

**CHARLES  
WILLIAMS  
(1886-1945)  
AND CURRENT  
ECONOMIC THOUGHT  
JOHN HIBBS**



I first came across Charles Williams' work in a small anthology in the *World's Classics* series *Modern Verse 1900-1940*.<sup>1</sup> My copy is dated August 1943. The poem printed there, which 'spoke to me', is headed *The Coming of Palomides*.<sup>2</sup> It still has the same glamour for me; the same mix of romance and hard thinking that marks all of the poetry, and most of the prose as well. Then I picked up a copy of *The House of the Octopus*,<sup>3</sup> and — after suffering from missionary plays in my childhood — discovered that religion did not necessitate apallingly bad literary standards.

Over the next few years I bought and read everything I could get hold of, and almost all the books were still in print. Along with Hopkins and Yeats, this was a heady cocktail of verse, made stronger by the novels, which uncover the realities beneath everyday behaviour. And this was taken further by the criticism; I still find the analysis of *Troilus* in *The English Poetic Mind*<sup>4</sup> the heart of CW's work, just as he found it to be at the heart of Shakespeare's. I once made a 'presentation' of this, using excerpts from the play interspersed with comments built on the argument of this wonderful book. (It does not seem to have been noticed that Charles Williams preceded R. D. Laing's enlightening study of schizophrenia — in *The Divided Self*.<sup>5</sup> In *Troilus* I suggest we have what may be called the 'schizogenic moment').

I am tempted to go on down that road, but perhaps it is not one that an economist can rightly explore. I would just say,

though, that another forming influence on my thought offers another link to be discussed another time. My cousin R. H. Blyth, who was chiefly responsible for introducing western thought to Zen Buddhism,<sup>6</sup> would have said of CW's work on *Troilus* (and much else) "but of course". For of all authors, CW's life and work seem to me to exhibit Zen most notably, and since Zen never sits on a pedestal, we do well to remember that. (It is something I believe Alice Mary Hadfield understood very well.)

**"THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN THE ECONOMY  
AND THE SPIRIT IS BUNK"**

Now, what is this man talking about?, you will ask. When do we get to the dreaded subject of economics? Starting to think about this paper, earlier this year, I received by some working of providence the Spring 1992 number of that excellent American journal, the *Humane Studies Review*.<sup>7</sup> In it there is, in the series *Current Issues in Literature*, an article by Donald McCloskey, who is a professor of Economics at the University of Iowa, called "Reading the Economy". I commend it to you.

To quote selectively is unfair, but inevitable. (I do not mean 'quote' in the sense that so infuriated Roger Ingram in *Shadows of Ecstasy*.<sup>8</sup>) McCloskey starts from the definition of economics given by Alfred Marshall in *The Principles of Economics* [London, 1890]: "a study of mankind in the ordinary business of life". (Marshall, after Adam Smith, is still the daddy of us all.) Would not CW have said the same of 'literature'? Is it not true of every aspect of his work? But McCloskey, building on this, makes a statement that I specially commend to you, of which I suppose CW would say "but of course". It is this:



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**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**

If literature often cannot be summarized without loss, my theme can: It is ‘The dichotomy between the economy and the spirit is bunk.’ ... The dichotomy is nutty and hurtful, and it is about time we got rid of it.

But, as McCloskey goes on to say, the typical academic specialist in Literature will turn to Marx for understanding of “mankind in the ordinary business of life”. The problem that arises from that is the Marxian assumption that you do not need to look any further. The danger then is that, like those who enter the wood of Broceliande, they return “loquacious with a graph/or a gospel, gustily audacious over three heavens” (from “The Calling of Taliessin” in *The Region of the Summer Stars*).<sup>9</sup> Aside from the essential theoretical weakness of the labour theory of value, on which Marxian economics is built, there is its self-confessed materialism; the ultimate in reductionism, that denies the validity of all but economics in accounting for human behaviour, and human thought.

Furthermore, the literary and religious establishments alike tend to be hostile to the doctrine of free exchange that lies at the heart of western liberal economics, and at the heart of CW’s theology, too. It is open to question how far the bench of bishops today have read any economics — or, for that matter, any Charles Williams. Certainly the pronouncements that some of them deliver show a total absence of rigorous thought about the ordinary business of life. And, I have to admit, economics has not made itself easily accessible.

Sir Roy Harrod, the biographer of Keynes and an important economist in his own right, has stressed the need for economists to look beyond the walls of their own discipline in order to become better economists. Too many stay within those walls, and cultivate their own private gardens within them. The walls, be it said, are walls of non-communication; an affront to literature and scholarship. At their most extreme, they defy the layman to enter, by their use of esoteric equations. As Robert Heilbroner said: “Mathematics has given economics rigour, but alas, also mortis.”<sup>10</sup> In a form of *trahison des clercs*, some economists defy the layman to enter their country without first having mastered a new language. (Admittedly, the sociologists are even more reprehensible in this way.)

