Heraclitus on the Way of Exchange

Bishop Kallistos Ware once[1] memorably described Williams's account of heaven as the place of exchange. He summed it up by drawing on a phrase Williams quotes in 'Bors to Elayne: on the King's Coins':

> This is the way of this world in the day of that other's;
> make yourselves friends by means of the riches of iniquity,
> for the wealth of the self is the health of the self exchanged.
> What saith Heracleitus? - and what is the City's breath? -
> *dying each other's life, living each other's death.*
> Money is a medium of exchange.

In one of his few notes, Williams gives his source: 'The quotation from Heracleitus was taken from Mr. Yeats's book, *A Vision*.'

This is a little terse, and it is worth following through in more detail. Heracleitus or Heraclitus[2] was one of the early Greek philosophers known to modern scholars as the pre-Socratics, and even in antiquity he was celebrated for his obscurity. This is compounded by the fact that, as with many others, his book survives only in quotations made by later writers, so what is published under his name is a collection of fragments. In any case his book may well have been a collection of sayings, rather than a treatise. These gnomic utterances are very striking, as is clear from a few examples[3], including the original of the passage used by Yeats and Williams:

> The sun is new every day. (32; 6)
>
> You cannot step twice into the same rivers; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you. (41,42; 49a, 12)
>
> War is the father of all and the king of all; and some he has made gods and some men, some bound and some free. (44; 53)
>
> The immortals are mortal, the mortals immortal, each living in the others' death and dying in the others' life. (67; 62)
>
> Fire lives the death of earth, and air lives the death of fire; water lives the death of air, earth that of water. (25; 76)
>
> Although the Word is common to all, many live as if they had a private wisdom of their own. (92; 2)
>
> The way up and the way down are one and the same. (69; 60)

Yeats came across Heraclitus in 1909, when he recorded the third and fourth of those above in his Journal[4]. It is clear from verbal similarities that he used a then standard work, John Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy*, first published in 1892 (the edition Yeats used[5]). Burnet was Professor of Greek at St Andrews University, and his book remained a standard source for English-speaking students for sixty years[6].

Yeats did not publish this Journal, but the final phrase of the fragment, in the form 'dying the other's life, living the other's death', became an obsession with him in his middle years. One could say that it plays a comparable part in his thought to that of 'This also is Thou; neither is this Thou' in Williams[7]. It occurs in several different places and is alluded to in more, but since Williams specifically cites *A Vision*, let us look at that.

A Vision is Yeats's book of occult wisdom. It was first published in 1925, in an edition of 600 signed copies 'privately printed for subscribers only'. It was therefore not an easy book to find, and it is a testimony to Williams's interest in Yeats that he did obtain it, and praised it in his 1930 essay on Yeats as 'that learned and profound work' [8]. Yeats later revised it considerably, and the later version was published in 1937 in a normal edition. Yeats scholars distinguish the two editions as *Vision A* and *Vision B*. Williams reviewed *Vision B* when it appeared[9], to Yeats's pleasure[10], but it was *Vision A* which first engaged him[11].

The phrase which interested him occurs first in one of Yeats's characteristic discussions of gyres, those interpenetrating cones which occur only in discussions of Yeats, but there turn up all the time. After a particularly tangled and abstruse passage we come across:

> It is as though the first act of being, after creating limit, was to divide itself into male and female, each dying the other's life living the other's death (*Vision A*[12], 130).

This was considerably revised in *Vision B*, but the phrase is used again, and this time is attributed:

> Here the thought of Heraclitus dominates all: "Dying each other's life, living each other's death" (*Vision B*, 68)

The second occurrence is in the context of Yeats's exposition of his cyclical theory of history, where we find:

> Each age unwinds the thread another age had wound, and it amuses one to remember that before Phidias, and his westward moving art, Persia fell, and that when full moon came round again, amid eastward moving thought, and brought

> Byzantine glory, Rome fell; and that at the outset of our eastward moving Renaissance Byzantium fell; all things dying each other's life, living each other's death (*Vision A*, 183= *Vision B,* 270-1) .

Williams seems to have picked up the phrase, without engaging with the Platonic content of the first half of the sentence in the first version. With the second sentence all readers of the Taliessin poems will find resonances with Yeats's mention of Byzantine glory and the significance of Rome and, to a lesser extent, Persia, while noting that Yeats's cyclical theory of history makes no appeal to Williams as a Christian.

