

## „Disordered Beauty” in Charles Williams’ *The Place of the Lion*

But what if man had eyes to see the true beauty—the divine beauty, I mean, pure and dear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colours and vanities of human life—thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty simple and divine? Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may. Would that be an ignoble life?

(Plato, *Symposium*)

### Introduction

*The Place of the Lion* (1931) is to the contemporary reader perhaps the best known book of Charles Williams, one of the Inklings, a literary discussion group whose meetings were held in Oxford in the 1930s and 1940s. Whereas C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien enjoy popularity as the classic *fantasy* authors, Williams, although highly estimated in his lifetime by such figures as W. H. Auden or T. S. Eliot (Huttan: 8), remains a “neglected classic” (BBC–Radio 4–Open Book–*Neglected Classics*). His books do draw on the fantastical, but their attraction does not lie in transporting the reader to the joyful world, bursting with colours (Lewis) or hypnotising him with melancholy gloom (Tolkien). Instead of providing an escape from the natural to the supernatural, they present the threat of uncanny powers invading everyday life of men, leaving the reader disturbed and puzzled. Williams pushes the borders of “what if”, provoking in the recipient of his fiction a range of feelings from surprise through confusion to terror.

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His highly intellectual narratives, described by Eliot as “supernatural thrillers” (Huttar: 7), stem less from the tradition of myths and fairy tales, and more from the eighteenth-century gothic novel. The richness of Williams’ inspirations and the uniqueness of his imaginative space, however, make the books difficult to classify. They defy the categories we usually apply to texts generically connected with the Gothic, which contributes to the puzzlement and difficulties in the reception of Williams’ fiction. A good example of such difficulty is the question of beauty in *The Place of the Lion*.

Traditionally, Gothic novel complies to the pattern of reading mapped out by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756). Much of the tension that arises in it comes from the interaction of the two aesthetic categories, which appeal to the mechanisms producing in us the emotions of, respectively, pleasure and pain. Yet, when applied to *The Place of the Lion*, these categories appear insufficient, not only for the reader. The question about the nature of beauty bothers the characters and surfaces in their conversations, as they attempt to comprehend it (Williams 1933: 11, 19, 61).

Since Williams’ book is classified as the offspring of the Gothic, Burke’s theory should not be entirely discarded. Rather it should be completed with the theories of beauty of Plato and neo-Platonists who were the author’s main inspirations in this novel. The fusion of Greek thought with Christian symbolism and eighteenth-century aesthetic convention produces a new category which will be the subject of this paper.

## Harmony and Deformation. Aesthetic Clash

Rational and ordered vision of the world in the antiquity assumed soul’s striving to attain the knowledge of Ideas—perfect and complete, original causes of everything we have access to through our senses. The copies, or images, of the Ideas would be dispersed before our eyes, luring us with their fleeting charm. Their very impermanence was what made them not worthwhile, and their incompleteness left one longing for the Absolute (Plato, *Symposium*; Plotinus, *First Ennead, On Dialectic*). Besides Ideas of physical objects, there were also Ideas of the abstract, the most prominent of which was the triad Beauty–Good–Truth. Since Beauty was indivisibly linked with the other desired virtues, identifying Beauty was of the utmost importance. The first lesson of the Absolute Beauty could be received from the “copies”—through art, especially music (Plato, *The Republic*: 39–40, 60, 117, 120–121, 136; Plotinus, *First Ennead, On Intellectual Beauty*). That is why it was deemed essential to provide for people the opportunity to develop their aesthetic sensibility from the earliest years (Plato, *The Republic*: 119),

so that they could recognize the features of the beautiful at first in the world of “shadows”. Such an educated imagination could not only direct the attention of man to the objects reflecting divine virtues, but enabled a correct aesthetic judgement.

