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THE VERSE DRAMA OF CHARLES WILLIAMS

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in English at Massey University

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This thesis will consider only the later verse-drama of Charles Williams, from *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* (1936).

Abbreviations used are Cranmer for *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*, Chelmsford for *Judgment at Chelmsford*, and Good Fortune for *The Death of Good Fortune*. The text used, to which unspecified page numbers belong, is *Collected Plays* (O.U.P. 1963). I would like to thank Mrs. A.M. Hadfield for her prompt reply to enquiries about the plays, the librarians at Massey University, and Mr. R.A. Neale and Mr. John Dewick for their supervision and encouragement.
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Charles Williams' Collected Plays, except for The Three Temptations, were written for specific church groups. Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury was commissioned for the 1936 Canterbury Festival, to be performed in the cloisters of the cathedral. Judgment at Chelmsford (1939) was written to celebrate the centenary of the foundation of the diocese of Chelmsford and Seed of Adam (1936) is a Nativity play written for the Religious Drama Society of the same diocese. House by the Stable, The Death of Good Fortune (both written in 1937) and Grab and Grace (1941) also Christmas plays were written for a wartime touring group, the Pilgrim Players. The United Council for Missionary Education asked Williams to write House of the Octopus in 1945. The commissioning of plays played a large part in determining subject, theme and structure, e.g. Cranmer's setting in the Church and main character, the main subject of The House of the Octopus (missionary), and Chelmsford's whole pageant structure and subject matter - the eight episodes from Chelmsford's history. Williams had too to consider the number, sex and acting capacity of members of the groups he wrote for and resources for production. He speaks of this in relation to the chorus in an article on "Religious Drama": "The Chorus is often, it seems, a matter of necessity in which the author has (very willingly) to oblige the producer. At least I know it has been so in my own case." But he adds "I am far from saying that one is not responsible, even so, for what one makes of it."

The subject of this essay is what Williams makes of the limitations or possibilities of the occasions for, and traditions in, which he wrote.
"Propaganda does not destroy art. Missionary plays (with whatever mission) can yet be well written and effective. But there is a condition and it is that the design must not be imposed from without. ...In art nothing is exciting but art...Propaganda, if any, of the idea must arise from within...."  

Chapter I, Background  
Williams' Collected Plays, in the tradition of religious drama, are didactic i.e. they are "designed to demonstrate, or to present in an impressive and persuasive form, a moral, religious, or other thesis or doctrine... to be distinguished from purely imaginative works which are written, not to propose or enforce a doctrine, but as ends in themselves for their inherent interest and appeal". Unlike his novels they are all explicitly Christian. Williams "belongs to the tradition of Christian transcendentalism in English poetry - Spenser, Vaughan, the later Wordsworth and Coleridge, and Patmore." Yet he was largely responsible for the Oxford University Press's translations of Kierkegaard, and Williams' work shows the influence of Kierkegaard.  

Williams was an Anglican, combining a High Church love of liturgy and emphasis on tradition - both seen in Cranmer - with a protestant individualism emphasising the Bible and personal experience. But his protestantism was romantic rather than fundamentalist. "There's no need to introduce Christ unless you wish. It's a fact of experience" says Peter Stanhope in Descent into Hell, one of Williams' novels. And in an article called "Natural Goodness" Williams wrote, "It is a little unfortunate that in ordinary English talk the words "natural" and supernatural" have come to be considered as opposed rather than as complementary." For his approach is sacramentalist. In Cranmer, The
Death of Good Fortune, and Seed of Adam, this approach is seen in his use of the word "image".

An image is something through which God can be known. In Williams' novel *The Place of the Lion*, butterflies are one image. Damaris Tighe sees them merely as butterflies, but to her father they are transfigured. He affirms the image. Williams' use of the word "image" is more than Romantic nature mysticism, however, just as John in *Terror of Light* vehemently denies being "what the literary people call a nature-mystic." (p. 333). In *Cremer* images include wealth, admiration, the English Bible, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Anne Boleyn. Each of these is valuable, each, in some way, and to a greater or lesser extent, images God. But when they become ends in themselves, they are "dissolved".

Williams' distinctive theology of romantic love is a development of this view. He interprets Dante's *Divine Comedy* in terms of the image, and there explains what he means by that word. "The image of Beatrice" existed in his thought, it remained there and was deliberately renewed. The word image is convenient for two reasons. First, the subjective recollection within him was of something objectively outside him; it was an image of an exterior fact and not of an interior desire. It was sight and not invention. Dante's whole assertion was that he could not have invented Beatrice. Secondly, the outer exterior shape was understood to be an image of things beyond itself. Coleridge said that a symbol must have three characteristics. (1) It must exist in itself, (ii) it must derive from something greater than itself, (iii) it must represent in itself that greatness from which it derives. I have preferred the word image to the word symbol, because it seems to me doubtful if the word symbol nowadays sufficiently expresses the vivid individual essence of the lesser thing.
Beatrice was, in her degree, an image of nobility, of virtue, of the Redeemed Life, and, in some sense of Almighty God himself. But she also remained Beatrice right to the end. But as the mental knowledge or image of her is the only way by which she herself can be known, so she herself is (for Dante) the only way by which that other Power can be known — since in fact, it was known so. The maxim of his study, as regards the final Power was: "This also is thou, neither is this thou."

In his article "The Theology of Romantic Love" Williams stresses that Love is not personal in that "Love does not belong to the Lovers but they to it." So Mary, in his play Seed of Adam, explains to Joseph that being in love is a literal statement: "to be in love is to be in love, no more, no less. Love is only itself everywhere, at all times, and to all objects" (p.159).

In common with Eliot, Williams speaks of the division in the history of Christendom between the affirmative way and the negative way. He points out that although "the Way of the Rejection of Images has been far more considered throughout Christendom, the two ways have the same maxim and the same aim — "to love everything because God loves it." This is their union and, this laid down, one way is not inferior to the other nor perhaps more difficult." Anne Ridler quotes a letter Williams wrote in 1943 which shows the relation of the two ways more clearly. "The essentials of the one Way are the accidents of the other...There must be sooner or later even in the Way of Affirmation, some sort of seclusion of the soul to the Omnipotence... the Rejection aims at this as a continual method...the affirmation endures it when it comes. As the Rejection has always to allow its debt to its parents, its teachers, its food and shelter, perhaps its love... We call it the Way and the other Way, but each is included in the other." To emphasise the equality of the Affirmative Way Williams quotes the criticism of Christ — that he was
"a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber."

Christ himself is of course, the image par excellence. And the presence of God, in some way, in people and things is "the principle of Incarnation." It is for example by virtue of the Incarnation that Eros and Agape are no longer divided. Incarnation is central to Williams' thought, and is the basis of another key idea of his. This is, in his idiom: the Way of Exchange. "The Holy Ghost moves us to be, by every means to which we are called, the Images of Christ... It is the intercourse of these free images which is the union of the City. The name of the City is Union... the process of that union is the method of free exchange." 12 Williams here speaks of the city because of the mutual dependence of the citizens of any city. The city is an image of the City of God. "Our whole social system exists by an unformed agreement that one person shall do one job while another does another. Money is the means by which these jobs are brought into relation, the 'means of exchange'. It is usually the medium in which particular contracts are formed. And contract, or agreement, is the social fact of 'living by each other.' This is the evident sense of social exchange." It is the same exchange as that of the Church when it "declared a union of existences. It proclaimed that our own lives depended on the lives of our neighbour. St. Anthony of Egypt laid down the doctrine in so many words: "Your life and death are with your neighbour."

August as that doctrine may have been, it is clear that it very soon became modified. It is regarded as Christian to live 'for' others; it is not so often regarded as Christian doctrine that we live 'from' others. There has been, everywhere, a doctrine of unselfishness, but that the self everywhere lives only within others has been less familiar. The "bear one another's burdens" became, on the whole an exterior thing." But Williams claims that exchange in the Christian Church differs from ordinary social exchange, not in kind but in power.
for an inner substitution can be made. "Substitution can be practised by bearing one another's burdens interiorly as well as exteriorly, by the turning of the general sympathy into something of immediate use; by a compact of substitution... Compacts can be made for the taking over of the suffering of troubles and worries and distresses as simply as an assent is given to the carrying of a parcel."

In *The House of the Octopus* Alayu and Anthony discover this depth of exchange. As is seen in this play Williams held that exchange over-rides barriers of time, place and death. The Christian stress on substitution is based on the Incarnation and Atonement of which Williams held a substitutionary view. "All life is to be vicarious" he insisted, because "it is in the exchange of burdens that they become light... "He saved others; himself he cannot save" is an exact definition of the Kingdom of Heaven in operation."

The kingdom of heaven, the city, the republic, Williams contrasts with "the Infamy". Williams continually discusses the nature of good and evil and their relation. His basic view of evil as the perversion of good is orthodox. It is his presentation of good and evil that is distinctive. Anne Ridley suggests that the central point of all his world is the possibility of seeing all the universe as good. This was "a possibility" something he would not have thought of unaided by Revelation. It was experienced at certain rare moments only, and could—and should—be questioned. "A great curiosity should exist about divine things. Man was intended to argue with God. Humility has never consisted in not asking questions...." Williams does this in some of his plays, centering his discussion in a central symbolic figure.

For any sort of communication, the reader, listener, or member of the audience must perceive some relation between what he reads, hears or sees and his own experience. Communication depends on shared experience.
The author draws from his own experience (including literary experience) certain conclusions or generalisations. He will, to a greater or lesser extent, be able to express these, or find expression of them, in a formula common to some tradition, e.g. religious or cultural. If he is writing for people who share this tradition, communication becomes less difficult. He has only to mention, or briefly outline the formula to set in motion a train of associations in the mind of his audience. Williams uses the Christian tradition e.g. in The Death of Good Fortune, where Mary introduces herself quickly and then sits silently on stage for much of the play. By her mere presence she is an effective counterpoint to the action, communicating at first the insufficiency of Good Fortune, and after his death, reason for hope (the Nativity). Williams does not need to build up the character of Mary at length because he can rely on "prefabricated associations" in the audience. Similarly he uses people or types from English history—King Henry VIII and the Priest and Preacher in Cromer.

