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THE VERSE DRAMA OF CHARLES WILLIAMS

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## PREFACE

This thesis will consider only the later verse-drama of Charles Williams, from Thomas Crenmer of Canterbury (1936). Abbreviations used are Crenmer for Thomas Crenmer 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 Hessey University, and Mr. R.A. Neale and Mr. John Dewick for their supervision and encouragement.

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## INTRODUCTION

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...."<sup>1</sup>

### Chapter I , Background

Williams' Collected Plays, in the tradition of religious drama,<sup>2</sup> 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".<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> Yet he was largely responsible for the Oxford University Press's translations of Kierkegaard, and Williams' work shows the influence of Kierkegaard.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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. 328). In Cranmer 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 "diseased". 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. (i) 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."<sup>8</sup> 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"<sup>9</sup>. 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 superior to the other nor perhaps more difficult."<sup>10</sup> Anne Ridler quotes a letter Williams wrote in 1945 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."<sup>11</sup> 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." <sup>12</sup> 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."<sup>13</sup>

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 Ridler 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...."<sup>14</sup> "Christian drama v..must...recover the speculative intellect....consider the nature of God"<sup>15</sup>. 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 Cranmer. 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 than 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."<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup>

Gary F. Waller 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...<sup>18</sup> 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 Roston, 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. Roston takes too an example from pictorial art. "In the famous 'Martyrdom of St. Erasmus' 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.p.16-17) This is similar to the double perspective provided in Williams' plays by a symbolic figure such as the skeleton in Cranmer.

The Nativity play, like medieval expressionism, belongs both to a literary and a religious tradition. Roston 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'. Roston 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 glimmering 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<sup>gor</sup> 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 Hyckescorner, 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 peins, but after her release converts Free Will and Imagination." (p.344). 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.<sup>18</sup> 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) <sup>/</sup> Masque elements are prominent in Cranmer, in Chelmsford, and Seed of Adam.

There is a danger in the use of formulae 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 ideal — 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 man into play." <sup>20</sup>.

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" criticises Williams for this in terms of "iconography" <sup>22</sup>. 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 Christians know, 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 snugly career 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."<sup>25</sup>.

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."<sup>24</sup> 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" (Roston). 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."<sup>25</sup>

Dawson quotes Williams' view of the role of religious literature: it should express "not doctrine, but existence, or only doctrine as existence".<sup>26</sup> 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 "rocky wood".<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere he speaks of "that perpetual slight alteration of language, words perpetually encased into meanings....which evidences a very high development of the senses."<sup>28</sup> Eliot 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."<sup>29</sup> Just as the interaction of "rocky" 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 Sale'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."<sup>30</sup> 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 "cozy" 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."<sup>31</sup> 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. Cranmer centres on the conflict within an historical character, Thomas Cranmer. 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.<sup>32</sup> 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 Tsar of Caucasie, 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 seas" 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. Abrams, Glossary of Literary Terms.
4. John Heath-Stubbs, Charles Williams. ^
5. (see, for example, William V. Spanos, "Charles Williams' "Seed of Adam": The Existential Flight from Death", Christian Scholar. XLIX/2, Summer 1966.
6. p. 98, "Peter Stanhope" was too 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."
9. He Came Down from Heaven pp. 68-80.
10. Image of the City pp. 68-69.
11. Image of the City p. Xi.
12. Image of the City p. 103.
13. See "The Way of Exchange" and "The Redeemed City" in Image of the City.
14. He Came Down from Heaven p. 32.
15. Image of the City p. 57.
16. Abrams, Glossary, p. 85.
17. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Preface to House of Seven Gables; quoted by Richard Chase, The American Novel and its Tradition, Chapter 1. Chase distinguishes between the romance and the mainstream novel.
18. (translated by Elizabeth Sprigge.
19. The Masque of the Manuscript (1927) and The Masque of Perusal

- (1929). See Hadfield pp. 70-6.
20. Biographia Literaria, ch. XIV.
  21. Practical Criticism, pp. 240-54.
  22. Sale is speaking more specifically of the poetry but he does include all Williams' work in his assessment.
  23. Hudson Review, XVII, Summer 1964, pp. 205-25.
  24. John Styan, The Elements of Drama.
  25. Craig, p. 4.
  26. Dawson p. 88. The comment is from The Fourth Report of the Chelmsford Diocesan Religious Drama Guild.
  27. Selected Essays, "Milton I".
  28. Selected Essays, p. 209.
  29. John Styan in The Elements of Drama uses this phrase.
  30. Quoted by Eliot in "The Metaphysical Poets", Selected Essays.
  31. John Heath-Stubbs, Introduction to Collected Plays.
  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. 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 (c.f. 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<sup>2</sup> 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, leisured 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 "emerods", parallelism, strong rhythm, and simplicity seen for instance in the summary contained in "Word" and "Alter", 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 subconscious 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, guilds 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  
desire to obtain a dispensation and to marry Anne/<sup>is</sup> 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 Cranmer "my soul pines ; the land dies ; counsel the King," the absence of connectives keeping Henry as a rather wooden figure and emphasising Cranmer'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 troubled 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 Crammer is. But they are further actualised than the Singers who are a formal device, a chorus. In an article called "Religious Drama" written in 1938 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..."<sup>3</sup>