### ECONOMICS: SIMPLE AND NOT SIMPLE

Now I must not deny that economics does have a high level of abstraction where its theoretical foundations are concerned. But I would defend the thesis that this abstraction is accessible conceptually, without having to have recourse to the formulae and diagrams beloved of the textbook writers, which, in my experience, put too many beginning students off. There is a paradox here, comparable perhaps to that expressed by Udall and The Confessor in Episode IV of *Judgement at Chelmsford*<sup>11</sup> — I recall the scene clearly even now:

THE SECOND GENTLEMAN: Do you understand that, my girl?

ENVY (curtseying and impertinent): Of course, father.

THE FIRST GENTLEMAN: Why your dress is to be so sober, hey?

ENVY: Of course. It’s as simple as the Holy Gospel.

THE SECOND GENTLEMAN: Ha, indeed. Is the Gospel simple, Nicholas?

UDALL: Well — in a way, yes, sir.

THE CONFESSOR (in an undertone): Brother, the Gospel is not simple, and you know it.

UDALL: Well — in a way, no, brother.

Perhaps I may take that as the best illustration I can find for the ‘difficulty’ of economics. But if economics is at one and the same time ‘simple’ and ‘not simple’, to master it is no more easy than it is to master any worthwhile discipline; say, theology. Mainstream ‘neo-Classical’ economics makes this more of a problem, since its theoretical account of the ordinary business of life can seem somewhat detached from human experience. ‘*Homo oeconomicus*’ is an abstraction living in a world where uncertainty has been made to appear irrelevant.

### HAYEK’S GREAT VISION

There is however an alternative paradigm, and one that, in my experience, appeals more to the actual experience of living in an uncertain world, where the future is unknowable, and information so diffuse as to make centralised decision-making ineffective. It is commonly labelled ‘neo-Austrian’ economics, since its originators came from that society. It is not my purpose today to explore the range of economic thought, but rather to bring together some of the ways in which neo-Austrian thinking seems to me to have parallels in CW’s work.

The author to whom I turn for this is F. A. Hayek, the Nobel prize-winner whose death earlier this year deprived us of one of the few prophets that modern European culture has produced. And Hayek’s work certainly extended well beyond the garden walls of economics. For Hayek — still best known, I suppose, for *The Road to Serfdom*<sup>12</sup> — has bequeathed to us a view of people engaged in the business of life that I believe would appeal to Lord Arglay, the Chief Justice in *Many Dimensions*.<sup>13</sup> For Hayek sees the business of life — the working through of the market *as process* — as depending upon a set of abstract rules, such as the sanctity of contract and the inviolability of private property, that have grown up because they have been seen to be successful, at the end of the day, in advancing the progress of society.

The Austrians see the market, where all business takes place, as a ‘catallaxy’. The term appears quite early in the evolution of economic thought; Richard Whateley in 1831 suggested that “the best name for economic science would be *Catallactics*, or the science of exchange”.<sup>14</sup> I suggest that CW would have found that approach to the business of living sympathetic, and might have carried it forward, for is not ‘the doctrine of exchange’ central to his thought?

And here, I think, we approach matters of great depth and worth. On another occasion recently, I presented a paper on the congruence of Hayek’s thought with that of the theologian P. T. Forsyth.<sup>15</sup> In *Judgement at Chelmsford*<sup>16</sup> we have Blake’s great statement of the doctrine — and again the words come to me as from the stage at the Scala Theatre in 1947:

Thus through all eternity  
I forgive you, you forgive me;  
as our dear Redeemer said —  
this the wine and this the bread.

It is the dimension of Christian theology that, it seems to me, both Forsyth and Williams bring to Hayek’s great vision of the “extended order” of society. In Forsyth, I find his concept of “the cruciality of the Cross” as the origin of just be-

haviour between men; in Williams it is this sanctity of exchange. For it is a basic concept of economics that each exchange leaves the participants equally satisfied; there can be no economic exchange subject to coercion. And, as Hayek concludes, socialist economies involve coercion in all our business. Indeed, he goes beyond that, remarking that “To be controlled in our economic pursuits means to be ... controlled in everything.”<sup>17</sup> The doctrine of exchange is about *free* exchange, or it is about nothing.

