awarding to Williams of the Oxford M.A., and by the university career of his (in his latter years) close associate C. S. Lewis.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 191.
The prime motive for Williams' emergence as a theologian was a personal experience, the experience of Romantic love. (Exactly what he intended by Romanticism, both in its sexual and in its wider context, the chapters that follow will make clear). His theology was therefore firmly rooted in his life as lover, husband, father, bread-winner, artist and member of the congregation: rooted, that is, in the everyday world. He wrote to illumine the self-understanding of others who had, as he believed, had experiences similar to his own, often without understanding their true nature. His theology did not partake of dogmatics or of rigorous textual criticism, though he could write with acuteness in both these areas when he chose. On the whole, however, he left these tasks to those who were better fitted for them by temperament, and directed his work to other Christians struggling with the business of everyday living.

I would, therefore, be more accurate to characterize his theology as devotional than as dogmatic. It partakes of the purpose expressed by Jane Grey in her last letter to her sister, accompanying the gift of a Bible:
I have sent you, good sister Catherine, a book which, though it be not outwardly trimmed with jewels, yet inwardly it is worth more than precious stones. It will teach you to live, and learn you to die...

Williams' aim was not conversion: he spoke to other Christians. But within the bounds of the faith he shared with them, and subject to the ultimate authority of the Church, his aim was to "teach us to live, and learn us to die". It was a purpose he accomplished with energy, originality and a high intelligence. I have found that his work sustains but the growing intellect of the student over a period of years. This quality places Williams among the choice few.

Williams is, then, worthy of study by virtue of his excellence. My second reason may or may not be shared by the reader. I believe the Romantic experience as Williams defines it to be genuine, important, and to have been comparatively neglected in the intellectual history of the Church. Williams' elaboration of Romantic theology is a valuable contribution to Christian thought.

---

I have spoken of Williams' originality, but it is necessary to define in what ways he was original and in what ways his thought followed intelligibly: a) from Christian intellectual history, and b) from the context of nineteenth-century England in which he grew to young manhood.

Williams was outstanding for the courage with which he attempted to fuse concepts despised, or at least regarded with suspicion, both by the Church and by secular intellectuals in modern times. I shall discuss all these in far greater detail later on, but will now characterize them briefly.

Williams attempted to rehabilitate the concept of Romanticism, and to rescue it from its popular connotation of sexual sentimentality or erotic self-indulgence. He sought, in fact, to give it a special definition which would include and then go beyond the sexual — although, because of his own interests, he did not entirely succeed.

He sought, secondly, to develop a theology of the body. In this effort he, like Dante and other less distinguished predecessors, encountered the suspicion

---

4 Thesis, Chapters 2, 7.
of the Church, which Williams charged with having avoided the implications of its own doctrine of Incarnation.\footnote{5}

As I hope to demonstrate, Williams did indeed prove the unsatisfactoriness of a common Christian attitude, and succeeded in offering an intelligent alternative.

He did this in terms of an \textit{incarnational theology of nature}: that is, by espousing a type of Christianity which asserts that God is present in the redeemed creation and accessible to the redeemed natural faculties of man. Williams rejected the opposite view, that human faculties are utterly corrupted by sin and that we are therefore dependent on revelation for whatever true knowledge of God we may possess. Thus Williams plunged into a controversy which is as old as the Church itself. He did not solve it, but his standpoint within it is clear.

Williams is \textit{not} original if by that one means that he stands alone. If this were so - if he had no predecessors in the history of Christian thought - then he would consider

\footnote{5}{Charles Williams, "Sensuality and Substance", in his \textit{The Image of the City}, (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 68 \textit{et passim}.}
his own work suspect, since he held his intellect finally subject to the discipline of Church authority. There was before him one major theologian of what Williams calls the Way of the Affirmation of Images (a synonym for Romantic Theology). This was the poet Dante Alighieri, Williams' chief mentor, whose influence on Williams I shall discuss in Chapter Two. There have been other pilgrims in the Way of Affirmation. The best discussion of them is to be found in Williams' book, The Descent of the Dove.

Williams also fits clearly into the context of the society in which he was born. English life between approximately 1850 and 1950 offered two intellectual trends which were to be united in the work of Charles Williams. There was, first, a current of popular religious revival, and second, the influence of an aesthetic and erotic romanticism. (Following Williams' own usage, I capitalize this word when I am using it in the specialized sense of Romantic theology; if the word begins with a small "r", I intend it to have a

---


7 Ibid., p. 215.
looser and more general meaning).

After the widespread cynicism and doctrinal aridity of the Georgian age, religion in eighteenth-century England underwent a startling popular revival. Methodism made an impact on the working classes, while the universities felt the lure of Rome. Even the process of resisting this attraction sparked a revival of interest in Christianity. Charles Williams, pious from his childhood, was intelligibly part of the milieu that would find its last widely popular expression in the next century, in the theological works of C. S. Lewis.

Side by side with this religious revival went an aesthetic and artistic revolution begun by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of young artists dominated in the public imagination by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

---


10 Wingfield-Stratford, p. 199.

Rossetti had been named for Dante Alighieri and, like Charles Williams, felt a peculiar devotion to this poet, although rather on the score of the latter's eroticism than of his religion. Rossetti's family were Italian Catholics: his sister Maria became a nun, his sister Christina a poet and mystic. However, he himself was interested in Catholicism only insofar as it evoked the dim, romantic, medieval past that obsessed his imagination—an obsession, born of dissatisfaction with the century in which he lived, that crystallized for Rossetti in the figure of the Ideal Woman. Rossetti's preoccupation with Woman and with the "most noble Love" of Dante's phrase was marked by neurosis and escapism; his personal problems were too heavy to have made true Romanticism, as Williams understood it, possible even had Rossetti been interested. As it was he achieved a vague linkage in the popular imagination between Ideal Love and Catholic symbolism; and

12 Ibid., p. 187.
13 Loc. cit.
14 Ibid., p. 43.
15 Quoted by Charles Williams, The Figure of Beatrice, (London: Faber and Faber, 1943), p. 42.
his influence on English art and letters was immense, nor is it yet exhausted.

Charles Williams does not acknowledge a direct debt to Rossetti. Indeed, the criteria of true Romanticism would have obliged him to reject most of Rossetti's theory, which was in any case infinitely less sophisticated than his own. But an indirect influence existed, for Rossetti strongly affected the thought of Coventry Patmore, 16 who was, next to Dante, the poet Williams most admired.

Although one's judgement of poetry inevitably involves a large subjective element, one is probably justified in concluding that Williams was wrong in ranking the man who wrote:

My best Amelia, fresh-born from a kiss,
Moth-like, amid the birthdew shuddering sweet
among the supreme poets in the English language. Patmore, like Charles Williams, lacked the sure instinct for verbal beauty that distinguishes the true poet. Patmore was a Catholic convert who found, in his love for his first wife

16 Encyclopedia Britannica, article: "Coventry Patmore".

17 Coventry Patmore, Selected Poems, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), "Amelia".
Emily, the sexual, emotional and spiritual centre of his existence. His devotion to her after her death approached worship (he was even rumoured to have told his children, when they prayed to the Virgin Mary, "Pray to your mother, if you like that better.")\(^{18}\) His intellectual impact on Williams was important.

His great-grandson, Derek Patmore, wrote:

(Coventry Patmore) interpreted the saying 'God is Love' in the most literal sense. To him the physical body was the temple of God, and the bodily union of man and woman was a holy sacrament. He exalted the flesh instead of despising it, and in his last book he wrote: "Lovers are nothing else than Priest and Priestess to each other of the Divine Manhood and the Divine Womanhood which are God."\(^{19}\)

Given the proper understanding of Williams' terminology and frame of reference which I intend this dissertation to provide, this might almost be taken as an acceptable epitomization of Williams' own Romantic theology in its sexual aspect (and in that alone). As Derek Patmore puts it, his great-grandfather appears to have developed a theory uncannily close to Williams' own.


This impression is misleading, although so far as an influence exists, Williams warmly acknowledges it. Only if one is familiar with Patmore's work, which is turgid and runic by turns, can one sufficiently admire Williams' talent in isolating his ideas, or Derek Patmore's in condensing them. I suspect, since the younger Patmore's essay was written in 1931, that he was in fact familiar with either the work or the conversation of Charles Williams, for the summary savours more of Williams than of Patmore. It is possible that here Williams made available to Derek Patmore his own well-attested gift for drawing out and epitomizing the thought of others. One will search Coventry Patmore's work in vain for the kind of disciplined Romanticism offered by Charles Williams. Patmore's influence therefore, while it is important for what Williams made of it, can be exaggerated.

Charles Williams was by the nature of his religious temperament an individualist, but he was not sui generis. Christian history offered him other examples of people who attempted to follow the Way of Affirmation. Williams learned from these examples. In addition, his immediate

---

20 Hadfield, p. 157.
context — English society in the half-century preceding his birth — had developed a resurgent romanticism, and a tentative connection between Ideal Womanhood and Christian symbolism. It remained for Williams to give this connection a full development, and to define its valid and invalid forms.

One more point should be touched on before we leave the question of intellectual influences, and that is Williams' association, during the Second World War, with the celebrated group known as the Inklings. By far the most influential members of this informal group of friends were C. S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien.

The Inklings met in the evenings to exchange ideas. Their chief influence on each other lies in the fiction they produced, for the novels of Lewis, Tolkien and Williams were read aloud at the meetings, and criticized as they progressed. However, the fictional and theological styles of all three men remained distinct.

Williams encountered this group in the last years of his life, when his deepest convictions were already formed. His chief contribution to the Inklings was probably

\[21\] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 176.
to impress on them his own theory of Substitution as a practical possibility. (For an account of this theory and of the Oxford experiments centering around it, see Chapter Three). He was not, therefore, influenced in the development of Romantic theology by C. S. Lewis’ work the Allegory of Love, a study of the treatment of sexual love in ancient and medieval literature. Although Williams admired this study, it was written before he and Lewis had actually met, and was in fact the occasion of their meeting, since Williams was the editor who read the manuscript on behalf of the Oxford University Press. The society of the Inklings should be seen as having offered Williams in his last years the friendship, encouragement and recognition he needed, rather than as a radical source of his ideas.

Of the influences I have listed, Dante and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were born in the Catholic Church; Tolkien was Catholic; Patmore was Catholic by conversion. But Charles Williams all his life remained staunchly Church of England. This loyalty, if it requires explanation, may be ascribed in part to Williams’ retrospective quality.

22 Ibid., p. 156.
It was his nature to look backward; to find the deepest significance in moments already crystallized in memory; to be loyal to the things of his childhood. This characteristic yearning toward the past became especially marked in the last months of his life.  

Williams, in short, felt at ease with the Anglican ideas in which he was brought up. Perhaps this in part explains the startling absence from his Romantic theology of any special focus on the Virgin Mary. He does indeed refer to her as "the last and greatest of the Images," but even there he is commenting on Dante. For himself he seems indifferent to the female figure who, for medieval Christians, exemplified redeemed Womanhood.

There is a further reason for Williams' comparative silence on the subject of Mary. It is not customary for the Catholic believer to perceive her in an overtly sexual fashion. She is Virgin and Mother, a mystery incarnate. Insofar as Romantic theology has a sexual emphasis, Williams is concerned with the normal, completed sexual relationship.

---

23 Ibid., p. 206-207.

24 Williams, The Figure of Beatrice, p. 222.
which has no place in the cult of Mary. Mary transcends the normal sexual dimension, and it is precisely the latter that Williams is concerned to integrate into his theology of Incarnation.

Mary, although she is in a sense the Christian type of Ideal Womanhood, is thus seen to be of limited relevance to Williams' endeavour. If she is absent from the following pages, it is because Williams felt that he had experienced redeemed femininity personified in a particular human being. He wrote to explain and justify that conviction, and in doing so he used the name not of Mary but of Beatrice.

It is essential to understand that, in developing the concept of "the revelation in Beatrice," Williams is not promulgating a "proof" of Christian doctrine. Beatrice - whoever or whatever that locus of revelation may be - is not a logical compulsion on the non-Christian. Williams is no missionary, and if we conceive him to be so we will perhaps approach his work with hostility, or find it ultimately frustrating. At all times Williams showed respect for the integrity of the Beatrician lover who is not a Christian. He seeks, it is true, to share with us his
own conviction that the only exhaustive and satisfying explanation of the Beatrician moment is in terms of Incarnation and Redemption. But his own faith sprang from many sources, of which Beatrician love was only one, and was sustained by many loyalties. In addition, Williams well understood the repellant aspects of Church history and the ways in which the doctrine of Incarnation can seem outrageous to the humane and sensitive agnostic; he sympathized with those who found life more bearable outside the Christian fold. He argues, convincingly as I believe, that the very possibility of a Beatrician moment must be rooted in some form of Blessedness. But it is up to us whether we choose to follow the inner logic that, for Williams, gave Blessedness the form of Incarnation and Redemption. It is his concern to expose that inner logic for our benefit, so that we become able to make our own decision.

It remains to glance at the field of Williams studies, and to sum up my own achievement in writing this dissertation.

Despite the respect and interest Williams has aroused in many Christian intellectuals, a bibliography of works about him might fill a single page, and valuable...
works are still less numerous. The best have been written by those commentators who combine first-hand knowledge of Charles Williams the man with a capacity for highly intelligent criticism; outstanding among these are C. S. Lewis and Anne Ridler. Among scholars of the second generation Williams has been more variably served. A surprising quantity of the work that has been done consists of elementary surveys which this thesis should equip the reader to go beyond, and which I have accordingly omitted from the Bibliography, retaining only the works I have found most valuable.

Even more surprising, to me, has been the extent to which the concept of Substituted Love has pre-empted critical attention over the past thirty years. Existing discussions of Williams' work, if they give the preference to either of his two central concepts, usually do so to the glamorous promises of action held out by the injunction, "Bear ye one another's burdens." Williams' popular fame rests on this concept, although he himself distrusted the simplistic sentimentality many people brought to the practice of Substituted Love.

I am among the few scholars to emphasize the other
half of Williams' thought, the theology of Beatrician love, and one of the very few to carry out an in-depth analysis and criticism of this idea. In this I am fortunate in having experienced the Beatrician moment, for its importance and validity are difficult to grasp intellectually if no temperamental affinity exists. This is, of course, one of the great limitations on subjective revelation; but its private character does not invalidate the Beatrician experience, as I intend to show.

My aim has accordingly been to extract from Williams' work the theme that concerns me. It is a synthetic aim, depending not on a further unfortunate fragmentation by analysis of single passages, but on a thorough knowledge of the body of Williams' work. My aim has been to draw together and epitomize the essential Beatrician experience, and then to determine its adequacy and significance. This has never before been done in comparable depth.

The passages in which I epitomize Williams' thought are among the most cogent and, I am convinced, among the most accurate yet written on this subject. This entails the difficulty that the reader may not find
quick confirmation of my summary statements in Williams’ own text. Accordingly, I have sometimes found it necessary to refer the reader to a long passage which will, if followed through, yield the meaning I have expressed in a more compact fashion.

Charles Williams’ skill as a teacher has often been attested. Even at second remove I have experienced his quality in terms of continual growth and intellectual enjoyment. It is my ardent hope that I have done Williams justice and honoured his work as it deserves.
CHAPTER I

The Life and Thought of Charles Williams

Charles Williams was a poet, theologian, novelist and literary critic who lived in England from 1886 to 1945. His life was comparatively short and his biography uneventful. He was born into a poor, but devout and literate family, and owed his early love of literature to long talks with his father, whose increasing blindness saddened Charles's childhood and further imperilled the family's meager living.

Charles Williams' early life flowed in a few, seemingly narrow channels. As a child he grew naturally into the Anglican devotion from which he was never to depart, and by the age of twenty he had accepted that his family's poverty would make a university education impossible. He made up for this by extensive reading while he worked as a clerk at a bookseller's shop. His social life at this time consisted mainly of a religious discussion group, where, his friend George Robinson recalled, "over pipes, cigarettes, coffee and cakes (we) explored the universe, regretted nonconformity, and had
a sneaking regard for but kept a wary eye on His Holiness."

In 1908 Williams was hired by the Oxford University Press. He was to remain there for the rest of his life—never rising as high as he felt his gifts deserved, but gradually achieving a unique influence on the friends who gathered around him. Money always remained a pressing incentive to work, but his job at Amen House provided him with a minimum security, both financial and personal, that enabled him to develop as a writer. His first group of sonnets, The Silver Stair, was published in 1912; five years later he married Florence Conway, to whom the sonnets had been addressed. In the years after his marriage he wrote novels, poetry, reviews, biographies, and lectures, which brought him into contact with a larger public.

His reputation was slowly growing, and in 1939, when the staff of Amen House were evacuated from London to Oxford, it bloomed into a limited celebrity. He was welcomed by C. S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and their friends;

---

1 The Image of the City, Introduction by Anne Ridler, p. xv.
he gave lectures and tutorials, and in 1943 received an honorary M.A. To these last years of maturity and reputation belong the theological works in which he summed up his deepest convictions: *He Came Down from Heaven* was published in 1938; *The Descent of the Dove* in 1939; *The Forgiveness of Sins* and *The Figure of Beatrice* in 1942 and '43.

Toward the end of the war he began to withdraw from public contact. His work and even his friendships interested him less than memories of his youth; and presently he became aware that he was going to die. Following an operation, he died on 15 May 1945, and was buried beneath the inscription, "Charles Williams, Poet: Under the Mercy."

Parallel to this mundane life — to the publications, the friendships and the need to earn a living — there existed a separate sphere of Christian experience. It is difficult to convey the impression left on a reader by Williams' skeptical, sensitive and sometimes ruthless mind; it is even harder (his friends have said) to recreate in print the quality of the living man. His
effect on those around him was extraordinary. In those close friends whom he called his "Household" he inspired a devotion which is undiminished thirty years after his death; and he could draw out the best in anyone, making the truth a shared discovery. His loving kindness was so real that T.S. Eliot inquired whether he was to be called the Blessed Charles in his lifetime. It was Eliot, too, who declared in a memorial broadcast: "Charles Williams approximated, more than any man I have ever known familiarly, to the saint." 2

The sanctity his friends experienced was not a conscious achievement (nor, Williams would complain, was the zest for life everyone seemed to observe in him). It sprang from a series of violent oppositions within his character. His many friendships were balanced by an inner self-sufficiency, which in turn was menaced by absolute loneliness. His affirmation of the body existed in tension

---

2Ibid., p. xxviii.
with disgust; sexual delight and celibacy were equal possibilities to his nature ("The rash oath of virginity which is first love's first cry.")\(^3\) As a Christian he affirmed the goodness of life and of the world; yet he insisted that, had he been offered the choice, he would have chosen not to live. The prospect of eternal life appalled him - but he declared his belief in the immortality of the soul because he considered it a logical consequence of the Divine Justice.

The letter in which he answered a friend's inquiry about personal immortality is worth quoting for two reasons. It illustrates Williams' ability to strip belief down to the most uncompromising language; and it was written after he had become aware that his own death was approaching, and so stands - against the background of a world war - as a final testament.

As far as 'something after death' goes - yes I do... believe in two things. I believe that every soul (ultimately) experiences and understands fully the entire and

\(^3\)Patmore, *Selected Poems*, "St. Valentine's Day"
living Justice of the universe. I believe that Justice to be a living, responsive, and intelligent existence - and one with Almighty Love. And I believe It make Itself clear to every soul in the way that that soul chooses. I believe that that Being - that some thing consciously and deliberately existing - is, of It's own ador able nature, nontemporal. But it is aware of, and present at, all points of time. Now I myself, as you know, have no passion for everlasting life. But I do not conceive that my personal wishes govern the universe; and - because of all the above - because Justice-in-Love exists, I believe in a Judgement, an Accounting. Or, to put it another way, I believe that we shall see our thoughts, words and actions in that lucid Justice...I do not think it happens here generally (i.e. in the world), but I think it happens; and if not here, then, somehow, 'after death.' And I believe those who know these great Mysteries rightly enter into the joy of the Lord. 4

Because of the inner contradictions I have noted, he was not a man who found life easy. In this he resembles another great modern Christian, Soren Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard's writings were not yet available in English when Williams' basic ideas took form, but in his mid-forties he heard a new voice. It was a voice unheard yet in England and it pierced the isolation of his thought with an accent he recognized at once. It spoke of faith and paradox and

---

4 Hadfield, p. 203.
dread. It cried that God is love and therefore man lives in terror and anguish...

Williams persuaded the Oxford University Press to launch translations of Kierkegaard's work; he delivered the first public lecture in England on the Danish philosopher. 

His sympathy toward Kierkegaard is revealing. Temperamentally the two had certain traits in common, most notably their awareness of the despair that underlies all our actions, and their attraction to the Via Negativa. For Kierkegaard, his renunciation of Regine Olsen symbolized his inability to take up the role of householder and to realize the peculiar perfection he felt must belong to the Affirmative Way. Williams, as we have seen, actively fulfilled the roles of husband and father.

However, we cannot go so far as to speak of "influence" here, since in his writings at least, Williams never credits Kierkegaard with any influence on his thought.

\[5\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 125.\]

\[6\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 126.\]
He encountered Kierkegaard in middle age, long after his own thought had taken its final shape. In the Danish philosopher he may have found confirmation, but not revolution.

Williams once prayed: "May the Sacred and Incarnate Intelligence excite in us the graces of belief and disbelief." Not only was he familiar with the temptation to despair; he had the intellectual courage to confront disbelief, in himself and in others. If ultimately he affirmed his faith, this was an act of deliberation. I doubt whether Williams would have claimed despair had been triumphantly overcome in his own life. It was out of a deeper affirmation - which, because it holds its own against the moods and temptations of the writer, has a claim to be called disinterested intellect - that he could find Justice-in-Love at the foundation of the world.

Williams placed his hope of posthumous fame in his poetry. He rated his own work high: when he wrote, "The English, a nation of shopkeepers, are a nation of poets,

---

7 Williams, The Image of the City, p. 195.
of whom a number of the best came literally out of shops, the words were not without personal reference (a small stationer's shop had provided his family's livelihood in the years of his father's blindness.) But the volumes of poetry, Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars, have failed to gain wide recognition. In both books Williams has adapted the character of the historical bard "Taliesin," and made him King Arthur's court poet. From his vantage-point "Taliesin" (who becomes a mouthpiece for Williams himself) observes and comments on the gradual corruption of Logres, the Arthurian kingdom, which had begun as an attempt to realize the heavenly City upon earth.

With these works and the unfinished Figure of Arthur, Williams intended to reinterpret the Arthurian myth in terms of an intricate and very private Christian symbolism. Since I am not primarily concerned with Williams as poet, I will not offer partial glimpses of this system: the best explanation can be found in

C.S. Lewis's preface to *Arthurian Torso*, without which (it is one of the great faults of Williams' poetry) the full meaning of the Taliessin poems is inaccessible to the reader. Anne Ridler has suggested that this defect springs from the unequal development, in Williams, of the aesthetic as compared to the intellectual powers. Williams explicitly states that the ideas embodied in the poetry are also expressed in *Descent Into Hell* and *He Came Down from Heaven*. I will rely on the last of these in this dissertation and will pass over the poetry, except where it illustrates or amplifies a theological point.

Nor do I intend to deal at length with the six novels. My reason is partly that I am not setting up as a literary critic. The other side of my reluctance is that the novels, while they express many of Williams' characteristic ideas, do so in oblique form, with little reference to the Christianity from which the author's convictions

---

9Ridler, Introduction to *Image of the City*, p. lxix.

spring. The description of them as "supernatural thrillers" conveys both their strength and their weakness: they are cluttered with magical and alchemical lore, which, while it attracted Williams' interest, had little to do with his deepest convictions. And the novel was a form he outgrew. His biographer has written that as he understood reality more, he imagined it less.