The Singers in Thomas Crammer 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 <sup>does</sup> not understand. (p. 36). 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 Crammer 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 <sup>(16)</sup> Communion Service. They do not need to ~~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).<sup>4</sup> 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.832) 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.834). 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 ~~in~~ 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<sup>and</sup> 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-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: "Hark 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 division, 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 ~~persistant~~ 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 usually 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, nether 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 Masques 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 Crammer'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 Caucasasia 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 "1. 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 Crammer 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."<sup>2</sup>

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 Cranmer 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. Margy'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 Man, 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."<sup>3</sup> Excitement is built up by e.g. masque elements, plot, and also by the "telescoping of time." The richness of associations this allows lends the play an intensity. Yet there is a lightness in Seed of Adam, present in Cranmer 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) 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 speaks of. A powerful impression is evoked, but the audience is kept detachedly critical.

It is this powerful evocation of Williams' ideas 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 Cranmer's Skeleton, but he shares the role of Necessity with Mary. Mary is partially mythologised, 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 Arisen." 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 deign 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 <sup>cens</sup>uring 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 <sup>p</sup>uppeteer, 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 -

Women, 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, stupefied 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 home, 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,<sup>4</sup> its companion  
 and sequel, is more complex, and shows the limites 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 "tiresome 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. It begins with an exchange between Pride and Hell before Man is present. Pride is on stage throughout the play, except for the very end, and is constantly active. She is the main character. Less confident than previously, she is Man's discarded mistress trying to regain her former hold. When she is finally ordered by Man to leave, her terror of Hell is vivid.

The deflection from 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 <sup>down</sup> 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 bathetic :

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

Pride: Denatures

Gabriel: Denatures !

Faith: O horrible ! O

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.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.



CHAPTER IV     The House of the Octopus

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<sup>1</sup> 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 (C<sup>o</sup> Cranmer's "God or the Devil," p. 6), corresponding to these two extremes. The latter 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 covenanted and uncovenanted, i.e. known in the Church in faith, in the way of exchange, and uncovenanted, 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: We 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 Christian 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 uncovenanted 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) uncovenanted, 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 Cranmer'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 ( 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 pagantry" called P'o-l'u), and the specific immediate danger from Assantu. After this introduction, there are five major sections or dialogues in Act 1. 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 Rais ; this choice is put into action as Assantu gains the obedience of Rais by showing her a "token" from the Octopus, i.e. by 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 <sup>he</sup> 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, Oroyo 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 P'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 <sup>the</sup> 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 T.L.S. reviewer, linking Cranmer with Murder in the Cathedral, speaks of it as being "rather mystical than eventful, rather lyrical than dramatic."<sup>2</sup> 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-i'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<sup>5</sup>, "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 "ease 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'o-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'o-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 William's 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 pagantry 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 maw 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 predators. 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 ~~does~~ 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; elsewhere 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." Tantal<sub>g</sub> 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 Rai<sub>g</sub> 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 bear or fat bull") and syntax is loose : "to name a bear 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 recognisable picture of the familiar (usually rural) objects."<sup>4</sup> 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", "disembark", "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 shore," with its long, contrasting vowels; and "bleak" is unusual. This is immediately followed by another contrast: "oarless" rhymes with "shore" making it sound simplistic - she is a superstitious native - but this is followed by "and drift alone to disembark." "Disembark" 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, (Eliot's comments on Metaphysical wit 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, Oroyo 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 <sup>freedom from</sup>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"<sup>5</sup> 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 everyman.

NOTES :

1. See above pp. 6-7
2. Dawson pp. 90-1
3. See above pp. 31-2
4. C.S. Lewis, p. 196
5. John Heath-Stubbs, Introduction to Collected Plays.

## 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 these 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"<sup>1</sup>, 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."<sup>2</sup>

1. T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" -

2. Gerald Weales, Religion in Modern English Drama.

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