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The Three Amigos and Their Three Dantes: ***What C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Dorothy L. Sayers felt the Divine Comedy has to say to us today.***

**CHRIS ARMSTRONG March 2010**

**C**. S. Lewis was a scholar and professor who became one of the premier lay theologians of the 20th century. He chose to communicate the truths of Christian faith both in essays and in fiction writing, with powerful effects that have resonated into the 21st century. Lewis's friend Charles Williams, arguably the linchpin of the "Inklings" literary circle to which Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and others belonged, also wrote both essays and imaginative literature with a deeply Christian message. Dorothy Sayers, detective novelist, playwright, and essayist, corresponded with both Lewis and Williams. And she developed her own powerful Christian apologetic, which she also expressed in both nonfiction and fiction.

These three "literary Brits" shared more than a lively Christian faith, the writing of imaginative literature, and a strong mutual regard. Together they launched a holy war on their era's scientific materialism and the spiritual declension that accompanied it. Each lifted up in their writings a rich, world-embracing Christian vision against the grey deadness of secularization. For each, this was a life-and-death battle, with the future of the Western world hanging in the balance. They saw their age's new creed of hard-nosed scientific pragmatism draining the world of spirit and meaning—indeed, as Lewis put it, threatening to tear out of us our very hearts, abolishing humanity itself.

In that precarious moment of Western history, on the war-torn front of secularization, Lewis, Williams, and Sayers took cues from the venerable four-star general of 20th-century Christian literary antimodernism, journalist and amateur medievalist G. K. Chesterton. To be precise, although they never came to share Chesterton's Roman Catholic faith, Lewis, Williams, and Sayers took a very "Chestertonian" approach to their own antimodern campaign: they turned for help to the pulsating, faith-filled energy of the medieval worldview.

This was hardly historical dilettantism. Each of the three was a professional medievalist with an Oxford University connection. Lewis was an Oxford (and later Cambridge) professor of medieval and renaissance literature whose imaginative works similarly marinated in the medieval. Williams was a polymath editor at Oxford University Press and sometime lecturer on Milton who dwelt long and lovingly on medieval themes in his poetry, plays, and novels. And Sayers did her graduate work at Oxford in medieval French and found time between writing detective novels and translating Dante's *Divine Comedy* to publish translations of other medieval works.

Nor was their Chestertonian medievalism slavish. That jovial Catholic had looked to such figures as Francis of Assisi and Thomas Aquinas, and to a medieval-guild-based economic vision of homesteading and small crafts. But Lewis, Williams, and Sayers found their inspiration in a medieval source that Chesterton had left largely unmined. Litterateurs all, they sat together at the feet of a different medieval master: the great 13th-century Italian poet Dante Alighieri.

**The Living Cosmos**

Interestingly, while the three Oxonians joined in loving Dante, they could hardly have been more varied in their devotion. Each found in the great Florentine poet a distinctive tonic for the ills of modernity. For Lewis it was Dante's vivid rendering of the medieval cosmology—the "Discarded Image" of a pre-scientific age—that captivated him, transposing his own worldview into a more spiritual key. In the planetary spheres of Dante's Ptolemaic universe Lewis found, not accurate science, but a vividly sacramental sense of the aliveness of all things, to be treasured in the face of much that was deadening in modernity. Lewis fell in love with the living cosmos and the individuality of the planets themselves, rooted in Pagan mythology but thoroughly Christianized by medieval authors. "The characters of the planets, as conceived by medieval astrology," he said, "seem to me to have a permanent value as spiritual symbols."

Michael Ward, in his book *Planet Narnia*, has now convincingly argued that the medieval planets (including the sun) make up the hidden pattern of Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*. Carefully peeling back the layers of Lewis's lifelong fascination with this older cosmology, Ward shows that even in his childhood, he was gripped by a fascination with the medieval idea that the planets are themselves living beings—something like angels or guardians of the heavenly realms. Lewis recorded in *Surprised by Joy* that when he was ten years old, "the idea of other planets exercised upon me a peculiar, heady attraction."