Williams' mature thought can be found in its purest form in five theological works. My primary texts will therefore be: The Figure of Beatrice, The Descent of the Dove, The Image of the City, He Came Down from Heaven, and The Forgiveness of Sins.

What were Williams' principal ideas? Basically they were two, and they run throughout all his works, providing a unity born of his own experience. They form at once the beliefs by which he came to live, and his contribution to theology.

First: The vicarious redemption of Man through the

---

11 Hadfield, p. 141.

12 Ibid., p. 91.
incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ has established a principle of vicariousness or "exchange": men are now enabled and commanded to bear one another's burdens, whether these be social, physical or spiritual. Through the cross - the ultimate symbol of vicarious suffering - the bearing of one another's burdens has been placed at the foundation of human reality: it has become a real possibility, a holy law, and (for the redeemed) a high delight. This is the concept of Substituted Love. It is not a simple idea and needs enlargement and illustration, which will be given in Chapter Three.

Second: Since all men are redeemed in Christ, we should devote a serious effort of understanding to those moments of our own experience when glory seems to shine in another person. The commonest intimation of this glory is a profound sexual love. If only for a fleeting moment, love enables us to glimpse the beloved as, in Christ, he truly is. Through the loved one we behold the glory of redeemed humanity.

In Williams' opinion the only Western thinker who has fully understood this species of revelation is Dante,
who transmuted his love for Beatrice Portinari into a vision of our salvation. This, therefore, is the concept of the Beatrician moment. Because it forms the theme of this dissertation, I will discuss it exhaustively in Chapter Two.

However, in Williams' thought the two concepts are equal and interdependent. It will be impossible to understand the Beatrician Moment without an elementary understanding of Substituted Love. We shall return to this concept, in an effort to make it clearer.

I have outlined certain formal limitations of this thesis. It will deal with the five mature theological works and not primarily with the novels or poetry; it will be theological in intention, a point which needs to be reiterated since at least one of the major texts (The Figure of Beatrice) is cast in the form of literary criticism. In succeeding chapters I will describe Williams' concept of the Beatrician moment, and develop in detail my reasons for choosing to emphasize this half of his theology.

But why write about Williams at all? Has he only obscurity to recommend him to the aspiring doctoral
student? If he were more famous, a study of his work might acquire immediate and unquestioned respectability. As it is, my choice requires explanation.

That explanation is simple and personal. All my life I have been baffled by a type of experience which I could share with no companion, for which I could find no explanation. It was the experience of finding another human being suddenly explode into a multileveled and passionate significance, until that person — who might be man or woman, friend or stranger, alive or distanced by history — became a symbol which engaged every faculty capable of response.

But a symbol of what? These people seemed charged with a significance I could not interpret, yet the importance of their eruption into my mental life was as self-evident as it was cryptic.

I began to recognize that I was prone to a certain type of experience, and to be intensely curious about its meaning. But I did not suspect that others shared my question until I discovered John Middleton Murry's book on Keats, which contains a perfect epitome of what Williams was to call the Beatrician vision. This experience as
Murry describes it is that of perceiving, in the life, work and death of one individual, eternity manifest.\textsuperscript{13}

Williams is the theologian of this type of revelation. He has offered a coherent clarification for an experience whose reality I can myself attest. I do not claim, and he does not claim, that the Beatrician vision is a universal religious experience; but he does insist on its legitimacy.

The incarnational theology of Charles Williams, and the Christian tradition on which he builds, are therefore of urgent interest to anyone who has sensed, in the life, work and death of another human being, eternity manifest.

CHAPTER II

Williams' Incarnational Theology

For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ.
One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God.
One altogether, not be confusion of substance, but by unity of Person.

The Athanasian Creed

The hungry sheep look up for metaphysics, the profound metaphysics of the awful and redeeming body, and are given morals.

Charles Williams

The life and character of Charles Williams represent a valiant, and largely successful, effort to mediate opposing impulses within himself, and to harness the energy of that opposition to a life lived outward in the world. A more slothful person, beset by Williams' self-contradictions, might well have experienced serious internal conflict.
Williams certainly did feel conflict, but he did not allow it to incapacitate him; intelligence, humility and ambition all helped to turn his self-understanding outward, transmuted into activity. I believe that his incarnational theology is the product of a conflict overcome, for his
reactions to the human body were ambivalent. Often his impulse was one of weariness and disgust; but deeper and more fundamental to his religious consciousness lay the perception of the body as "awful" (awesome) and "redeeming". To explain precisely what he meant by these two words, and why he used them, is the object of this chapter.

As a religious temperament Williams was introspective and retrospective: that is, he found the most persuasive confirmation of Christian teachings within himself, by a process of self-examination; and he tended always to look back on certain highly-charged moments of experience that had somehow contained or expressed the essential truth of his life.

The experience...arouses a sense of intense significance, a sense that an explanation of the whole universe is being offered, and indeed in some sense understood; only it cannot yet be defined...

Certain instants of experience, according to Williams, convey a meaning so intense that they somehow express the deepest significance of life. To isolate and examine such glimpses, and then to trace them to their source, was

---

1 Williams, The Figure of Beatrice, p. 68.
natural to Williams' personality. It is not surprising, therefore, that he developed such "loaded" moments, and his search for their meaning, into an important basis of his theology.

Resting as it did on certain moments of high (if cryptic) significance, Williams' theology did not develop much in the sequential sense. His basic approach remained the same, but as he matured, his understanding of the seminal moments became more exhaustive and profound. All his life he circled around the same questions: why do some facets of experience seem to convey "a sense that an explanation of the whole universe is being offered, and indeed in some sense understood"? What do such moments mean? Why are they so important?

To answer these questions was a major object of Williams' life, both as a theologian and as a private person. He did in the end find an answer; but that answer illuminated, in retrospect, experiences whose importance had been perfectly evident to him from the beginning.

Later in this chapter I will deal at length with the type of moment that Williams tended to find significant in this suggestive, far-reaching sense. But, for any
instant of experience to be so loaded with meaning, he must have held certain assumptions about the relationship between the single moment and the whole of experience. Williams did indeed make such a basic assumption: he took for granted the reality of what I will call "the eschatological moment."

"Eschatology" means "the science of the last things." The word can be understood in a simple temporal sense, as denoting the end of the world when God will bring all creatures to judgment. There is, however, also a subtler concept of eschatology which involves the individual soul's private encounter with God and judgment; and it is in this wider sense that the thought and work of Charles Williams are eschatological. In a sense, for Williams, the "end of the world" is always potentially present here and now, because the Divine can intervene in the temporal order whenever It chooses. Such an intervention or irruption

---

must be, for those who encounter it, the "end" of time, for it is an encounter with God, and therefore with the Divine judgment. At that intersection of the temporal with the eternal, the individual must choose - by accepting or rejecting the Divine presence and the demand it lays on him - whether he will be saved or damned.

This terrible proximity of the holy to our ordinary life is depicted, with great imaginative force, in Williams' novels. In these works Williams usually depicts isolated irruptions of the Divine power into the world, and the crucial choice this encounter forces on certain individuals. Only in one novel, *The Place of the Lion*, does he envision the whole world endangered by a misuse of magic which begins the process of world-dissolution, a process that is arrested in the nick of time by the hero.\(^3\) Despite this near escape, within the framework of Williams' novels time does not end; certain people transcend time because they have encountered the holy, and made the choice that ramifies throughout eternity.

If they have chosen evil, then their bodies may live on

\(^3\) Charles Williams, *The Place of the Lion*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1931).
in the ordinary world while their mind, their essential self, is reduced to the self-chosen isolation of madness. This is the fate, in Descent Into Hell, of Lawrence Wentworth, the scholar who has cherished his professional jealousy and his disappointed love until the moment when he chose to prefer his fantasies to reality. In other words, he deliberately preferred his own desires, and fulfilled them himself in a masturbatory isolation, instead of seeking legitimate fulfilment in the world ordained by God. Solitude is what he wants and, horribly enough, it is what he gets.\(^4\) This, says Williams, is one of the roads to hell.

Wentworth has resisted the demand made on him: to turn from his selfish grudges, and seek healing in the realistic terms of loving and being loved. To him, therefore, the eschatological moment - which is precisely the instant when he chooses for himself and against the world - comes as a terrible judgment. But this need not be so.

\(^4\) Charles Williams, Descent Into Hell, (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), Chapter 12.
Those who turn to meet the glory find, not terror, but overwhelming love. One of the most moving examples also occurs in Descent Into Hell, in the figure of the heroine Pauline Anstruther. Pauline is menaced by her own doppelganger. The fear of meeting this mirror-image has paralyzed her and affected her whole personality for the worse. The poet Peter Stanhope offers to experience her fear. Through goodwill and mental concentration he takes over the burden of Pauline's terror to sufficient effect that she is enabled, finally, to face her double, and to discover the good her fear had prevented her from seeing.

Nor is this all. Herself relieved of fear, Pauline (in the beautiful and moving climax of the book) becomes strong enough to take on the fear of another: her ancestor, a Protestant martyr whose terror puts him in danger of recanting to save his life. Across the centuries she beholds him in his lonely agony and he beholds her with the help and love she offers. His fear vanishes as Pauline takes it on, and he goes to the stake crying, "I have seen the salvation of my God."\(^5\)

\(^5\)Ibid., chapter 9.
Pauline knows that one day she must face her doppelganger, and she flees in terror from that encounter. Significantly, her redemption from fear begins when she confides her secret to Peter Stanhope. Here Williams illustrates once again that a deliberate solitude is the first condition, not only of misery but of damnation. At the end of the book Pauline beholds her martyred ancestor and knows that she lacks the strength to take on his fear; it is the voice of her double which says, "Give it to me, John Struther." 

Pauline's flight; her eventual turning to await the encounter, which she still fears; and her discovery that the thing she most dreaded is the greatest manifestation of God's love - these epitomize, in Williams' mind, one possible response to the eschatological demand. As long as we reject it, God's love will strike us with fear; turn and accept it, and it is joy and fulfilment beyond our ability to conceive.

6 Loc. cit.
I began by stating that Williams took a perception of "the eschatological moment" for granted. This is true: all his work, from the novels to the culmination of his theology in The Figure of Beatrice, proclaim the ultimately Divine significance of what I have called the "loaded" moments. This was Williams' developed interpretation of a type of experience he had been familiar with all his life. However, in a sense I have anticipated his development, for he began with the experience itself: full understanding of it came later.

I have asked what, for Williams, was the relationship between the moment and the whole of experience (which, in his terms, certainly involves the eternal as well as the life we ordinarily know). The answer is that the moment can reveal the whole: that is, it can reveal the eternal. Williams' incarnational theology consists of an elaboration of this essential insight.

I have tried to establish the basic starting-point for Williams' thought: 'he asserted that his own experience had held certain moments of intense significance, and affirmed the belief that this significance derived its power from its origin in, and revelation of, God. Up to
now I have referred to these glimpses of highly-charged meaning as "loaded" moments. This term eventually becomes awkward, since it is not Williams' own; so I will now begin to use his terminology, and refer to "Beatrician" moments. Earlier I mentioned that the adjective "Beatrician" was coined by Williams from the name of Beatrice Portinari, the beloved of Dante.

However, before I can clarify the content of the Beatrician moment or discuss further the relation of Dante and Beatrice to Williams' thought, several questions must be answered. These questions are: a) What kind of moment figured in Williams' own experience as "Beatrician"? b) How did he reconcile his emphasis on this experience with his commitment to Christianity? c) What does he mean when he applies the word "Romantic" to his incarnational teaching?

It is necessary to answer these questions because Williams was dealing with a kind of religious experience which is not universally shared; and he did so in response

---

7 e.g. Williams, _Figure of Beatrice_, p. 27.
to certain pressures (a possible conflict with Christian doctrine) and in an idiosyncratic language which makes a very specialized use of the word "Romantic". Unless we understand his language, and the intellectual pressures he was responding to, his method of formulating his thought will appear incomprehensible.

Let us return to the first question: What kind of moment figured in Williams' own experience as "Beatrician", i.e. as deriving its extraordinary power from its origin in God? The answer is: the moment of falling in love. He was later to assert that the Beatrician moment can exist apart from sexuality, but for him personally, the experience of falling in love with Florence Conway, who became his wife, initiated the intellectual quest which finally issued in his theology of Romantic love. 8 (As we shall see, Williams used the term "Romantic theology" as a synonym for the Beatrician Moment or Beatrician Vision; and all three terms are names for his incarnational theology). He nicknamed her Michal, after David's wife

---

8 Ridler, Introduction to Image of the City p. xviii,
who mocked when he danced before the Lord; \footnote{Loc. cit.} and He Came Down from Heaven is dedicated "To Michal, by whom I began to study the doctrine of glory". Williams knew by experience the profound shock to intellect, sex and spirit that changed Dante's life forever when he first met Beatrice: for Williams that moment had contained "a sense that an explanation of the whole universe was being offered, and indeed in some sense understood". The marriage was difficult but successful; it lasted till Williams' death and in that time he also experienced the labour of those who try, not only to understand the Beatrician vision, but to keep it alive in marriage.

The second question I set out to answer was: How did Williams reconcile his emphasis on one type of experience - the "loaded" or Beatrician moment - with this commitment to Christianity? The Beatrician devotion, epitomized in the experience of falling in love, was intrinsic to his character, so important and so basic that he was not free to refuse it even if he had discovered it
to be in conflict with Christian doctrine.

Williams believed that no conflict ought to exist; at the same time, he maintained that historic Christianity has, unofficially but persistently, downgraded the body and so created a prejudice against those who seek to explore love, especially sexual love, as a type of revelation. 10

Confused records have come down to us 11 of a type of experiment in the early Church which involved marriage without cohabitation. The forbearance of the married couple was presumably intended to create a sublimation of sexual energy which would strengthen their spiritual endeavors; but the theory behind such experiments has been lost (if indeed it was ever clearly formulated), while reports of failure and scandal have echoed down the centuries with regrettable clarity. The early church could not


afford scandal: it forbade sexual experiment as a 'Way of the soul, and preferred normal marriage, both for the propagation of children and because St. Paul had recommended it as the simplest solution to sexual tension. In this instance, Williams concludes, the Church was probably right; the pressure of physical frustration was likely to lead, not to spiritual exaltation but to "sentimental lust". 

Sexuality as a Divinely ordained and ordered relationship between man and woman was, the Church decreed, to be confined to marriage. But even in marriage, Williams asserts, the possibility of sexual love as a revelation of the Divine was not explored; rather, marriage became a matter of social stability.

The effort in Christendom of the polarizing of sex-relationships towards God had been officially disapproved since the Councils of Elvira and Nicaea except in marriage,

12 5 Corinthians verse 7.

nor on the whole had much been done to encourage the great experiment even within the limits of marriage. In the general effort of establishing and maintaining a settled civilisation, marriage had become a fixity of social life rather than a dynamic of divine things.14

By "the polarizing of sex-relationships towards God" Williams means the Beatrician vision in the aspect that interested him most: sexual love in all its richness—physical, intellectual, spiritual—understood as a revelation of the glory of God. The element of understanding will be emphasized again and again, for Williams, as I intend to show, is not proposing the kind of "experiment" that goes from body to body, promiscuity sentimentalized into a false, because self-willed, spirituality. He held that the experiment of sexual love could and should be followed within marriage, so highly did he value the virtues of patience, fidelity, persistence, and intelligent understanding. The deepest love is profoundly intelligent. We shall hear these words again, for the theme of "intelligence in love" is crucial to Williams'

14 Ibid., p. 129.
thought. For the moment, however, let us return to his
critique of the Church's attitude to the body.

Christian society, Williams maintains, has largely
accepted an unacknowledged and "unofficial Manichaeism". ¹⁵
The word is derived from the name of Mani, who taught that
spirit is good and matter, including the world and the
human body, is evil. How this "unofficial Manichaeism"
within the Church has come about, Williams does not
clearly explain; perhaps the covert cultural influence of
systems like the Manichaean is to blame, despite the
official Christian repudiation of such doctrines. In any
case,

The operations of matter are a means of the operation of
Christ, and the body has not, in fact, as some pious
people suggest, fallen a good deal farther than the soul...
It remains [true], however, that the help which the body
gives to the soul has been far less seriously examined
than the help which the soul gives to the body. The
dichotomy which orthodoxy turned out of its official dogma
has continually returned in its unofficial language; the
result was epigrammatized in the question of [Coventry]
Patmore's daughter, "Father, isn't marriage rather a
wicked sacrament?" ¹⁶

¹⁵ Williams, "Sensuality and Substance", in his
  Image of the City, p. 69.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 68.
Despite the Church's official affirmation of the goodness of the body, Williams levels against it the charge of an unspoken degradation of the body in favour of the soul. This is the attitude Williams set himself to combat in formulating his theology of the body, of sexual love, and of marriage.

Because of Williams' own emphasis on the Way of Romantic sexuality (to use his own terminology which I will clarify below), the weight of my discussion has temporarily shifted onto his understanding of the human body, and so, necessarily, to his critique of the Church's attitude. But it is important to remember that Williams is dealing in only one category of a generic experience, that is the moments of our life which function as "images" of the Divine. His incarnational theology embraces all such moments; but, because his interest fell on the sexual aspects of the Beatrician vision, my discussion also must continue this emphasis for the present.

For Williams the most profound and moving revelation of God - which means, in his terms, of our redemption in Christ - was the human body: specifically, the body of his beloved. He was aware that Christian orthodoxy might
oppose his teaching, or at the very least, find it distaste-
ful. Who would be right, if it came to an argument over
whether Williams' exaltation of the body was doctrinally
correct? It was important for him to resolve this
question, for he had been a Christian from childhood, and
all his life considered obedience to the Church to be an
important virtue.

Williams concluded that his emphasis on the body as
a locus of revelation was entirely orthodox, for was not
Christ the incarnate God: born of a human mother,
participating to the full in the realities of birth, of
nourishment, of physical suffering and death? Christ has
a double nature: he is truly God and truly man. We also
have a double nature: man is body and soul. Christ has,
through his incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection,
redeemed both soul and body. Therefore Williams asserts
that he has the most distinguished of all precedents for
regarding the human body as a locus of revelation.

It is clear that the Sacred Body was itself virtue [i.e.
that Christ's "flesh" was no less holy than his "spirit",
nor, indeed, were the two divisible in him.] The same
qualities that made His adorable soul made His adorable
flesh. If the devotion to the Sacred Heart does not, in
itself, imply something of this sort; I do not know what it does imply. 17

A profound sexual love, then, reveals the body of the beloved to be exactly as Wordsworth proclaimed:

    ... The human form
    To me became an index of delight,
    Of grace and honour, power and worthiness. 18

The question I have attempted to answer was: How did Williams reconcile his emphasis on what he called the Beatrician moment with his commitment to Christianity? He found his answer in the very nature of the incarnate God whom Christianity professes. The flesh can indeed reveal the Divine, for Christ has made the flesh divine, and the "Beatrician" moment in which we perceive it to be so involves a true understanding.

In this manner Williams recovered an intellectual possibility which he believed Christianity has both abandoned and misunderstood. He set out to demonstrate "the help which the body gives to the soul", a process

17Williams, "The Index of the Body". Ibid., p. 84.
18Ibid., p. 80.
"which has been far less seriously examined than the help which the soul gives to the body". He determined to rectify the omission.

We can now begin to approach nearer to the "Beatrician moment". First, however, it is desirable to examine Williams' terminology, and see why he chooses to speak in the way he does, and what meaning he gives to the terms that became important for his thought. This brings us to the third question: What does Williams mean when he applies the word "Romantic" (which he consistently capitalizes to denote the special content he gives it) to his incarnational teaching?

Williams uses three names interchangeably for his incarnational theology (that is, his theology of the Incarnation in Christ as it reveals itself through specific moments of our experience): he called it the Beatrician Vision, Romantic Theology, and the Way of Affirmation of Images. This last term can be discussed most clearly in the context of Williams' book on Dante (see below).
Let us pause and clarify Williams' use of the word "Romantic". This was in two ways a dangerous term for him to choose. The word "Romantic" is loosely used in modern times to mean sentimental sexual love. Williams was certainly familiar with the widespread vulgarization of the word he had chosen to use as the keystone of his theology.

As if this were not sufficiently formidable for a Romantic theologian, the word Romantic is also the recognized appellation of a certain school of thought. Here I must deal in broad, but (to most readers) familiar generalizations. Romanticism as in intellectual movement is often represented as having arisen in opposition to the formalism and rationalism that pervaded Eighteenth Century culture, the so-called Age of Enlightenment. Actually the two cultural trends existed parallel to each other for many years before the Romantic movement became dominant, a shift in balance which occurred near the end of the Eighteenth Century. 19

19 Wingfield - Stratford, Those earnest Victorians, Chapter x.
Romantics tend to assert the importance of the individual, the validity of his perceptions, and the desirability of a genuine, spontaneous emotional response to human and natural reality. They share, also, a tendency to believe that God can and does reveal himself to man in the ordinary course of things, in the beauty of the world and the passions of the human heart. To perceive this kind of revelation, individual sensitivity and intelligence were sufficient - or at any rate more sufficient than in strictly revelationist and authoritarian religions.

The emphasis on individualism and on passion was seen in poets like Goethe, Shelley, Coleridge and Wordsworth; in theologians like Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard; and in politics, in the various populist revolutionary movements that swept over Europe.

The distinguished exponents of Romanticism had many followers, some of whom were very silly indeed. Under their influence the dominant ideas of the great Romantic theorists lost intellectual clarity and purity of intention. Individualism became self-will and unrestrained subjectivity: passion fell into the danger of becoming promiscuity,
or thrill-seeking emotionalism, or self-conscious decadence such as we find in the works of Aubrey Beardsley or Baudelaire. The philosophy of the great Romantics was largely lost amid the convulsions of their followers. 20

By Williams' time, the serious Romantic had to contend, not only with the type of vulgarization fostered by the media, but with a skeptical attitude toward Romanticism among intellectuals.

Faced with all this, one may feel with a twinge of exasperation that Williams enjoyed moving mountains. He set out to rehabilitate the concept of Romanticism, just as he had set out to rehabilitate the Church's theology of the body.

In a sense he had no choice. He knew himself to be a Romantic: especially he shared with Wordsworth and the precursor, Dante, the affirmation that the natural order can reveal the Divine. It was therefore in his interest to

---

20 Marcus (The Other Victorians) offers a fascinating and valuable discussion of the degeneration of the Romantic movement.
rehabilitate Romanticism from its popular connotation of sentimental sex, emotionalism and brainless subjectivity, and to explore what distinguished the true Romantic from the pseudo-Romantic.

Williams' comments on this matter are scattered and unsystematic - more so than the reader could wish, considering the interest of the subject and its importance to Williams himself - but they reveal careful thought. From them, it is far easier to gather what Williams conceived to be the characteristics of true Romanticism; his discussion of the falsification of this Way is more difficult to draw out, and is closely involved with his understanding of sin. 21

The truest, the greatest Romantics have, according to Williams, had two leading characteristics: a) a rigorous intelligence, which they used to understand b) their perception of the Divine as it reveals itself in human experience. Only a few such individuals have left records

21 Williams, The Figure of Beatrice, pp. 117-119.
of their love and their intellectual labour - the two being inseparable in the true Romantic. As we should expect, these few have been poets, for the ideal poet is unusually gifted, both in his self-understanding and in his command of language. Romantic devotion can, Williams acknowledges, exist in less articulate people and in other kinds of experience than the poets describe, but he insists that "the chance of genius" drives us, for information, to these masters of language.

