

*Charles Williams as a literary critic*<sup>1</sup>

Among many other things Charles Williams was a jobbing writer. In that capacity he wrote a good deal of literary criticism. There are five complete books, or rather four and a half, the last being unfinished:

*Poetry at Present*, 1930

*The English Poetic Mind*, 1932

*Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind*, 1933

*The Figure of Beatrice*, 1943

*The Figure of Arthur* (unfinished), in *Arthurian Torso*, with C. S. Lewis, 1948

There is also a large number of essays. Some of these were collected by Anne Ridler in *The Image of the City*, 1958, but many interesting ones were not, and I shall be referring to some of these. There is also a number of reviews of detective stories, to which I shall not be referring. And there is editorial work of various kinds, including anthologies with introductions and notes, retellings and similar work. A particularly important contribution of this kind was his edition of the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Related to this is the editorial work he did for the Oxford University Press, which, because it is unsigned, is largely invisible to us. We know from Alice Mary Hadfield, for example, that he had a considerable part in the original *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (1941), and I suspect he wrote the preface. We know that he was responsible for commissioning W. B. Yeats to compile *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) and W. H. Auden for *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* (1938)<sup>2</sup>. The first was a disaster and the second a success. He may have been involved in the selection of poets for the series Oxford Standard Authors, which has some surprising inclusions and omissions<sup>3</sup>. At the end of his life he would have liked to publish the book by Robert Graves which became *The White Goddess*<sup>4</sup>. In all this work he exercised critical judgement, but, as in the parallel case of his slightly younger contemporary T. S. Eliot, it is a largely unexplored field.

Before looking at the books and essays in more detail I want to begin with some general considerations about Williams as a literary critic. The first thing to say is simply that this is a considerable body of material; he actually wrote far more literary

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<sup>1</sup> A paper read at a conference of the Charles Williams Society in London on 18 October 2008. Full details of all works consulted are given at the end.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Mary Hadfield: *Charles Williams: an exploration of his life and work*, 79, 140-1.

<sup>3</sup> Inclusions: Alice Meynell, Williams' mentor; Robert Bridges who was still alive and in copyright (but he was Poet Laureate); and Lascelles Abercrombie. Omissions: the Metaphysicals apart from Donne (though Herbert was in the smaller World's Classics series), Pope. Of course commercial considerations, the presence of rival editions or the absence of suitable editors might all have played a part in these decisions.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Seymour-Smith: *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, 397-8. Cf. also Williams: *To Michal from Serge*, 209.

criticism than theology and of the rest of his work only the novels form a comparably important body of work. Poetry, particularly the mature Arthurian poetry, is of course another matter. But the large bulk of literary criticism compared to the small bulk of mature poetry suggests another comparison with Eliot, who also wrote far more criticism than original poetry.

And in fact some of Williams's other books which present themselves as being about other matters in fact contain literary criticism. The very early *Outlines of Romantic Theology*, written in 1924 but not published until 1990, contains a chapter called 'Doctors and Documents'. The doctors of romantic theology turn out not to be theologians at all, at least not the kind of people one thinks of as doctors of theology, such as Anselm and Aquinas, but the poets Dante, John Donne and Coventry Patmore, together with Malory. All these people are normally thought of as literary writers, not as doctors of divinity<sup>1</sup>. And at the other end of his career, in *The Forgiveness of Sins*, 1942, we find a chapter on 'Forgiveness in Shakespeare' as well as his main discussion of Blake's long poem *Jerusalem*.

Next we should note the range of his literary interests. He was most seriously interested in poetry, which he once described in passing as 'the noblest of human activities' (*Poetry at Present*, 84). Next to poetry come Malory and the Arthurian romances, some of which are indeed in verse, but which I think he read in prose translations. He was not greatly interested in English poets earlier than Shakespeare but he cared passionately about Virgil and Dante, whom he read at least to some extent in the original – another parallel to Eliot. He did occasionally write about serious prose fiction: the preface to his anthology of *Victorian Narrative Verse*, 1927, begins with a discussion of the novels of George Eliot, and there is a sympathetic treatment of D. H. Lawrence in his essay on 'Sensuality and substance' (in *The Image of the City*). But it was poetry to which he constantly returned.

And we should note that his tastes in poetry were formed before the revolution that was brought about by Eliot. I need to take a moment to explain this. Eliot not only brought about a change in poetic language and subject, for which *The Waste Land*, 1922, continues to stand as the representative moment; he also helped inaugurate a new era in literary criticism. He was not alone in this. I. A. Richards was another founding father and F. R. Leavis and the *Scrutiny* group carried through a systematic programme based on their ideas. In so doing we may think they coarsened them. But the result formed the sensibility of not one but several generations of English students and hence of many school and university teachers of English literature in a way that has still not wholly passed away. I should perhaps add that William Empson was a somewhat maverick outsider in this movement. They also had their American equivalents, such as Cleanth Brooks, Austin Warren and John Crowe Ransom, and it was Ransom who called the whole movement the New Criticism.