It was Dante's great *Comedy*, however, which Lewis found to be "the highest point that poetry has ever reached," that plunged Lewis into full-blown infatuation with the Ptolemaic universe. In a 1930 letter to his friend Arthur Greeves, Lewis described the *Paradiso* as "like the stars—endless mathematical subtility of orb, cycle, epicycle and ecliptic, unthinkable & unpicturable, & yet at the same time the freedom and liquidity of empty space and the triumphant certainty of movement." The whole poem felt *important* to him; "its blend of complexity and beauty is very like Catholic theology—wheel within wheel, but wheels of glory, and the One radiated through the Many."

Ward shows us that Lewis treasured Dante as the only poet to have infused the medieval model of the heavens with "high religious ardour." Adds Ward: "Dante is no longer alone in this latter respect, because Lewis has joined him." He did so in the hidden structure of the Narnian Chronicles, in the living, throbbing cosmos of the Space Trilogy, and in his erudite but accessible lectures on the medieval worldview, published as *The Discarded Image*.

**Romantic Theology**

For Charles Williams it was Dante's lifelong obsession with the girl Beatrice that drew him to recover an older "Affirmative Way" of faith—the ancient Christian spiritual road of the "affirmation of images," in which earthly things lead us on to spiritual realities. He found this Way embodied compellingly in the story of how Bice Portinari (Beatrice) became the poet Dante's muse and spiritual guide. Williams drew from this *exemplum* a rich theological picture of how God works a kind of divine alchemy through human relationships, turning the mundane material of romantic love into the heavenly gold of salvation. Williams worked out this theme in his masterly exegesis of Dante's work, *The Figure of Beatrice*. And he used this Dantean theme, along with his idea of "co-inherence"—the human possibility of indwelling each other to the point of redemptively sharing each other's sufferings—to forge a "romantic theology." But Williams was not a romantic in the popular sense of a starry-eyed idealist. In his novels he also painted sin in all its hues—those stories contain some of the most penetrating and harrowing portrayals of human sinfulness in modern literature. And in this, too, he was formed by reading Dante. Dante was deeply Augustinian, and so in his *Purgatorio* and *Inferno* he showed the shades of sin and levels of depravity as so many variations on the theme of disordered love. In his novels and his *Figure of Beatrice*, Williams explored the many wrong turnings and sordid alleys of this Dantean/Augustinian disorder.

**The Drama of the Soul's Choice**

For Dorothy L. Sayers, working in the wartime shambles of European life and mores, it was Dante's striking and forceful rendering of humanity's moral condition that made her blood rise and her pen flow over. The brilliant Sayers was an accomplished novelist, translator, and literary critic, who had been among the first class of women students at Oxford to receive their Masters' degrees. Her area of scholarly specialty was "modern languages"—to be precise, medieval French. When she first encountered Dante, she had already translated key texts in that area. Then she read Williams's *Figure of Beatrice* and the *Comedia* itself (which she started in a London bomb shelter as German V1 rockets screamed down over the city) and was stirred deeply.

Sayers loved Dante's story-telling skill, the earthiness and vividness of his spirituality, and his masterful use of the fine details of everything from astronomy to Thomist theology in constructing his poem. And so she made the translation of Dante her last great life-work. But for her, Dante's value went beyond his literary mastery. His moral worldview presented an antidote to modern malaises: She saw wartime Europe descending into passivity, blame-shifting, and an alarming susceptibility to propaganda. And there stood the *Comedia*, towering over world literature as "the drama of the soul's choice"—a gripping, multi-layered narrative poem whose very theme is moral responsibility. For Sayers, the *Comedia* was a "tract for our times."

May we read Lewis, Williams, and Sayers now as what they were: conduits of medieval wisdom for a modern, or postmodern, age. And may we also follow their footsteps to the feet of the master, Dante Alighieri.

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