The attractive features of the beautiful object would be: utility, harmony, symmetry, brightness, softness, loveliness, youth, novelty, flexibility and grace (Dillon: 173; Plato 1860: 76, 242; Plato, *The Republic*: 53–54, 112–113; Plato, *Symposium*; Plato, *Timaeus*; Plotinus, *First Ennead, On Dialectic, On Beauty*). Once a man was drawn to it by finding pleasure in what he perceived through his senses, and he could detach himself from emotions and appreciate it intellectually by recognition of the separate features. He should realize “that what ravished him was no other than the Harmony of the Intellectual world and the Beauty in that sphere, not some one shape of beauty but the All-Beauty, the Absolute Beauty” (Plotinus, *First Ennead, On Beauty*).

Thus, we could discern two kinds of beauty. One would be the beauty of the “small things” (Plato, *Symposium*). It would rely on the emotional attachment to an imperfect object, on finding in it features which provoke love almost automatically. Its recognition would differ from man to man, since it required the application of subjective judgement (Plato, *Phaedrus*; Plato, *Symposium*). The characteristics of the beautiful, listed above, are things which are universally thought pleasurable (Plato, *The Republic*: 99), and thus can show the direction to appreciate the higher Beauty. The judgement should be polished so that it can apprehend its reflection in the object.

The other, the Absolute Beauty, exists by itself. It is a complete, unchangeable and timeless harmony which expresses itself through light (Plato, *The Republic*: 112; Plotinus, *First Ennead, On Beauty*). It is connected with wellbeing and can never be harmful (Plato, *The Republic*: 41). Still, on encounter it provokes “salutary terror” (Plotinus, *First Ennead, On Beauty*). Thus, it is not necessarily connected with pleasure (Plato, *The Republic*: 112), which belongs to the realm of fleeting emotional states and opinions (Plato, *The Republic*: 70, 99). It requires preparation to be able to perceive it, leaving behind reason and emotions (Dillon: 97; Plato, *Timaeus*; Plotinus, *First Ennead, The Animate and the Man, Problems of the Soul*), but also to appreciate it. In the end, by opening oneself to the Absolute Beauty, an individual is transformed by it. “For This, the Beauty supreme, the absolute, and the primal, fashions Its lovers to Beauty and makes them also worthy of love” (Plotinus, *First Ennead, On Beauty*).

The theory, holding that beauty is connected with a perfect form, was maintained through the ages. It was seen as a divine feature and associated with things eternal and unchanging. Although at the end of Renaissance there appeared an idea that beauty is a product of the tension of one striving to achieve the ideal, graceful proportion was preferred over the troubled beauty up to the eighteenth century (Eco: 95, 224). It was then that the “passions”, despised by antiquity, achieved positive evaluation and there appeared a need for redefining the beautiful.

At first glance, the division into the beautiful and the sublime rests largely on the previously existing distinction into the two kinds of beauty: the imperfect one, provoking feelings of pleasure and love, and the perfect one, awe-striking and magnificent. What is beautiful attracts by its being gentle, bright and graceful, whereas the sublime strikes with grandeur and simplicity (Burke: 157). Still, Burke makes assumptions that do not allow for furthering the parallel.

First of all, he divorces the idea of beauty from the idea of proportion. “For deformity is opposed not to beauty, but to the complete common form” (Burke: 127), he writes, allowing the patterns, present in beautiful works, to deviate from the straight line (Burke: 144, 193). It is the incomplete and imperfect that is celebrated. It does not need to be useful and serve some purpose: we can observe a shift from the rigid requirements of the classical vision to the flowing lines of Hogarth’s paintings. Instead of simplicity, it is complication and variety that are perceived as the properties of the beautiful.

Furthermore, Burke notices that light, which was so closely tied to the notion of the beautiful, especially in its divine kind, can be called “a species of darkness” (Burke: 102). Strong light, like that of the sun, can blind the observer, having a similar effect on the senses as complete darkness. This realization brings forth two consequences. Firstly, what is shining is not necessarily beautiful: extreme light can appear as a threat and thus provoke pain, rather than pleasure. Secondly, light remains a stimulus acting so strongly on the senses that its importance cannot be ignored and Burke fits it in his aesthetic theory by moving it to the realm of the sublime, together with darkness. Consequently, darkness, annexing a part of light, can also be appreciated.