In the same play he uses the Communion Service from the Book of Common Prayer and the 1588 Bible. It is helpful to understand the literary tradition of the author in the same way as it is helpful to know his religious tradition. The formula may be a particular rhythm, or type of image, which helps place the speaker in time or place or characterise him. Or the formula may be a stock character. Stock characters are part of any literary tradition. They are more general then e.g. King Henry, and their evocative power is consequently lessened. They have the advantage however of a more widespread acceptance. Williams uses them extensively e.g. characters in Death of Good Fortune include the Lover, and the old woman who dislikes her daughter-in-law. And in House of the Octopus there is the Marshall who is the exponent and practitioner of psychological warfare. Stock characters are most
prominent in literature which seeks to show a general pattern in life, such as religious drama, satire, romance or expressionism. These themselves are formulae. In satire, such as The Importance of Being Earnest, the typical qualities of stock characters are stressed even caricatured (e.g. the effusiveness of Gwendolen and Cecily on their first meeting) to evoke attitudes of amusement, contempt, or scorn. In Grab and Grace the morality figure of Pride, who calls herself Self-Respect, is similarly exaggerated to show that Self-Respect is merely a more subtle form of pride. In romance, complexity of character is sacrificed to "the truth of the human heart."

Gary F. Weller sees Williams' novels in the light of the romance genre and some of Chase's comments are applicable to The House of the Octopus and others of Williams' plays: "the characters and events have a kind of abstracted simplicity about them...character may be deep but it is narrow and predictable. Events take place with a formalised clarity...the characters, probably two-dimensional types, will not be complexly related to each other or to society or to the past. Human beings will on the whole be shown in ideal relation — that is they will share emotions only after these have become abstract and symbolic...Characters may become profoundly involved in some way,... but it will be a deep and narrow, an obsessive involvement...the plot we may expect to be highly coloured. Astonishing events may occur and these are likely to have a symbolic or ideological, rather than a realistic plausibility...the romance will more freely veer toward mythic, allegorical and symbolistic forms."

Expressionism moves further than romance from "a realistic plausibility." Strindberg, often regarded as the founder of expressionism, introduces Dreamplay with the comments: "time and space do not exist, on a slight groundwork
of reality, imagination spins and weaves new patterns made up of memories, experience, unfettered fancies, absurdities and improvisations. The characters are split, double and multiply, they evaporate, crystallise scatter and converge. But a single consciousness holds sway over them all — that of the dreamer. For him there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples and no law. He neither condemns nor acquits, but only relates... 18 Williams takes expressionist liberties with place and time especially in Seed of Adam, in which, for example, Adam is the father of Mary, and of the three Kings; he is Joseph's lord and merges into Caesar Augustus. This expressionism is not as abstract as Strindberg's; Williams' characters are definite historical/mythical figures. Expressionism as Williams uses it is in some way a traditional device of religious drama. Murray Boston in Biblical Drama in England, speaks of the "medieval penchant for mingling expressionism with realism," giving as an example Joseph in Egypt standing a few feet away from his brethren in Palestine. The compression of time and space are traditional in a drama that arose before the "historical sense" dominated Western views of history. Merging of characters has a basis in tradition in the merging of abstract qualities and historical characters, or in the progressive revelation of character as in Magnificence. And a theological basis in for example, typology. But the extent of the compression is far greater in a play such as Seed of Adam. Boston takes too an example from pictorial art. "In the famous 'Martyrdom of St. Eneas' at St. Peter's, Louvain, Dirk Bouts, for example, portrays the martyr as gazing at his own disembowelment with almost undisturbed tranquillity. As in the York Crucifixion, the physical torture itself is depicted with vivid realism, the saint's entrails being slowly extracted on a spit, but there is no attempt to provide any realistic coherence between the gruesome scene and the victim's calm, almost
detached response. For the artist here is stylistically superimposing the spiritual content of the scene upon the physically realistic setting, so that by transcending the limits of chronology he permits us an advance glimpse of the saint's joyful acceptance into heaven." (p.16-17)

This is similar to the double perspective provided in Williams' plays by a symbolic figure such as the skeleton in Grammar.

The Nativity play, like medieval expressionism, belongs both to a literary and a religious tradition. Boston notes that "behind the Nativity Plays ... may be perceived the tradition of the 'praesepe' or crèche" He points out the widespread practice (in almost every church and chapel) of having a model of the manger, often life-size, and concludes that the earliest shepherd plays were probably an outgrowth of the liturgical office performed at this 'praesepe'. Boston then suggests that, medieval art being well established before the rebirth of drama, "no medieval audience would be impressed by a Nativity play which fell short of the annual 'praesepe' model in visual impact. The play provided in a sense a live version of a model familiar to every spectator in which haloed figures in gorgeous robes offered and received the gifts of the Magi in a setting glittering with jewels and glowing with richly coloured tapestry. It was this 'praesepe' tradition, coupled with the supreme sanctity of the theme for the Christian spectator, which lent a ceremonial and almost static quality to the plays of the Epiphany, with the emphasis upon dazzling spectacle rather than emotional realism.

The haloes discouraged that identification of audience with character so necessary to naturalistic drama... but served to enhance by the distance they created between mortal and divine figures the solemnity of the semi-liturgical scene represented." (pp 20-1). Seed of Adam in particular belongs to this tradition.
The morality play is another literary-religious tradition that Williams draws on. The stock character here is used to express abstract qualities - the fat man is Gluttony. Allegory is the essential characteristic. And the situation, presented in "perfectly general terms" is described by Craig: "In consequence of the fall of Adam, man is destined to die in sin unless he be saved by the intervention of divine grace and by repentance." (p. 351) Character is often formalised with the Everyman figure yielding to temptation without a struggle, and repenting for no reason except Repentance's request. Some morality plays are austere, but in many there is humour: Craig speaks of "the brilliant and amusing Byokamæwer, an oldish play printed about 1512 in which Pity acts as umpire and advocate of peace in the warfare between Virtues and Vices and gets put in the stocks for her pains, but after her release converts Free Will and Imagination." (p.354). Williams' Grab and Grace contains similar incidents in Faith's imprisonment in Hell's bag, and Hell's attempt to down Grace.

Religious drama in general can be seen as a tradition. Audiences are more disposed to accept poetry in religious drama, as Eliot points out in Poetry and Drama. One final tradition that may be helpful as background to Williams' plays is the masque. Williams wrote several masques before he wrote plays, and two were enthusiastically received by the group for whom they were written and enjoyed when later produced elsewhere. Abrams describes the masque as "an elaborate form of court entertainment, combining poetic drama, music, song, dance, costuming and spectacle, which flourished in the reigns of Elizabeth, James I and Charles I. A plot often slight, and for the main part mythological and allegorical - served to bind together these various elements. The play proper was climaxed by the event that gave the form its name - the dance of the masked
figures in which the audience often joined... "(p.49) Nasque elements are prominent in Grammar, in Chelmsford, and Seed of Adam.

There is a danger in the use of formulas from any tradition, and it is that the author will rely too much on stock responses. Coleridge noted that "sameness must be reconciled or balanced with difference, old and familiar objects with novelty and freshness; the representative, the general and the idea—e.g. allegorical characters or the way of exchange—must be harmonised with, respectively, the individual, the concrete, and the image. And the reason he gave for this was that the poet should, ideally, "bring the whole soul of men into play." 20.

J.A. Richards similarly criticises "withdrawal from experience", "no new outlook, no new direction of feeling! This is common in religious plays which rely heavily on the experience and knowledge of the audience. Roger Sale, in "England's Parnassus" C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams and J.R.R. Tolkien criticise Williams for this in terms of "topography" 22 An icon (or religious symbol) differs from a literary symbol in that in the case of the icon, the vehicle is coherent only because of the tenor. In the case of a symbol the tenor is built up by the vehicle; the vehicle does not depend on the tenor! Williams... uses his symbols as icons. He knows, Lewis knows, and good Christian knows, without going further, that... But I do not know this, and it is the province of the imagination to make me understand that a thing is so regardless of what I personally believe.... an icon is not meant to be understood imaginatively... it is only a reminder of a truth already believed in...

For even if we attempt to move within Williams inner circle and try to see just what he tells us to see, the result is imaginatively defeating. The system, as Lewis presents it and insofar as I can discover it in the
poems themselves, is thoroughly worked out so that after the reader has gotten used to plugging the right meanings in the right places, he can snally careen through the universe, secure in the knowledge that what would baffle someone on the outside is really in perfect, working order. His final assertion is the epitome of cultist declarations: I praise the vehicle because it is so hard to operate but I have mastered it. But if Williams must be classified as iconography, it must be added that the fault is endemic to much of modern literature.... The difference between Williams and the other writers mentioned [Lewis and Tolkien] lies primarily in the rigidity of his intellectual symbolic system. The reader determined to explore sympathetically and yet not give himself away is more easily defeated by Williams because the only way to read Williams at all is unresponsively and unimaginatively.... Eliot, on the other hand, teases his reader in and out of belief, in and out of time, in and out of the stifling clarity of iconography... it is possible to read *Four Quartets* at least without giving in. The Rose Garden, unlike Broceliande [the country of Williams' poems], can be walked in by anyone. 23.

It seems that Sale is raising three objections to Williams' writing. The first is that only a select group ("any good Christian") can respond to his work. This reminder of the limited appeal of Williams' writing may be helpful, though in itself it is not a valid objection to the plays. They were written for specific occasions for this select group. The second objection is that iconography is not meant to be understood imaginatively, somewhat qualified by the reference to Eliot's imaginative use of iconography. The third is that Williams' iconography is so thoroughly worked out as to be an end in itself. This third criticism,
if levelled at the plays, is only partly true. Williams, in most of his plays, uses iconography to convey a vivid impression of some aspect "a truth already believed in", Often his ideas are in some way new and distinctive. The excitement of the plays is often an intellectual excitement, but he does "start, elaborate and sustain a pattern of interest." By ceremony and spectacle, poetry and dance and other masque elements he builds up and intensifies his impression of some truth. This is a valid form in the tradition of the masque, of romance which sacrifices verisimilitude to "the truth of the human heart" (Hawthorne), expressionism whose dreamer "only relates"(Strindberg) and the Nativity Play whose "dazzling spectacle discouraged... identification of audience with character...but...served to enhance by the distance they created between mortal and divine figures, the solemnity of the semi-liturgical scene represented " (Boston). The "life-blood" of this drama, as of the morality play is "Religion and its success depends on its awakening and releasing a pent-up body of religious knowledge and religious feeling." Dawson quotes Williams' view of the role of religious literature: it should express "not doctrine, but existence, or only doctrine as existence". This is presumably why the characters in his novels are often not explicitly Christian. The plays, as Sale points out, are rigidly Christian. Yet, in several of the plays, the focus is on one person; ideas are embodied in his conflict and development which is the central action of the play. In these plays doctrine is seen "as existence", and an imaginative experience is at least possible. Sale is demanding from Williams the "sensuous apprehension of thought" that Eliot praised in the Metaphysical poets and in Shakespeare. Eliot, comparing Milton with Shakespeare speaks of two qualities that Milton lacks. The first is "particularity" — "the feeling of being in a
particular place at a particular time. "The second quality is "perpetual novelty": words developed in significance." These qualities arose from certain combinations of words, such as "rooky wood". Elsewhere he speaks of "that perpetual slight alteration of language, words perpetually encased into meanings...which evidences a very high development of the senses." Elliot is referring specifically to sensuous imagery, which he maintains Milton lacks. He relies instead on the sound effects of words, on "auditory imagery". Williams tends to do this too, to build up another world, whereas sensuous imagery relates the subject to the audience by the interaction of two meanings, of two groups of associations. But this sort of interaction is not limited to sensuous imagery. This effect is possible by other powerful combinations.