Dante was, in Williams' opinion, the archetypal Romantic, for reasons I shall discuss below; and his experience took the form of Romantic sexuality, a mode of being that deeply interested Williams. Second in rank after Dante comes Wordsworth, who found revelation in his close rapport with Nature.

The "unknown mode" of being which in Wordsworth is "Nature", is in Dante Romantic Love. I keep the word Romantic for three reasons. The first is that there is no other word so convenient for describing that particular kind of sexual love. The second is that it includes other loves besides the sexual. The third is that in following the Dantean record of his love it may be possible to understand something more of Romanticism itself, and of its true and false modes of being...[the word] defines an attitude, a manner of receiving experience [italics mine]...That there is a
false Romanticism I willingly concede; that Dante denounced it I hope to suggest. 22

Romanticism is, then, a "manner of receiving experience", and one that is capable of being falsified if certain criteria are not met. But what manner, and what criteria? For a complete understanding of the answers, we must turn to the story of Dante, and then to Williams' book on Dante, The Figure of Beatrice.

The love of Dante for Beatrice Portinari figures in Williams' thought as the archetypal romance. Its details, though slight, are integral to his thought; he refers to them constantly; therefore they should be reviewed.

Beatrice was the child of a neighbor of Dante's; both families were citizens of Florence, and Dante's people were members of the Ghibelline party, that is the party which supported the independent city-states against Papal claims of overlordship. The dispute between Guelph and Ghibelline was not only political but philosophical, and in Dante his support of secular against Papal authority extended naturally into an attribution of as much

---

22 ibid., p. 14.
theophany as possible to individual vision, 23 which is, as I have pointed out, a prime characteristic of Romanticism in Williams' thought. Dante loved and served his city, which he understood as a type of the City of God. The revelation he experienced in Beatrice, as I will show, closely involves the community to which they both belonged.

He met her first at a children's party when she was eight and he was nine. This first meeting affected him deeply, but his acquaintance with her during the next nine years was slight. One morning in 1283, when Beatrice was eighteen, she greeted him in the street. Thereafter, the acquaintance seems to have prospered, although it never achieved intimacy: there was never, it seems, any question of marriage between them, and in early maturity both Dante and Beatrice made marriages which were probably arranged by their families. 24

23 Williams, Descent of the Dove, p. 133.

24 Williams, Figure of Beatrice, p. 41.
Slight as the friendship was, it did not escape the gossips of Florence. His devotion to Beatrice became such common knowledge that Dante, as a blind, devoted himself to another young woman, with the result that Beatrice "refused me her most sweet greeting in which all my blessedness lay". Later, at a certain wedding-feast, his agitation in her presence was so obvious that Beatrice laughed and gossiped about him with her friends. But these quarrels were made up, for Dante was unable to renounce his fidelity to "her image" - _la sua immagine_. As a tribute to Beatrice he began _The New Life_, but the writing was interrupted by her death, on 8 June 1290.

Dante was faithful to her memory for three years. He then dallied briefly with "the Lady of the Window", who was at least - perhaps no more than - a personification of the consolation he had found in Philosophy; but he returned remorsefully to the thought of Beatrice as the truest revelation within his experience of "most noble love". The rest of his life was devoted to a deeper understanding

---

of his passion for her. He expressed this first in The New Life, interrupted by the death of Beatrice, and in the unfinished Convivio. It is probable that he abandoned the latter in order to write the Divine Comedy, the great work in which his understanding of Beatrice achieves its apotheosis. In maturity he suffered political reverses and went into permanent exile from his city. He died at Ravenna in 1321.

Charles Williams was not notably modest, but he was humble, and it is characteristic that he cast his own incarnational theology in the form of one of the greatest critical studies of Dante ever written. Williams was intensely sensitive, not only to Dante's thought, but to the language in which he wrote, and The Figure of Beatrice is a tribute by a poet to a supreme master of the art.

But The Figure of Beatrice has another and more important purpose. Using the life, work and (to a significant extent) the myth of Dante as a basis, Williams launches his own incarnational theology. The Figure of Beatrice is a book about Dante, and about Dante's poetry; it is also a book about Romantic Theology, or the Way of
Affirmation of Images.

Dante is important for Williams in four ways. First, he is a supremely gifted poet whose achievement Williams admires and enjoys. Second, Dante shares with Williams an important and intimate experience: that of falling in love in a particular way, with an impact on body, soul and intellect which seems to speak not only of the beloved woman, but even of God. The two men are thus, in the most exact sense, "kindred souls". Third, Dante developed and deepened his perception of Beatrice until the love that had begun in the streets of Florence found its culmination literally "in heaven". Williams did not think that Dante was merely telling a story; he believed that the Florentine had spoken with the most serious intention, and that he deserved to be believed. Fourth, as Dante perceived in Beatrice an "Image" or symbol of the Divine, so Williams perceives in Dante an Image (or myth, as I have called it above) of the pilgrim soul who follows the Affirmative Way to its true end. He has done successfully what Williams also wishes to do; his life and thought are therefore very instructive to anyone who seeks to follow him on the Affirmative Way.
I intend to examine the development of Williams' argument in detail; but as a guideline, it would be well to epitomize his most important point. What is the Way of Affirmation of Images?

When Williams refers, as he often does, to a Way of the soul, he means two things: a temperamental predisposition, and a deliberate choice. The Way is the path that each soul follows to God. The Way one pursues is not a matter of arbitrary choice: it is founded in one's character and experience: i.e., Dante's spiritual path was revealed to him the moment he first saw Beatrice. Thereafter the Way is followed by choice and by the power of the will: i.e., Beatrice died but Dante deliberately maintained his intellectual fidelity to "her image", and drove ever deeper his understanding of that initial revelation: "Now your blessedness has appeared to you".

What does Williams mean by Image? An Image in this sense is any created thing in which the glory of God reveals itself. For Dante the Image was Beatrice; for Williams it was his wife; for Wordsworth it was Nature; for Middleton Muir, it was the life, work and death of Keats; for Marcel Proust, as we shall see, it was three trees
standing by the roadside. An Image is that person, place or thing in which we perceive - not at first intellectually, but a perception "felt in the blood, and felt along the heart" - a meaning so profound that we have no concept for it but the concept of God.

What is the Affirmation of Images? It is the testimony that the profound meaning associated with the Image is not a delusion, a wish-fulfilment, or a stupid mistake, but rather that the Image does indeed reveal an objective truth, which is in principle accessible to intellectual examination. The Image and the significance are real, and they are good.

The Way of Affirmation of Images is, then, a type of religious devotion which some people - for instance, Dante and Charles Williams - first discover in themselves and then devote their lives to following and understanding. It is a manner of worshipping God, but the worshipper adores

---

27 Wordsworth, "Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey", Line 27.
27b Other individuals may choose the chief alternative to the way of affirmation. This is the via negativa, where because God is "The Beyond" in a very strong sense, anything said about him must in the saying be negated; this way culminates in mystical silence. See Page 50.
him first in his Image, and only after a rigorous intellectual quest perceives the origin of the Image in God. This quest is precisely what Williams means by Romanticism.

Why did Williams choose to make Dante the starting-point of his own Romantic Theology? Because, declares Williams, "The range of his whole work provides a complete account of the making of the [Romantic] experiment, and of its success." In order to see how Dante did this, we must follow The Figure of Beatrice in some detail.

Williams begins by explaining the title he has chosen. Dante was, he says, "one of those poets who begin their work with what is declared to be an intense personal experience". The experience was that of falling in love with Beatrice, and its effect was to produce a "stupor" or astonishment of the mind which stimulated Dante to two emotions: reverence and curiosity. It is therefore fitting that Williams' book on Dante, extending as it does beyond Dante into the Type of revelation typified by Beatrice,

---

28 Williams, He Came Down from Heaven, p. 67.

29 Williams, Figure of Beatrice, p. 7.
should be called by her name.

"The image of Beatrice existed in [Dante's] thought; it remained there and was deliberately renewed".  

Williams has, for the first time, used the important word "Image". Dante himself, in that "deliberate renewal" of her image which Williams has set himself to follow, related all the other components of human society — city, Church, "wise women and worthy men", friends and enemies — to the great Image of Beatrice; and in doing so he created "the greatest expression in European literature of the Way of approach of the soul to its ordained end [i.e., the knowledge of and conscious participation in its own salvation] through the affirmation of the validity of all those images, beginning with the image of a girl".  

Williams is emphasizing, as he will do often again, that Beatrice derives much of her power from her involvement in the community Dante knew. By association, the glory

---

30 Loc. cit.

31 Ibid., p. 8.
that shines through her shines through all the other
Images, and salvation in Beatrice is the salvation of the
City.

Dante, then, is the poet par excellence of the Way
of Affirmation of Images; and to examine this Way is Williams'
declared intention. Christian thought has, he maintains,
permitted the approach to God according to two disciplines of
the soul. According to Charles Williams the more familiar has
been the Way of Rejection, which consists in the systematic up-
rooting from the mind of all the Images in order to make room
for that which is "free from every limitation and beyond
them all", in the words of Dionysius the Areopagite. 32
God is no thing; he is none of the Images; theoretically,
if the Images of created things can be eradicated from the
mind, the pure consciousness of God will remain.

The other approach to God lies through the Images.
"The maxim of this Way", says Williams, "is in the creed
of St. Athanasius: 'Not by conversion of the Godhead into
flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God'. 33 "The

32Ibid., p. 9.
33Loc. cit.
taking of the Manhood into God" is in one sense a definition of the Incarnation; but since both Williams and Dante affirm the truth of the Incarnation—i.e. they assert that all creatures have indeed been redeemed in Christ—the formula that describes the Redeemer acquires a much wider application, for it is also true of the redeemed creation, and therefore of each of the Images, including Beatrice.

Neither the Affirmative nor the Negative Way, Williams emphasizes, is sufficient to itself: each needs the other for balance, and each involves a courteous recognition of the other. We must remember that "Our sacred Lord, in his earthly existence, deigned to use both methods...It is said that he so rejected [the Images] for himself that he had nowhere to lay his head, and that he so affirmed them by his conduct that he was called a glutton and a wine-bibber".\textsuperscript{34} Human life involves a constant pull in both directions: for instance, between the "negative" good of virginity and the "positive" good of

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., p. 10.
marriage. ("Negative" here carries no pejorative connotation; it simply refers to the refusal of a particular Image - in the illustration given above, the Image of sexual love.)

Williams wishes to emphasize the Way of Affirmation, since he is himself called to this discipline. The word "discipline" should be carefully noted: Williams warns us against the assumption that the Way of Rejection is difficult while the Way of Affirmation is easy.

To affirm the validity of an image one does not at the moment happen to like or want - such as that of one's next door neighbor - is as harsh as to reject an image - such as oneself as successful - which one does happen to like or want. "To fashion this ability" [Wordsworth] is a personal, secret, and arduous business. 35

Dante began "to fashion this ability" when he fell in love, and set out to understand to its depths the emotion Beatrice aroused in him. In doing so he carried the Image of Woman, which the troubadours had already

touched with mystical significance, to a new extreme. Incipit Vita Nuova: "Here begins the New life."

Williams goes on to analyze more closely what Dante meant by "Love." In the poems, Love is personified ("I have spoken of Love as a man") but Dante assures us that he actually considers Love to be a quality — a quality of himself toward Beatrice. It was, moreover, his pride and his boast that his analysis of this quality was accurate: "I am one who, when Love breathes in me, note it, and expound it after whatever manner he dictates." Dante is making a claim about the accuracy and seriousness which characterize his descriptions of his love. This accuracy brought to bear on deep emotion is the "intelletto d'amore" — the intelligence in love — which has such crucial importance for Williams.

Williams wishes us to respect Dante's claim to accuracy, and to listen with the utmost seriousness to the

---

36 See C.S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love, passim.
37 Williams, Figure of Beatrice, p. 18.
38 Ibid., p. 19.
poet's analysis of his first reaction to Beatrice. His response was, first of all, genuinely sexual (this was no "spiritualized passion" in the sentimental sense). Second, his intellect was amazed and said: "Now your blessedness has appeared to you!" Third, his heart - "the organ of the passions of the soul," according to Aquinas - trembled and said, "Behold a god stronger than I who is come to rule over me."\(^{39}\) **Incipit Vita Nuova:** something new, a "dreadful perfection," has entered Dante's life: "something like the glory of God is walking down the street towards him."\(^{40}\) And, Williams notes, Dante is far from being the only young man who has felt "something like the glory of God" in the presence of his beloved. "This state of things is what Dante calls 'Love.'"\(^{41}\) And in this state Reason, intellect, intelligence, begins to play an important part. Beatrice is "la gloriosa donna della mia mente,"

\(^{39}\) *Loc. cit.*  


"the glorious lady of my mind": she is also, according to Dante, "la mia beatitudine" - "my beatitude," and "salute" - "salvation". The ecclesiastical censors were extremely dubious about such terminology: when Dante's work came to be published, they eliminated the explicitly theological terms.

We have, says Williams, two alternatives when faced with the application to Beatrice of specifically religious concepts like "beatitude" and "salvation". We can retain his terminology and decide that he was only paying an exaggerated kind of compliment, that he did not really mean it; or we can, like the ecclesiastical censors, do him justice of assuming that he meant exactly what he said.

[Dante] explains what he meant by blessedness, and it seems that he meant blessedness...The sight of Beatrice (dico - I tell you) filled him with the fire of charity and clothed him with humility; he became - and for a moment he knew it - an entire goodwill. Neither of these great virtues is gained by considering oneself; and the apparition of this glory, living and moving in Florence, precisely frees him from the consideration of himself... This love certainly does not exclude the physical reactions...[In Paradise] the light, beauty and love of the holy souls will grow greater through their bodies, and they will see more deeply into God. It is an image of this state which he already sees in Beatrice, as for a moment its actuality - humility and charity - is, so
far as he can bear it, communicated to his soul. Neith

er Dante nor Williams could be more explicit than this; and both of them wish to be taken seriously when they assert that, the effect Beatrice awakens in Dante — an upsurge of the heavenly qualities, humility and charity — is a foretaste of the redeemed state, of Paradise. No hyperbole is involved: the beauty of Beatrice is in some sense an Image of heaven itself. "By their fruits shall ye know them" and where heavenly qualities — forgetfulness of self and the love of one’s fellow man — are awakened, Paradise already exists.

But Beatrice is also a flawed and human person; she snubs Dante. He goes away and weeps, and falls asleep, "like a beaten sobbing little child." In sleep he has a vision of Love, and Love announces: "I am the centre of a circle to which all parts of the circumference are in a similar relation; but you are not so."

---

42 Ibid., p. 23.

43 Matthew 7:16.
In other words, Dante is still on the circumference of the circle: the unkindness of a particular woman can still make him miserable, because, for all the temporary access of heavenly qualities, he still perceives Love only through that woman. She is not Love itself, but only an Image of that Love which is God, and which constitutes the centre of the circle. At the centre "Love is Love", and "charity and humility do not exist there only in relation to [Beatrice]: they are at all times everywhere to everyone."\(^{44}\) Dante must find his way to the centre of the circle, to that Love of which Beatrice is an Image.

This [observes Williams] is the point of the beginning of Romantic Theology; that is, of theology as applied to romantic experiences...Beatrice is the Mother of Love in Dante; that love has authority; it communicates and demands charity and humility; it can endure without failing the application to it of such words as beatitude and salvation.\(^{45}\)

Dante explicitly ascribes this theological content to his

\(^{44}\) Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, p. 24.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., p. 29-30.
adoration of Beatrice. "The vehicle of Love moves in Florence as (after an incomparable yet comparable manner) it moved in Nazareth."⁴⁶ It is a dangerous parallel, for adoration must not become idolatry: Beatrice is not Christ, although she reveals him and the redemption he has accomplished.

Then Beatrice dies; or, if we consider "Beatrice" in the figurative sense, the Beatrician quality dies—the glory vanishes from love. Such a "death" is common among lovers, says Williams; the vanishing of that quality is the origin of a certain threadbare worldly wisdom, embodied in phrases like "It won’t last", "calf-love", "You mustn’t expect—" and "a quiet affection". Beatrice dies, and Dante must live on alone. This is hard enough if her death is literal and physical: perhaps harder if the lover must long for a glory, beauty and delight which have withdrawn from the relationship.

But this death, hard as it is, is a further stage

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 30.
upon the Way. We may, of course, decide that the disappearance of the glory proves it to have been nonsensical, meaningless, a delusion. This is the decision of the agnostic, the anti-romantic. Or we can continue to affirm the vision even though it is no longer visible to us. The Beatrician quality was not only of the senses, but of the intellect; when it chooses to withdraw (and Williams prefers the active verb), the vows, the memory of communicated virtue, and the lover's free will, all remain. Williams draws a bold parallel between the physical life of Beatrice and the childhood of Christ: when Beatrice dies, "Love must, in every sense, be about his father's business." 47 In other words, the lover, although he is bereaved and grieving, can determine to go on living in terms of the humility and charity revealed by the original vision.

Since this means living towards one's fellow-man, the proper scene for such an effort is the City— in

47 Ibid., p. 38.
Dante's case, Florence. As Williams points out, the severest trial of the lover's vocation is not the death of Beatrice but Dante's exile from Florence — that is, his formal exclusion from the community within which he should have practised the virtues communicated to him by Love. But Dante was to find another and greater fulfilment: the writing of the Divine Comedy.

Beatrice died; Dante was faithful to her memory for three years. He waited so long because he was determined to mean by Love what he had meant before, nothing less. Then the "Lady of the Window" looked on him with pity, and suddenly it seemed to him that "most noble Love was with her" also. 48 "It is not surprising", observes Williams, "that a young man, after the death of his girl, should fall in love with another girl; it has been known to happen even before the death of the first". 49 Nor need the predictability of this second falling in love denigrate the meaning that Dante sought to give it, for,

48 Ibid., p. 46.

49 Loc. cit.
maintaining that the beloved is [in the Beatrician moment] seen in her proper and heavenly perfection, [the doctrines of Romantic Theology] maintain also that such a perfection is implicit in every human being, and (had we eyes to see) would be explicit there. The Christian religion declares as much. 50

That we do not perceive the vision in every human being is an operation of the Divine Mercy, for that universal glory cannot, asserts Williams, be safely contemplated except from the centre of the circle: in other words, only the perfected soul can contemplate the beauty of universal love without being moved to selfish desire - to sin. An Image, even though truly perceived, can still be perverted by covetousness (and this, as we shall see, is one of the roads to hell), for an "appetite for the use of the Image" can distort the truest love. If we were to see the Beatrician glory everywhere, then, how unable we would be to cope with it - "what sin, what despair" 51 would follow! Only the entire process of purgation and education of the soul, as Dante was to describe it in the Divine Comedy, could enable us to gaze on the glory in its entirety.

50 Ibid. p. 47.

51 Ibid. p. 48.
Still, the appearance in one's life of a second love (or, as Williams calls it, "a second Image") is, by Christian definition, legitimate. If the first love has served as a basis for marriage, a second love can still occur. To recognize it is not sinful, according to Williams; but to lust after it, whether physically or spiritually, is to fall into concupiscence, into the "use of the Image", and therefore into sin. The reality of the second love does not negate the first, nor justify us in abandoning the vow of fidelity we originally made.

It seems that in the image of his second love, "the Lady of the Window", Dante combined an actual woman with the personified figure of Philosophy. "I declare and affirm that the lady of whom I was enamoured after my first love was the most fair and noble daughter of the Emperor of the Universe, to whom Pythagoras gave the name of Philosophy". We need not insist that the lady was wholly mortal or wholly allegorical; it seems likely that

\[52\text{Ibid. p. 53.}\]
her image contained both elements. The dispute over her identity is more important than may appear, for this reason: Dante had beheld Beatrice, and had known her to be, in some sense, Love itself. After her death he sought consolation in philosophical writings; and presently he perceived the Beatrician quality in another woman— but the second lady is seen, not only as Love, but as Philosophy, that is an unaided intellect. Philosophy is the culminating achievement of human reason; Christian love is a revelation of Christ; the two are radically different, though not incompatible, categories of experience. Dante's changed allegiance, then, has significance because it potentially affected his interpretation of the Beatrician moment. Would he locate the glory ultimately in unassisted human reason, or would he conclude that its quality must be revelatory of God?

He decided that he had been mistaken. "Most noble Love", in the original Beatrician sense, did not dwell with the Lady of the Window, who now vanishes from our sight. She had not shaken his soul as Beatrice had done, for Beatrice had been to Dante a vision of perfection. This is not to denigrate Philosophy, the noblest function
of "holy intellect"; but the Beatrician quality both is the beginning of philosophy - for "by Beatrice much is perceived...which without her would seem miraculous" - and exhibits the perfect aim and end of all philosophy, that is of reason; for "through her we may believe that every miracle may be rational for a loftier understanding, and therefore may exist". 53 Beatrice is both the experienced glory, and the hope we draw from her of a universal glory. She is thus a starting-point for faith; the "Love" that is particular in her may, we can legitimately hope, be universal when perceived by a "loftier understanding". It was Dante's aim to achieve, as far as is possible to a human mind, the understanding by which Beatrice is perceived in her true relationship to that Love which is the source of all Images. It was Williams' aim, not only to understand and to follow Dante, but to draw general principles from a revelation that Dante had made specific in Beatrice.

53 Ibid. p. 67.
I have said that the greatest thwarting of Dante's Beatrician vocation was his exile from the City. In fact, however, he himself locates the beginning of his troubles at the height of his maturity and success: at Easter in the Jubilee Year 1300, when the poet was thirty-five years old. At this point we move into the opening scene of the Divine Comedy. The framework of the Comedy is a dream, or more properly a vision; and it begins, significantly, as the poet awakens from a deep slumber and sees about him a strange, frightening and unfamiliar forest. It is dawn. Dante's only escape lies in reaching a hill which he can see rising above the forest. This is what Williams calls "the timeless hill of the good;" Dante refers to it as "the source and occasion of all joy". The symbolism of the forest is difficult, but it certainly involves Dante's essential misery as a fallen creature, and also perhaps the yoke of worldly duties and ambitions that he has taken on. At the height of his powers, a famous poet and an

54 Ibid. p. 109.
aspiring politician, he perceives the real truth of his situation in the nightmare landscape of the forest.

And he cannot escape, for as he heads toward the hill he is prevented by three menacing beasts: the beautiful leopard that (at least in Williams' interpretation) symbolizes youth; the lion that stands for the power and ambition of maturity; and the she-wolf of old age, "lean with infinite craving".\(^55\) All the forces of natural life resist his effort to reach the Good.

He is rescued by the appearance of a ghost-like figure, insubstantial in the gloom of the wood. It is Virgil, who announces: "I was once a man; my parents were Lombards and both were of Mantuan land. I was born under Julius, though late; I lived at Rome under the good Augustus, in the time of false and deceitful gods. I was a poet..."\(^56\) Virgil had been Dante's poetic mentor; now he is to become his tutor and protector through the first two stages of the spiritual journey, that is through Hell and Purgatory. For these are the realms of free will abused -

\(^{55}\) Loc. cit.

\(^{56}\) Ibid. p. 110.
of human solitude; and Virgil represents human reason in its noblest development. It is because he stands for intellectual excellence (or, alternatively, for Poetry) untouched by Redemption that Dante cannot, as a Christian artist, allow Virgil to enter Paradise. Paradise is the realm of the Redemption, and therefore of Beatrice.