Since Yeats did not attribute the phrase to Heraclitus in *Vision A*, how did Williams know where it came from? It seems unlikely that 'Bors to Elayne' was written after 1937, when *Vision B* was published, given that *Taliessin through Logres* came out in 1938 and Anne Ridler dated most of the poems in it to 1934-5[13]. One possibility is that he picked it up from Yeats's play *The Resurrection*, whose closing words, before a song, are:

> Your words are clear at last, O Heraclitus. God and man die each other's life, live each other's death.[14]

However, I prefer to think that Williams simply asked Yeats, whom he knew personally[15]. This would account for his use of the variant spelling Heracleitus, which is slightly closer to the Greek.

To consider in detail the significance of this phrase to Yeats would take us too far afield, so one passage must suffice:

> To me all things are made of the conflict of two states of consciousness, beings or persons which die each other's life, live each other's death. This is true of life and death themselves[16].

The significance of the phrase to Williams is clear. It is a summary of the way of exchange. In 'Bors to Elayne: on the King's Coins' it is spoken by the archbishop, so his acceptance of a Greek saying implies the acceptance by Christianity of what is good and true in paganism. We may compare St Paul's quotation of a line of the Greek poet Aratus[17], and Williams would also be aware that he was thought to have quoted Euripides[18].

Williams uses the line again in 'The Founding of the Company', again to summarize the way of exchange:

> The Company's second mode bore farther
> the labour and fruition; it exchanged the proper self
> and wherever need was drew breath daily

in another's place, according to the grace of the Spirit
'dying each other's life, living each other's death'.

'The Founding of the Company', 60-4

The most dramatic example of exchange in the poems is Blanchefleur, who, we know from Malory, 'died from a letting of blood to heal a sick lady' (Malory XVII. 11). In 'The Last Voyage', her body accompanies Galahad to Sarras:

Before the helm the ascending-descending sun
lay in quadrilateral covers of a saffron pall
over the bier and the pale body of Blanchefleur,
mother of the nature of lovers, creature of exchange;
drained there of blood by the thighed wound,
she died another's death, another lived her life.

'The Last Voyage', 70-4

Furthermore, exchange may operate not only among the living, but also, with due qualifications, in respect of the dead. We remember Pauline Anstruther in *Descent into Hell*, and, more immediately, 'Taliessin on the Death of Virgil'.

By virtue of his fourth eclogue, which was considered to foretell the birth of Christ - and indeed did so, if we allow that poets may speak more wisely than they know - Virgil was considered a prophet, 'Maro, prophet of the gentiles.' But as a pagan, who had not faith, he did not know grace and his place in the after-life was in limbo, from which he is sent to rescue Dante, who was in an even worse predicament[19]. 'Others he saved; himself he could not save': this line from the gospel accounts of the Passion[20], which Williams uses to sum up Virgil's predicament in the poem, is also the starting point for his principal prose exposition of exchange[21], and the first of his sentences 'For the Companions of the Co-inherence[22]. And Virgil's friends, that is, in principle, all of those who have recognized great poetry and followed the prophecy which he unwittingly made, can take part in Virgil's redemption by prayer across time and the barrier of death. Williams is here applying to Virgil himself the general law of the spiritual life which he used Heraclitus's words to enunciate, and which Dante's Virgil helped him to understand[23].

To conclude this discussion we can consider C. S. Lewis's brief mention of this passage, which comes in his discussion of that part of Williams's obscurity which he ascribes to Unshared Backgrounds. He compares Williams's requirements with those of T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, and starts by arguing that some of each poet's expectations are wholly legitimate. He goes on:

> When Mr. Eliot assumes that you know Miss Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, or Williams that you know Heracleitus as quoted by W. B. Yeats . . . the difficulties are becoming less obviously legitimate[24]

This is a good debating point: the implication is that Williams has not only used a secondary source but one which may have distorted the original author's meaning. We should also remember that at the time Lewis was writing, Yeats's occult interests, as embodied in *A Vision* and elsewhere, did not have the fashionable New Age aura that attends similar interests now. It was then highly disreputable. For example, W.H. Auden wrote an obituary dialogue for Yeats in which he puts this jibe into the mouth of an imaginary Public Prosecutor:

> In 1900 he [Yeats] believed in fairies; that was bad enough; but in 1930 we are confronted with the pitiful, the deplorable spectacle of a grown man occupied with the mumbo-jumbo of magic and the nonsense of India[25].