The play as a whole functions in a similar way to the image. A play is, in a sense, an image, built up by the interaction of its component parts in a "sequence of impressions." Just as the interaction of "rooky" and "wood" results in particularity and new meaning, so the interaction of different aspects of the play—language, e.g. in rhythm and imagery, people, scenery, silence, actions—builds up, modifies and varies the central impression.

Clichés are just as possible in the larger image of the play as in a phrase, by the use of stock situations, characters, rhythms and ideas. This is Stage's accusation. For this reason Williams' plays are often better when he employs historical or semi-historical characters; by telescoping of time too he is able to multiply associations and significance, building up characters in the same way as a symbol is built up.

At the other extreme lies the fault that Dr. Johnson noted in the Metaphysical poets (and Eliot agrees that in the case of Cleveland,
this was just): "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence
together."

The different components of the play may not harmonise.
This does happen in Williams' work. It is perhaps most obvious in the
novels where the emotion appropriate to the symbolism and themes seems
too intense for the almost "cosy" style. Of the plays, it is most
obvious perhaps in Terror of Light, the prose play. Poetry enables
Williams to distance the play sufficiently for the introduction of
magicians and spirits of the dead. Poetry builds up and expresses the
intensity of the situation at the heart of the play. Murray Roston
criticises the verse, for example, of Seed of Adam because it "falls so
far short of the subject matter. It creates an impression of
scintillating originality in its verbal juxtapositions and compressed
imagery, but the effect remains superficial and the basal internal
rhymes betray the doggerel beneath the alliterative camouflage." He
goes on to speak of the "more recent Terror of Light which moved
into prose and whose opening section has a simplicity and directness
more effective than any of his verse drama. The disciples a few days
after the Crucifixion come alive as troubled human beings unsure of their
next move but convinced that the world has in some way been profoundly
changed. But Simon Magus enters with Luna and the play disintegrates
into scenes of ghosts and necromancy "(p.292). It is presumably
because of the lesser ability of prose to carry weighty themes and
subject matter such as "ghosts and necromancy" that Williams intended
the final draft to be in prose. Poetry is, ideally, of the essence
of a play in its theme and subject. In a letter Alice Hadfield writes
"I can certainly tell you that none of the plays was written first in
prose and then in verse. C.W.'s mind did not work that way. Poetry
was thought of as poetry and grew as poetry. Prose did the same, in
its nature as prose. Both are used in the plays, and within the plays,
but each grew as itself and was not worked as an alternative. Terror of Light never got "worked" into verse. It would have had to be completely thought again in poetry - no doubt one reason why he never did it."

Two movements in Williams' plays, following chronological sequence, can be seen. The first concerns choice of subject and is circular. Cromer centres on the conflict within an historical character, Thomas Cromer. Judgment at Chelmsford seems historical in that, between prologue and epilogue, eight semi-historical scenes are shown. But the concern is not with any of these scenes and the people in them but rather with the spiritual states of which each is an example. And the pageant-play focusses on a lightly-delineated and only spasmodically seen personification - Chelmsford. There is a definite progression, both in time and in Chelmsford, but the play is more of a pageant-play. Seed of Adam was actually written before Judgment at Chelmsford, though it is placed after Judgment at Chelmsford in Collected Plays. Seed of Adam is noted for "telescoping" of time and character. Characters are historical or mythical even if coalesced, but attention moves from the historical and more widely accepted mythical characters, to the fictionalised or fictional characters of the Teas of Caucasia, Sultan of Bagdad, King of Myrrh and Mother Myrrh (Hell). In Death of Good Fortune in which Good Fortune is the central character, Mary is an historical figure, but the others are all generalised ("the magician", "the lover" etc.). House by the Stable, like Good Fortune, is a Christmas Play but the conflict does not focus on the Nativity. And two of the main characters are allegorical - Hell and Pride. Grah and Grace is a sequel to House by the Stable, and all the characters except for Gabriel, the angel-servant and Man are allegorical.
With House of the Octopus, the direction begins to turn. The play is located in "a land in the outer sea" in the twentieth century. And the inhabitants are recently - primitive islanders (distinguished by name), a twentieth century missionary priest, and oppressors who combine elements of both. Terror of Light is back with Cranmer with historical characters - this time in Jerusalem at Pentecost. The radio play The Three Temptations relies heavily on telescoping but is firmly based in history.

The other movement is linear: it is a movement towards simplicity and naturalism with a less dense exploitation of language in such forms as alliteration, rhyme, strong and changing rhythm, and of spectacle and other masque elements. The writing of a prose play and a radio play is perhaps indicative of this change.

When Williams creates distance in his plays - distance from the everyday and the trite which can be achieved by placing characters backward in time and by stylisation of language and when he adds to particularity by using definite historical characters, his ability to express spiritual truths, especially violent, unusual or powerful spiritual truths, effectively is greater. When action is focused on a conflicting and developing character, and from this focus ideas emerge, Williams most successfully draws his reader into an understanding of the play - and his ideas. For these reasons Cranmer is perhaps Williams' most effective verse-play. Seed of Adam, which uses similar masque elements in a symbolic structure, is less successful. The other Christmas plays are simpler, and particularly in House by the Stable, Williams uses this simplicity to effect. House of the Octopus combines a more normal play structure than any of the other plays with the simplicity of House by the Stable. The limits of this simplicity in expressing Williams' ideas can be seen both in some of the Nativity Plays and in House of the Octopus.
NOTES

1. *Image of the City* p. 56.

2. "Religious drama" i.e. drama drawing on the experience of one tradition as expressed in its symbolism and doctrines.

3. Abram, *Glossary of Literary Terms*.


5. See, for example, William V. Spanes, "Charles Williams: "Seed of Adam": The Existential Flight from Death", *Christian Scholar*, XLIX/2, Summer 1966.

6. p. 93."Peter Stanhope" was the pseudonym Williams used when he wrote Chelmsford.

7. *Image of the City*, p. 75.

8. *Figure of Beatrice*, p. 7. And in the introduction to *Descent of the Dove* Williams sums up the history of the Christian Church in the phrase "This also is thou—neither is this thou."


10. *Image of the City* pp. 68-69.

11. *Image of the City* p. xi.

12. *Image of the City* p. 103.


14. *He Came Down from Heaven* p. 32.

15. *Image of the City* p. 57.


18. Translated by Elizabeth Sprigge.


20. *Biographia Literaria*, ch. XIV.


22. Sale is speaking more specifically of the poetry but he does **include all Williams' work in his assessment.**


25. Craig, p. 4.


27. *Selected Essays*, "Milton I".


29. John Styan in *The Elements of Drama* uses this phrase.


32. As Cranmer is also a festival play, with many similarities, and *Seed of Adam* too is similar, and because Chelmsford is not as unified as one would expect drama to be, this play will not be looked at closely.
"A play must start, elaborate and sustain a pattern of interest...
the "poetry" lies in the depth and strength of the whole meaning of
the stage action, and only indirectly in the words spoken....language is
only one manifestation of the original image of the play conceived in the
dramatist's mind. But the poetic dramatist uses language as his
strongest contributing instrument in the communication of his idea."

- John Styan.

Chapter Two: Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury

Writers on serious drama, have traditionally insisted on unity
of action, action here being more than a "plot-line". Thomas Cranmer of
Canterbury is about the rise to authority, and subsequent fall from
power, of Thomas Cranmer - the play includes events from 1522-56 -
and his finding salvation through these events. This worked out in
the concept of the "image". An image, as used here, is an approach
to God, valid but limited and incomplete by itself. 1 In the symbolism
of the play, each image is seen as a bone of the skeleton. In
isolation, i.e. when it becomes an end instead of a means, the bone
becomes "diseased". The play centrally presents Cranmer discovering
that his image of knowledge and scholarship is incomplete and even
unimportant in itself, that "all life is redemption". And his acceptance
of this in an honesty which requires him to take back his recantation
and yet admit that "if the Pope had bid me live, I should have served
him". In the symbolism of the play, he runs to meet the skeleton.
Counterpointing this movement of Cranmer in time and toward salvation
is the Skeleton's leading of Cranmer. The Skeleton describes himself
variously as "the devil or God", "necessity", "necessary Love",
"figura rerum" (i.e. the nature of things). He has a certain control
over events. And comments wryly or passionately from Heaven's
point of view. Cranmer develops; the Skeleton is gradually revealed,
all other characters are deliberately flat and static (e.g. the static evil characters of the romance). Their flatness suggests their limited outlook and stature, and provides implicit comment on it. Sometimes this is memorable.

"Preacher: But God -

God has only us to defend his glory

and what will happen to that if we leave off killing?"

The motives, actions and reactions of these characters contrast with, and parallel, those of Thomas (and of the audience) e.g. the flight of the Preacher when Queen Mary enters contrasts with Cranmer’s stand.

This is a part of the way that these characters are used to form the basic structure of the play, the pattern of interest, first seen in the Priest and Preacher 2 who embody the basic dichotomy - Catholic/Protestant.

The violence of this clash is expressed from the beginning. The play’s setting is associated closely with the communion service, with the Singers entering in procession and praying. When the Preacher and Priest run on and abuse each other, the contrast with the former prayer and formality is startling. And is pointed up by the inversion of prayer as they curse each other — "the Lord remember you!" etc. — by the liturgical succession of their cries, short and parallel, and the highly figurative language they use — "scabs and emerods", "Beast","Devil" — which stands out after the abstract, leisureed prayer of the Singers. The two views are effectively summed up in "Word" and "Altar"; later, parallel words are used e.g. "communion" and "adoration", "witnessing" and "sacrificed", images becoming a structural device in the same way as character.