Even in the forest, the power of Beatrice is present; for it is at her appeal that Virgil has come to Dante's rescue. But escape will not be simple. Sheer retreat is now impossible; instead Dante will have to go forward to the whole purification of the soul. He will have to behold the principle of the universe, in its three great modes. He must see i) 'the ancient spirits who in pain bewail the second death', ii) 'those who are contented in the fire', and iii) 'the blessed peoples'.\(^{57}\) Virgil undertakes to lead him.

We are not, in this chapter, concerned with Virgil's province. Hell is a monotonous place, and, in terms

\(^{57}\)Ibid. p. 113.
of the concepts I am discussing, it is important only for the terrible rejection it embodies. "All hope abandon, ye who enter here", (Inferno III, l-9) - so reads the famous inscription above the gate; but more terrible still is Virgil's brief characterization of the Damned:

le genti dolorosa
c'hanno perduto il ben dell'intelletto -
"the miserable race who have lost the good of intellect".

The Inferno is unpleasant to read. It was intended to be so, rather than to arouse the cruel enjoyment for which Virgil at one point has to rebuke Dante. One may react with distress or even repugnance to the fate of certain individuals (for instance Brutus, whom as a regicide Dante places in the inmost circle of hell, in the jaws of Satan himself. Shakespeare has awakened our sympathy for Brutus; but as Williams observes, there is no evidence that Dante ever expected he would have to reckon with Shakespeare). Williams himself is deeply distressed by the exclusion of Virgil from Paradise: he makes a

58 Ibid. p. 140; and Inferno, XXX, 130-2.
touching attempt to explain that the exclusion is purely symbolic, then mutters sotto voce that we can at least hope salvation will prove to be universal.

But even if we disagree with details of Dante's Inferno, we should not allow a simplistic reaction to obscure the principle that underlies damnation, as Dante and Williams, assenting—understand "the miserable race". According to Christian anthropology, man has freedom of the will: he is free to reject good and to prefer evil, and the primordial catastrophe expressed in the myth of Eve has resulted in a racial bias toward sin, the preference for evil. In this view, Hell is not the sport of a vengeful God: it is the ultimate, self-chosen destination of those who have systematically degraded their faculty of choice until neither the normal human potential for good, nor the possibility of choice, remain. After a certain point the inner being, the essential character of a person can become so distorted as to render impossible the choices available to a healthy man. The Christian understands salvation as true spiritual health. Hell as Dante presents it is the realm of spiritual disease: of the self that, having made a god of its own lusts, is truly and
only finally alone.

Only one example concerns us here: that of the anti-Beatrician couple, Paolo and Francesca. Their sin is adultery, but even in Hell they remain true to each other; they are beautiful, young and loving, and Dante pities them. His description of their fall is sensuous and moving: in fact, observes Williams.

He so manages the very description, he so heightens the excuse, that the excuse reveals itself as precisely the sin...It is *lussuria*, luxury, indulgence, self-yielding, which is the sin, and the opening out of hell. 59

A modern reader may feel that these devoted lovers have been too harshly punished, and that it is wrong, as Williams and others of his circle (especially C.S. Lewis) habitually do, to represent a single surrender as carrying such an appalling price. With Paolo and Francesca, or with the noble pagan excluded from Paradise, the discussion of guilt and justice becomes a dangerously two-edged sword. Such questions are nearly unbearable if considered in personal terms. The real Paolo and Francesca, the real

---

59 Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, p. 118.
Virgil, may be—perhaps must be—rescued at last by an infinite Compassion. We may hope this, but as Williams points out, within the limits of Christian orthodoxy (assuming our willingness to respect those limits) we cannot be certain of it. And meanwhile a principle is at stake. Paolo and Francesca represent a yielding to temptation which Dante considers fatal, and Williams considers very serious, to the soul precisely because it is seductive, so apparently excusable, so easily glossed over. It is the moment of mutual indulgence which because it is shared is encouraged to take precedence over the claims of "adult love". Paolo and Francesca genuinely love each other, and even in Hell they keep the good they have chosen: as Williams movingly puts it, "their love is as changeless as the storm"—the storm symbolic of sensual self-indulgence—that will rage around them forever. But they have taken the first, highly dangerous step: for "lussuria cannot in fact stop there; the mutual indulgence

---

60 Loc. cit.
is bound too soon to become two separate single indulgences." Lussuria has a momentum of its own, and, however slight and excusable its beginning, its momentum tends downwards into the depths of Hell, where Brutus, as the murderer of Caesar, has set his own will against the survival of the community - and therefore, in Dante's mind, against the very fabric of creation.

Sensual self-indulgence is, Williams maintains, a mark of the pseudo-Romantic. But Paolo and Francesca, in their love which is also sin, lie very close indeed to the redeemed couple, Dante and Beatrice. The "Francescan moment" differs from the "Beatrician moment" only in the direction that emerges from it, i.e. in the working of the lovers' wills upon the original Romantic experience.

Still the example of Paolo and Francesca is difficult to accept as Dante intends it to be accepted. He, and Williams as an orthodox interpreter, chooses the stern recognition that love and compassion are not all-sufficient; that justice and intellectual clarity are equally important.

Ibid. p. 119.
Perhaps it is the universality of the Franciscan yielding that makes this passage so disturbing: we have all experienced a temptation of this genre, and, by Christian testimony at least, we have all fallen short of obedience, of goodness, of the truest love. The whole episode seems designed by Dante to drive home the lesson that man's depravity, redeemable only by Grace, is present even in his smallest acts - in moments as apparently slight as the one when the lovers, reading together the story of Lancelot and Guinevere, set the book down. "Then he who shall never be divided from me kissed my mouth all trembling; the book was a pander, and he that wrote it; that day we read no more". 62 Against this reaction Williams would object that events which are brief in terms of time, or even slight in terms of conscious awareness, may still be profound and profoundly - even eternally - important.

One is tempted to ask: Is love really not sufficient? To this Williams might initially appear to answer,

62 Ibid. p. 118.
"No". But I suspect that his considered answer would run something like this: "A perfect love is indeed sufficient; but if Paolo and Francesca had loved perfectly the pattern of their love would have involved all their relationships, all their duties, in an equally joyous obligation. They would have kept the balance of their loves. In preferring the easiest and most pleasant way, they rejected all the other goods that might have remained open to them. 'I am the centre of a circle to which all parts of the circumference are in a similar relation; but you are not so'. We must make the effort required to reach the centre; the alternative is to disorder the circumference for our own purposes'.

The heaviest objection against the Franciscan dilemma as Dante presents it is that it tends to turn into a choice between justice and compassion. It is possible to comprehend an intellectual system that exacts an eternal consequence for a temporal choice; but it is difficult, in this case, not to find that system repugnant, for there is so much of human good in Paolo and Francesca - so much that rightly moves us to compassion; and Williams recognizes this. Why, in this instance, must
judgment be passed on the lovers by a justice, an intellectual consistency, that excludes mercy? Is it that mercy in such matters — and Dante would have to understand "mercy", here, as a privileged breach of the basic intellectual consistency he is trying to establish — belongs only to God? That is an extremely dangerous precedent to maintain.

And it may legitimately be asked whether it is possible to represent so much genuine good, so much love in the adulterous couple, and yet to maintain that they have corrupted themselves beyond the possibility of choice. My answer would be that they have not or if they have, all humanity belong, with them, just within the mouth of Hell. In fact they are very close to the outer boundary: so close that their subtle corruption marks the metaphysical frontier between ordinary sin and the sin from which there is no turning back. Perhaps Dante put them on the side of damnation because intellectual indulgence toward them, however persuasive its rationale, could so easily lead to indulgence toward worse things. It is a difficult problem. There the poet leaves it; and so, therefore, must we.
"But if - ?" demands Williams.

If the true Romantic Way had been followed? If intellect and the Images [are] affirmed? If the Imagination, for a little suspended in choice, had then determined to actualize within itself the thing seen outside itself? If it had willed to become faith? 63

It was the whole function of Dante Alighieri to will, as a lover, the right use of the Beatrician moment - and, as a poet, to record his pilgrimage.

Sin is now comprehended: "all is seen"; 64 still under the guidance of Virgil, Dante begins to ascend the Mount of Purgatory, that is to purge his mind so that it may perceive the Images as they are in themselves, and as God knows them in their union with him. With exquisite grace Williams sums up this process of growth: "The only illusion is that there is in us a necessity to demand something other than [God]; the only disillusion is to find that it is not so, and that our only necessity is love". 65 From the moment his eyes first rested on

63 Ibid. p. 145.

64 Ibid. p. 146.

65 Ibid. p. 147.
Beatrice, Dante has been moving toward this "disillusion".

The gate of Purgatory is guarded by an angel, who opens it with two keys: the silver key of Rejection, which is "more dear" that is, "more costly"; and the golden key of Affirmation, which is "more difficult to use". Yet both are necessary. The air of Purgatory is murmurous with the prayers of those still on earth, and the blessed souls, aided by the prayers of the living, go gladly about the business of purifying their desires so that their ascent of the Mountain may continue. It is only because the desire, which once turned to sin and is now undergoing a difficult transformation, is not yet fully purified that Purgatorial experiences contain the pain of growth. As they ascend, the souls become increasingly filled and identified with the quality of love, and the Images - not quite shrink, but assume their true proportions; no one is less important, less glorious than the others, however it may have seemed on earth.

Dante and Virgil reach "the earthly Paradise".

---

66 Ibid. p. 175.
the realm where Man is as he was meant to be; and here Dante beholds an angelic procession. Then "donna m' apparve" - "a lady appeared to me", and Dante turns to Virgil, exclaiming, "Every drop of blood in me is trembling; I know the signs of the ancient flame". But, to Dante's grief, Virgil is gone. He is left alone with the woman, who now utters the famous words:

Guardaci ben: ben sem, ben sem Beatrice
"Yes, look well: we are, we are indeed Beatrice"; and Dante knows her to be the girl who once greeted him on a May morning in Florence, and the friend who "endured for my salvation to leave your footprints in hell". 67

For, if Dante has a function, Beatrice has one too - and so, as Williams puts it, does "the Beatrice of any couple". 68 It is to sustain her lover's adoration in the full knowledge that the glory is not her own possession; and to lead him through the contemplation of herself to

67 Ibid. p. 181, and Paradiso XXXI 80-1.

68 Williams, Figure of Beatrice, p. 182.
that Love which is the source of all the Images. The redeemed and transfigured Beatrice of the poem is enabled to fulfil her function. She accepts his adoration, yes; but she does so because she knows well the source from which her glory comes.

And, because she was the very first of the Images to move him toward salivation - because she has vigorously and nobly requited his love for her - she is still the special companion of his soul. But, as the Paradiso moves to its close, Dante realizes that the nature of Beatrice mirrors the double nature of Christ; being redeemed in him, she is, like him, both human and divine.

Ultimately they come to "the heaven which is pure light, intellectual light full of love, love of the true good full of gladness".\(^69\) This is their destination. At this ultimate point the Image of Beatrice gives way to the last and greatest of the Images: Mary, the God-Bearer, "who has so ennobled human nature that its Worker did not

\(^69\) Ibid. p. 219.
disdain to become its work”. Now the lovers who began their journey in the streets of Florence gaze upon Christ himself. The journey is done; the function of Beatrice is fulfilled; and Dante addresses to her his last prayer.

"O lady, in whom my hope has strength, you who have borne to leave your footprints in hell for my salvation - I recognize the grace and virtue of all the things I have seen by your power and your goodness. You have brought me from servitude to liberty by all the ways and all the means possible to you. Guard your magnificence in me, that my soul, which you have made whole, may please you when it unknits itself from the body".

I prayed this; and she, so far away as she seemed, smiled and gazed; then she turned herself to the eternal fountain. 71

What is the relationship of Beatrice to Christ? Williams has stated that the vehicle of glory "moves in Florence as, in an incomparable yet comparable fashion, it moved in Nazareth". In what way "comparable"? In what way "incomparable"?

An important fact about Williams' thought has no

70 Ibid. p. 222.

71 Ibid. p. 221, and Paradiso XXXI 79-93.
doubt become apparent; it must now be explicitly stated. Only in a secondary fashion does Williams move from the cryptic revelation that is Beatrice to a knowledge of our redemption in Christ. The Beatrician experience does not, considered in isolation, enable us to deduce Christian theology as a logical consequence.

Logic there is, and of an impressive kind; but it is a logic strongly akin to that used by Anselm in his "ontological proof" of the existence of God - the logic, that is, that speaks to the believer. For Williams, Beatrice reveals the glory of the Incarnation because the Incarnation is true. The glory in Beatrice, rightly understood, reveals the process of Redemption. But it does not reveal it in the sense that Redemption is a theory capable of being rejected if we do not like it. Beatrice is not an argument, because Redemption is not taken by Williams to be a fact on a level with other facts, and so capable, like them, of being proved to the intellect alone. Rather it is the constitutive truth of human experience.

Incarnation and Redemption have made Beatrice possible. Insofar as her beauty touches Dante to the quick, i.e. to the veritable depth of his soul, she must
by definition contain in herself, and in a sense reveal, the profoundest truth of our nature. For Williams the definition of that profoundest truth is not in doubt: it is the Incarnation.

There is indeed a logical progress from Dante's first cry of recognition ("Now your blessedness has appeared to you!") to the vision of Christ in Paradise. But that development springs from the truth of the Incarnation; only secondarily does it testify to that truth. Apology to the agnostic intellect is not the purpose of Beatrice. Like Anselm's "proof", Williams' incarnational theology is meant to cast a fresh illumination on the experience of the believer.

For Charles Williams,

Beatrice reveals the Incarnation because
the Incarnation is true
and therefore
Beatrice reveals the Incarnation because...

etcetera ad infinitum. I shall refer to this quality as
the "Anselmian circularity" of Williams' thought.  

Given Williams' premiss - the reality of Incarnation and the essential truth of Christian doctrine - the relationship of Beatrice to Christ is given by definition. (It is not my purpose at this point to speak of those Beatrician lovers who refuse to admit this premiss. Williams would wish them well, and pity them for the theoretical void in which - lacking what he holds to be the true solution - they must inevitably find themselves.)

Dante calls Beatrice "salute", salvation. And yet Beatrice is not Christ: to call her so would be to corrupt a permissible adoration into an idolatry. Beatrice was a woman, born in Florence in the year 1266; but between her

\[72\text{At this point Charles Williams and Anselm incur a similar misunderstanding. It is possible to maintain that Anselm's ontological "proof" of the existence of God has been improperly so-called because it is not a proof in that it attempts to convince the unbeliever; rather its logic was primarily designed to illuminate the experience of the already believing Christian. For Charles Williams, Beatrice similarly functions not as a proof but as a testimony. The "circularity" arises because both Anselm's argument and Charles Williams' involve an apparent tautology, in Anselm's case springing from his positing of that-than-which-nothing-greater can-be-conceived, in Williams' case from his positing of Incarnation. In using the word "illuminate" I do not mean to imply that either thinker intends any rejection of reason or intellect. Williams absolutely rejects the concept of rationality and insight as opposites; he attempts rather to define the noblest function of "holy intellect".} \]
and the carpenter, born in Galilee in the reign of Tiberias Caesar, there is an "incomparable" difference in quality, an almost infinite gulf. For Christ and no other achieved the Redemption. Christ is incarnate Creator and Redeemer. Beatrice is a redeemed creature.

And because she is redeemed, she is (by Grace and for no other reason) indeed "comparable" to Christ. She is like him in her humanity, and like him, by Grace, in the divinity to which he has restored our nature. This is the significance of the passage in the Paradiso where Dante sees Beatrice mirrored in the eyes of the Gryphon, which, being both lion and eagle, is a symbol of Christ's double nature. Beatrice is almost infinitely smaller than her Creator, but thanks to his redemption of the City - of the race to which she belongs - she is like him in essential quality.

How then can Dante be justified in saying that Beatrice "is" his salvation? Christ is his salvation, and Beatrice is not Christ. Pace the ecclesiastical censors, Dante knew that perfectly well. Innately Beatrice is, in addition, not superior to any other Image (a lesson she herself teaches him before the end.) But she is the
Image for Dante, for reasons that remain beyond understanding. Through her alone he experiences - "felt in the blood, and felt along the heart" - the glory that he ultimately apprehends to be true of every creature. Beatrice "is" Dante's salvation in the sense that, for much of his life, the majesty of God in Incarnation and Redemption was visible to him chiefly through her. The fact that he could not initially perceive the revelation apart from her reflects his fallenness. But after the privilege of man and of great poets in particular, he succeeded in transforming this very limitation into the basis of his transcendant achievement.

Williams' heavy emphasis on the sexual model helps obscure the fact that this is not the only type of Beatrician devotion. The poetry of Wordsworth, too, exhibits an aspect of the redeemed creation, and Williams often quotes Wordsworth to expand and clarify the Dantean experience. 73 However, his own comparative lack of

73 e.g. Williams, Figure of Beatrice, pp. 16, 69, 83, 102, 148, etc.
interest leads to a disappointing vagueness in his treatment of non-sexual Beatrician devotion. Wordsworth's communion with Nature is one such variation. Hero-worship may be another, though Williams endorses it with hesitation - I suspect because we project a good deal of fantasy on our heroes, whereas the contemplation of Beatrice freed Dante from all self-absorption and gave "the self-forgetfulness which (only) makes room for adoration". The greater proportion of self, of fantasy and projection, our adoration contains, the farther it is from the perception of objective truth which marks the genuine Beatrician quality.

The Beatrician moment in a non-sexual context has been described with startling power by Marcel Proust. The passage is worth quoting almost in full, because nowhere else have I found the Beatrician quality so well conveyed. The narrator, Marcel, is driving along a road near Balbec, a watering-place where he has come to spend the summer. Against the horizon he sees three trees; they strike him with a sense of mysterious significance, which he urgently seeks to understand.
I looked at the three trees; I could see them plainly, but my mind felt that they were concealing something which it had not grasped, as when things are placed out of our reach, so that our fingers, stretched out at arm's-length, can only touch for a moment their outer surface, and can take hold of nothing. Then we rest for a little while before thrusting out our arm with refreshed vigor, and trying to reach an inch or two farther... All three of them, as the carriage moved on, I could see coming toward me. Where had I looked at them before? There was no place near Combray where an avenue opened off a road like that... Were they... an image freshly extracted from a dream of the night before, but already so worn, so altered that it seemed to me to come from somewhere far distant? Or had I indeed never seen them before; did they conceal beneath their surface... a meaning as obscure, as hard to grasp as is a distant past, so that, whereas they were pleading with me that I would master a new idea, I imagined that I had to identify something in my memory? Or again were they concealing no hidden thought, and was it simply my strained vision that had made me see them double in time as one occasionally sees things double in space? I could not tell... In their simple, passionate gesticulation I could discern the helpless anguish of a beloved person who has lost the power of speech, and feels that he will never be able to say to us what he wishes to say and we can never guess. Presently, at a crossroads, the carriage left them. It was bearing me away from what alone I believed to be true, what would have made me truly happy; it was like my life.

I watched the trees gradually withdraw, waving their despairing arms, seeming to say to me: "What you fail to learn from us today, you will never know. If you allow us to drop back into the hollow of this road from which we sought to raise ourselves up to you, a whole part of yourself which we were bringing to you will fall forever into the abyss"... Of those trees themselves I was never to know what they had been trying to give me nor where else I had seen them. And when... I turned by back on them and ceased to see them... I was as wretched as though I had just lost a friend, had died myself, had
broken faith with the dead or had denied my God. 74

Many of the Beatrician qualities are present here: the intimation of profound meaning communicated by a superficially commonplace object; the conviction that this meaning, whatever it may be, is uniquely revelatory of truth and happiness; the passionate effort to understand. The passage, remarkable for the minuteness of its sensitivity, is made all the more moving because Proust fails to grasp the meaning of the three trees. It is as though Dante gazed at Beatrice helplessly baffled by the emotion she arouses in him; it is the Beatrician moment manqué, for Proust cannot penetrate beyond the Image. But I have come across no other writer who so brilliantly conveys the quality of the initial movement.

Proust's experience, with its felt yet unexplained significance, is probably the commonest type of Beatrician moment. Dante was unique in his ability to penetrate the meaning; but most human beings, even if they are disposed to this kind of devotion, cannot do as much. Charles

---

74 Proust, Within a Budding Grove, Volume 2, pp. 20-23.
Williams would maintain that any moment which, like the one Proust describes, proclaims, simply by being itself, its link with the deepest truth and happiness of life, must ultimately originate in God who is the source of all revelation.

By Williams' criterion, however, it is apparent how far Proust still has to go from the first impulse of emotion. For Beatrician love to fulfil itself, the first "stupor" of the mind must yield at last to the "intelletto d'amore", the "intelligence in love" which partakes of the Divine nature. "It is possible", Williams observes, to follow this method of love without introducing the name of God. But it is hardly possible to follow it without proposing and involving as an end a state of caritas of the utmost possible height and breadth, nor without allowing to Matter a significance and power which (of all the religions and philosophies) only Christianity has affirmed. 75

---

75 Williams, He Came Down from Heaven, p. 77.
CHAPTER III

Substituted Love

I have stated[1] that Williams' theology has two main aspects. The first is his concept of the Beatrician moment. The second is his concept of Substituted Love. Although the latter is not the main focus of this thesis, we must now discuss it briefly, both for the sake of completeness and because the idea of Substituted Love corrects - as Williams intends it should - some features which might become problematic if the Beatrician Moment were left to stand on its own.

Williams uses three terms here: "Substituted Love", "exchange", and "the principle of coinherence". All mean the same thing. If the Beatrician Vision represents, for Charles Williams, the Incarnation as it transforms individual experience, then Substituted Love represents the Incarnation at work in the community. The pilgrim-figure of the Romantic lover - who is called Dante in Williams' personal mythology - is not only the lover of Beatrice;

---
he is also a citizen of Florence, and this aspect is just as essential to his identity and functioning as a Christian Romantic.

At the basis of this concept lies an assumption Williams does not and cannot prove; he takes it as given. The reader must understand its primacy, though for himself he is free to accept or reject it. This is the assumption that the Incarnation is true, i.e. that the whole fabric of reality has been fundamentally transformed by God's redeeming act in Incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection.\textsuperscript{2} Humanity as we experience it is humanity redeemed.\textsuperscript{3} The fact and the mechanics of redemption are therefore constitutive of the reality we know.\textsuperscript{4} We cannot know an unredeemed creation, for there is no such thing.\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{2} Williams, "Natural Goodness", in his \textit{Image of the City}, p. 77.

\textsuperscript{3} Williams, \textit{Descent of the Dove}, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid. p. 28.

\textsuperscript{5} Williams, "The Cross", in his \textit{Image of the City}, p. 137.
Williams is not making a dogmatic statement. He holds the historical Church to be a sometimes distorted expression of Incarnation. Christianity does not exhaust the fact of Redemption, some aspects of which other world religions may have expressed more truly. In using words like "Incarnation" and "Redemption" Williams is attempting a fundamental statement about reality—that is about God-in-relation-to-man. Incarnation is, to borrow a phrase Williams uses in a slightly different context, a "great natural fact at the very root of all human facts...".

In his essay "The Way of Exchange" Williams offers a highly condensed expression of this principle.