### MONEY IS A MEDIUM OF EXCHANGE

Which brings me to what I take to be CW’s closest approach to ‘catalactics’; the poem “Bors to Elayne: on the King’s Coins” in *Taliessin Through Logres*.<sup>18</sup> It is really remarkable how much economics there is in it; one could give it to a postgraduate student to enlighten her or his own thought.

I think it was Trotsky who said “If you want to destroy capitalism, first debauch the currency”. Fortunately, capitalism has proved itself able to survive even such debauchery as the Bolivian inflation, ten years ago, at an annualised rate of 24,000 per cent. But we have in recent years seen, here at home, the confusion of values that has gone along with the steady fall in the value of money; and we have more recently seen the consequences of the self-seeking manipulation of the international exchange rates. This is the kind of thing that Bors feared would follow from the release of the king’s little dragons.

Bors is the steady, dependable man, for whom common sense rules, yet whose reason is shot through with the vision that he finds in Elayne. The problem for all such men is that ‘common sense’ is often in conflict with the discipline of economics. Take for example the ‘paradox of thrift’ — were we all to be thrifty and careful, there would be no spending to enable the catallaxy to move forward, so the supposed virtue of mere thrift restricts the growth of wealth in society. (Much of the current ‘recession’ has been brought about as people have stopped buying, not so as to save and invest, but so as to reduce their debt.) So Bors finds it difficult to reconcile his instinctive distrust of the coinage with Kay’s cogent argument for the benefits it will bring — and is not Kay “the king’s steward, wise in economics”?

But Taliessin, too, is afraid, and CW makes no attempt in the poem to reconcile the ambiguities, beyond leaving two statements resonating in the mind. And in this he takes us, with great skill, to the very heart of the essential ambiguity of money, just as every economist has to. Bors says of the dragon-coins “They carry on their back little packs of value”, but he sees “house-roofs under their weight/creak and break”, and what better metaphor could there be for the recent collapse of the housing market, as “shadows of great forms/halloed them on, and followed over falling towns”?

Yet Kay, in words appropriate to Hayek’s thought, sets out the case for money: “The poor have choice of purchase, the rich of rents”. Foreseeing Kipling’s observation that “transport is civilisation”, he says “Traffic can hold now and treasure be held/streams are bridged and mountains of ridged space/tunnelled” — have we not here the Channel Tunnel, internationally financed as “gold dances deftly across frontiers”? And he concludes, in words that CW must have heard in the world of small businesses in which he grew up:

Money is the medium of exchange.

Were that all, things would be so simple (or, as Udall had to acknowledge, perhaps not). But in the next stanza Taliessin discerns the problem that has shaken the policy of Britain in

recent weeks — that money may also be a commodity in which trade can proceed, to the detriment of its function in exchange. Ask anyone in the export and import trades of our own kingdom what they think about those who play the currency markets, and you will feel the truth of Taliessin’s comment, that “When the means are autonomous, they are deadly”. Pursuing his analogy with verse, he goes on:

...when words  
escape from verse they hurry to rape souls;  
when sensation slips from intellect, expect the tyrant;  
the brood of carriers levels the good they carry.

and he asks “are we glad to have brought convenient heresy to Logres?”

Unexpectedly, it is the Archbishop who answers. (Dare I ask who, on today’s bench of bishop’s, could have such command of the landscape where theology and economics meet? Who but a poet, and the ‘grand art’ is not a requisite for episcopal rank, yet.) The Archbishop brings into play the treasury of ancient wisdom:

What saith Heracleitus? — and what is the City’s  
breath? —  
*dying each other’s life, living each other’s death.*

Through Bors’ reporting to Elayne of the conversation of the lords as they look upon the king’s coins. CW seems to me to bring us to the door of what I suggest is the central problem of economics; the inherent conflict between the two uses of money. Kay’s functional vision and the distrust of the king’s poet. And, having brought us to this point, he leaves it to the Archbishop to comment, by one small adjustment of Kay’s perfectly valid remark. An adjustment of one small preposition — and CW must surely have rejoiced in the way one part of speech can carry so much meaning! Taking up Kay’s proposition that “Money is the medium of exchange”, the Archbishop concludes:

Money is a medium of exchange

and thereby opens the possibility of salvation, in economic terms.

In *The Constitution of Liberty*, Hayek identifies the need for a just regime for public expenditure and taxation. This seems to me to be near to Bors’ comment on the “organisation in London” from which he has ridden to reach Elayne, “the sole figure of the organic salvation of our good”:

ration and rule, and the fault in ration and rule, law, and  
the flaw in law ...