The beating rhythm, expressing strong emotion, contrasts not only with the Singers but also with Cranmer’s speech which follows with its gentle rhythms and thoughts. This is pointed up by the link provided
by "halter": the Priest had introduced the thought of burning at the stake and hanging, (a pointer to later developments): "You shall come to the fire with your hands in a halter", and Cranmer enters immediately after and speaks of riding. Cranmer's interests of scholarship and horseriding are juxtaposed to progressively illuminate each and his character. Gentle rhythm is built up by such balanced phrases linked by alliteration and rhyme as "steeds and studies", tenderness and tyranny, riding and reading. Archaisms and "poeticisms" such as "O'erstriding" and "twain", and synaesthesia e.g. "softens a mile" contribute to the impression of a scholar and a gentleman. The effectiveness of the juxtaposition of Cranmer's two interests can be seen in the rhythm of

"Coming in from the gallop, I vault on language halt
often but speed sometimes, and always heed
the blessed beauty of the shaped syllables. I would let go
a heresy or two for love of a lordly style
with charging challenge or one that softens a mile
to a furlong with dulcet harmony, enlarging
the heart with delicate diction..."

which ably expresses Cranmer's excitement from words and style. It is not until Williams has built up this scholarly impression of Cranmer that he shows the strength of Cranmer's convictions e.g. in the slight shock of "lusts to withdraw itself" and the emphasis on less poetic sounds such as "creature", "nature", "Nurture". Yet the way Cranmer speaks of riding (e.g. "tyranny") has prepared the audience.

"Word" and "Alter" summarize the images that the Preacher and Priest have. Other characters are shown to be following images. Part One of the play can be divided into four sections: the first, up to the King's entry (p.7) is introductory and focuses on these basic Protestant-Catholic images. The second section comprises Thomas'
promotion to Archbishop, Anne's to queen, and her downfall (up to p. 15). In this section the King's image of Anne's love is shown, and its breaking. This section centres on the resultant breaking of Anne's image - personal glory - as she falls from favour and is condemned to death. The next section presents the King's vision, the "crimson flashing creature" of which he caught a glimpse, and tried to hold, in Anne. And his horror of dying without finding the object of this vision, a horror of non-being. The King then dies, clutching Thomas and refusing to "think on Christ alone." These three sets of images together with a sketch of the images of the Commons (c.f. the Preacher's and the Priest's) and of the Lords ( riches and power) lead up to the final section of Part One. This builds up Thomas's image and the Skeleton's efforts to persuade him to go beyond it. The action of Part Two is set under way as the Skeleton tells him

"I must run then after you.
You will choose the rack instead of the cross? . . .
Of all my Father gave me I will lose none."

The Second Part enacts this.

Use of words such as "emerald", parallelism, strong rhythm, and simplicity seen for instance in the summary contained in "Word" and "Altar", emphasise the distance of the Priest and Preacher from reality. As does the technique seen especially in the speech of the Lords, whereby a character literally "speaks his mind", often showing his unconscious motives yet unaware that he has said anything unusual. Other characters may be similarly unaware that he has said anything untoward, depending on their own spiritual awareness. But the audience is made strongly aware by, for example, the use of Biblical or liturgical language:

"Second Lord: "We are making a ritual for our own Communion
on lands, houses, chantries, abbeys, builds which
are broken for us, and blood is given for us..."(p.21)"

Or differently, as in the character of Anne Boleyn, by a ruthlessness
("I wanted so little only the Crown because
it lay in my way and a few small pleasures -
variations from Henry.)

which is counterpointed against the childish simplicity of agitated
repetitions ("Henry Henry Henry....") and the childish narcissism of
her image:

"Cranmer: Be you the image of God's image

Anne: I have seen an image of myself:

a golden-shoed, crowned and redmouthed image

which the King holds in his hands over his
lands...."

Henry is more central in the play. On the level of plot structure -
seen as the "historical" or "objective" events - he is the centre of
Part One. His entry is the climax of the gradual entrances. The Singers
build up this impression with their prayer for the King. And the action
proper begins from his entrance, as Henry immediately calls to Thomas and
speaks of his marital problems. Henry's centrality in Act One parallels
Mary's in Act II, the one reign quickly resulting in Thomas' rise, the
other in his immediate fall. The Act division thus develops the Preacher-
Priest division, drawing this division closely into the centre of the play
(Cranmer's struggle).

Because Henry is more important he is not as simplified as the
other characters. Yet Williams limits characterization of Henry too: his
is desire to obtain a dispensation and to marry Anne/quickly summarised.
His appointment of Thomas as Archbishop is almost automatic. His
disappointment with Anne and sentence of her are not dwelt on,
attention centering not on Henry but on the effect on Anne and Thomas.
Henry is at times seen interacting with other characters, but this is
simplified and highlights Thomas' plight. His "reality" is limited
too by the highly figurative language he uses. It is vivid and stark
in its simplicity and compression, contrasting with the procession
and prayer:

"Thomas I am married to a Death.
The Lives I saw one slain in the woman's blood.
Corpse - conceived is the heir of my kingdom and power."

The marriage-Death shock of the first line is emphasised by
"saw/slain" and further by the more concrete and compressed "corpse-
conceived" which is pointed up by a change in the basically regular
rhythm to emphasise "corpse". The speech builds up to the agitated
order to Grammer "my soul pines; the land dies; counsel the King",
the absence of connectives begging Henry as a rather wooden figure and
emphasising Grammer's position. The influence of Charles, the Holy
Roman Emperor and Mary's uncle, on the Pope preventing the dispensation
for Henry's marriage to Anne coming through, it is expressed vividly
and allegorically, the allegory while highlighting Henry's feeling,
sustaining the static nature of his characterisation.

"The Pope's throat is thick.
His cold was caught in the Alps, Christ's image
Is worked by German cords to mechanical glory."

The Alps are of course colder than Rome, so on this level
the image is accurate. The repeated "th" sound ("throat", "thick")
suggest the cold and the sound as well as the meaning begin associations
of restriction which are continued in the image of the puppet. Again
there is the rapid, disjointed build up of phrases, ending his words in a state of agitation:

"My mind misgave me; God confirms me; my children die, for my seed is drowned in my brother's blood."

The presentation of Henry is simplified but is sufficient for his part in the play: he is not caricatured. One way that Williams avoids this and at the same time builds up particularity, is by using less usual and less simple words or mixing concrete and abstract images. "The Pope nods from a corner" (p.8) is balanced by "I am turmoil each way with desire and hope" (p. 8). (Williams often uses nouns as verbs and vice versa to combine the simple and the unusual). "Mechanical glory" is another unusual combination.

In the case of the more simplified characters, feelings and thoughts are simultaneously and obviously counterpointed in their expression of them. Anne's selfishness is immediately obvious when she tells her image. This tends towards caricature. Henry is more "real" than other such characters; this counterpoint is less immediate when he speaks. But the impression builds up. "My mind misgave me; God confirms me; my children die...." is one instance - Henry is seeing coincidence as the judgement of God - the lack of true logic being suggested by the missing of connectives. Similarly, Henry speaks of "my kingdom and power" (c.f. "Thine is the Kingdom, the Power....") and this identification on Henry's part between the health and glory of his kingdom with that of God's is again suggested as Cranmer replies "Omnipotent sir..." The images he uses show this counterpoint too: Henry's contrast of Anne who has "live children playing by her" with "the mitred Skeleton of Rome" at the door of Mary's room is ambiguous, as the Skeleton has already been presented as a figure of authority. Later Henry tells Thomas of his nightmare, using the
same colours as Anne, the difference between Anne's "golden-shoed... red-mouthed... image of myself" and Henry's "crimson, flashing creature" being a measure of their difference of stature and of structural importance.

The Priest and Preacher, the Lords, the Commons, Anne, and Henry to a lesser extent are structurally important rather than important in themselves (in so far as this distinction can be made even in a play such as this) as Cranmer is. But they are further actualised than the Singers who are a formal device, a chorus. In an article called "Religious Drama" written in 1939 Williams suggests that the most obvious uses of the Chorus are (i) to represent multitudinous mankind, (ii) to unite the other actors with the audience. The second use ought often to be superfluous... Commentators are... dangerously weakening; they are turned from the play to the audience..." For this reason Williams says he prefers not to use choruses. But he adds: "An alternative - which I have been trying - is to make the chorus - after the protagonist - the most important character..."  

The Singers in Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury are by no means the second most important characters. But they are integrated into the structure. The Singers enter first in the play, they begin and end each Act; at different times in the play they sing psalms or prayers expressing the feelings of people on stage, conveying a depth of feeling that the more wooden characters cannot. More important, they are the Skeleton's Singers able to pray the words that Thomas writes but not understand. (p. 58).

For they are the choir (and the congregation) of the Communion service which Thomas writes during the play, and which is the basic setting of the play. It is the basic movement of the play - Thomas' moving to a real communion. "I am equated now to his very soul" says the Skeleton of Cranmer at the end of the play (p. 57) and of course the
sacrificial aspect of the Communion service is a parallel to Thomas' martyrdom.

As Williams says "the chorus...unite the other actors with the audience." Does this weaken the play? Williams suggests that Choruses are weakening because "they are turned from the play to the audience." That is, they break down the involvement of the audience with the events on the stage to emphasise their significance. The stylisation of the Preacher, Priest, Bishop etc. has already contributed to this breakdown. But they build up a certain actuality; for Williams thus can quickly suggest the setting in time and place. The Priest and Preacher are recognizable summaries of attitudes that the audience knows were present. The stylisation helps distance events to this period. And provides a solid setting for Cranmer. The Singers, though not characterised, have a similar function, building up the setting of the Communion Service. They do not need to further integrated for they do not function as the main Commentator; the Skeleton has this role. They are his Singers (p.36) and very much subordinated, And the Skeleton is "the second most important character."

Audience involvement arises centrally from Cranmer's struggle. Most of the other characters build up the background providing the events and vividly suggesting the different factions among which he attempts to manoeuvre. They also provide a pattern of character and action, a thematic background, building up Cranmer's character by parallel and contrast. They express his feelings or the opposite of them. They act similarly (they all have images with which they confuse reality) or in contrast; the Preacher running away before Mary's entrance points up Cranmer's stance. By building up the pattern they enable Williams to present a complex person, and yet to shape his audience's reaction. But for audience involvement with the "hero's"
struggle, Thomas must have a strong antagonist: the conflict must be externalised for the audience to participate. The antagonist is the Skeleton.

The Skeleton has an antecedent in the characters of Satan and Gabriel in *The Rite of the Passion* (1929). Its presence in Cranmer is followed by the Accuser in *Chelmsford*, the Third King and Mother Myrrh in *Seed of Adam*, Good Fortune in *The Death of Good Fortune* and, in *House of the Octopus*, the Flame, usually considered the best of these figures.

The best introduction to this figure is an article by Williams in *Contemporary Review* in 1920, nine years before even *The Rite of the Passion*. The article is called "The Hero in English Verse"; in it Williams speaks of the separation of the "Champion and the Oppressor of Mankind." This is seen, for example, in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with the complete separation of God the Father (the arbitrary God, associated with Law) and Christ, and the consequent loss of the reader's sympathy with God.