Burke agrees that such features like gloom, ruggedness or suddenness, i.e. the features he ascribes to the sublime, are founded on pain (Burke: 72, 158). Still, he talks about a special kind of pleasurable pain, “a sort of tranquillity shadowed with horror” (Burke: 46). It may take place when the individual is free from the imminent danger to his body. The idea itself is not new: already Plato wrote about it in his *Republic* (Plato, *The Republic*: 156), but in the eighteenth century it acquires a special importance. It gives rise to the aesthetic category of the sublime, opening the doors for those chimeras, graves and the darkness of matter that Plato and neo-Platonists so strongly rejected (Plato, *The Republic*: 159).

This trend found its expression in the Gothic novel, which was created at that time in England. Things beautiful, i.e. fair, bright, colourful, varying, lovely, delicate and gentle, were threatened by the sublime, i.e. dark, monochrome, overwhelming, terrifying, massive, and violent. The aim of the genre was to produce in the reader particular emotions (e.g., terror) and one of the techniques was to employ the contrast outlined by Burke. The place of the rigid classical requirement of proportion was taken by no less rigid dichotomy.

As can be seen, in the eighteenth century the idea of Absolute Beauty was parted with, replaced by the category termed “sublime”, which encompassed things dark and evil. As in the antiquity things good and divine could not be

harmful (i.e. they were considered as “lovely” Plato, *The Republic*: 41), so now greatness was far from inducing love. It was rather awe and respect that was provoked by the sublime, and love was limited to the “small things” (Burke: 141).

### *The Place of the Lion* and the Butterfly

*The Place of the Lion* belongs to the group of Williams’ thrillers, classified also as “Christian horrors” (*The Greater Trumps*; Christian Horror), written in the early 1930s, in which his fascination with Platonic and neo-Platonic thought is the most apparent (Huttar: 29). The plot centres round Smetham, a small town in Hertfordshire, where a Mr Berringer holds meetings of a discussion and meditation group for his neighbours, during which they talk about the existence of Ideal Forms. The two main characters are Anthony Durrant, a sub-editor of the academic journal *The Two Camps*, and Damaris Tighe, his girlfriend, finishing her PhD thesis on Pythagorean influences on Abelard. At the beginning, preoccupied with their own life, they are gradually drawn into the plot, as Anthony witnesses a lioness, which escaped from some menagerie, and attacked Mr Berringer in his own garden. As a result, the lioness vanishes into thin air, Mr Berringer falls into a coma and in the surroundings there appears a great and terrifying lion, which for the rest of the book roams the vicinity of the town, hunting for prey and roaring ominously.

Soon, the rest of the characters experience similar encounters with enormous, supernatural animals. The regular, physical animals are literally drawn into their huge counterparts, and the town empties of them. The characters must face what appears to be the Ideal Forms representing ultimate versions of the principles which they have followed all their lives. Often, the encounter means death.

The symbolic animals, used by Williams in this narrative, can be fitted into Burke’s dichotomy. The purely sublime lion, the serpent and the eagle evoke strong feelings of awe and terror. They are presented as very dangerous, and—in case of the lion and the serpent—evil<sup>1</sup>. Often the characters panic on meeting them and either try to defend themselves or escape (as was the case of Quentin, Anthony’s friend). The description of the lion may serve as an example of the “sublime group” of the Forms:

Anthony and Quentin saw before them the form of a man lying on the ground, and standing over him the shape of a full-grown and tremendous lion, its head flung back, its

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<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to remember about Williams’ Christian background. His lion is not the symbol of Yahweh (e.g. *The Bible*, Rev. 5:5). It is rather the “roaring lion” from the epistles (see *The Bible*, Peter 1:5). By the same token, the serpent is associated here with possession and unpleasant smell.

mouth open, its body quivering. It ceased to roar, and gathered itself back into itself. It was a lion such as the young men had never seen in any zoo or menagerie; it was gigantic and seemed to their dazed senses to be growing larger every moment. Of their presence it appeared unconscious; awful and solitary it stood, and did not at first so much as turn its head. Then, majestically, it moved; it took up the slow forward pacing in the direction which the man had been following; it passed onward, and while they still stared it entered into the dark shadow of the trees and was hidden from sight.