No, if one were going to quote Heraclitus, much better to do so from an unimpeachable source. Lewis may have remembered that, two years before *Taliessin through Logres* was published, Eliot had published 'Burnt Norton'[26], and had prefixed it with two epigraphs from Heraclitus - but these were in the original Greek, and quoted, not secondhand from Yeats, nor even from Burnet's handbook, but from the scholar's reference work, the German edition by Diels. Eliot's epigraphs are the last two of the seven passages I quoted at the beginning of this paper.

However, Lewis's is not more than a debating point: Yeats's version is perfectly accurate as far as the immediate sense of his original is concerned, and Burnet is a respectable source. What Heraclitus himself meant by it is anyone's guess - or rather, to put the same point more elegantly, it is a matter for controversy among scholars. Yeats seized on the passage, as poets do, and incorporated it into his own imaginative vision. So did Williams. The moral is clear: whereas scholars should try to convey the sense of their originals and not distort them, it is the poet's privilege to convert what they appropriate, and the test is not fidelity to the original but suitability to the new context. And Williams here uses Heraclitus's phrase to embody succinctly one of his central beliefs.

[1] ‘Heaven and Hell in Charles Williams’; unpublished paper given on 21 June 2003 to the Charles Williams Society.

[2] Heraclitus is the usual spelling by English scholars and I shall use it except in quotations.

[3] The following fragments are given first with the number in Burnet’s edition (see reference 5 below); then the standard Diel-Kranz references, each of which should be prefixed with DK22b. The translations have been slightly modified.

[4] Yeats: *Memoirs*, transcribed and edited by Denis Donoghue, 1972, 216.

[5] Harper and Hood demonstrate this convincingly in the notes to their edition (see reference 8 below), 32-3.

[6] I have a 1952 reprint of the 1930 fourth edition. In 1957 it was superseded by G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven’s *The PreSocratic Philosophers*, which, with revisions, is still standard.

[7] E.g. *The Descent of the Dove*, 1939 (Faber 1950 edition), viii; *The Figure of Beatrice*, 1943, 8.

[8] *Poetry at Present*, 1930, 58.

[9] *Time and Tide* 4 December 1937. (I have not seen this.)

[10] Foster, R. F.: *W. B. Yeats: A Life. II: The Arch-Poet*, 2003, 607.

[11] *A Vision*, in either version, is notoriously obscure. To anyone wishing to study it in detail I recommend Northrop Frye: ‘The Rising of the Moon’, in *Spiritus Mundi*, 1976, and Graham Hough: *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats*, 1984.

[12] It was a great relief to Yeats scholars when Macmillan reissued *Vision A* with introduction and notes by George Mills Harper and Walter Kelly Hood in 1978. The body of the book is a facsimile reprint of the original, with unchanged pagination.

[13] Introduction to Williams: *The Image of the City*, 1958, lxiii, footnote.

[14] Yeats: *Collected Plays*, 1952, 594. The play, in a version which includes this passage, was first published in 1931.

[15] Hadfield: *Charles Williams: An Exploration of his Life and Work*, 1983, 31.

[16] Yeats: *Letters*, edited Allan Wade, 1954, 917.

[17] *Acts* 17.28.

[18] Milton, Introduction to *Samson Agonistes*, citing *I Cor* 15.33

[19] *Inferno*, opening

[20] It occurs in all three synoptic gospels: *Matt*. 27.42; *Mark* 15.31; *Luke* 23.35.

[21] *He Came Down from Heaven*, 1950 edition, 83. First published 1938, the same year as *Taliessin through Logres*.

[22] Hadfield: *Charles Williams*, 174.

[23] In Dante’s own scheme Virgil is seen trapped in limbo and has no access to purgatory except as an observer. Williams sees exchange operating not only between the living and the dead but also backwards in time, as indeed it sometimes does in Dante too (Casella in *Purgatorio* II, Trajan in *Paradiso* XX). We must also remember that Dante’s poem does not purport to give us a definitive account of the afterlife but a vision of it.

[24] Williams and Lewis: *Arthurian Torso*, 1948, 189.

[25] W. H. Auden: 'The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats' in *The English Auden*, edited Edward Mendelson, 1977, 391.

[26] 'Burnt Norton' first appeared at the end of Eliot's *Collected Poems 1909-1935*, published 1936. When it was reissued as the first of *Four Quartets*, 1944, the epigraphs were transferred to prefix the whole cycle.