"Only the expression in that will [i.e. in God's arbitrary will] of a passion of love could save him, and that is an idea which is certainly not artistically expressed in Milton." (p. 83) The problem is that "Though we speak of reconciliation between man and destiny, it is really conquest that we look for, to satisfy completely the idea with which we follow any of the legends of the Hero, that Hero must endure, combat and overthrow his enemy, making it the instrument for the achievement of — poetry has not yet told us what, or perhaps certain of the dark poems of mysticism alone have done so." (p. 83b) Williams concludes the article by looking at Patmore, in whose work although it is fairly remote from the tradition of symbolical hero, "man is conscious throughout of the true nature of his opponent and man's heroism — in so far as it exists at all — is but the continued attempt to confirm his
will to that greater Will. There is the same darkness and pain
i.e. as in Wordsworth or Browning or Tennyson ... but it is
a suffering accepted or even desired. There is nowhere any doubt
of Love, or of the perfect rightness of the relations between God and
the soul - such names are in these poems, given to Destiny and Man.

These two meditations, on man as the Hero and on man as the
soul, have not yet been united. We wait still for the poet who shall
show us Destiny becoming God - more especially who shall show us,
perhaps in some symbolic figure, man, conscious first of that fate which
in character and circumstance seems to tyrannise over and endanger
him, becoming aware of that which lies behind - man conquering the
Omnipotence which Milton enthroned and finding the Lover with whom
Patmore walked:

"See the Christ stand!"

From the beginning of the play, the Skeleton is the "symbolic
figure shown to be lying behind ... character and circumstance."

The play opens with the procession of the Singers and
their prayer that "thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass
through things temporal, that we finally lose not things eternal,"
thus pointing up the movement of the play. Next to enter are the Preacher
and Priest/ Then Cranmer, soon followed by his counterpart, the Bishop
who is "vested with acolytes and incense." The association of Cranmer
with the Preacher, and the Bishop with the Priest is pointed up by
Cranmer's denunciation of the obscuring of communion by adoration.
Then the Skeleton enters, carrying the crozier, symbol of spiritual
authority and introduced by the Singers.

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"

He is like the synthesis of a dialectic, the Preacher being
the thesis and the Priest the anti-thesis, the Skeleton comprehending
and going beyond both.

Similarly the Skeleton is shown to control State affairs, e.g. In the first exchange between the King and Thomas, after bringing Thomas to the King the Skeleton then stands "between and behind them" as the King tells Thomas of his marriage problems and invests him as Archbishop of Canterbury. It is the Skeleton who gives the crozier to the King who then gives it to Thomas. The Skeleton participates in, but stays beyond, both Church parties; and participates in, but stays outside too, political activities.

The whole action of the play is set under way by the exchange between Thomas and the Skeleton at the beginning of the play. Thomas prays

"O that the King, O that God's glory's gust
from heaven would drive the dust of the land....

set with his fire ablaze
their heavy somnolence of heavenly desire, his word bid
what God said be heard, what God bade be done,
that the King's law might run savingly through the land:
so might I, if God please, outcast from my brethren stand."

The Skeleton's reply is immediate, pointing out that people do not need to worry that their prayer will not be heard, for "asking, at once, before they seek, they find.... They run, after each entreating him, runs his prayer." The action of the play is the working out of Thomas's prayer and the Skeleton's reply.

Just as the Skeleton draws together the Priest-Priest-Preacher dichotomy so in the whole structure of the play he draws threads together. Earlier, I divided Part I of the play into four sections, the first showing the images of the Priest and Preacher (the basic division of the play), the second Anne's, the third Henry's and the fourth, which
the others lead up to Thomas’s. The images of the Lords and Commons are shown too. Of all these images only that of the Lords has not been presented to some extent when the Skeleton points to them: "Mark the images go abroad", claims that he "set the images free" and that he is the origin of them: "spectral images, lacking love's grace, of me ... each grows a wicked automaton to each, a diseased bone, to be flung to Gehenna; Yet I only am the pit where Gehenna is sprung." Each person must go beyond his image. This is ritually enacted as the Skeleton goes round the stage as if blind and begging, asking if they know the way, and each group answers.

"Priest: Aceipe: this is the way

Preacher: Audi, this is the way

Commons: This, we heard was the way

Lords: This, we feel is the way

King: This that I bid is the way

Commons: This - is not this the way?

The Skeleton replies: I am the way

I the division, the derision, where
the bones dance in the darkening air...
...the way to heaven and the way to hell."
And as he goes round the stage, singing, everyone is gradually drawn in until all are running after him.

The Skeleton leads or beckons people here and there; he is a Death figure, leading Anne out under his cloak. He encourages the Lords in their opposition to Cranmer, and encourages Cranmer to recant. His is a rather violent nature: when he cannot achieve his ends by peaceful means he does not give up:

"I must divide his [i.e. Cranmer's] life to the last crack
and pull his soul - if it lives - through the cracks..."(p.22)
His nature is paradoxical: he describes himself as "God or the Devil" (p. 6) and later as "the Judas who betrays men to God." (p. 35).

But it is not only when the Skeleton is central in the action, as here, that his nature and his relation to the events are seen. For present on stage almost continuously, he is a constant counterpoint to the action. He is a persistent commentator, telling and warning of what is to come, pleading, replying to questions and prayers, wryly or passionately interpreting and linking events and attitudes. Through the Skeleton, "Heaven's point of view" is seen.

And Heaven's activity. From Cranmer's prayer for renewal onward, the play offers the double perspective of Cranmer's point of view on the one hand and on the other the "reality" lying behind and in what he sees as real. The integration of the Skeleton into the structure of the play enables the comment to build up the drama, not detract from it.

The woodenness of the characters allows the Skeleton this function. For it is in keeping with his nature as destiny. Their usually stylised and patterned movement or stillness, contrasts with the Skeleton's movement and agility as he runs, jumps, sits for a moment crouches, threatens, chases, or turns abruptly to speak to the audience. This is reflected in his speech and its contrast with that of other characters.

The Skeleton's speeches are strongly rhythmical, with short and end stopped lines, balanced and repetitive phrases, and simple words. His words are linked too by alliteration and assonance; end-rhyme is more regular. His words carry a sense of authority from the finality these devices afford.

"Fast runs the mind and the soul a pace behind."

The rhythm is unusually jerky, contrasting with that of all the other
characters, emphasising, as here, his disruptive effect.

"without haste or sloth

come I between both."

The combination of simplicity, often colloquial diction and syntax, and strong counterpointed rhythm, with its jerky low-key effect, on the one hand, and seriousness seen in frequent violence of imagery, statement and action on the other, is the Skeleton's characteristic way of speaking.

"There blows a darkening wind

over soul and mind:

faith can hear, truth can see

the jangling bones that make up me

till on the hangman's day

and along the hangman's way

we all three run level

mind, soul and God or the Devil"

This combination gives his speech a detachment consistent with his nature ("This also is thou, neither is this thou") and moving easily into ironic comment, a lightness of tone, and a sense of movement which lifts the play.

Williams later felt that the figure of the Skeleton was a little crude. Yet, by drawing on history, tradition and ceremony, by exploiting masque elements and by the device of the Skeleton, Williams was able to present his ideas forcefully, and at the same time to gain the sympathy, the involvement of the audience in his concentration on an Everyman "hero" who is muddled, often ineffectual, and only shakily honest right to the end.
NOTES

1. See above p. 4.

2. Actually the Singers present the theme before the Priest and Preacher enter, but it is in general terms, and is not dramatically presented by them.

3. Image of the City p. 58

4. Anne Ridler sees the Introducer of the Masses as a fore-runner too.
Chapter Three - The Nativity Plays

If, as Roger Sale insists, "it is the province of the imagination to make me understand that a thing is so regardless of what I personally believe", then Seed of Adam is not very successful. It is more like "a reminder of a truth already believed in" (p.212). From Cranmer's combination of naturalism and symbolism Williams moves toward a symbolic structure uniting event and spiritual reality. Seed of Adam is essentially a celebration and development of something the audience already knows. It belongs in the tradition of a drama gradually developing from an inanimate nativity scene. The play is about the Way of Return (to Paradise) for which Adam is searching. Adam knows that it lies in "the centre, the core of the fruit" which he dropped and cannot find. The expressionist "telescoping of time" allows Adam as the father of mankind, to be Mary's father and the father of the Three kings - the Tsar of Caucasus who represents the West seeking joy or oblivion in trade, exploration and riches; the Sultan of Bagdad who represents the Eastern search in art and philosophy; and the King of Myrrh who "represents the experience of man when man thinks he has gone beyond all hope of restoration to joy". Adam, as Caesar Augustus orders a census to be taken, to try to find someone who can help him in his search. The Third King, accompanied by a Negress (Hell) arrives after Mary and Joseph: the Third King is the core of the fruit. The Negress, whom he calls "Mother Myrrh" attacks Mary, but is defeated after Mary's cry "Parturition is upon me". And after Mary goes to the stable, the Third King sends Mother Myrrh to be midwife.

The play is less convincing than Cranmer because there is no dramatic focus for Williams' ideas, for the Way of Return. The plot coheres in the Mankind figure Adam-Augustus. He is disgusted with the behaviour of his children, and decides that, to protect Mary from them, she and Joseph shall marry. Attention now turns to Mary. Later when the
Chorus cry out to him "Father Adam, save us or we perish," he re-enters
as Augustus, but his part is limited to the announcement of the census
and its purpose, and a brief order to his soldiers to seize Mother Myrrh.
At the end of the play Joseph asks Adam who shall be mid-wife; it is the
Third King who answers. Adam's next and last action is to go to the
stable when called by Mary.

Mary is more often in the centre of the stage, the dramatic
action. It is Mary who fights Mother Myrrh at the climax of the play.
But she enters the play long before. Mary is contrasted at the beginning
of the play with her brothers and sisters because she will not "marshall
phenomena: Cows, clowns and crowns are all alike to her." She does not
develop significantly, acting as a counterpart to the action of the play
(the search): Eve suggests "Paradise perhaps is hers and here." The
characterisation of Mary thus anticipates the way of return and she
elaborates on this way when she explains to Joseph the nature of love.