...The mystery of the Christian religion is a doctrine of co-inherence and substitution. The Divine Word co-inherits in God the Father (as the Father in Him and the Spirit in Both) but also He has substituted His Manhood for ours in

---

6 Williams, Descent of the Dove, passim.

7 Ibid., p. 110.

8 Williams, "The Way of Exchange", in his Image of the City, p. 150.
the secrets of the Incarnation and Atonement. The principle of the Passion is that He gave His life. "for" - that is, instead of and on behalf of - ours. In that sense he lives in us and We in Him, He and we co-inhere. "I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me", said St. Paul, and defined the web of universal power toward substitution. To love God and to love one's neighbor are but two movements of the same principle...  

The principle is that, given the fact of the Incarnation, we are all members of one body and members of one another: in the words of the Anglican Communion service, "we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people".  

The consequence of this principle is the existence and performance of social duty; more simply, it is the injunction "Bear ye one another's burdens". Charles Williams applied this concept with a startling literalness. He held, not only that we are enjoined to help one another, but that the Incarnation has rendered realistic a degree and kind of mutual help which most people would consider impossible, if not outlandish.  

---

9 Ibid., p. 152.  
10 Ibid., p. 154.  
11 Ibid., p. 148.
The many common exchanges and substitutions of daily existence; the social balance of specialized occupations; the deaths and labours on behalf of others, and the deliberate acceptance of them, which are becoming more and more a part of our life at war [Williams was writing in 1941]; the inter-knit resistance of the enemy; the vigils of holy souls for others; ... the mystery of the Atonement; ... the co-inherence of the Blessed and Glorious Trinity itself -- these are expositions of the same identity. Reposing in that identity, we may become conscious of it everywhere... Mental burdens can be carried as well as physical; and even physical more than we know. The very healing of the flesh might be hastened by it...12

The variety and daring with which Williams applied this principle can best be conveyed by three illustrations. I have already13 mentioned the first: the experience of Pauline Anstruther in the novel Descent Into Hell. The poet Peter Stanhope offers simply to experience Pauline's fear for her. He takes this obligation seriously, entering into a vivid imaginative experience of the girl's terror. Pauline, when next she confronts the apparition that haunts her, remembers that Stanhope is being afraid on her behalf, and finds to her astonishment that her own fear is thus reduced to an endurable level, enabling her

13 this thesis, chapter 1.
not only to face the haunting but to discover its deeper meaning. 14

Wartime offered Williams many examples of substitution in a community drawn together by the common threat, and forced to diversify its functions in the interests of self-defence. Thus, soldiers die for the community 15 while others perform different, equally necessary functions on behalf of those who are dying and, indeed, on behalf of those who are already dead. For it is one supremely moving aspect of Christian co-inherence that the dead are not exiled or conceived to be non-existent, but are united with the living in the exchanges of the City. 16

The practice of exchange was seriously attempted by a group of Oxford friends, and also by hangers-on who brought to the concept a sentimentality which disgusted

14 Williams, Descent Into Hell, Chapter 9.


16 E.g. Williams, Descent Into Hell, Chapter 9.
Williams. While, in his art, he depicted the noblest heights of which substituted love is capable, he tartly discouraged delusions of grandeur. In this as in everything else, we should exercise common sense. 17

It is in small things that the practice could be begun—sleeplessness or anxiety or slight pains. It is between friends and lovers that the practice could be best begun; always remembering that in the end he whom holy Luck throws in our way is our neighbor...To begin the way in small things is better than to dream of...remote splendours...To begin by practising faith where it is easiest is better than to try and practise it where it is hardest. 18

"The very healing of the flesh might be hastened..." An oral tradition exists that, when C.S. Lewis's wife was dying of cancer, Lewis himself "assumed" the pain of her disease, and so brought her relief. Whatever the truth of this report, it indicates how strongly Williams impressed Substituted Love on his friends as a real possibility.

How is this concept important for the Beatrician Vision? Its true value will become progressively clearer

17 Williams, "The Way of Exchange", in his The Image of the City, p. 152.

18 Loc., cit.
as we examine certain dangers of Romantic adoration. We have already encountered, in Williams' commentary on Paolo and Francesca, his opinion of Beatrician love that finds sufficiency in itself and rejects the community. Such Romanticism, says Williams, is one road to Hell.

Why is such Romanticism false, dangerous and wrong? Because, for one thing, human self-sufficiency does not exist; it is an illusion filled with pride. Paolo and Francesca, intoxicated by their love with its glimmering of true vision, imagine that love exalts them above the moral standard of the community, which is embodied in their case in the commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery". They imagine that their love has set them above the law. Their temptation is common to mankind; their yielding is understandable. What Williams finds inexcusable is their attempt to rationalize - to claim that, by grace of love, wrong becomes right. ¹⁹ I use the word "grace" advisedly: for in Williams' view, grace is from Christ alone, and Christ is as fully present in the

¹⁹ Williams, Figure of Beatrice, p. 118.
law and the community as he is in the Beatrician Vision or in other forms of inwardness. 20

One danger, then, of the Beatrician lover is a delusive self-sufficiency. Because this is untrue — because man is dependant on others and obligated to them from the cradle to the grave — actions based on this imagined autonomy will be morally unsound, and tend almost inevitably to sin.

It is prideful to reject the way things are in favour of the way one would like them to be. In choosing a fantasy-world of moral isolation, Paolo and Francesca are guilty of pride. It is odd that the Romantic lover is so often popularly conceived as an escapist immersed in fantasy. In his analysis of the choice made by the adulterous lovers, Williams strongly rejects the possibility that any good can be founded on delusion. The true Romantic is a realist. He will not succumb to a proud isolation — which I have described as a danger, not as an

20 Williams, "The Redeemed City", in his Image of the City passim.
inevitable consequence of Romanticism. Rather he can be known by his acknowledgment of what is, in Charles Williams' view, the other, equally important aspect of our nature: responsibility within the community. 21 Dante is the lover of Beatrice, the solitary pilgrim of the wood; but it is equally important to Charles Williams that he is also Dante the politician, performing his duty to his City even at the price of exile. It is because the historical Dante affirmed this dual function so vigorously that Williams regards him as the type of the true Romantic.

If Christ is equally present in the City and in the law, then to reject either is to reject an aspect of Incarnation. On pain of debasing his own insight, the Romantic lover must not, according to Williams, be guilty of this mistake. However genuine the Beatrician Vision may be, it cannot subsist in isolation; to try to make it do so is to reject Christ in the community, and to cut oneself off from all the salutary realism the City has to offer.

In Williams' view, then, the concept of Substituted

\[21 \text{Ibid., p. 105 et passim.}\]
Love is the necessary complement of the Beatrician Vision. It is necessary because the social, outward-directed aspects of our nature are valid, important and redeemed. It is necessary also because the Romantic - since he finds his supreme revelation in a private moment of inwardness - is vulnerable to devaluing the community and its moral judgments. Only the false or pseudo-Romantic succumbs to this temptation; but he is vulnerable to egomania with all the moral falsity that entails.

Although Substitution will not be the main focus of the discussion that follows, it is important to remember that Charles Williams is aware of the need this concept fills. When we study Williams' attempts to define true Romanticism, we must remember that the true Romantic is by definition capable of practising Substituted Love, and does so routinely as a normal part of living in the world. To exempt oneself from such duties, as Paolo and Francesca have done, is one of the surest signs of pseudo-Romanticism.
CHAPTER IV

Problems of Methodology: Williams As an "Academic" Writer

Up to this point I have tried to tell the reader who Williams was and what he did; I have tried to explain, fully and sympathetically, his concept of the Beatrician Vision, both in its experiential aspects and in its developed interpretation.

Even to speak in this way (i.e. of "experiential aspects" as distinct from "developed interpretation") may be to imply, for the sake of convenience, a distinction that is not ultimately true. The relationship between experience and interpretation is a very difficult one when one attempts to consider Williams' Romantic theology. For the moment let us allow the distinction to stand, on the understanding that it is a convenient and provisional structure which may change under more stringent analysis.

We must now turn to a more critical scrutiny of Williams' basic ideas, and of the ways he chooses to present and develop those ideas. Our first intensive analysis will concern the relationship between interpre-
tation and experience in the Beatrician Vision. However, before we can tackle this problem, it is necessary clearly to explain the difficulties which Williams' methodology creates for the student.

Williams practiced many literary trades: poet, critic, essayist, theologian, novelist, playwright. But when asked to put himself into a category, he always insisted on considering himself a poet. So strongly did he feel that this was his basic vocation that it was by the simple inscription, "Charles Williams, Poet: Under the Mercy" that he chose to be memorialized on his tombstone.

Williams' conviction that he was basically a poet is directly relevant to his theology. If his poetry is highly cerebral - often to the detriment of its intelligibility, and of the reader's understanding - his theology is highly poetic. Williams was not primarily an academic writer in the sense that the academic endeavour, whatever existential content one may choose to ascribe to it, involves a full, self-consistent examination of a problem. He did not try to be academic in this sense, and one can picture him objecting blandly that the frustrations his "poetic" theology causes the student are the student's problem, not his.
As I have indicated above, in speaking of an "academic" writer I intend a person who is concerned that the expression and exposition of his quest for truth make consistent, logical sense. Such a writer ideally conducts his discussion within carefully defined limits, using terminology whose meaning he is careful to explain. Within the limits he has set up, he sees every avenue of exploration of his subject and follows it out fully, leaving no doubt, dissatisfaction or ambiguity in the reader's mind.

Charles Williams was not, overridingly concerned with the academic in the limited sense given above: if he sometimes neglected to follow every possible development of an idea, or even allowed an apparent contradiction to creep in while leaving the reader to discover for himself that the contradiction was only skin-deep, this was because geometrically minute application of intellect concerned him far less than his search for Intellect in its deepest and noblest aspect. He found the intelletto d'amore - the plenitude of redeemed intellect-in the Beatrician moment of certainty which involved every faculty in the declaration: "Now your beatitude has appeared". This is an intellectual apprehension, although other aspects of "ratio" are also involved in the prior discipline that brings the artist to the Beatrician moment, and in the lifetime's
effort by which Dante unravelled the Beatrician declaration.

*Williams considered it significant that the way Dante took, the path he chose to follow, was the Way of poetic imagery: an imaginative pilgrimage through the cosmos of Catholic myth, whose symbols he deepened, but felt no need to change. The Divine Comedy is an intellectual and theological statement; but it achieves the greatest part of its impact, and of its meaning, from the poetic images of which it is composed. Pictures derived from Catholic mythology are individualised and embellished by Dante in such a way that they enlist, not only the reader's aesthetic facilities, but all his emotions in the service of understanding. Dante, in other words, achieves his unravelling of the initial declaration ("Now your beatitude has appeared") by a multidimensional method that appeals to many modes of understanding. The meaning he thus builds up is multiple yet unitary, and thus far richer than a straight cerebral exposition.

It is sad that Charles Williams was a poet of far lesser calibre; because I think that if he had had the gift, he might have attempted a "Romantic theology" that was primarily poetic, i.e. that appealed to other ways of understanding besides the intellectual. As it is, he tried. His desire for artistic excellence and for fame were con-
centrated passionately in his poetry, but his temperament was too cerebral to make him a great poet; or rather he was unable fully to transmute cerebral understanding into the totally different system of symbols which constitutes poetic understanding. Keats possessed both abilities; but Charles Williams was temperamentally unsuited to be completely successful in the one medium about which he passionately cared.

Williams was, therefore, a very cerebral man who desired to express himself through poetic beauty. He would have done better to have recognized his limitations, and to have turned his full energy to the more rigorous form in which, had he given it his first love, he might have excelled. As it was, both his poetry and his theology suffered: his poetry from an excess of untransmuted intellect, and his theology from a longing after less cerebral forms of expression.

This may help to explain why Williams' theological work gives a curious impression of being both rigorous and unsystematic. He could (if he chose to use the ability) be rigorous when his mind was brought to bear on a certain problem. This seems to be especially true if the criticism required were negative: Williams was very good at
dissecting theories less adequate than his own, theories which he genially and efficiently demolished. He was rigorous also in a certain fundamental consistency of attitude: in a spiritual integrity which — intangible though it is — rightly impels the student to take him seriously.

But the student who wishes to do Williams' theology full justice encounters problems. Often he will find himself posing a question, and — rather than being able to produce a full answer developed by Williams himself — will be forced to say: "Extrapolating from Williams' known position, we can logically assume that he would answer in this way:..."

Why is it so often necessary to answer questions about Williams' theology by extrapolation? This problem arises from his faulty methodology. In this respect his greatest failing is his habit of appearing to offer a complete definition of some important term — a definition which further examination reveals to be incomplete, and therefore misleading.

As I have indicated, Williams had the potential to be a truly academic theologian. For various reasons he
found this unrewarding, and wavered between logical-cerebral argument and poetic imagery as a device to convey his meaning. But his sporadic attempts at rigorous methodology create an impression of academic precision, whose misleading quality only gradually becomes apparent to the reader.

I will give one important example. Williams' central effort is to define the Romantic or Beatrician quality, i.e. the quality common to the Beatrician lover and to the numinous moment of revelation. One way of throwing this Beatrician quality into high relief is by defining what it is not: that is, by defining what it means to be a false Romantic or, as he often calls it, a pseudo-Romantic.

In several books, including *The Figure of Beatrice* and *The Descent of the Dove*, Williams describes the Dantesque ("Romantic") experience; and each time he touches also on its opposite, false or pseudo-Romanticism. And each time he contrives to imply that the definition is complete.
In *The Descent of the Dove* Williams says, referring to the Early Church:

The Romantic discovery was followed by a grand intellectual Romantic movement, as it might be called. It was inevitable: it was proper. But it went, as Romanticism unchecked will [my italics] to the wildest extremes... Some [romantic folktales about the childhood of Christ] edified and some did not, but they did not much relate to serious matters.

The other part of this Romantic movement was far more deadly...[These schools of thought] developed, and the teachers who were related to them developed, the usual marks of the lost Romantic. The lost or pseudo-Romantic, in all times and places, has had the same marks, and he had them in the early centuries of the Faith. He was then called a Gnostic. The Gnostic schools were many...but they all tended to develop along the same lines. They accepted the idea of Salvation; they accepted heavenly beings in operation; they accepted supreme and passionless Deity. They then proceeded to "purify" these ideas from the "low and crude" interpretations which a "materialistic" Christianity had somehow introduced into them [emphasizes mine]... They removed from that supreme Godhead of theirs any tendency to creation, especially any tendency to the creation of matter, and most especially any tendency to the creation of anything capable of "evil". They regarded creation in a Deity not so much impossible as indecent... They agreed that somehow the pure light of the lower heaven had got involved in this unpleasant business of matter and had to be redeemed. It was set free by the descent of a Redemption which, however, itself put on

---

1 Williams, *Descent of the Dove*, pp. 21-3.
merely the appearance of matter and withdrew it long before the Passion and Crucifixion could in any way stain its own lordly spirituality...

and so on through an orthodox appraisal of the Gnostic movement within and outside the Early Church.

The justice of Williams' estimate of Gnosticism is not the issue here. The salient points of his discussion are these:

1. Williams states that the "lost" or pseudo-Romantic (whom we will call A) has, in all times and places, the same characteristics;

2. he adds that Gnosticism (which we will call B) was the form taken by pseudo-Romanticism in the early Church;

3. he then proceeds to define Gnosticism as a rejection of all "degrading" involvement of Divinity in matter (a characterization which we will call C).

Williams has therefore made the following equation:

\[ A = B \]
\[ B = C \]

therefore

\[ A = C \]

In other words, Williams has declared that the pseudo-Romantic "in all times and places" is characterized by a
Gnostic rejection of matter as evil and degrading.

This is all very well: it is Williams' theory and, for the sake of understanding Romantic Theology, we are willing to accept his definitions. It is all very well, that is, until (in The Figure of Beatrice) we find ourselves confronted by another "complete" example of false Romanticism: the fate of Paolo and Francesca.

The adultery here is only the outer mark; the sin in a sin possible to all lovers, married or unmarried, adulterous or marital. It is a sin especially dangerous to Romantics, so much so that its essence has often been taken to be a mark of Romanticism. But this, if we allow Dante and Wordsworth to be true Romantics, it hardly is; it is much more a sign of the pseudo-Romantic - in life even more than in letters. 2

The sin of Paolo and Francesca is twofold. It consists in a) a self-indulgence which uses the mutuality of love as its excuse; and b) an uncritical acceptance of the body and the created sphere as sufficient vehicles of the Divine. Paolo and Francesca are - for Dante, Williams and the reader - pseudo-Romanticism personified, in that they have taken a true adoration and made the very glory

2Williams, Figure of Beatrice, pp. 118-9.
of love an occasion for their idolatrous self-indulgence.

Paolo and Francesca, then, have taken Matter too seriously: they have failed to look beyond it to Divinity (which at least the Gnostics do!). They are pseudo-Romantics, but they are not Gnostics: they have exalted Matter too high, believed too presumptuously that the world and the body are sufficient.

Williams has, in fact, offered us two definitions of pseudo-Romanticism which it is extremely difficult (although not impossible) to reconcile. An attempt at reconciliation might involve pointing out that these two examples do indeed have an underlying kinship. Williams makes very clear that anything, carried to extremes, is likely to become sin. Both the Gnostics and the adulterers have sinned by extremism: the first by rejection, the second by affirmation.

But it is the reader himself who must reconcile the two. That it can perhaps be done does not excuse Williams' own failure to do it. He has not stated in the boldest terms that each definition is full, complete and definitive; but he has permitted the reader to believe that each is so, by the strongest implication. Anyone who had
read only The Descent of the Dove, or only The Figure of Beatrice, might be excused for thinking that he had received a full definition of pseudo-Romanticism. Through Williams' laxity, the reader in this position would be seriously misled.

I am not simply claiming that Williams fails to meet certain standards; I am claiming that, by any standards, he sometimes fails in his duty to the reader and to his own Romantic Theology. The reader deserves the justice of a clear explanation.

This is why the student so often has to extrapolate from Williams' existing systematic statements. In attempting this task, one sometimes encounters omissions or even contradictions.

Considering the importance of the Beatrician theory - not only in Williams' own thought but, as I believe, its intrinsic importance - Williams' failure to elaborate it fully is disappointing. He gives us to understand that the Romantic experience can be analyzed according to two major types:
a) Christian/secular  
b) sexual/non-sexual  

Presumably, pedantic though it sounds, we could further specify that the Romantic experience can be:  
a) Christian/sexual  
b) Christian/non-sexual  
c) secular/sexual  
d) secular/non-sexual  

But, as we have amply seen, Williams' own interest is limited almost exclusively to the Christian/sexual type. His glances at non-sexual Beatrician love (for which Wordsworth's "Nature" is his main example) are cursory and unsystematic; and he almost totally slights such a non-Christian, non-sexual example as Proust's glimpse of the three trees.  

Is this simply another example of Williams' failure to follow out his theory to its logical limits? Or would the Proustian vision - on the surface, so hauntingly similar to the Beatrician vision - qualify as "Romantic" at all in Williams' mind?  

This question opens issues so important that we must deal with them in another chapter.
CHAPTER V

The Problem of Experience and Interpretation

The time has come to consider the adequacy of Williams' achievement. In order to do this we must recollect the affirmation with which we began, i.e. an affirmation of the reality of a type of experience that resembles "the Beatrician moment"; and we must isolate those fundamental issues with which Williams - in his passionate concern with the Romantic experience - inevitably becomes involved. In the light of these issues we must ultimately ask and answer the question: Has Williams adequately clarified and evaluated the Beatrician experience?

Let us try a simple remark, and see, in the context Williams' thought creates, how rapidly it ceases to be simple. Beatrician love is subjective. In a sense it is subjectivity in excelsis, for in Williams' understanding, Beatrician love is the supreme out-reaching - the paradoxical self-transcendence - of our subjectivity. It is the point at which personal, loving perception transcends
individual limitation and touches the Real, thereby
transfiguring lover and beloved in the experience of
Blessedness. ¹

What is Blessedness? It is, says Charles Williams,
our salvation in Christ. ² But other religious traditions
have affirmed the reality of Blessedness without needing
to understand this state in terms of Incarnation and
Redemption.

And let us note further, in token of the problems
that lie ahead, how very difficult it is to speak of "the
experience of Blessedness" without implying a high degree
of conscious understanding as a necessary part of that
experience. Can one be blessed and yet not know oneself
to be blessed?

To ask this question is to focus on a crucial issue
in Charles Williams' thought. Does the state of Blessed-
ness necessarily involve understanding? - which is another
way of saying, "Does the Beatrician moment necessarily

¹ Williams, Figure of Beatrice, p. 26.
² Williams, "Collects Composed for a Marriage", in his Image of the City, p. 195.
involve a confession of Christian faith?"

This issue is not new in Western thought. It is possible to see the Garden of Eden story as an early expression of the same dilemma. The acquisition of knowledge — of awareness — is closely linked with man's trespass and his subsequent exile from Paradise, although the exact character of that connection has been a matter of debate. And yet, because this awareness — this power of discrimination — is inseparable from human nature as we know it, the Genesis story seems paradoxically to present Paradise as a state that can only be known in loss. The Golden Age must always lie (as it does in every cultural tradition) in the "vast backward and abyss of time", for it is antecedent to our own being as presently constituted. The time when experience and knowledge were undivided lies, therefore, outside historical reality, a fact only thinly disguised by its folktale location in "very long ago".

This is not meant to be a formal discussion of Genesis but rather an impressionistic drawing-out of certain implications which have, I think, lived on as this story was assimilated into popular cultural tradition. Insofar as the Beatrician lover partakes, as Williams
literally puts it, of Paradise - that is, of the redeemed state - he is open to the ancient dilemma of whether Paradise is a state of knowledge, and if so, of knowledge in what form?

It is possible to argue - not in terms of the author's intention, but in terms of the cultural influence this story has exerted - that Genesis represents the original Blessedness as a state where man's intellect had not yet separated itself from an unselfconscious participation in Being.

Now, since Charles Williams maintains that the Beatrician state closely involves the intelletto d'amore, it appears that Blessedness must have changed since Adam's time. And of course, according to Christianity, in a sense it has. In the ensuing time man has, historically speaking, gone through a whole drama of shipwreck and rescue, culminating in the establishment of a redeemed Blessedness which some theologians have argued to be even better

\[3\] Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, pp. 22-3.
than the bliss of the Garden: as the traditional exclamation puts it, "O happy fault, that has merited such and so great a Redeemer!" 4

However, one can, at this point, hear Williams' voice objecting. Christ is "very man", and therefore has appeared at a certain place and a certain time; but He is also "very God", and as such is not subject to temporal or historical limitation. The Incarnation, being eternal, is true at every point in time; it must therefore in some sense be true even for that vague collective ancestor whom Williams insists on discussing in the plural, by the tribal designation of "the Adam". 5

Williams' comment on Genesis would therefore be: "only our historical concept of Blessedness has changed. Beatitude itself remains the same".

4 This exclamation has been attributed to Augustine, but is so ancient in the Church that its ultimate origin is uncertain.

This brief discussion will serve to remind us of two things. One is that, in a way he insisted on but did not fully elaborate, Williams held the intelletto d'amore — the plenitude of redeemed intellect — to be an essential aspect of the blessed state. Paradise, which embraces all perfection, is among other things the perfection of understanding. ⁶

The second point of which I wish to remind the reader is that, with his whole being, his life and the entire passion of his intellect, Williams testified to the reality of Blessedness.

This is meant to be an existential statement of the simplest sort. From his childhood Williams yearned after a perfection of love for which the primary word is not Incarnation or Redemption — implying as these inevitably must a developed theology — but simply Blessedness.