(Williams 1933: 5)

Although majestic and stately, it is nevertheless dangerous and the characters are painfully aware of it. The reaction of Quentin is violent, and terror prevails over detached astonishment and awe.

For Quentin, though he was running, had already passed, it seemed to her, any state in which a man could be, and live. He was almost naked, he was torn and bleeding all over, especially his feet, which appeared to her no longer feet but broken and shapeless masses of bloody flesh. His arms were tossing frenziedly, his hands dangling from them as they were flung about; his face was inhuman with terror and anguish. The dreadful noise that came to her as he drew near was his breath wrenched from the very extreme of existence; his eyes were sightless, and one cheek was horribly bitten and gnawed.

(Williams 1933: 87)

Williams' sublime, then, would be very close to "monstrous". Still, Quentin's behaviour is the result of his not being able to control his emotions in the face of the Absolute. Anthony and Damaris, after the first shock wears off, manage to live up to the challenge of the fearsome side of the supernatural. Damaris, watching Quentin being hunted down, experiences terror and pity, but she herself feels secure from the lion's mouth. For her, it is eventually a sublime Form, which demands reverence, and strength, not to be overcome by its greatness.

As in Williams' depiction of this group of symbolic animals there prevail the elements evoking fear, while the other group, "the beautiful", evokes the feeling of love. The Forms that appear to Mr Tighe and Anthony are: a butterfly, a unicorn and a phoenix. They are bright and colourful, described as "lovely", and leave the characters elated and enraptured with love and admiration. The butterfly passage, termed as the most Platonic one in the whole of Williams' fiction (Huttar: 33), shows many traces of Burke's theory of the beautiful.

It was a terrific, colossal butterfly, it looked as if it were two feet or more across from wing-tip to wing-tip. It was tinted and coloured with every conceivable brightness; green and orange predominating. It was moving upward in spiral flutterings, upward to a certain point, from which it seemed directly to fall close to the ground, then again it began its upward sweep, and again hovered and fell. Of the two men it seemed to be unaware; lovely and self-sufficient it went on with its complex manoeuvres in the air. Anthony, after a few astonished minutes, took his eyes from it, and looked about him, first with a general gaze at all his surroundings, then more particularly at Mr Tighe. The little man was pressed against the gate, his mouth slightly open, his eyes full of plenary adoration, his whole being concentrated on the perfect symbol of his daily concern. Anthony saw that it was no

good speaking to him. He looked back at the marvel in time to see, from somewhere above his own head, another brilliancy—but much smaller—flash through the air, almost as if some ordinary butterfly had hurled itself towards its more gigantic image. And another followed it, and another, and as Anthony, now thoroughly roused, sprang up and aside, to see the better, he beheld the air full of them. Those of which he had caught sight were but the scattered first comers of a streaming host. Away across the fields they came, here in thick masses, there in thinner lines, white and yellow, green and red, purple and blue and dusky black. They were sweeping round, in great curving flights; mass following after mass, he saw them driving forward from far away, but not directly, taking wide distances in their sweep, now on one side, now on another, but always and all of them speeding forward towards the gate and the garden beyond. Even as a sudden new rush of aerial loveliness reached that border he turned his head, and saw a cloud of them hanging high above the butterfly of the garden, which rushed up towards them, and then, carrying a whirl of lesser iridescent fragilities with it, precipitated itself down its steep descent; and as it swept, and hovered, and again mounted, silent and unresting, it was alone. Alone it went soaring up, alone to meet another congregation of its hastening visitors, and then again multitudinously fell, and hovered; and again alone went upward to the tryst. (Williams 1933: 19–20)

It is worth quoting the whole of the passage because it illustrates well the aspects shared by the representations of the beautiful in Williams’ novel. The features that comply to the pattern set by Burke are immediately contradicted by introducing elements characteristic of the sublime. The butterfly, accordingly, is enormous, solitary and silent and—although lovely and marvellous—leaves the two men speechless: Mr Tighe with admiration and Anthony with bewilderment. Other characters admit that even the idea of meeting a giant butterfly is scary (Williams 1933: 45). Mr Tighe, though, cannot describe it in other terms as “lovely”—and his love becomes so strong as to lead him to a total dissolution of his own existence in the perfection of the Idea.