But Bors flies back to the old, rural, certainties; the farmstead as household and home to the extended family; the lost dream of the good peasantry, for which France and Germany today would sacrifice the food of our citizen the altar of the Common Agricultural Policy. Bors fears the way in which “compact is becoming contract”, but the Archbishop has no such atavistic leanings. With an insight worthy of Aquinas he says “make yourselves friends by means of the riches of iniquity”; perhaps even an echo of the divine ambiguity in Matthew 10, 16 — “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Revised Standard Version). The doctrine of exchange lies at the heart of all things; money is *a* medium of exchange.

### BREACHING THE WALL BETWEEN LITERATURE AND ECONOMICS

I hope I have not trespassed too far on your time in this exploration of some themes that I believe have been unduly

neglected. It was Alice Mary Hadfield who set me on this path, when she sent me a reference I needed for a paper of another kind.<sup>20</sup> In this paper I have sought to home in on *Bors and Elayne* because it is so extraordinarily relevant to the central problems of economics, but I have tried also to examine in some measure the whole range of CW's work, in the light of McCloskey's remark that "The dichotomy between the economy and the spirit is bunk".

Working from that assumption, I have also tried to show how the work of Charles Williams can be illuminated from the perspective of — at least — neo-Austrian economics, as well as to extend Harrod's argument that economists should learn from the world outwith their own narrow discipline. McCloskey says in his article:

It is hurtful for nine out of ten adults who work in home, office, or factory to be told their main occupation is beyond the reach of poetry and fiction. No wonder they turn to other sources of poetry and myth, to rock music and country, the TV soaps and the National Football League. The literary people keep telling them that what they do is 'alienating' and that the only real living happens in leisure time and in libraries.

But if 'literary people' have in this way alienated themselves from the people, as I agree they have, the same is true of economists. And to compound the process, literature and economics have turned their backs upon each other. Part of CW's greatness lies in the absence of such barriers from his work, though he knows they exist, as witness Roger Ingram again (in *Shadows of Ecstasy*<sup>21</sup>), who confesses to "embalming" poetry, and who finds Muriel, the maid, so offensive. So if I have done something to indicate a congruence between CW's work and that of Hayek, perhaps I have opened a further breach in the walls. I rather think that both men would, in that case, approve. In which case, there is work to be done.

## NOTES

1. Phyllis M. Jones (ed.), *Modern Verse 1900-1940*, Oxford University Press, London, 1940.
2. Originally printed in *Taliessin Through Logres*, Oxford University Press, London, 1938.
3. Edinburgh House Press, London, 1945.
4. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1932.
5. Tavistock, London, 1961, recently re-issued by Hodder & Stoughton.
6. R. H. Blyth, *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*, The Hokuseido Press, Tokyo, 1948.
7. Institute for Humane Studies, George Mason University, Fairfax VA.
8. Victor Gollancz, London, 1931.
9. Printed in *The Region of the Summer Stars*, Editions Poetry London, Nicholson and Watson, London, 1944.
10. I found this in *The Guinness Dictionary of Poisonous Quotes*, Enfield, Middlesex, 1991.
11. Cambridge University Press, London, 1993, reprinted in *Collected Plays by Charles Williams*, Oxford University Press, London, 1963.
12. Routledge, London, 1944.
13. Victor Gollancz, London, 1931.
14. Quoted in Roll, *History of Economic Thought*, 5th edition, Faber, London, 1973, p. 338.
15. Forsyth, *Hayek and the Remoralisation of Society*, reprinted as Libertarian Alliance, Religious Notes No. 5, London, 1992.
16. See note 11 above.

17. Quoted from the Libertarian Alliance poster, that shows Hayek at the Alternative Bookshop. (Editorial Note: To our shame, although we know that this quote, albeit somewhat cobbled together from two or three paragraphs, is genuine, we did not note down which Hayek book it comes from, and do not now know. See Tactical Notes 11 — which is about Footnotes and their importance — to see just how ashamed we are about this.
18. See note 2 above.
19. Routledge, London, 1960.
20. *Looking Upwards: An Essay on the Origins of Authority in Church, State and Industry*, Congregational Federation, Nottingham, 1991.
21. See note 8 above

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*The Greater Trumps*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1932.  
*Shadows of Ecstasy*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1933.  
*Descent Into Hell*, Faber and Faber, London, 1937.  
*All Hallows' Eve*, Faber and Faber, London, 1945.

For a further critical biography, readers should turn to *Charles Williams, Poet of Theology*, by Glen Cavaliero, Macmillan, London, 1983.

A number of the books listed above exist in later editions.

The Charles Williams Society holds meetings in London, Oxford, Cambridge, Lake Michigan Area and Dallas, Texas, and publishes a quarterly Newsletter. Information from the Hon. Secretary, Mrs Gillian Lunn, 26 Village Road, Finchley, London N3 1TL.