"How can one be in love with someone?...to be in love is to be in love,
no more, no less. Love is only itself
everywhere, at all times and to all objects...
The glory is eternal, and not I,
and I am only one diagram of the glory." 2

In this way Williams provides some indication of the effect of the Nativity.
For she is speaking of the principle of Incarnation. The "diagram" is
implicitly related to the Tsar's wealth and the Sultan's philosophy, for
they too can be "diagram(s) of the glory", but only after the Nativity.
The problem is that it is the effect of the Nativity — the Nativity as the
Way of Return — that is Williams' subject in this play. And it is difficult
for such a situation to be the focus of attention. Usually a play centres
on a character, for it is easier to focus action, ideas, and emotions
from these, in a character. Sometimes the dramatic focus is a symbol, as
for example in Chekhov's Cherry Orchard. The situation of the play — the ideas,
the feelings of the characters, and the action - is focused in the
difficulty with the
cherry orchard. But the Nativity is that it cannot be the focus of
the action. Normally a writer will have an Everyman character at the
centre of the play, as Williams does in House by the Stable, for this
reason. Williams, in Seed of Adam, splits the focus between Adam the
searcher and Mary the protagonist. The weakness of this is seen at the
climax of the play, where the intensity of the conflict between Mary
and Mother Myrrh is lessened, both because Mary's struggle is not one
the audience is involved with, and because the climax is drawn out to
include the actual birth off-stage and adoration.

The symbolism of the apple, though it makes the pattern more
clear, does not really make the play more convincing. Adam ate the
fruit, and threw the core over the fence of paradise. The Sultan
and the Tsar are lightly associated with the smell and taste of the fruit
and the Third King - Myrrh - is stated to be the core. More exactly, he
says later that the sun split the core and he grew out of it. He is
akin to Despair calling himself the "itch", "the diabetes of the damned."
The sun also released a small worm at the heart of the core which is
forever eating. The Third King calls her his "little Mother Myrrh
because of her immortal embalming". The situation is clear in the play:
because of Man's sin, he is inseparably linked to evil - it is a part
of him and to deny it is to deny part of himself. It is inseparable
unless evil itself is conquered. So the climax is the fight-dance
between Mary and Mother Myrrh. The symbolism is not altogether
convincing because, with the introduction of Mother Myrrh, it becomes
mechanical, more in the nature of allegory. The Third King as the core
of the apple has been prepared for, even though we do not see the
progression to this state in any character. The association of the Tsar
and Sultan with the smell and taste of the fruit is light. But with the
introduction of a worm at the heart of the core - however horticulturally and theologically sound this is - the myth, already strained, loses conviction. To demand this sort of conviction from Seed of Adam is, however perhaps unfair. It is a Nativity play in a tradition of dazzling spectacle. It is meant to be enjoyed. Dawson quotes an introduction to the play on the occasion of its production in Watermoor Church, Cirencester. "The man who will not like Seed of Adam is the intellectual snob who rates understanding higher than enjoyment (which he regards as vulgar), who feels he ought to understand everything, and who then gets cross when he does not and the bubble of his pride is thus pricked. It was no intellectual snob who said of Seed of Adam "that was a wonderful play. The more you think of it, the more you see in it." It was a curate's charlady." (p. 90) To this ad hominem argument, it is perhaps worth noting that Seed of Adam, like Cresser and Chelmsford, is indebted to the masque tradition. The masque was an elaborate entertainment written in poetry, and often symbolic allegorical, or mythological. Costuming was elaborate, spectacle and music important. Plot was often slight, serving merely to bind together the various elements. Mary's fight-dance with Mother Myrrh, to which the Chorus sway, can be linked with the dance of the masked figures at the climax of the masque, in which the audience often joined. In this sort of structure, the entry of a Mother Myrrh who is the worm at the core of the fruit, and then becomes mid-wife to Mary, is part of the spectacle.

Williams uses the masque in a celebration of the meaning of the Nativity. The play is effective in evoking his impression of this
meaning. It is coherent and has a simplicity of subject not to be
gainsaid by the number and fluidity of characters. For the structure
is clearly patterned from the entrance of the two groups representing
Eastern and Western Men, and then in the contrast with Mary. The
action is probable e.g. Adam's concern for Mary's safety motivates his
betrothal of her to Joseph and the arrival of the Third King is rendered
probable by the census. The simplicity does not detract from
excitement. T.S. Eliot commented after seeing the play performed
"I...not only found it extremely exciting, but was aware that the actors
and most of the audience did too; and that I regard as the first piece
of evidence I have seen of the great possibilities of the modern mystery
play." 3 Excitement is built up by e.g. masque elements, plot, and also
by the "telescooping of time." The richness of associations this allows
lends the play an intensity. Yet there is a lightness in Seed of Adam;
present in Grammar by the use of the Skeleton but subdued by the
ponderous Thomas, a wit of the kind that Eliot describes in his essay
on Marvell. "There is here an equipoise, a balance and proportion of
tones....a constant inspection and criticism of experience...a recognition
implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience
which are possible." (pp.302-3)4 This can be seen in the language which
combines richness and the colloquial: "molten and golden streams" are
spoken of, and then the Tsar comments:

"Tricked out in riches, half the world follow me,
who fall, crawl, or are kicked into dry ditches."

There are relatively few images (as distinct from symbols) in the play,
and when they occur they tend to sound self-conscious as when Adam
describes Mary as "as agile as the honey plucking bee..." and Joseph:

"To see swung whole squadrons in the charge and - in a wild clatter
of words breaking - flung down the speaking of a poem, when the matter
is sprung to the flashing and slashing of a steel line at the throats 
blood." The combination of richness and the colloquial, the literary image 
used by an irritated father, the expressive over-use of the myth, the 
combination of intensity from the strong association of characters 
with obvious patterning: all these contribute to the "wit" that Eliot 
spends of. A powerful impression is evoked, but the audience is kept 
detachedly critical.

It is this powerful evocation of Williams' idea that The 
Death of Good Fortune lacks. The play is more abstract. Its subject, 
the discovery that all fortune is good because of the Incarnation, is 
worked out in the death and resurrection of the allegorical figure of 
Good Fortune. He is a successor to Crapman's Skeleton, but he shares 
the role of Necessity with Mary. Mary is partially mythologized, 
her role in the play being similar to that of the Flame in House of 
the Octopus. She introduces the play, describing herself: "Begins 
substance to move through everywhere the sensuality of earth and air. 
I was its mother in its beginning: I taught the royal soothsayers 
to follow a moving star, and brought them to their primal, far and 
hierarchical head. I am wisdom whose name is Mary. I wept by the 
Dead. I arose with the Aisen." In accordance with this she controls 
action throughout the play. The introduction continues "I have determined 
that in this town this very day this gay popular lord shall come to 
his change and a strange new vision of himself." Mary decides when in 
the play this shall happen. She then bids him rise, and encourages 
him to tell what he has learnt. She ends the play commenting on, and 
dismissing the characters who will not accept fortune as good: "You 
have chosen your ways; be blessed; go with God." The choice is then 
put before the audience. During much of the play Mary has been silent, 
only occasionally commenting. But her very presence on stage is a
counterpoint to the action, an effective commentary on the action.

Good Fortune is lightly, but effectively characterised. His entrance is prepared for by the arrival of first the Old Woman and the Youth, and then the Lover and Magician, who are curious to see him, and want or have this good luck. His vanity is lightly sketched in when he speaks:

"My mere arbitrary choice...
I desire to gratify; cry then my praise..."

And his response to the Girl's scepticism,

"Am I defrauded in my chosen town?" suggests a frailty which the King and other characters try to ignore by their opening ceremony. It is after Good Fortune's death that the play weakens. The turning point, the actual death of Good Fortune, is more theatrically effective and more convincing, than the discovery that all fortune is good. Because of the double centre - Good Fortune and Mary - very little is actually seen happening. Mary, the omniscient puppeteer, announces Good Fortune shall die, and she has a seizure. Later when she commands him to rise a little of his experience of his journey back to life is seen, most vivid when Good Fortune is before Christ who is on Mary's knee:

Mary: What does he say?

Good Fortune: He says Live Good Fortune -

Woman, woman on earth, tell me to die.

Mary: What is he doing?

Good Fortune: He has taken my heart from my side

and is twisting it in his hands...."

But even here it is reported, with characters on stage looking on. He has had no choice. And much of his journey he does not describe until it is finished. During his journey Good Fortune has lost his vanity, and, as Blessed Luck, he is quite colourless. The effect of his life
and death is seen in the other characters, but they are few and are
stock characters. the King, the Lover, the old woman with her
hidden savings who dislikes her daughter-in-law, the Magician/fortune-
teller-except for the girl. Her refusal to believe and later, her
uncertainty, are more interesting. But she is not central enough for
the play’s ideas to be convincing. Williams’ use of masque
spectacle to convey the impression of the central discovery, is very
limited in this play probably because the play was written for a
war-time touring group. Williams uses the symbol of the star to link
the Nativity more closely with the onstage Mary and to suggest Good
Fortune’s contact with the Nativity, but the star is not sufficiently
part of the whole structure of the play for it to be convincing, or
indeed to lose its triteness.

The Lover’s shout “that is it! that is it!”

all luck is good” is extravagant.

For this is not shown in the play.

House by the Stable is less ambitious in theme than Good
Fortune. It is a morality play showing Man, stymied by Pride,
unwittingly becoming entangled with Hell. And the gradual call away
from them by the Nativity, with the help of Gabriel. It is the
unified focus on Man that makes this play more successful than either
Good Fortune or the later Grab and Grace. Williams shows the effect
of the Nativity by centering the action on Man’s inner conflict; Pride
as an allegorical character representing the sin is finely fused with
Pride as the Man’s antagonist in the play. Man and Pride are lovers
and Pride introduces Man to her brother, Hell. Man, curious about
Hell’s house suggests they go there some time. When Pride tells man
that Hell has promised his house to them, Man arrogantly suggests that
perhaps Hell knows he would take it from him. Pride replies
"I love, how I love to hear you talk so
but for my sake do not be harsh to my brother
for your Pride's sake, smile at her brother Hell..."

Similarly Pride leads Man to play a game of dice with the stake of
"that old jewel your servant talks
often of...
soul he calls it, I think"

by the accurate plea
"Sweet for Pride's sake throw him something in return."

This strong counterpoint within the main characters enables Williams to dispense with the central omniscient commentator, Mary in *Seed of Adam* and *Good Fortune*, and the Skeleton in *Cranmer*. It is the same device — an extreme form of dramatic irony, a morality convention that he used in the speech of minor characters of Cranmer. But *House by the Stable* is not as static as Cranmer because there are few characters and they participate more fully in the action.

The lightness of tone to which the counterpoint lends itself is part of Man's characterization, for man is rather stupid, blinded by pride. At the climax of the play, when Man at last calls on Gabriel, and Gabriel goes to him "in his magnificence":

Sir, God made me and bade me wait
on this moment in your life: what do you need?"

Man replies genially "You are a good fellow."