By making this point I wish to establish, for purposes of this discussion, the theoretical possibility

⁶Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, p. 219.
of a distinction between Blessedness and Incarnation. This is a distinction which Williams himself would be willing to admit only in the most limited sense, but my reasons for it will, I hope, soon become clear.

My interest in Williams was originally an existential one. Since childhood I have been familiar with the type of moment that Williams designates "Beatrician". From time to time I came across statements, like Proust's vision of the three trees, which seemed to indicate that my experience was shared. I do not, therefore, question that the Beatrician moment is real and very important for certain individuals, although I do not claim — any more than does Charles Williams — that it is universally familiar. To some temperaments, indeed, it may be so foreign as to arouse a sense of puzzlement and even of exasperation. For such people I have attempted, through my own statements and by quotations from other authors, to convey some sense of the Beatrician moment. It happens; and for those to whom it happens, it is unforgettable.

This vividness — this conviction of significance — justifies the effort to understand it.

Charles Williams proposed to trace the Beatrician
experience to its roots: to offer a true explanation and a full understanding. However, the discerning reader will have noticed, in Williams' thought as I have presented it, two characteristic and related problems.

The first can be called "the problem of experience and interpretation". From time to time I have loosely applied the words "theory" and "interpretation" to the Beatrician experience in its developed form. These words did serve a legitimate function: they served to impart a certain quality of reservation to my discussion of Williams' ideas. This was my reason for using them.

However, it has already become clear that the Beatrician Vision is, for Charles Williams, not a theory - or not only a theory - but a truth. Williams in fact claims for the Beatrician Vision a thoroughgoing objectivity which I have not been willing to concede without further examination. It has therefore seemed advisable to imply a certain subjunctive quality in my own discussion of Williams' thought, even though this has led to a problem of terminology which must now be cleared up.

For the time has come to look far more closely at the words "theory" and "interpretation" as they apply to
the Beatrician Vision. This examination will involve the questions: a) What kind of objectivity does Williams claim for Beatrice, that I should hesitate to agree with it and introduce the word "theory"? and b) Is it correct to apply the word "interpretation" to the Beatrician Vision?

Another way of putting this question would be to ask: "With reference to the Beatrician Vision, does the very word 'experience' necessarily involve some concept of interpretation?"

Let us turn to the first question, which I have expressed in this way: "What kind of objectivity (or reality) does Williams claim for Beatrice?"

This question is difficult, for the quick and obvious answer is: Williams claims for Beatrice the objectivity or reality of the Incarnation. But Williams knows perfectly well that Beatrice is not Christ. She is not the Incarnation, which Williams as a Christian affirms to have been uniquely present in the person of Jesus; rather Beatrice has her being in the reality of the Incarnation, for Incarnation and Redemption are the constituent facts
of her nature - of her exalted "Beatricianness". By being herself she shows forth God's glory - for God's glory is herself, the self of redeemed humanity.

This quality is not unique to Beatrice but is universal, and is potentially visible in every human being. The Incarnation has become the self, the constitutive truth, of redeemed human nature. In this sense Beatrice is identified with the Incarnate Christ (although not with the individual Jesus of Nazareth). It is the truth of Christhood that Williams claims for her.

At this point a problem may occur to the reader's mind. Since (according to Williams) to understand Beatrice truly is to understand her in the light of Christian truth, how can he continue to insist on the validity of non-Christian Beatrician love? Does not Christianity

---

7 Ibid., p. 27.

8 Loc. cit.

9 Ibid., p. 48.
become one important (if not indeed the main) criterion of the truly Beatrician? It almost appears that Williams is refusing to follow to its inevitable extreme the fundamental logic of his own position, according to which a) the truly Beatrician lover must reach a Christian understanding of his love, and therefore that b) the lover who does not ultimately understand his adoration in Christian terms is not truly Beatrician.

In short, the suspicion arises that Williams may be undercutting his own position by this eagerness to spare the integrity of secular Beatrician love.

In order even to begin to answer this question we must make a crucial distinction. I have said that the reality ("objectivity") Williams claims for Beatrice is the reality established by the Incarnation. But it is possible, and indeed in this context necessary, to understand that, for Williams, the word "Incarnation" means two things. (The discussion that follows is my own expression of Williams' position as I understand it.)

---

First, Incarnation is the Christian term for God-in-relation-to-man. The Christian designation for that aspect of What-Is is "Incarnation". Incarnation is What Is, regardless of man's awareness or of his confession.

Second, the word "Incarnation" condenses the developed Theology of the Church, a body of words and thoughts which, whatever their possible origins in revelation, figure in this context as an historical phenomenon.

It is true that Williams considered the Church's reflection of Truth to be, among human institutions, comparatively accurate. However, since What Is in its modulation God-in-relation-to-man ("Incarnation") is infinite, no human institution, including the historical Church, can exhaust or exhaustively express It.

Historical Christianity with its confessions of belief cannot, therefore - despite its (in Williams' view) comparative accuracy and many excellences - exhaustively, conclusively and finally declare the truth of God toward

---

11 Williams, Descent of the Dove, p. 6.

12 Williams, The Forgiveness of Sins, p. 109; p.120.
men. Insofar as the historical Church has been in the habit of making such a claim, Williams considers it mistaken. 13

We now begin to see in what sense the Beatrician lover is, and must be, "Christian". He need not confess the Christianity of the Church, although Williams indubitably considers it a good and desirable thing that he should do so. But by declining to "confess the Name" the Beatrician lover does not - indeed cannot - reject or remove himself from the realm of What Is, or God-in-relation-to-man. The King's writ runs everywhere. By the fact of participating in Beatrician love, then, a human being - because Beatrician love is a genuine intuition of What Is - willy nilly participates in the Incarnation in the first, most basic sense.

My mention of Anselm of Canterbury was à propos, for his shadow falls over the argument and any of its type. If one defines Incarnation as What Is, one must of course concede it at least a paper reality - for What Is,

by definition, is.

My purpose at this point is not to debate the merits of the "ontological" type of argument, but merely to point out Williams' fondness for this kind of (as its critics would maintain) tautology. The only critical point I wish to make here is that it would be a mistake to think that Williams is conning his readers with tricks of logic. His theological thinking bore a significant similarity to Anselm's, although he did not work out that similarity in the open. One should regard the buried ontological quality in his work as an interesting and genuine revelation of this thought-process, not as a species of logical outrage perpetrated on the reader's good sense.

My reservation, then, about conceding to Beatrice a Christian reality relates to my own doubts about the historical Church regarded as the definitive and final mediator of God's truth to man. But it is difficult to deny Beatrice her participation in What Is, and therefore to deny her Incarnational or Christian nature in what I have called the more basic sense.
Considering the nature of the reality that Williams ascribes to the Beatrician Vision, it is finally inaccurate to refer to the latter as a "theory". One characteristic of a theory is that it is vulnerable to falsification. I sympathize with those who feel that the unique significance of Jesus, in terms of the claims made for him by the Church, has not by any means been proven. If faith depends on "proof" in the ordinary sense, then faith-positions will - as the Church found in the wake of Darwin's Origin of Species - constantly seem to be threatened with dis-proof by new evidence.  

Williams is not asking that those who find themselves unable to accept the divinity of the man Jesus, or who are repelled by the historical Church, should become Christians. He does ask the reader to recognize that the statement about reality contained in the word "Incarnation" is of another order: it is not subject to falsification. Christhood (Incarnation, Blessedness) is not subject to falsification. Rather it is the absolute

14 Ibid., p.219.
precondition of all human experience;\textsuperscript{15} It is, then, the
ground both of Christianity and of the most serious and
weighty disagreement with Christianity.\textsuperscript{16} Christ is
reality; He is Beatitude; He is God-in-relation-to-man.

Both as a manner of speaking and as an expression
of my own doubt, then, the word "theory" has served me well
up to this point. It is useful even in its inaccuracy, for
in dismissing it we are forced to consider the reasons why
it is wrong. But its usefulness is done, and I will not
employ it any longer to describe the Beatrixian Vision.

What about the second word I have occasionally used:
"interpretation"?

\textsuperscript{15} Williams, "The Way of Exchange", in his \textit{Image
of the City}, p. 152.

\textsuperscript{16} Williams, \textit{Descent of the Dove}, p. 110.
Interpretation is a fully developed intellectual understanding. Whereas a theory is an hypothesis about truth, "interpretation" is ideally a penetration to the truth. This involves the assumption that there is a truth accessible to understanding; and therefore an interpretation, by the interpreter's effort to penetrate to the truth of the situation, has what we shall for the present loosely call an objective aspect.

At the same time, interpretation is the work of an interpreter: it is the work of a man who considers himself, or is considered by others, peculiarly competent to draw out the correct meaning of the event, scene or passage in question. The peculiar competence of the interpreter (in the case important to us, Williams' claim to have experienced the Beatrician Vision) helps to guarantee the accuracy of his understanding.

But a hint of doubt hovers over this aspect of the interpreter's function. The less expert depend on him for guidance. His is only one opinion, after all...What if he is wrong?

This independence of judgment, and its accompanying vulnerability to error, lends to the interpretative function
an aspect which I shall for the present loosely call subjective.

Granted that there is indeed a "Beatrician Vision" which Williams did experience, how far does his understanding - Christian and theological as it is - involve interpretation? This question arises out of Williams' insistence on the theoretical integrity and genuineness of non-Christian Beatrician love. His own understanding and presentation of the Beatrician Vision attained an elaborate theological form. How far was this theological content part of the actual moment of vision? In other words, how far is Williams' Christianization of the Beatrician Vision a subjective contribution of his own?

Williams has all along been at some pains to emphasize that those who experience Beatrician love do not speak lightly when describing it. Their words are measured, because they tend to be aware how difficult of expression, even perhaps how outlandish, this experience seems to others. I agree with Williams that Dante - and, I would add, Marcel Proust - were serious and, as far as they were able, precise in their descriptions. With this in mind, let us look again at two highly condensed characteriz-
ations of the Beatrician Vision.

The first is Dante's illumination, which Williams heartily endorses: "Now your beatitude has appeared to you".\(^\text{17}\) The second, which we have not yet considered at any length, is Proust's statement when the carriage drove on past the three trees: "It was bearing me away from what alone I believed to be true, what would have made me truly happy; it was like my life".\(^\text{18}\)

If we accept, as I think we must, the seriousness of Dante's intention, then we have to recognize that the word "beatitude" - the most solemn word that Dante, in the context of his time, could possibly have chosen - implies not only significance, but meaning. Some kind of understanding is present, highly condensed, in the initial moment of revelation.

If we accept this then we will not be surprised to find Proust, for all his bewilderment, identifying the vision as "what alone I believed to be true". What justification have we for making light of this? The

\(^{17}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 132.}\)

\(^{18}\text{Proust, } \text{Within a Budding Grove, Vol.2, pp. 20-23.}\)
statement is exact. We are asked to accept that the moment of vision somehow contains— and Proust knows it, even though he knows not how—a truth of supreme importance, a unique source of happiness.

The French word for "happy", "heureux", can also mean "blessed". I suspect the ambiguity is deliberate, and that Proust is associating (as he does at least by virtue of proximity) the idea of truth with the idea of blessedness. In that case, both he and Dante are locating a realization of beatitude (which is, in Christian terms, Salvation or Incarnation) in the moment of vision itself. And, as I have already briefly discussed, the idea of a blessed state is closely involved with the idea of understanding.

In other words, Dante, Proust and Williams all assert that some kind of understanding is part of the very moment of revelation, i.e. of the Beatićian Vision itself.

What do these three "visions" reduce themselves to in objective terms? We behold Dante, in the middle of a children's birthday party, gazing intently at a little girl; Proust in a victoria driving past a few trees; and Williams, perhaps, sitting on a sofa, shyly offering a
volume of poems. Objectively these events do not amount to much: they are so ordinary, so absurdly simple as to pass unnoticed by everyone but the visionary himself. In fact, it might with justice be said that the entire significance of these particular events is inward, subjective - and so a matter of "interpretation".

But what is Dante interpreting? The Divine Comedy is a surprising development from the sight of a little girl in a red dress; the process involved may be (as Williams might put it) the logic of heaven, but it is certainly not the logic of earth. Proust’s reaction too is unusual: most people can bear the sight of trees without losing their composure.

If interpretation is involved here, it is interpretation of an event that was primarily inward to begin with: it is the subjective brought to bear on the subjective.

The psychological sciences have proven (even if religion had not long asserted) that no human being is a tabula rasa. We bring our own contribution to every experience. Our perception is bent and biased different ways, whether one ascribes the causes to infant trauma or
to Original Sin; and this "bent" influences our perception of events.

I agree with Westcott\(^ {19} \) that "it is a final fact of our nature that we must interpret the phenomena of human life". I maintain further that interpretation of a kind is the primary fact of our functioning in the world, for we experience nothing except through the mediation of body, brain, nervous system, psyche. This truth is contained in the great myth of the Garden of Eden; for man as he is now constituted - for human being as we know and experience it, that is for historical man - the "knowledge of good and evil" is an accomplished fact, a fact now inseparable from the human nature which has fallen and been redeemed.

When we ask: "Was the Beatrician Vision originally a 'pure' experience that underwent subsequent interpretation?" we cannot, therefore, mean that it was experienced in any way except through the medium of human perception, with whatever distortions that involves.

We may, however, also understand the question to

\(^ {19} \) Encyclopedia Britannica, article: "Interpret".
mean, "Was the Beatrician Vision originally non-Christian, and is Christianity a subsequent imposition according to the bias of the visionary?"

In answering this question we once again have to deal with the limits of our constitution. Man is a physical creature living in time; his knowledge functions through physical structure and temporal limitation. The structure of the brain, and of the organic world to which it belongs, necessitates that our normal understanding be sequential. The ordinary consciousness does not perceive complex intellectual equations all at once, that is in a way freed from the structure and limitations of time. This atemporal quality partakes of eternity; and perception sub specie aeternitatis is not "normal".

It is, however, possible. Charles Williams and many others affirm that it happens.\(^{20}\) It is rare, and it seems to alter temporarily the normal relationship of our perceptions to time. The rest of the Proust passage testified to this, as the author searches his recent

\(^{20}\) Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, p. 23.
dream-memories in an unsuccessful attempt to find a temporal source for his emotion. The same affirmation, of the a temporal nature of the vision, is involved when Williams equates Beatrician love with Paradise. 21

Now, Paradise as Williams describes it is characterized by the intelletto d'amore. But understanding which may, outside time, be simply present in all its complexity must, in the framework of normal human life, be grasped and communicated laboriously, one-step-after-another. Only so can it be rendered into a form that others can understand. Even the normal intellect of the visionary, because of its physical-temporal structure, must define its own experience in terms of a conscious, analytical short-hand, making use of linguistic and cultural symbols. The supernal knowledge of the vision belongs to another state of consciousness: a process of translation is involved.

I take most seriously Charles Williams' assertion that the Beatrician Vision is Paradisal, i.e. that it is essentially non-temporal. 22 In the Paradisal ("redeemed",

21 Loc. cit.
22 Loc. cit.
"blessed") state, understanding of a complex sort can be fully present and extremely condensed in its expression (for instance the degree of meaning Dante compressed into the single word "beatitude").

To translate visionary understanding into temporal terms - a process unavoidable unless the visionary prefers to remain silent - necessarily involves a process which will in a time-sequence framework appear secondary, and which may therefore possibly appear to be an imposition. It is, however, not an imposition, but the necessary first step in translating the visionary experience into the terms of normal consciousness.

The visionary is by no means at full liberty to choose his symbols. He must use structures offered by his time and culture, and by his own psyche: as a man he can do nothing else. And, because the vision is supremely important, he will choose those symbols which, for himself and his contemporaries, are capable of containing the maximum meaning. If a Christ is the most highly-charged symbol available in his culture, then he will not only communicate the vision in terms of Christ, but consciously experience it in these terms as well. His aim, after all,
is to communicate, or he would keep silence; and in fact, faced by the effort to express the transcendent, this is what many visionaries have elected to do.

I have heavily emphasized the limitations placed on man's understanding by time and the body—and then I have located the Beatrician Vision in "Paradise", i.e. precisely outside the time from which I have asserted it is almost impossible for man to escape. How can I reconcile this contradiction?

It is a contradiction, and so unacceptable (as "materialism" and reductionist psychologies have found it) if we insist that man must be one thing or the other, either physical-temporal or spiritual-eternal. If we consider that he must be strictly physical-temporal, then the Beatrician Vision cannot possibly be what Charles Williams and other visionaries have claimed. We will therefore dismiss it as glorified neurosis, or naive imagination, or a lie. If man is completely defined by time and the body, how can he possibly participate in an atemporal ("eternal") experience? Even if such things are true, they would have to lie as far beyond the possibilities of human perception as though they did not exist.
Put most briefly, my point is this. One can accept the accuracy of Williams' "Beatrician Vision" only if one is prepared to accept the possibility of man's participating in the eternal; for that is what the vision means. It is difficult to conceive of man's perception transcending temporal limits unless one assumes that there is in man some element which is itself atemporal, and so is capable of perception on a different level from the normal. This is precisely what Christianity maintains when it conceives man as an immortal soul. We perceive the eternal because there is in ourselves something that participates in the eternal; or, to put it in Williams' terms, we perceive the Divine because we are ourselves redeemed. 23

It is possible to turn our initial statement inside-out and assert that if one accepts that Williams is accurately describing a real experience, one is led irresistibly on to considering the reality of the soul.

Christianity does not, in this case, insist on an either-or. In the Christian view, man is a spirit, but he

23 Williams, Forgiveness of Sins, p. 165.
is also emphatically physical; our being in the world cannot be rejected without falling into Gnosticism. Christianity has maintained an admirable tension between the two, emphasizing now one, now the other as a corrective to Gnostic or materialist extremes. The Beatrician Vision is, in Patmore's phrase, an "epitome of man", for it involves body, intellect and soul. In the moment of vision, all three aspects of man testify to their common source.

But that oneness is fully known only in Paradise. On earth there persists a tendency to extremism, and also the need to translate the vision into terms comprehensible to the normal understanding.

I began by mentioning "two characteristic and related problems" that occur to the student of Williams' work. The first of these was the relationship within the

---

24 Williams, Descent of the Dove, p. 58.

25 Williams, Figure of Beatrice, p. 48.
Beatrician Vision between experience and interpretation. The second might be called the "mediacy-immediacy" issue. They are related because "immediacy" corresponds to "experience", and "mediacy" to "interpretation".

"Immediacy" as I am using the word means "without a mediator". It is a useful shorthand characterization of those schools of thought which have insisted that pure experience is possible, desirable and admirable. This leads naturally to an insistence on the importance of the individual, and on the validity of his perception, judgment and emotions in bringing him into relationship with truth. An emphasis (not always well considered) on immediacy is characteristic of Romanticism, both in the nineteenth century and in contemporary culture.

"Mediacy" involves a mediator between the individual and truth - whether that mediator be a teacher or prophet, or academic tradition or the authority of the Church. Mediacy is not authority per se, but rather the insistence that an "intermediate" or interpretative stage is important to the apprehension of truth. This has been the traditional attitude of theology and academics.
Charles Williams repeatedly calls himself a Romantic theologian. In the terms I have just established he is not, however, speaking with complete accuracy. He was Romantic ("immediate") in that he testified to the reality of Blessedness with all his being — and this emphasis he insisted on restoring to Christianity, from which he felt it had been absent too long.

He was non-Romantic ("mediate") in his insistence on schooling pure experience to the disciplines of understanding, duty, patience and obedience as mediated to him by his own cultural context, the Christian Church. 26

Seen in this light, Williams' Romanticism appears as strategic: deliberately adopted to correct an overemphasis on mediacy which he detected in the attitudes of the historical Church. However, readers who recall his commentary on Paolo and Francesca will recognize that an overemphasis on pure experience and individual illumination is precisely the sin of the lovers — quintessentially a Romantic sin. Williams recognizes the nature of

26 Williams, He Came down from Heaven, p. 80-1.
their trespass very clearly, and his appeal from passion to the lovers' other obligations - to things like marital duty which only the most intelligent Romantics have appreciated - represents an equally strategic drawing back from a typically Romantic position.

Williams' claim to Romanticism should be seen as the slogan of a genial propagandist rather than as a thoroughgoing conviction. He feels no more obligation to mere consistency in this matter than he does in any other, and if we expect him to adopt a sterotypically Romantic viewpoint in every situation, we will be bewildered by his mobility. Even though he seems to file his own work under the heading "Romanticism", let us not commit the same error. If we expect to find in Williams a conventional Romantic, then his trenchancy, his capacity for obedience, and his occasional hardness will frustrate us, and their value go unperceived.

27Williams, Figure of Beatrice, p. 119.
CHAPTER VI

Some Criteria of Genuine Religious Vision

Charles Williams claims that Romantic Theology is one type of genuine religious vision; it is "genuine", "valid", "legitimate".\(^1\) It is not exhaustive: it shares legitimacy with other types of vision that may well be more congenial to non-Romantic temperaments.\(^2\) Williams claims only that the Romantic has a right to follow his star, and that there is — in opposition to certain widely held assumptions — nothing inherently dishonest in this enterprise and nothing inherently absurd or false about the result.

A vision is genuine — first and most obviously — if the visionary speaks in good faith. That is, a true vision is not a conscious and deliberate lie or manipulation of others.

\(^1\) Williams, *Descent of the Dove*, p. 57-8.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 140-2.
This may seem an overly obvious point to make, but a degraded popular materialism has rendered necessary the statement that the visionary is not a liar. The attitude I refer to was well exemplified by a student of my own who, in considering the miracle of the loaves and fishes, started out with the (to him self-evident) assumption that miracles do not occur. The first question to be asked therefore became: "How did Jesus deceive the crowd?" and the fact that a whole philosophy underlay his assumption had to be explicitly pointed out to him.

This kind of naivety has long been unfashionable among the intellectually sophisticated. For them there is, since the rise of psychoanalysis, another a priori, more reflective and requiring more attention from the critic, but too often advanced as though it were self-evident and fundamental. This is the question: "How is the visionary deceiving himself?"

It is, of course, possible in all good faith to deceive oneself. It could be argued that religious vision - because it deals with man's most imperative longings and locates their solution in the realm of the unseen, thus excluding most human beings from the vision -
is peculiarly vulnerable to this kind of falsification. Encouraged in his solitary course by powerful emotions within the community and lacking the normal objective restraints, the visionary obviously runs great danger of self-deception. 3 At this point I wish only to express the problem, and to note that modern psychology has rightly devoted much attention to it. 4 What psychology has not achieved, however - as those with a superficial acquaintance with its work in this area frequently assume - is to prove that the visionary is always or necessarily self-deceived. William James has dealt cogently with this kind of reductionism and has sharply criticized the modern assumption that, if majority opinion declares the visionary to be neurotic, his vision is a) automatically discredited and b) explained.

3 Ibid., p. 21-2.

4 E.g., William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, (New York: the Modern Library 1902), Lectures XIV, XV, "The Value of Saintliness".

5 James, Ibid., Lecture II, "Religion and Neurology".
By the standards I am attempting to establish, a "genuine" vision involves neither overt lying nor covert self-deception on the part of the visionary. It is — in one way — an experience as "objective" as slicing a loaf of bread; that is, the visionary experiences a reality that exists apart from himself and over against him, a truth that can be encountered.

However, it is also, according to Charles Williams, a truth that is intimately part of the visionary's own nature. In this sense it is "subjective". Potentially, the vision opens to the seer a truth so fundamental that it constitutes the foundation of his own being. This is the ethos within which Williams understands the concept of Reality; this is the order of "objectivity" he claims for the Romantic vision. (I have tried to make clear that in this essay "objective" and "subjective" are not, respectively, a term of superior value and a term of denigration).