“Loveliness” is tied here with being true and natural, that is, the essence of Williams’ beauty is classical. Its form, though, is a striking combination of the elements of the beautiful and the sublime in Burke’s understanding of the words. The paradoxical “lovely sublime” of the butterfly stems from different assumptions behind the theories Williams employs. For the philosophers of the antiquity, beauty was ideal and an individual had to strive for it and conform to its absolute pattern. For Burke, beauty was largely a creation of man: it was the result of his appreciation of certain features as far as they caused pleasure. Completing his statement, one could assume a formula: beautiful is not opposed to deformity, but to pain.

Williams realizes what an unusual effect he achieves by using at the same time theories advocating and rejecting absolute perfection. Anthony feels compelled to ask Mr Tighe, if the lioness does not keep him from the pursuit of butterflies. And still, the threat of bodily harm cannot prevent a devoted entomologist from looking for beauty. The sterile, conscious creation of the beautiful to satisfy oneself is condemned.

“But,” objected Anthony, “all the trees won’t be cut down. What about forestry and irrigation and so on?”

“O,” Mr Tighe said, “there may be tame forests, with artificially induced butterflies. That will be only a larger kind of zoo. The real thing will have passed.”

“And even if they do,” Anthony asked, “will man have lost anything very desirable? What after all has a lioness to show us that we cannot know without her? Isn’t all real strength to be found within us?”

“It may be,” Mr Tighe answered. “It may be that man will have other enemies and other joys—better perhaps. But the older ones were very lovely.”

(Williams 1933: 19)

Tameness and detachment are not the means, then, to approach beauty. Both the antique and the eighteenth-century theories advocate non-involvement. In the first case, an individual must leave emotions behind. In the second, he is left with the experience of only a virtual world providing him with safety. Man’s mastery over this mental realm gives him the opportunity to manipulate emotions by making up a world to suit his own needs. In Williams’ view, however, it seems that we have to experience beauty holistically, not giving anything up. As Mr Tighe remarks, Absolute is everything, encompassing the mutton and the butterflies (Williams 1933: 11). The forms of “small things” are equally important as the “Ideals”.

### Conclusion: “Disordered Beauty”

It is at the very end of the book that Williams uses a fixed phrase explaining the nature of beauty as he sees it. In the passage describing the naming of the beasts by new Adam he calls it “disordered” (Williams 1933: 101), fully aware that this word can be understood in a few ways. First of all, the original beauty is dispersed throughout the world. The multitude of copies must return to the original and only then they can be created anew, achieving another kind of existence (re-naming). It corresponds with the theories of Plato and neo-Platonists of images striving for fulfilment by the participation in the larger, perfect source.

Secondly, beauty is “disordered” in the sense close to Burke’s “deformation”. It is at this point that the fusion of the two theories is best visible. According to the classical thought, the copies would necessarily be imperfect, lacking in harmony, symmetry or proportion. They can be recognized as beautiful, but are not beautiful in themselves (Plotinus, *First Ennead, On Beauty*). Burke shows that this lack of order can be found pleasurable and should be included as a feature of beauty.

Lastly, “disorder” is one of the effects of the appearance of beauty in the streets of Smetham. Peaceful, everyday life is violated by the abstract ideals, throwing people into confusion and altering their life out of recognition.

On encountering the Ideal Forms some of the people undergo a violent transformation, not only psychological, but also physical. Mrs Rockbotham is changed into a serpent, Mr Tighe dies of bliss and longing for the Absolute, Damaris’ vision of the world shatters together with her ego. The house, in which there lies entranced Berringer, bursts out in flames, from which a form of Phoenix, a symbol of rebirth, rises (Williams 1933: 92).