Drama such as this obviously has its limitations. It is the simplicity of the subject/theme that enables Williams to be successful, for this play has less scope than *Cranmer* in particular for presenting Williams ideas. *Grab and Grace*, its companion and sequel, is more complex, and shows the limits of the morality play.
Grab and Grace which takes place 100 years after the event of *House by the Stable*, is about Pride's attempts to win Man back. Like *House by the Stable*, it is a morality play and Joseph and Mary of the former play are replaced by Faith and Grace. The play has more of the lightness of *House by the Stable* with Grace as a "tirosome boy" who whistles when Pride leads Man astray. Faith is a sophisticated young lady who fights Pride "woman to woman". Hell is more active in this play, with more initiative and power. Pride now calls herself "Self-Respect" and is less attractive, especially in comparison with Faith. The play concentrates far more on these allegorical characters.

The conflict between Man as the central character is emphasised by irrelevancies such as the quip, between Faith and Gabriel -

Gabriel: Madam, could he do better than listen to Faith's songs?

Faith: Well, to be frank, that depends..."

which, while it contrasts the two groups (Pride and Hell, Faith and Gabriel) and characterises Faith with a certain lack of self-importance in contrast with Pride, it detracts attention from their relation to Man. Even when more directly relevant to the action, the ceaseless activity of the other allegorical characters often detracts. Its result is that most of the conflict of the play takes place outside Man and its relation to him is blurred despite the witty exactness of the allegory.

The long conflict between Pride and Faith, the attempt of Hell to draw Grace, Faith's capture by Hell and Pride; Hell's bag of odds and ends
containing Abel's blood, Jezebel's belt, Adam's tooth, the kiss of Judas etc; Hell's attempt to strike Faith which, missing Faith, hits Pride - all these have an allegorical significance which is not very difficult to work out. But their number and complexity contrasts the simplicity of allegory and symbolism in *House by the Stable*: the soul as a jewel is simple and effective; it is part of the structure, a jewel being an obvious stake for a dice game and a suitable gift for Christ. The linking at the end of the play, of Man's continual drinking with Pride and Hell is convincing. Gabriel, bringing Man to Mary, apologises "Lady, Man is a little drunk and a little sleepy with a little hankering after Hell." At the end of *Grab and Grace*, although the fight is exciting and Man's pain and apprehension vivid, yet these are not the culmination of a play-long inner conflict between faith and pride; which Man's faith (aided by grace, wins. The difficulty in drawing the play together at the end, and gaining intensity by the expression of Pride's fear, is seen in the language. "Baboons" and "crocodiles" are suddenly introduced. Worse is the use of the word "denatures" at the culmination of Pride's fear, which is almost pathetic:

Faith: "But what does he (Hell) do?

Pride: Denatures

Gabriel: Denatures!

Faith: 0 horrible! 0

God, pitiful God, have mercy on us all."

The play however, is amusing and if it does not convey all the allegorical significance that is contained in the events and characters certainly much of the situation is conveyed.
NOTES

1. Appendix of Seed of Adam, written by Williams, Collected Plays p. 173.

2. see above p. 4-5

3. Dawson p. 91.

4. Grab and Grace is not actually a Christmas play - but, as companion and sequel to House by the Stable, it is convenient to group it here.
Like the Nativity plays, House of the Octopus is a much simpler play than Cranmer. Meaning and events are united in a symbolic structure. There is one simple division between the Way of Exchange and the Empire of Mastery, or Anthony and Assantu, or the Chorus and Marshall - Prefect, Alayu and Rais. Basically this is a split between Good and Evil. The Skeleton of Cranmer is here divided into two, the - Flame and P'o-l'u (Cranmer's "God or the Devil," p. 6), corresponding to these two extremes. The later is evoked, but not present in person: it is seen in "P'o - l'u's men" the Marshall and Prefect, and in Assantu, the antagonist. This simple contrast between the Way of Exchange and the empire of Mastery is used to show the nature and seriousness of the actions and motives of Anthony, the protagonist, which are, in turn, used to show how easily the two ways can be confused.

Anthony is a priest who has brought the Gospel to the island and is head of the little Christian community. He is contrasted with Assantu, a member of the Church who betrays Anthony to P'o - l'u's men, and later tries to kill him. Assantu is attempting to "compel a sacrifice", to gain spiritual protection and power; in the terms of the play, he is seeking the Flame uncovenanted.

The Flame is the Holy Spirit or, more usually in the play, an image of the Holy Spirit:

"We are of those who first came into being
when the Holy Ghost measured within the waters."
He is the Spirit both conravanted and uncoavanted, i.e. known in
the Church in faith, in the way of exchange, and unconvenanted, wanted
as spiritual power, as Assantu wants it. This approach prevents
Assantu from achieving his goal for

"It is your own nature you see, Assantu, not me..."

and: what you see here is only a spark
of that furious dance we made before my
companions and I were gathered and thrown and
sealed to the Christian altars and the souls of men."

Assantu, in his efforts to gain this power, enters the service of
P'o - l'u, the Octopus, not realising the full implications of the
Empire of Mastery:

Assantu: "It was promised, lord -

Marshall: so and you have no common terms,
therefore no agreement. P'o - l'u is unique.
If you need commonalty, you must believe other faiths
the Catholic and its incarnation for all I care.
Now you will obey us to whom you have given
yourself when you gave us the Priest."

P'o - l'u is presented in horrific images especially the
Octopus. This is one of the shapes of which the Flame speaks:

"we powers of heaven, we flames of the Spirit we
seeds of conjunction - are sometimes seen on earth
in uncoavanted shapes, shapes of triumph and terror,
tempting gloom and greed. Ask your hearts, my people,
if you do not mistake your desires for the fires of the
Spirit."

So P'o-l'u is the Flame when known (grasped) uncoavanted, as Assantu
experiences him. The play develops the parallel between Anthony and
Assantu so that, by imaging vividly the "devouring" of Assantu by the Octopus, the parallel spiritual Octopus that is entangling Anthony is evoked. For Anthony, by wanting to be his community's means to God, is shown to be similarly refusing the Way of Exchange.

House of the Octopus thus attempts to convey far more distinctive ideas or ideas in greater depth than the Nativity Plays. Its thorough exploration of the Way of Exchange parallels Crammer's of the image. The effect of William's change from naturalism, the difference made by the greater actualisation of the spiritual meaning in the structure of events and characters, can be seen by comparing the two plays.

The action of House of the Octopus is straightforward. In Act One the Flame enters and introduces the play: the location (a land in the outer seas), the general subject (the Mind of God's Church), the basic situation (a young Church in his care which is struggling against "an empire of pagany" called P'o-l'u), and the specific immediate danger from Assantu. After this introduction, there are five major sections or dialogues in Act I. The first is between the Flame and Assantu, and illustrates and develops the Flame's introduction to him. Assantu will not heed the Flame, who then tells him "do your choice." The second is between Assantu and Raia; this choice is put into action as Assantu gains the obedience of Raia by showing her a "token" from the Octopus, i.e. his relationship with P'o-l'u. She agrees to help him kill her brother, Tantula, as part of a long term plan to rid the island of Christians. The third section centres on Anthony's reluctance to leave his community and their insistence that he leave them to God's protection. Tension is built up as Assantu too tries to persuade Anthony to leave but for rather different reasons: he has arranged for Anthony to be caught by P'o-l'u's men that evening.
He asks Tantula to say goodbye to Rais before he leaves as Anthony's guide. The others go to collect Anthony's and Tantula's supplies, and Rais leads Tantula towards the trees and Assantu. Their argument about the different means of salvation, as well as pointing up the theme, is dramatic in its immediate relevance to the doomed Tantula. Tantula is killed; the Christians reappear and are told that spies killed Tantula, and Assantu takes Tantula's place as guide. Anthony and Assantu leave together and the Chorus are left, Oruyo wondering why there was no cry from the deaths, and Alayu fearful of being hurt.

Assantu—in his relation to the Christian Community, i.e. as the immediate danger from E'o-l'u, — is thus central throughout. The discussions on the need for the community to "take refuge in the Maker of all and the Flesh-Taker;... whose deeds are enough for our needs," and on the different views of salvation, Rais's and Tantula's, are dramatic, forwarding movement and building up the sense of danger.

This simple progression and economy contrasts with the action of Cranmer. Part I contains a great number of events and a great number of characters. After the gradual entry of the Singers, the Priest and Preacher, Cranmer, the Bishop, and the Skeleton, the action proper starts. Cranmer is appointed Archbishop; Henry gains his dispensation and marries Anne; the Lords attempt to have the monasteries dissolved. Anne is sentenced, the English Bible is written, the Lords attempt to get rid of Thomas; Henry dies; the Lords take power; Thomas begins to write the Book of Common Prayer. The speed of this suggests the uncontrollable progression of these events; and the consequent pressure on Thomas. But to keep the focus on an essentially inactive Thomas and his spiritual conflict, Williams creates stylised even caricatured
characters and the play has a stark quality unlike the rapid movement of House of the Octopus. One reviewer noted of Cranmer that the words were/drama; there is no real stage action in the play. It "often seems to be ritual rather than a play." Another was impatient of the "talky" character of Cranmer, and suggested that it was perhaps time "to create a new manner for these symbolic biographies." And the N.Y.S. reviewer, linking Cranmer with Murder in the Cathedral, speaks of it as being "rather mystical than eventful, rather lyrical than dramatic." Events and characters are linked, and significance shown, by the Skeleton.

The Flame does not have such a ubiquitous role. He is not continuously on stage; in Act II he is seldom present. This Act is begun and ended by servants of P'o-l'u, and it is by their words and actions that the audience is guided. Anthony's offer of protection—provided he agrees to use the name word for both God and P'o-l'u—is placed immediately following the Marshall's talk of mental and spiritual absorption and Assantu's discovery that to serve P'o-l'u in any way involves ultimate total subservience. Throughout the play Assantu takes the role of Antagonist. And the Chorus of House of the Octopus combines the functions of the Singers and the Commons of Cranmer expressing and reinforcing what is (rightly) felt and said by more active characters, and also participating importantly in the action.

The simplification of the role of the symbolic figure makes him more coherent gaining the sympathy of the audience in a way that the Skeleton did not. The symbol of a Skeleton is powerful, immediately drawing on association of death, and easily extended to images both of a hangman and of a puppet. The associations of death are very relevant to Cranmer with its theme of acceptance of the cross in recognising the limitation of images, its setting of the communion service, and its
action which leads up to a martyrdom. The specific attributes of a skeleton are drawn on when the skeleton speaks of images being his bones, diseased when seen singly, but in reality dancing together. The image draws on the medieval dance of death and the mystic dance of life. But this dance of the bones, which images the theme of the play, is not part of its basic structure in the same way that the Flame is. The audience's interest, but not their sympathy, is drawn. The skeleton remains.

Necessity: in the terms of William's article on the hero, "Destiny" is too eccentric a figure to "become God".