We must now consider more closely what constitutes a genuine religious vision; and whether, by the standards

---

6 Williams, Descent of the Dove, p. 10.
we shall establish, Williams' Romanticism can be considered legitimate or valid. Why is it necessary to raise this question? It is necessary because, from the very beginning, Romanticism in all its forms has encountered a certain type of criticism. Again I quote from William James:

What immediately feels most "good" is not always most "true", when measured by the verdict of the rest of experience. The difference between Philip drunk and Philip sober is the classic instance in corroboration. If merely "feeling good" could decide, then drunkenness would be the supremely valid human experience...There are moments of sentimental and mystical experience...that carry an enormous sense of inner authority and illumination with them when they come. But they come seldom, and they do not come to everyone; and the rest of life makes either no connection with them, or tends to contradict them more than it confirms them. 7

More cogently, Christmas Humphreys has observed:

"(Emotion) deludes the mind into accepting it as intuition". 8

These two statements encapsulate the charge that has been made repeatedly since Romanticism first became articulate: that the Romantic is, in effect, Philip drunk. His emotion or sensation (often but, as we have seen, not

7James, Varieties, p. 17.
invariably sexual in character) "feels good", and so he hastens to equate it with intuition.

If it were possible to find absolute criteria, the question of what constitutes a valid religious vision need not be raised. Failing a set of standards that would settle the issue once for all, what criteria shall we choose - and on what basis shall we choose them?

Many have been advanced - all, I believe, having two things in common. First, criteria arise from the personal experience of the individual who formulates them. He has, in Keats's phrase, tested them on the pulse, and has arrived at a conviction of their truth in the area most intimate and therefore in a sense most sacred, that is in his own devotional life.

Second, he believes his criteria capable of a larger application - he asserts for them a more general validity. The critic remains aware that no basis of judging religious visions will prove universally acceptable, and so he does not expect to stumble on the "ideal, complete and final" criterion which - if it were both extant and accessible - would long since have put an end to this debate.
The principles that follow are founded in my own experience. At the same time I believe that others may find them useful.

A "genuine", "valid" or "legitimate" religious vision will show the following characteristics:

1. It renders the visionary's experience largely coherent.

This is not to say that any absolute system of belief is possible to us on an intellectual level: I believe with Williams that this is not true and that any religion which claims absolute accuracy in this sense, claims falsely. However, this reservation does not render the question of what is believed unimportant. Williams held that Christianity offers a comparative intellectual accuracy, while I am more inclined to rely on the check provided by Conditions 2 and 3B (see below).

Condition 1 does, however, attempt to point to a principle of faith, understanding and experience which almost by definition underlies the major religion: the conviction that human experience can be apprehended by

---

9 Williams, Descent of the Dove, p. 190.

10 Williams, He Came Down from Heaven, p. 99.
Reason; that our existence, individual and collective, will ultimately be susceptible of understanding and of deliberate human participation in what Williams calls our salvation.

2. A genuine vision leads, in the desire and effort of the visionary, to doing good.

A "religious" conviction that issues in no action at all is almost universally recognized to be false, arising from hypocrisy or self-delusion. Indeed, this is one of those encouragingly widespread criteria which seem to have been reached by common human consensus—a type of decision we must treat with great respect when considering the problem before us.

There is a pervasive belief in our own society that an action, to be good, must be directed toward the world; thus in part the high moral value placed on "activism" of various kinds in the past decade. However, both Eastern religions and the monastic theme in Christianity have maintained that valid religious action can also take the

---

11 Hadfield, p. 203.
form of inwardness (or perhaps that the hope of the secular world lies precisely in the individual soul's own self-transformation). If any clash exists here it does not concern us, and so I assume both inward- and outward-directed effort to be valid types of action.

More difficult is the question of whether an action is right or good. This is important, offering as it does the main objective check on the visions of the mystic. It is a truth of sad and frequent demonstration that a man can desire to do what is right and still, in the later judgment of himself or others, make serious errors. Human fallibility does not impugn the effort toward right action which comes from a true religious vision. Similarly, it is possible for a man, governed by this desire, deliberately to do something which is wrong by his normal criteria or in the opinion of others. One famous example is Pastor Bonhoeffer's decision to participate in the plot to murder Hitler, even though he believed that murder was, and remained, a sin. 12

Here again, millennia of human experience have shown that there are no absolute criteria - although there are certain standards so widespread as to give the lie to the simplistic extrapolation of morality from herd instinct, hunger and lust.

For reasons I have tried to make clear, the question whether an action be judged good is difficult, and must be approached in humility and in charity. The proverb "The road to hell is paved with good intentions" embodies a lie so vicious it has been responsible for much suffering. In a world where, according to Christian understanding, all action is to some extent corrupted, the desire to do good is one of the few things we can offer in simplicity. Surely the road to heaven is paved with good intentions, and true religious vision gives rise to the desire and effort to do good: for success in that endeavour is guaranteed to none of us.

3a. If a vision or belief conduces to crippling despair - i.e. to rendering the human being non-functional - I take the impairment of function to be an indication of falsity.

Once again, this argument is blazingly obvious; yet its absence from most d...
deeply disturbed me.

Two illustrations occur to mind: the Pauline dispute between the principle of Law and the principle of Grace; and the experience of the young Martin Luther. I am not concerned, in mentioning Paul, with the technical aspects of New Testament criticism, but rather with Grace and Law as perennial tendencies of the human mind. The "legal" cast of mind - which has, for the average Christian, acquired the adjective Pharisaic, - is inspired by the infinite contrast between man's sinfulness and God's perfection. It expresses God's just requirements toward his creature in the form of laws. But man, being sinful, is never able to keep the Law in its perfection; he always falls infinitely short. To the sensitive and conscientious individual this sense of infinite unworthiness, promoted as a good by the legalistic type of religious man, can be a source of soul-killing despair.

The spiritual crisis experienced by Luther in his early manhood is a classic example of the misery religious
legalism is capable of breeding. ¹³ Luther has eloquently described his conviction that his most strenuous efforts could never make him acceptable in God's eyes. He has also described the sudden resolution of the crisis by the revelation that his unworthiness, infinite as he still perceived it to be, was the very occasion of God's grace. ¹⁵

For the anxious, frightened and conscientious soul, the Law easily becomes a source of despair, all the more as its justice is acknowledged. The change from "Law" to "Grace" is marked by a rapturous yielding to a God who accepts the sinner in all his imperfection: a God suddenly revealed to be infinite in love as well as in justice.

¹³Williams, Descent of the Dove, p. 165-5 and 168-9: and James, Varieties, p. 108.

¹⁴"The word (iustitia) used to give me such a seasickness...that I would hardly have been sorry if somebody had made away with me...Ay, even today I am as though transfixed when I hear God called "the Just" - Quoted by Simon, Luther Alive, (New York: Doubleday, 1968).

¹⁵Williams, Descent of the Dove, p. 169.
Luther's is only one example of a common religious crisis. The point I wish to make is this: Despair kills. In destroying hope, in destroying a just and wholesome self-love, it destroys the capability for action. One can only labour under despair for so long before sinking down entirely.

I do not wish to attack the legalistic type of religiousness as such (still less the concept of Law in all its ramifications); my use of the word "law" is existentially oriented. I do wish to speak for those religious people who know despair for the killer it is. How urgent it is to reiterate the words of a modern writer, Jane Roberts: "'All That Is' is the creator of individuality, not the means of its destruction". 16

3b. Similarly, if function is enhanced, I take this enhancement to be an empirical — though not an absolute — indication of truth.

It seems obvious that, if God exists and (as Christianity affirms) is good, then he ultimately wills our health, wholeness and wellbeing. "For God so loved the

---

The Christian affirmation of God's goodness necessarily involves in principle the increased health which I have called "enhancement of function".

No individual who has been delivered from religious despair by an intuitive vision of the divine can doubt that he has gone from death to life, and that greater truth resides in the vision which delivered him than in the beliefs which nearly destroyed him as a functioning human being. "All That Is", being the Creator of the individual soul, is ultimately the source of all that strengthens, purifies and refreshes the soul, thus enabling it to function in service toward the rest of God's creation.  

17 John 3:16.

18 Williams' concept of Substitution, by which one individual can function on behalf of another, beautifully expresses the experience of God as the source of spiritual health which enables us to serve our fellow-man. In doing so we serve God himself, for Williams sees our neighbor as a member of Christ's Body.
3c. "Enhancement of Function" involves these characteristics: not only does it expedite action, but it promotes conditions - such as patience, loyalty, mercy, courage and hope - which are good by daily demonstration and by general human consent.

The question of what is judged to be a loyal, patient or merciful action in a particular situation or culture is difficult, and does not concern us here. But while ethical judgments vary, the principles from which human societies have perceived them to spring have maintained a surprising constancy. Most cultures have recognized these qualities and have considered them, at least in the abstract, to be good.

A true religious vision must, then, conduce to qualities which are recognized as virtues by general human consent.

These three criteria are far from absolute, but they are also most difficult to avoid. Pedestrian, commonsensical and even "childish" in their simplicity, they are also so basic as to have become all-too-frequently ignored in discussions of what constitutes valid religious vision. Each of them, taken in isolation, is
vulnerable to some perversion; but each is wholesome and useful when balanced by the others.

How, by these criteria, does Charles Williams' Romantic theology come off - limiting that question for the moment to the career of Williams himself? It is clear that Williams' kind of Christian devotion amply fulfilled Condition 1: it rendered his own experience largely coherent, and therefore meaningful. It thus (fulfilling Condition 2) gave him a basis for action which he proceeded to use to the best of his ability. Like everyone else, Williams had his enemies and his failures; but he seems to have done good with singular energy and success, to judge by the loving testimony of his biographer and of other surviving friends.

Personal probity is not, in itself, an argument: the Romantic might theoretically be a good man and a fool.

---

19 Hadfield, p. 127.

20 Ibid., p. 136-8; and Ridler, Introduction to Image of the City, p. xvii.

21 Ridler, Ibid., p. xxi.
As far as we have any right to judge, Williams was a good man. Although limited by the intensity of his concerns, he also possessed intelligence and intellectual integrity. His character and career are difficult to explain on the theory that the Romantic is nothing but Philip drunk on sex or sensation.

Williams' Romantic theology is most interesting in the way it fulfills Condition 3. As I have said, Williams was temperamentally prone to despair. 22 It is this continuing vulnerability - in no way desensitized but rather heightened by his faith - which can render him so sympathetic for the non-Christian reader; his frank recognition of the horror, squalor and absurdity that we find not only in the world, but lodged in our most secret selfhood. 23

This recognition, which is not merely acknowledged but is seen to be inescapable and is felt with keen sensitivity, is characteristic of the religious type called by James "the Sick Soul". 24 Williams' optimism (it is an

---

22 Hadfield, p. 56.

23 Loc.: cit.

24 James, Varieties, Lectures VI and VII.
accurate word for his belief that the Redemption is present to us even in "the fury and the mire of human veins") was not of that chest-thumping variety, so disparaged by Professor James, that comes without effort and regards evil as something to be ignored, disdained or manfully surmounted.  

Here we face a paradox, but one not past understanding. For Williams' religion belongs to the other side of James's typology, to what he calls the "Healthy-Minded" type. This is where James located those "natural" religions that, like Romantic theology, find God to be discoverable in the world, and so accessible with comparative ease to human longing.

It is no accident that Charles Williams, inclining as he did to the dark side of the religious temperament, came to practise a variety of "natural" religion, as I have defined it in the paragraph above. Rather, the development of Romantic theology embodied, for

---

25 Yeats, "Byzantium".

26 James, Varieties, p. 125.

27 Ibid.
Williams, a crucial correction of balance—a healing measure which was, I believe, both deliberate and instinctive. His Christianity, which meaningfully incorporated both his love for his wife and the continuing power exerted on him by all natural and sexual beauty, enabled him to build love, wisdom, continence and discipline on a foundation for which the Christianity of his time could offer only a negative and punitive understanding. He thus experienced an increase in mental and spiritual health—an "enhancement of function"—which, in the pattern I have designated 3b, led him to attribute greater truth to transfigured sexuality than to the Church's traditional understanding of the same phenomenon.

Another Romantic (on whom Williams would, one feels, have looked with a somewhat dubious eye) has written on an all-too-famous but still useful expression of the type of equation so characteristic of Romanticism. Apostrophizing the Grecian Urn, Keats wrote: "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty..."28

28 Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn".
Thus far, Williams would in part agree. He held that all true good in its various manifestations arises from one source, God the Creator and Redeemer. All good, therefore—whether it be manifested as justice or wisdom or as fleshly beauty—partakes of the essential fact, Redemption. All good can lead us to a perception of Redemption and so all goods are identical at the source; and this, Williams strongly and repeatedly affirmed, is true Romanticism—the insight into Redemption through any created good.\(^{29}\) This was why he considered Wordsworth's nature-visions as Romantically valid as his own.\(^{30}\) The only reasons for an exclusive insistence on sexual revelation are temperamental preference (which Williams acknowledged in himself, and of whose dangers he was aware) or concealed lust—which is the sin of the pseudo-Romantic.

At this point, then, Williams would take issue with Keats. Williams could not accept the latter's conclusion,

\(^{29}\) Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, p. 153-4.  

\(^{30}\) *Loc. cit.*
"This is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know!"

If this is not actual pseudo-Romanticism it verges, dangerously on it; for the true Romantic acknowledges all the other checks on his vision, all the other criteria offered by a redeemed creation. He acknowledges the jurisdiction of intellect, of ethics, of authority, of common human goodness.

Williams' Romantic Christianity, then, made him a happier and a healthier man. We are not justified in concluding that because of this it is "merely self-serving" or "merely subjective". On the contrary, I have attempted to show that, if the Christian affirmations about the divine goodness are true, increased health is an inevitable characteristic of genuine, legitimate religious vision.

The criterion of increased health, while it is as I believe crucial to the assessment of religious vision, is capable of perversion, and for that reason requires careful control by other conditions. For even a vision that

---

31 Ibid., p. 118-9; and Williams, Descent of the Dove, p. 136.
the majority of men ultimately judge to be evil - like the
mythos of Fuehrer, Reich and Aryan superman - can initially
produce a comparative and genuine increase in health, or
"enhancement of function". It is possible to argue that
the state of Germany following the First World War was so
abject that the rise of Nazism, with its associated
mythology, was "good" in that it unified the country,
reforged its self-respect and rescued it from economic
depression. Should we not regard with suspicion a crit-
erion of genuine vision that is fulfilled not only by
Charles Williams' Romantic theology, but also to a certain
extent by the achievements of Nazism? And those achieve-
ments were focused in the charismatic person of Adolf
Hitler. Does Hitler also embody the Beatrician Vision?

To this legitimate and - in view of modern world
history - very important question, Charles Williams would
return two answers:

A. No, Hitler does not embody the Beatrician Vision
because he fails the ultimate test of Beatricianness:
Beatrice is good, and Hitler was evil.

B. Yes, Hitler is in a sense a perverted Beatrice-figure,
for he is the logical culmination of false or pseudo-
Romanticism. Romanticism carried to extremes (like anything else similarly abused) is sin; and Hitler can be regarded as the sinful "Beatrice" produced by a diseased Romantic extremism.

Let us examine Answer A. This answer, vital to Charles Williams' religious affirmation, depends for its credibility on the Christian position that God a) exists and b) is good. The Beatricianness of Beatrice consists in her showing forth, among other qualities, God's transcendent goodness. As a human personality Beatrice has her faults, for like all humans she is in sin; but though flawed she cannot be evil, for that would contradict her essence. She could not be evil and still be Beatrice.

If one assumes that Romantic discrimination is a matter for unaided human judgment, then perversions of the Hitler type will arise. But, as far as Charles Williams is concerned, human judgment is only a part of the Beatrician

32 Williams, Descent of the Dove, pp. 21-6.

33 Williams, Figure of Beatrice, p. 27.
experience. The other part is God, who exists and can be encountered; who made his nature and his love known to men in the Incarnation. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that Williams affirms God to be not only an objective standard for our own struggles toward goodness, but also a living, reciprocating consciousness which enters into relationship with us. It is thus proper that Beatrice, in so far as she partakes of Incarnation, is not only the passive mediator of Dante's beatitude, but also (in the full consciousness given her by redeemed intellect) his active teacher concerning the glory that shines through her.

Romanticism, then, does not exist only by the fitful light of human wisdom. If it did - and when it does - it quickly becomes sin-ridden. Any Romantic adoration which acknowledges no criterion beyond itself is false, and sinful. By this standard the Hitler-figure appears for what he is, and offers no rivalry to the true Beatrice.

I prefer to speak of "the Hitler-figure", since, in discussing this question, we are obviously not concerned

---

"that she could be believed to be so" (i.e. as Dante depicts her.)\textsuperscript{35} Rather I am concerned with the ecstatic personal devotion that Hitler aroused - or perhaps occasioned - in many of his followers, notably among adolescent boys and girls. This devotion, with its mixture of eroticism, exaltation and self-transcendence,\textsuperscript{36} bears a disquieting resemblance to the Beatrician emotion, for the conviction of being restored to the source of one's being lends this aspect of Hitlerism a genuine Romantic character.

This capability of perversion does not, however, damn Romanticism as such any more than the capacity for sin ultimately condemn the human race to the status of a bad job or a failed experiment. For Charles Williams the possibility of a corrupt Romanticism follows from the fact of original sin: the "blame", if such a word is appropriate, lies not with Romanticism but with our fallenness.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 135.
\textsuperscript{36} G.L. Mosse, The Crisis of German Ideology, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap 1964), Ch. 9.
\textsuperscript{37} Williams, He Came Down from Heaven, p. 77-8, p. 81.
Hitler represents a Beatrice-figure unchecked by any of the other criteria to which the true Romantic willingly submits himself. It is Romanticism thriving on the darkest instincts, undisciplined by Churchly authority, intellectual lucidity, or any genuine intuition of the Good - or even, for that matter, by good taste. The individual who identifies his soul 's home with Germany instead of with the City of God is, after all, deeply mistaken.

It would be an error to think that Williams underestimated the darkness of false Romanticism. Once again I return to his profound analysis of Dante's decision to place Paolo and Francesca - that devoted and pathetic couple - within the mouth of Hell. This apparent harshness is justified, in Williams' view, precisely because pseudo-Romanticism in its full development is so evil. We are, however, speaking of false not of true Romanticism. The former is dangerous because it bears, for the second-rate mind, so seductive a superficial resemblance to the real thing.

But the true Romantic is judged by his ability - and his willingness - to refuse the gratifications of lust, whether sexual or other - while the pseudo-Romantic courts
such gratification and is corrupted by it. It is worth remembering that Dante himself hovers on the verge of false Romanticism when he finds himself enjoying the tortures of the damned, and calls forth Virgil's just rebuke: "Go on looking. A moment more, and we shall quarrel".  

True Romanticism as Williams has delineated it bears the marks of a legitimate and healthy religious vision. It renders experience coherent and meaningful; it inspires the visionary to do good; it refutes despair and encourages faith, joy, thanksgiving, hope, and charity toward other religious Ways of being. That Romanticism is capable of perversion would neither dismay Charles Williams nor surprise him: rather it is what, if we subscribe to a Christian anthropology, we ought to expect. The evil of pseudo-Romanticism is commensurate to the intense goodness of Romanticism used rightly.

The true Romantic is a responsible member of the City.  

---

38 Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, p. 140.

and honours his own being in all its capacities, for these partake of the goodness of a redeemed creation. But, knowing that Redemption is extended to all alike, he willingly admits that he has no right to exalt his own vision above other revelations. Charles Williams is fully aware of this, and insists on it with urgency. He is a true Romantic. As such his vision is legitimate and deserves what Williams desired for it: restoration with honour to the history of Christian devotion.
CHAPTER VII

The Christian Orthodoxy of Charles Williams

...Meanwhile the general consent of the Church was producing a written orthodoxy, "of whose authority", to quote the articles of the Church of England, "was never any doubt in the Church." Never is a long time.

Attempting to define orthodoxy would involve us in a controversy which, like King Charles's oak, is ancient but still hale. Christians have always striven to define orthodoxy; they are still striving. One is sometimes tempted to think that it clarifies itself more in the breach than in the observance: for the Church has shown an agonized ingenuity in defining what orthodoxy is not. The "right" form of Christianity has thus acquired in part a negative outline by means of the heresies which, we are assured, constitute a false understanding of that enigmatic figure, the carpenter of Nazareth.

The intellectual effort of two thousand years has not succeeded at arriving at a watertight, universally

---

accepted definition. I shall not attempt the impossible. Charles Williams insisted that his own thought was ortho
dox, and he knew exactly why. ² He even questioned the "orthodoxy", that is the propriety, of the Church's popular incarnational theology and he claimed greater "orthodoxy", propriety and truth for his own incarnational teaching and for those streams of thought which historically resembled it.

In other words Williams — while respectful of other points of view and regarding them, indeed, with unusual empathy — claimed in some respects to be more orthodox than the orthodox. He did not do this out of self-
exaltation, but out of a passionate desire to impress upon his fellow-Christians that a certain kind of incarnationalism should flow naturally from the nature of the Redemption they profess. Williams wanted others to see the logic that was so obvious and so important to him. He wanted this not for his own sake but for the sake of the truth by which he lived.

²Ibid., p. 59.
³Ibid., p. 56.
In the matter of orthodoxy, then, Williams is not on the defensive. He is an aggressor, a loving critic of the Church. He believes that in certain important respects she has failed to understand, develop and support her own creed in all its consequences: That is, he is criticizing not the creed itself, but the use to which it has been put. He conceives it his job to demand that this failure be recognized and corrected.

Certain assumptions about the nature of orthodoxy are implicit here. Williams does not identify orthodoxy with majority opinion, although as a member of the City he would feel bound to treat this factor with all due respect. But if numbers could decide, then he knows well that he, Dante, Patmore and their companions would be heretical simply by virtue of being few.

Despite his respect for the verdict of the Christian community, Williams accepts only with great caution the criterion of orthodoxy by sheer weight of numbers. The standard he most clearly accepts is the internal logic of Incarnation itself.

I have tried to make exhaustively clear Williams' own understanding of the Incarnation and of its worldly
expression, the Way of Affirmation of Images. I will assume that the reader by now understands Williams' own incarnationalism. In the discussion that follows I will consider the following questions: Why did Williams consider "popular" incarnationalism to be inadequate — and, by that token falling short of true orthodoxy? Why did he believe his own position to be an improvement, and so more genuinely orthodox? Is Williams right about the relative adequacy of Romantic theology?

Two immediate areas of difficulty will already have suggested themselves to the reader's mind. The first is Williams' individualism, which follows unavoidably from the profoundly personal character of the Beatrician moment. Generally speaking, the Church's opinion of individualism in matters of faith has been more repressive than Williams' own. A clash with popular orthodoxy is possible here. There are also certain questions clustering around the issue of "natural religion", a term whose meaning within this dissertation I define below. Williams' theology falls

4 Ibid., Chapter 5, "The Imposition of Belief", passim.
under this heading because he meets the most common criteria of natural religion, viz. he believes that God is present in the redeemed creation and is accessible to the redeemed natural faculties of man. The need for Grace, and the relative initiative of God and of man in this scheme of things, remain to be worked out. And there is, from the Christian point of view, the issue of idolatry: the danger that, since salute is "in" Beatrice as well as in Christ, the Romantic lover will myopically mistake Beatrice for the Redeemer. These objections I have already answered in part.