Those characters who, like Mr Tighe or Anthony, are able to free themselves from fear induced in them by the sublime aspects of the beautiful, are transformed in a positive way. Still, they have to abandon their previous lives. In the case of Mr Tighe it takes an extreme form. Damaris, after meeting the Pterodactyl (the Absolute Ugly, as it seems, cf. Plotinus, *First Ennead, On Beauty*), and being rescued by Anthony, becomes a new Eve. For Anthony, the breaking point comes at the encounter with the Eagle, when he experiences a near-death state (Williams 1933: 53). The result is his becoming a new Adam, *kalos kagathos*, whose task is to restore order to the “disordered beauty”.

His way of experiencing beauty appears as the fullest. Perhaps at the beginning he is puzzled, then terror-stricken, he becomes “disordered” himself, in the end to transcend the artificial opposites of the sublime and the beautiful. He reflects the Ideal Beauty, terrible and lovely at once. All creatures are drawn to the source of it, attracted by the power that stands above the opposites and unites them in perfect existence. “The place of the lion”, dark and sultry, is transported by supernatural power of beauty, not leaving any being undisturbed. In the words of Plato: “For vehement would be the love she would inspire, if she came before our sight and shewed us any such clear image of herself, and so would all other lovable things; but now beauty only has the priviledge of being most manifest and most lovely” (Carry: 427).

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„Rozproszone piękno” w powieści *The Place of the Lion* Charlesa Williamsa

## STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł dotyczy zagadnienia piękna w powieści Charlesa Williamsa *The Place of the Lion* (Gdzie lew ryczący). Autor, będąc spadkobiercą tradycji powieści gotyckiej, wykorzystuje konwencję, aby zaprezentować szczególną kategorię estetyczną. Jego źródłami są Platon oraz neoplatonicy, którzy postrzegali piękno przede wszystkim jako harmonię i światło. Rozdzielali je równocześnie na piękno „rzeczy małych”, tj. niedoskonałe, oraz Piękno Absolutne. Człowiek powinien poprzez poznanie niedoskonałego piękna dążyć do Absolutu.

Jednocześnie Williams stosuje się do osiemnastowiecznych wymogów estetycznych piękna i wzniosłości Edmunda Burke'a, który dostrzegł, iż brak harmonii nie musi być związany z brzydotą. Jego „piękno” nie musi być symetryczne i harmonijne, a światło niekoniecznie łączy się z przyjemnością. Subiektywizacja percepcji prowadzi do docenienia „rzeczy małych”.

Williams, wykorzystując obie teorie, tworzy rodzaj „wzniosłego piękna”: budzącego strach, lecz jednocześnie będącego „ślicznym” (*lovely*), jak można się przekonać, analizując przykładowo przedstawienie ogromnego Motyla. Do opisu swojej kategorii estetycznej używa

zwrotu *disordered beauty* („rozproszone” czy też „zaburzone piękno”). Wyraża w tym wielość form, które muszą znaleźć swoje źródło w Idei Piękna, lecz również jego niestabilną, „zaburzoną” naturę oraz chaos, który piękno wprowadza w życie bohaterów.

Kwestia piękna w *The Place of the Lion* jest przykładem, jak ten mało znany pisarz godzi sprzeczne ze sobą poglądy, czerpiąc z europejskich źródeł. Antyczna tradycja, leżąca u podstaw myśli Williama, otrzymuje formę o całe wieki późniejszą. W rezultacie otrzymujemy frapujący problem, wyrażony w unikalnej kategorii estetycznej.

#### **NOTA AUTORSKA**

Anna Bugajska jest doktorantką na Wydziale Filologicznym UJ, związana jest z Instytutem Filologii Angielskiej. Jej zainteresowania naukowe koncentrują się na literaturze dziecięcej oraz literaturze XVIII wieku. Przygotowywana praca doktorska dotyczy przemian wyobraźni w brytyjskiej literaturze XVIII wieku na przykładzie *Pieśni Osjana* Jamesa MacPhersona.