In contrast, House of the Octopus can be seen as a unified symbolic structure centering on the Flame. The Flame introduces and ends the play and his domination of action is reflected in images.

"Fire" (1,6) is used, referring back to the "sow and joy of our Lord" ("Some of you tonight are alive and alight with fire of this same kind" says the Flame). And referring forward to "the mind of God's Church... the only and universal joy." The Flame then links himself to this fire: "We are of those who first came into being when the Holy Ghost measured within the waters the angle of creation; then in a sudden visibility we dropped from his rushing flame-scattering wind, to teach the blessed the speech of heaven and of us."

The symbol/image of fire is present throughout. At first it widens into "glow", "light", "dance". But, as talk of P'0-l'u begins, it widens.

"....we flames of the spirit
.....are sometimes seen on earth in uncovenanted shapes, shapes of triumph and terror."

The Flame and P'0-l'u are not completely separate and the image pattern round the Flame merges into that of the Octopus, which is primarily predatory ("tentacles", "clutch", "maw") and often of the
sea or water ("octopus", "shark", "crocodile"): Assantu, trying to grasp the Flame as spiritual power describes him as "angry smoke... fire... licking and pricking our hearts with the hunger of the sea, and the sea beyond the sea." There are two types of fire, the fire of the Flame covenanted, committed to the "purging of souls" yet "gentle and cleansing, and the fire of the Octopus described in terms of "fiery volcanoes", of choking and stifling. There are two types of water, the merciless sea associated with P'o-l'u, and the water the Flame speaks of: "I am more gentle and cleansing than any water." And there are two types of hunger. The Flame speaks of "food given"; the "eating and being eaten" of the Christians seen especially in the exchange between Anthony and Alayu, contrasts with the eating of the Octopus. The latter is described in terms of "absorption", "devastation", "rotting flesh", "decay", and "tooth-tearing".

This symbolic unity, while it allows the Flame a more coherent role, has its disadvantages. House of the Octopus lacks the actuality that Williams can quickly achieve from well-known historical events and characters, and well known literature. And Williams does not replace this by the actuality of sensuous imagery. This can be seen in his use of the Octopus symbol. It is like a religious symbol rather than a literary one because Williams relies on and builds up, feelings and associations that the reader has prior to the play, instead of allowing the Octopus itself to do this. The first description has some direct reference to an actual octopus:

"an empire of pagentry lies within these seas,
called P'o-l'u; it has long stayed quiet,
but now moves. It stretches wide tentacles,
gasps and clutches, and one by one fetches
into its new these ancient scattered islands."
O now who shall save my young innocent church?
but then we hear of "Father and Eater..."

the great shore of the ghostly island
where your fabled father eats the fabled flesh...
the father who makes his meat of the dead
among the fiery volcanoes in the waste of the sea...
save me from the soul's swallowing" (P. 252-3).

Even in the first passage, "gasps" and "clutches" are highly figurative rather than referential words and "new" even more so.

A close look at the images of a passage confirms this view
e.g. Anthony voicing his fears for the young church speaks of "the log that within the marshes of a stagnant soul becomes the crocodile;
the shark's tooth that tears the despairing heart; the negligent body caught by waving tentacles! the hidden dark surprise of all the eyed creatures with meaningless eyes!" (261)

The three images vividly express the horror that Anthony feels.
They are linked, being predatory. But only the phrase "stagnant soul" seems to me to approach the sort of surprise, and newness that Eliot speaks of. "Stagnant" has strong associations of still water, putrid and overgrown, associations which have not been lost or lessened by much metaphorical use. "Soul" has associations of something pure which give its juxtaposition with "stagnant" a slight shock. "Shark's tooth-tearing lacks the creative effect of joining two still distinct contents, and relies instead on stock responses. It is a cliché. The main disadvantage of this is that although the author can thus powerfully present a feeling of horror, the reader and audience do not experience this. But both these examples, the growth of the octopus symbol, and the passage looked at - are evocations of P'o-l'u. It is only in evoking
P'o-l'u that Williams uses this highly figurative language. And he uses it to reveal character. In Act I the Flame speaks of P'o-l'u. But the Flame speaks e.g. as Assantu's "own nature" (it is your own nature you see, Assantu, not me," he says): he is a flexible enough figure to be able to speak the thoughts of others. And the Flame later speaks of "your fabled father" (p. 253) and "I speak to the proud only in their own tongue,

there I am loud; other where very soft" (p. 252).

This suggestion of the unreality of P'o-l'u is picked up later when he speaks to Anthony of "dreams...themes of sad nightmare...the universal conceit...fantasies, lies of the soul." Tantula is more explicit, telling Rais "I have come now

out of all these tales of a spectral Father
on his island ... But now we know that the Father is a true Power of good, and his son our food and not we his, and there is but one Ghost and that holy,

Think, sister of this God. All the others are nothing." (p. 264).

In the light of this, the speech of Anthony's looked at above is a pointer to his spiritual condition. For he uses the highly imagistic language natural to a frightened superstitious member of a primitive tribe. For Rais and Assantu these "images", which to Anthony are metaphors, actually are concrete and "real". In Rais' speech p. 265 the only metaphor is the submerged image of frightened birds. Her speech is almost stark, with few, or simple, adjectives ("no boar or fat bull") and syntax is loose: "to name a boar for you

that it may there choke and stifle and decay

instead of you."

"Williams does not abound in the kind of imagery which is the
peculiar glory of older English poetry - the sharply recognizable picture of the familiar (usually rural) objects. Yet his language is effective for in the same way that "stagnant soul" gains meaning from the interaction of two different and definite contexts. Rais' speech combines unusual or technical words such as "solitary", "Disemberk", "putrid", "bleak" with the simpler or more common words. "The dead come dreadfully" is quick and simple; "dreadfully" outworn. The sentence continues however "to the bleak shade," with its long, contrasting vowels; and "bleak" is unusual. This is immediately followed by another contrast: "earless" rhymes with "shoe" making it sound simplistic - she is a superstitious native - but this is followed by "and drift alone to disembark." "Disemberk" is a very exact word suggesting efficiency and loud speakers. Similarly the rather extravagant "Father roams amid putrid flesh" is balanced by the natural image of birds ("souls chirping with terror"). This contrast acts, as a control, (cf. Eliot's comments on Metaphysical wit as as constant awareness of disparate experience), so that Williams is able, as here, to use vivid images, reinforced by rhythm, by alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme, showing the horrific fantasies of Rais and her simplicity, without degenerating to the ridiculous and to caricature.

This way of speaking appropriately links the superstitious islanders, the more sophisticated but evil Marshall and Prefect, and the desires of Anthony. For all are resting in images. In their literalness, or use of the same images, their expression contrasts with the ephemerality of the apprehension of spiritual truth seen in the speech of the contrasting group, Siru, Groyo and Torna. Because they are no longer tied to the "fantasies", their speech is more abstract. It can be striking because of the occasional simple,
homely image:

"It may be that her last scream
was no more than a cry in childbirth, when he was born
piercingly in her soul, and her very death
her first motherly waking."

More often it is striking because of unusual combination of parts
of speech, very often adjectives becoming nouns e.g. "smallness
of death", and "naughting", and of the abstract and concrete or
abstract and sensuous such as "sweetness of fact". In its/obvious
rhyme, alliteration, assonance etc. too the contrast is built up.

The problem lies in the combination of the two ways of
speaking, the simple more naturalistic with the highly (horrifically)
figurative, which follows the good-evil division. House of the
Octopus lacks Seed of Adam’s distance in time which lends veracity
by removing the action to "a timeless dimension" and by drawing on
historical character. The horrific symbolism outweighs the actuality
that could otherwise be built up by the more simple language of the men
of the island. And there is not the unified focus on the struggle
of the central character which could powerfully gain the audience’s
sympathy. It is with the struggle in Anthony that the audience
sympathises; but he shares the dramatic focus with Assantu. Assantu
is a colourful parallel, contrast and antagonist but not convincing.

For these reasons Williams does not overcome the ambiguity
inherent in the presentation of the spiritual struggle. He shows that
P'o-l'u is a "fantasy of Assantu’s own soul" by presenting P'o-l'u
in horrific images that suggest the terror vividly, but keep the
audience detachedly critical. This reminds the audience it is fantasy,
reveals character, and allows the Flame to dominate. The difficulty
arises when Williams simultaneously shows P'o-l'u as fantasy and relies
on Assantu and the Octopus to point up the depth of the spiritual struggle of a Twentieth Century everyone.
NOTES:

1. See above pp. 6-7
2. Dawson pp. 90-1
3. See above pp. 31-2
4. C.S. Lewis, p. 196
EPILoGUE

In Chapter One two directions in Williams' plays were noted. The first was a movement from Cranmer's combination of the historical and symbolic to the more abstract Nativity plays, such as Good Fortune, followed by a return to the historical. The other was a movement toward a lighter style. These are part of a general direction which can be seen in terms of symbolism. Cranmer, Chelmsford, and Seed of Adam are similar in their use of aspects of the masque and ritual. They are pictorial: a succession of scenes, made possible by the telescoping of time, is linked by, for example, the Skeleton and Cranmer. This is rather like symbolism whose essential qualities, as seen by Coleridge, were the reality of the symbol, its derivation from something greater, and the presence in the symbol of the thing from which it derives. These three plays lack the latter. The natural and its significance are combined, but they are not fused in symbol. From this type of symbolism, Williams moves, perhaps because of the limited resources of the Pilgrim Players, to allegory in Good Fortune, House by the Stable, and Grab and Grace. As in the history of the morality play, allegory is effective when it concentrates on Everyman's conflict. But the range and extent of ideas that can be expressed is limited. The ideas of House of the Octopus, like those of Cranmer, are more distinctive. In House of the Octopus Williams comes near to fusing the event and its significance in a symbolic structure though, for example, as Every points out, the Flame still must explain that he is Assantu's own nature. But the play lacks the distance that allows Cranmer to be convincing, distance created by spectacle, dense poetry, and the use of historical character. And it lacks the conviction
that can arise from the concentration on a central conflicting and
developing character, from the use of historical character and from
the "recreation of thought into feeling," by the use of sensuous
imagery,

Gerald Weales suggests Williams' contribution:
"The unique quality of Williams' mind is that it plays across
its material, whether historical or fictional, and illuminates
that material by personal vision. It is impossible that that
vision should be shared exactly by anyone else. Insofar as it is
a Christian vision, other Christians can approach it; insofar as
it is poetic or artistic, it can be experienced as literature. Of
all the modern religious playwrights, Williams is the least evangelical.
Here, he says, is the way things are - things seen and unseen. The
reader can accept or reject the vision as he wishes or as he must." 2.

1. T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets"
2. Gerald Weales, Religion in Modern English Drama.
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