The Descent of the Dove contains Williams' most sustained discussion of the struggle to define orthodoxy within the early Church. For all his claims to orthodoxy when confronted by the Church's limitations, Williams possessed an awareness of the agony and doubt of any human life including the Christian; and for him this awareness precludes the possibility that any doctrinal expression of

\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{Chapters 1 and 2.}\]
God toward men can be absolute and final. Nevertheless his discussion of the early heresies, of Gnosticism and Pelagianism in particular, interestingly expresses his own reaction to these aberrant forms of Christianity, and to the orthodoxy that emerged more or less triumphant. 6

Williams fully agrees with the majority of Catholic opinion in his rejection of Gnosticism; but his definition of the Gnostic movement is precise and limited. He understands Gnosticism to be an extreme rejection of Matter, which the Gnostics, whether Christian or non-Christian, regarded as a pollution of Godhead. In Gnosticism as Williams understands it, Matter and the world are both believed to be so hopeless - so inimical to spirituality - that they must rank as evil. Their creator must therefore be the deluded world-god or Demiurge, for creation, and man's present state of bondage in Matter, is absolutely incompatible with the wisdom and goodness of the true God, who redeems man through the *gnosis* of his

---

(man's) originally spiritual nature.  

By the time the long struggle with Gnosticism ended, the Church had rejected this way of thought and reasserted the goodness of creation and God's loving relationship to man. This rejection, with its corresponding affirmation of the honour and goodness of being human, Charles Williams heartily ratifies.

Nevertheless, he maintains that a world-rejecting influence remained, and contributed to "the vague suggestion" within Christianity "that the body has somehow fallen farther than the soul", i.e., an implication that, if man's will is corrupted by sin, his body and in particular his sexuality are somehow still more deeply corrupted and more dangerous to the aspiring soul. It is this implication that arouses Williams' indignation. Only the desert ascetics were brutally honest in their rejection of all the body's demands, but particularly of its sexuality.

---

7 Ibid., p. 23-4.
8 Ibid., p. 25.
9 Ibid., p. 56.
Sex - the poor ignorant creatures thought - was one of the greatest, most subtle, and most lasting of all distractions; nor had the Church...shown any striking sign of intending to exhibit it as sometimes the greatest, most splendid, and most authoritative of all inducments. 10

At the risk of belabouring the obvious I will point out that this passage is ironic throughout. Williams thoroughly understands the fright of the "poor ignorant creatures" when faced with "the greatest, most subtle, and most lasting of all distractions"; insofar as their panic sprang from a real perception of the power of sexuality, Williams applauds their understanding. But neither they, nor even the Church which finally condemned the utmost rigours of asceticism, carried the understanding far enough.

The Church had chosen to affirm that man's body and his sex are good in the eyes of God. But Williams maintains that that affirmation, throughout most of nineteen centuries, has been gutless and halfhearted. According to Williams, the transfigured sexuality of the Beatrician moment can with the utmost propriety be regarded as "the

10 loc. cit.
greatest, most splendid, and most authoritative of all inducements" toward conscious participation in our salvation. Williams is charging the Church with having been lukewarm in its defense of the body - of tacitly allowing the paradox that sex is both holy and dirty, thus making inevitable the question asked by Patmore's small daughter - "Father, isn't marriage rather a wicked Sacrament?" 11

The Way of Affirmation of Images - particularly the subdivision of that Way to which Williams is especially drawn - seeks to restore the full honour of sexual love as a locus of revelation, since the Church has failed in its duty to do this. But Williams, though most of his energy was devoted to elaborating the Affirmative Way, pays full recognition to its opposite and complement. Both Affirmation and Negation are, he maintains, essential to each other.

No Affirmation could be so complete as not to need definition, discipline and refusal; no Rejection so absolute as not to leave necessary (literally and metaphorically) beans

11 Patmore, quoted by Williams, Image of the City, p. 68.
and a wild beast's skin and a little water. 12
To the Way of Affirmation he ascribes the achievement of
Christian art, Romantic love, philosophy, social justice,
and the theology of marriage; to the Way of Negation he
ascribes "the profound mystical documents of the soul" such as The Cloud of Unknowing and the works of Walter Hilton. Both Ways are essential to the fulness of the
City and the health of its citizens.

Under the influence of Augustine, the Church
turned its collective attention to the problem and nature
of sin. Charles Williams charges Augustine (whether
accurately or not is for students of the latter to decide)
with rejecting the anima naturaliter Christiana: with
failing to grasp - what Williams in this passage implicitly affirms - "that a man could grow, sweetly and natural-
ly - and no less naturally and sweetly in spite of all the

12 Williams, Descent of the Dove, p. 58.
13 Loc. cit.
14 Loc. cit.
15 Ibid., p. 63-4.
16 "The soul is by nature Christian".
stages of repentance necessarily involved - from man into new man." Then comes a revealing comment on Williams' own effort: "Formally Augustine did not err; but informally?" That "informal" errors are elusive does not mean they are nonexistent, or that they fail to exert pressure on the believer.

The shadow of Pelagius rises here - the Irish monk who passionately rejected Augustine's teaching concerning sin. Pelagius was a good, even a noble man: he believed fervently in man's basic decency and in his natural ability, given manly effort and a reasonable amount of good will, to conform to God's law. Augustine's gloomy view of human incapacity and corruption was, to Pelagius, an insult both to man and to his Creator. But despite its nobility, the theology of Pelagius reflects his temperament, which had the buoyancy of the born optimist.

---

17 Ibid., p. 66.
18 Ibid., p. 64.
His doctrine in effect admonishes the sinner (in Charles Williams' witty summing-up): "Pull yourself together, my dear fellow!" 20

Is Williams' own Christianity Pelagian in tendency?

I think that the distinction between the attitudes of the two men is indeed one of degree. Williams does believe, like Pelagius, in the possibility of "growing sweetly and naturally...from man into new man". He is far more willing than Augustine to affirm this as at least a theoretical possibility. Williams puts considerable confidence in man's goodness and in the goodness of his bodily instincts, for he conceives both to be redeemed, and refuses to treat them with the agonized distrust that so often breaks through in the work of Augustine. 21

But Williams did not, like Pelagius, conceive sin to be simply an undesirable habit, to be overcome by the unaided will. He shares Augustine's sense of the intimacy with which sin has permeated our being. Living as he

20 Williams, Descent of the Dove, p. 66.

did to see, in Hitler, the apotheosis of false Romanticism, Charles Williams was in no danger of underestimating the Fall and the extent of our corruption.

Williams does not despair before sin. He acknowledges it with a kind of stoic courtesy. But he refuses to focus on it, lest - as so often in the history of Christendom - direct focus become exclusive focus. The fascination of sin, the horrible glamour of it, is one aspect of sin itself. Williams was well aware of this. I suspect him of sharing the attitude of C.S. Lewis when Lewis remarked, concerning his own *Screwtape Letters*, that there are two errors we can make with regard to the devils. The first is to disbelieve in their existence. The second is to believe in their existence, and be fascinated by it. They themselves, says Lewis, are equally delighted by either error - because both are equally dangerous to the human soul.  

Charles Williams recognized the gravity of our fallenness. He acknowledged not only the fact but the

---

subtlety and tenacity of sin, and could if need arose describe its methods with great trenchancy. He did not spare his own great love, Romanticism, from a scathing exposure of its own perverse and sinful forms.

But still, like Pelagius, he is optimistic about men. He was not, like the Irish monk, an optimist by temperament. Rather he was an optimist by will and a consistent effort of intelligence. Since Christ has redeemed our nature, Williams will not presume to despair of it. To do so would be - in the chivalric terminology which held, for Williams, such a wealth of meaning - discourteous.

If Williams' understanding of redeemed human nature is compared to the position of Pelagius, there appears to be a certain limited similarity founded on their common optimism about the efficacy of human effort. However, the similarity is superficial, and examination reveals a more important difference rooted in the special meaning Williams gives to the terms "redeemed Nature" and "natural theology". Insofar as Pelagius attempts to establish a gradation or connection between unredeemed and redeemed Nature, Williams
would reply that we exist as part of a redeemed creation. We experience a redeemed natural order, and an unredeemed Nature is, for us, an empty theory. Williams' "natural theology" functions within the closed circle of redemption. For him, it is by God's grace in incarnation and redemption that our human efforts toward goodness have a certain efficacy of their own, an efficacy springing by grace from our redeemed humanity. He does not intend (another common meaning of the phrase "natural theology") that nature has always, i.e. before the Incarnation, exhibited the divine glory.

However, "before" is a difficult, because a temporal, term. Williams holds that the incarnation in Christ is an incursion of eternity into time. As temporal fact, the lifetime of Jesus can be dated to the reign of Tiberius Caesar. In the realm, however, of the incarnation's transcendent or eternal efficacy, temporal sequence is abolished and the word "before" ceases to have meaning. By grace in Redemption and Incarnation, Williams holds that our own humanity has been rendered essentially transcendent or eternal. To speak, therefore, of an "unredeemed" nature that existed "before" the Incarnation is, according to
Williams' understanding, really to utter an unintelligibility. The Eternal has no before or after. The Incarnation is efficacious throughout time as we know it: i.e. it is true "before" the lifetime of Jesus as well as "after". I am certain Williams would maintain that pagans living before the lifetime of Jesus experienced a redeemed natural order by virtue of the Redemption which was, in their limited temporal terms, still to come. Valid Beatrician experience would thus have been possible, not only to early man, but to agnostics like Proust.

If one then asks: "Is there, for Williams, an unredeemed Nature?" I would answer, again in temporal terms: "Not anymore." The "time" when there "was" an unredeemed Nature lies outside our historical and human experience, transfigured as both these now are by redemption. The Garden where man existed "before the Fall" cannot be located in time or history. Since Williams maintains that neither time nor history is finally essential to our redeemed being, it should be intelligible to locate the Fall "outside" these.

The actual course of history then presents a
problem. I sympathize, as would Charles Williams, with the Rabbi who remarked that if Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, world history since his time does not bear out that claim. Williams was committed to the belief that Jesus was the Messiah, and therefore he is forced to view history and human nature as redeemed. I have attempted to make clear that he never fully reconciled this faith-position with his frequent emotional recoil from the squalor, cruelty and seeming hopelessness of life. The pull between faith and emotional repugnance involved a genuine and not fully resolved difficulty in Charles Williams' life and in his thought.

However, if for Williams there is no unredeemed Nature, there is sin. The relationship of sin to redemption is a vast subject that lies beyond the scope of this dissertation; however, insofar as for Williams sin is the occasion of redemption, it is somehow comprehended in the redemptive process: "O happy fault, that has merited such and so great a Redeemer!" Sinful creation is also redeemed creation, by God's grace. The apprehension of the sinful Beatrician figure - for instance Hitler - would
not be, for Williams, a function of unredeemed Nature; rather it is a sinful distortion of a Nature Christians must hold to be essentially redeemed.

Williams does not locate illumination in passion as passion. This had been one of the greatest dangers of Romanticism, and one of the chief errors of its critics. If "in certain states of romantic love the Holy Spirit has deigned to reveal, as it were, the Christ-hood of two individuals each to (the) other", "this is possible only because of the Incarnation". 23 The glory is not inherent in

Cont......

23 Williams, Descent of the Dove, p. 131.
Matter as Matter: rather it is present in Matter as redeemed.

Williams believes that the heterodoxy (so to call it) of popular, mainline, historical Christianity has consisted in a failure to elaborate and fully to affirm the Church's own doctrine of Incarnation. His own comparative orthodoxy in this one respect (for he claims no more for himself than that) consists in what Williams believes to be a more honest elaboration of that same doctrine. He shares with the Church that seminal definition of Incarnation which is found in the Athanasian Creed: "Not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God". Williams considers Romantic theology to be a legitimate and indeed inevitable development of the concept of Christ as incarnate Redeemer. Gnosticism, Manichaeism and the other world-despising cults have been denounced; the Church has declared that the created order, including man's body in all its aspects, partakes of the Redemption.

I have defined true Romanticism as the ability — or better still, the Grace; for Williams insists that the
revelation comes and withdraws, actively as it will to experience Incarnation and Redemption through any created good. Sex, which to the perhaps ironic relief of the rest of mankind the Church has officially declared a created good, can therefore logically partake of, and offer insight into, Incarnation and Redemption.

One could deny the legitimacy of Williams' position only on two main grounds. The first would be the insistence that any human insight into blessedness comes by Grace alone, utterly without any human initiative or any natural capacity in man - a view which presupposes the utter corruption by sin of man's ability to relate to the Divine. The second ground for objection would be the conviction that blessedness is not and cannot be communicated, ever, by sexual means - in Williams' words, the conviction that "no love-affair can be more than an unilluminated love-affair". As a pendant to this might be the objection that, while natural things and sex in

---

24 Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, p. 36-7.
25 Williams, *Descent of the Dove*, p. 139.
particular can in theory be illuminated by blessedness, attempting to carry that conviction into practice is too loaded with danger to be worthwhile.

To deal with the first objection at length would be to enter a conflict far beyond the scope of this thesis, and far beyond my ability to resolve. Williams' reaction to such a strictly revelationist species of Christianity, if anyone now professes such a thing, would be, baldly, that it is wrong. He had the evidence of his own intellect and senses - and the testimony of the teachers he most respected - that a strictly revelationist interpretation is wrong, and that a Christianity which inclines toward "natural religion" as I have defined that term is comparatively right - always within the limitations imposed on us by sin. Williams' standpoint is clear, and the division of opinion between the naturalist and revelationist extremes is too stark to admit of fruitful discussion.

As to the second objection, the church has wavered. Williams holds that the editing of Dante's work by the ecclesiastical censors exhibits a conviction that Dante must, however poetically and with whatever misguided pseudo-
religious feelings, have been merely lusting after a young woman. But the Church censors, unlike many modern critics, at least paid Dante the compliment of realizing that he was serious. To them, Williams would answer gently in some such words as these: "Think of the Church's affirmation that man, being redeemed, is good in all his faculties except in his sinfulness. Sin cannot be identified with any one faculty or instinct; still less can it be identified with sexuality; rather it permeates every faculty and every instinct, and each is admittedly vulnerable to some corruption. That is not the issue. You are willing enough - and rightly willing - to see the dangers in sexual love. Why will you not also see its beauty and indeed its holiness? Be careful what you are about, for in refusing to honour the sexuality of the redeemed body, you run the risk of rejecting both the body and its Redeemer."

26 Loc. cit.
I have already discussed, and tried to demonstrate Williams' thorough awareness of, the dangers of lust. Paolo and Francesca lie within the mouth of Hell to testify to those dangers. They are pitfalls, too, to which the Church has done ample justice. Williams asserts only that justice is due also on the other side, and that it has been disgracefully neglected by those whose doctrine of Incarnation should obligate them to exhibit sexuality as potentially "the greatest, most splendid, and most authoritative of all inducements."

An uncritical exaltation of sex as holy in itself is wrong, and pernicious in its effects. But an uncritical condemnation of sex as in itself dangerous to the soul is equally wrong, and equally pernicious; and since the Church has hardly clamoured to point this out, the task has fallen on Charles Williams and a few other Romantics.

One question remains to be answered: what is the role of Grace in Romantic adoration?

It is considerable. "The revelation in Beatrice" is, as Williams chooses to express it, impersonal but also
active; it shines forth, it withdraws, it chooses to return. The lover cannot compel the vision; it is crucial that he understand this. 27

But Williams assumes also the presence in the Romantic lover of a natural aptitude toward this love and this mode of understanding. The reason for that aptitude is unsearchable; we might as well ask why it was Beatrice and no other by whom Dante perceived the glory. We cannot know why one human being is fitted for the Way of Affirmation, another for the Way of Rejection. It is enough for us to recognize the goodness of both Ways, and to pay due honour to those who follow a path we ourselves are not equipped to choose.

27 Williams, Figure of Beatrice, p. 37.
CHAPTER VIII

Conclusion

How are we to assess the work of Charles Williams? How, in the end, are we to judge his achievement?

We must assess and judge him in the two spheres where Romanticism itself subsists: the religious (specifically, the Christian) and the secular.

The first is by far the easier task. It would be dangerous, in view of the evidence Williams advances, to dismiss his charge of an "unofficial Manichaeism"\(^1\) within popular Christianity as mere undocumented vapouring. Williams was speaking, not only from an historical but from a contemporary point of view: he was a modern man and the attitudes he complains of still linger on in our own society. Half a century after Williams' youthful psyche received the impact of his own Christian culture's "unofficial Manichaeism", honesty must compel many readers of this thesis to admit a similar presence, whether

\(^1\) Williams, "Sensuality & Substance", in his Image of the City, p. 69.
more or less traumatic, in their own religious background. The target of Williams' attack is nebulous but real; all the more oppressively real (as most who have suffered from it will agree) for being largely unspoken. The object of Williams' work - which is, in part, to expose and correct this "Manichaeism" within the Church - is therefore legitimate.

And expose it he successfully does. Whether he is capable, singlehanded, of correcting it is not up to Charles Williams to decide. He did all that argument and private example could do. Williams' broadest effort finds a fascinating resonance in social developments he did not live to see, that is in the widespread effort of the 1960's to discover a more honest and guiltfree mode of sexuality. This popular movement has generally shown less intellectual calibre, and less moral rigor, than characterized

2The frequent changes of verbal tense with which I refer to Williams are I think legitimate, reflecting as they do the two ways we can now experience him: he was a living man, he is a theologian of continuing distinction. My changes of tense will be found to correspond closely to the aspect of Williams which concerns me at the moment.
Williams himself; nothing could be on the surface more different than the sentimentalized promiscuity which young people of the 60's all too often mistook for liberation and the chastity which Williams held to be essential to redeemed sexuality.

In any case, the direct social impact of Williams' ideas - which would perhaps be vulnerable to the vulgarization of which anti-romantics have always, and rightly, warned - is limited by its Christian context. Christianity has not been as fashionable as more exotic cults, at least in the past fifteen years. So Williams' works have been kept largely inviolate, known only to a few; and this is fortunate. Only those with the motivation and the intelligence to penetrate the difficulty of his thought are likely to be realistic candidates for the Way of Affirmation. There is little that is more evil, or more unfortunately common, than corrupt Romanticism. I do not think Williams would have gone so far as to beseech his reader, like the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, to show the book to no one who was not ready for the most arduous
spiritual effort. But he would have been quietly content that the intensely Christian character of his works should limit their interest to those who were, in some sense at least, prepared.

Is the Way of redeemed sexuality simply too difficult to do? Yes, probably, in somewhat the same way that the lofty and noble and optimistic morality of Pelagius was too difficult— or, as Augustine corrected in exasperation, impossible—to follow. But, with Grace, who knows what may be possible? And Grace is intrinsic to the Beatrician Vision, for revelation is Grace. It is the Grace of Christ, as Charles Williams delights to acknowledge, that renders Romantic adoration possible at all.

That the Way of Affirmation of Images is capable of corruption Williams explicitly affirms. Anyone who seeks to follow this Way must be alerted to its peculiar dangers. Those who lack the strength to follow this path may honourably choose another—although, since Romantics are born and not (except by God) made, there may not be a choice.

\[^{3}\text{Quoted by Williams in Descent of the Dove, p. 140.}\]
But any other path will also have its pitfalls, and there also the pilgrim must beware. In this temporal order sin, like the glory of love in Beatrice, exists always, everywhere, to everyone. Even for non-Romantic Christians, then, Williams' scrupulous examination of the dangers should set a wholesome example.

What about non-sexual Beatrician love? If God is in Nature, is Nature God? No, this is a confusion, just as it is a confusion to say that because Christ is in Beatrice does not mean that Beatrice Portinari was the man Jesus bar Joseph. If the Romantic cannot think clearly, says Williams, he is lost. Heaven is among other things the plenitude of intellect: "Intellectual light full of love"; and the more the Romantic partakes of the Heavenly state - as, according to Williams, he does, at least in the moment of the vision - the less liable he is to confusion. To bring a charge of potential pantheism against him is like accusing Dante of literally idolizing Beatrice. When Romanticism is genuinely understood, both charges are seen to be absurd. There Williams leaves them.
I believe that Williams is right in his accusation of "unofficial Manichoeism" against the Church, and right in his effort to restore this type of adoration to the honoured place in Christian orthodoxy which it deserves. The Church has once already (in that shadowy experiment of unconsummated marriage) tacitly abandoned this way as too difficult to be practical. Charles Williams admits that in that instance the Church was probably right; and, rather than see his ideas vulgarized into an excuse for promiscuity or worse forms of self-indulgence, he would recognize that the generality of mankind are probably not yet — may never be — ready for the institutionalization or the wide application of true Romanticism.

But let us acknowledge the possibility, even if that also means acknowledging our incapacity. Let us respect those who try. Above all — and with this Williams is most urgently concerned — let us bring to their effort an enlightened understanding, even if, on the best of grounds, we disapprove.

---

I believe, therefore, that Williams presents an impressive and convincing argument. He has persuaded me that Romantic adoration is a legitimate aspect of Christian experience. As I stated in chapter seven, only a thoroughgoing revelationist could deny outright the validity of Williams' effort. There is indeed a conflict between Williams' "natural" or "naturalistic" Christianity and such a severely revelationist point of view. That conflict is not susceptible of solution; it is genuine, and must stand until this age-old dispute is solved.

But is all this (we ask) any help to Marcel Proust? There he is in his victoria, driving past the three trees. Shall we, by the end of his journey, have made a Christian of him? He did not expect such an outcome to his afternoon drive, and I am not at all sure he would like it.

In other words, what has Williams done for the Romantic who is not a Christian, and sees no reason to become one?

He has, to put it briefly, most cordially wished him well. Beatrice is not an argument. She does not prove the Incarnation; still less does she prove, or point
to, the fully developed corpus of Christian theology. She testifies to the Incarnation because Redemption-in-Incar-
 nation is her very substance.

And here, I think, the non-Christian finds a meeting-point with Williams. Now I will speak in my own person, as a spokesman for all those Romantics who, while moved by the beauty and brilliance of Williams' achieve-
ment, are not Christian and have no intention of becoming Christian.

Williams has not, for me, made Church theology more convincing or the historical record of Christendom less repellent. He has shown me that "the glory" cannot be understood unless it is seen for what it is: an island which - unobtrusively and yet in a way perceptible to the educated understanding - is the only visible portion of a vast submerged continent. The continent is Blessedness, by whatever symbol-system or according to whatever theology one may choose to receive it. Williams has convinced me - and I am abidingly grateful for the conviction - that this most cryptic of revelations derives its power from Blessedness, for which another name is Paradise.
It is possible to follow this method of love without introducing the name of God. But it is hardly possible to follow it without proposing and involving as an end a state of caritas of the utmost possible height and breadth...5 of such height and breadth that one can only give thanks for the vision, and try to follow it.

5 Williams, He Came Down from Heaven, p. 77.
SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

This bibliography includes works cited in the text, and secondary material which I have found particularly useful, not only with regard to Charles Williams but for the general aims of this dissertation.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Poetry


---------. The Region of the Summer Stars. London: Poetry Editions, 1944. (?)


Novels


---------. The Place of the Lion. London: Victor Gollancz, 1931.


Historical Biography


Theology


--------. The Figure of Beatrice. London: Faber & Faber, 1943.

--------. The Way of Exchange. (Pamphlet), James Clark, 1941.

--------. Witchcraft. London: Faber, 1941.

SECONDARY SOURCES


--------. Introduction to Arthurian Torso, by Charles Williams, (see above).

--------. Preface to Taliessin through Logres, by Charles Williams, (see above).


Sayers, Dorothy. Introduction to James I, by Charles Williams, (see above).