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<sup>1</sup> Donne did in fact become a Doctor of Divinity but not until after he wrote the love poetry which Williams regards as embodying his teaching for this purpose.

The New Criticism emphasized close analysis of the texture of poetry, it valued ‘a firm grasp of the actual, poetry ‘must be in relation to life, it must not be cut off from direct vulgar living’ – I take these phrases from René Wellek<sup>1</sup>. It was part of the movement to give a much lower place to Milton and the Romantic poets than had been customary, and to elevate the Metaphysicals and the Augustans to a higher place. And though no school of criticism fails to engage with Shakespeare, both the quality and the quantity of the work produced by the *Scrutiny* group was disappointing<sup>2</sup>. (Eliot, Richards and Empson did, however, produce some remarkable essays on Shakespeare.) It also tended to avoid consideration of the actual subject of the written work, so as to resist moving into philosophical or historical or theological matters. This was because as the movement got established in universities it wanted to win acceptance for the study of literature as an academic discipline of its own, and not as a handmaid to some other discipline.

Now Williams formed his literary tastes in an earlier age. Though he was only two years older than Eliot, it feels almost as if he were a generation earlier. And on all the points I have mentioned he took the opposite view to that of the New Critics: he was not specially interested in close analysis though he was perfectly capable of it when he chose. He was quite happy to write impressionistically. He held to the older valuation of Milton and the Romantic poets. He engaged frequently and successfully with Shakespeare, his own experience as poet and dramatist no doubt helping him. And far from resisting moving into philosophical or historical or theological matters, his characteristic move, as I have already implied, was precisely to use poetry to illustrate spiritual truths.

Not only were his tastes different from those which have been formed under the influence of the New Criticism, but his audience was different also. Much of the contemporary audience for criticism consists of current or past professional students of literature, most of whom have been to university and many of whom are teachers. In those days far fewer young people went to university but there was a strong self-improvement movement among all strata of society, so that many people went to evening classes to study literature in an enthusiastic but non-academic way. There was a much greater emphasis on the written word anyway, and visual media such as films, television and computers either did not exist or occupied a much smaller part of people’s lives. And people were more familiar with the Bible and had at least some knowledge of Christian doctrine; Williams frequently alludes to the Bible in the King James version and to the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Williams wrote for such people and indeed must have drawn on his own experience of teaching evening classes. His experience as an Oxford academic came much later. And he does not write like an academic or for a primarily academic audience. This

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Leavis in *The Common Pursuit*, 215.

<sup>2</sup> This is not just my view. I remember an article by J. M. Newton, an ardent Leavis disciple, ‘*Scrutiny*’s failure with Shakespeare’, appeared in an early number of *The Cambridge Quarterly* in the 1960s, and greatly annoyed Leavis.

can be refreshing, in that he does not employ the more cumbersome paraphernalia of scholarship. But it can also be maddening: he is quite capable of discussing a poem without quoting it or giving any clue as to where it is to be found, what its first line or title is, or where a passage comes in a play. I should say that he does usually seem to check his quotations, but his critical books could do with annotations giving proper references.

However, it would be wrong to give the impression that Williams went his own way, unaware of and uninterested in the literary discussion that was going on around him. Not only would that have been an absurd stance for someone whose day job was as a publisher but it is demonstrably wrong, and I shall try to place him in the context of contemporary literary thought.

One final general point: I am sure that for Williams, as certainly for Eliot<sup>1</sup> and I expect most imaginative writers, his criticism was really a by-product of his poetic workshop. He saw himself most of all as a poet, and I think that everything he wrote was in some way intended to help him articulate and realize his poetic vision, using the older poets as teachers, companions and friends. I need give only one example: in the Preface to his anthology of Victorian Narrative Verse there is a detailed discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, poems which do not appear in the anthology itself. His conclusion is that 'The weakness of the Victorian age, as of the *Idylls*, is in its concern with conduct but its failure artistically to suggest an adequate significance in conduct'<sup>2</sup>. He is clearly thinking of his aims in his own projected Arthurian cycle and how he felt, as he acknowledged later, a 'vague disappointment' with Tennyson<sup>3</sup> which acted as a stimulus to him.

Let us turn then to his first published critical volume, *Poetry at Present*, published in 1930. The choice of poets is very much of its time: there are some names you would expect to see: Hardy, Housman, Kipling, Yeats, de la Mare, Eliot and Graves, and there are some names whose reputations have faded considerably: Bridges, W. H. Davies, Chesterton, Masfield, Ralph Hodgson, Wilfrid Gibson, Lascelles Abercrombie, the Sitwells and Edmund Blunden. You will notice that apart from Blunden there are no war poets: no Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfrid Owen or Siegfried Sassoon. Also, apart from Eliot, who was by then anyway a British citizen, there are no Americans: no Frost, Pound, or Wallace Stevens all of whom had made reputations by 1930<sup>4</sup>.

There is an oddity about this book: each essay is followed by what he calls an End Piece, a short poem, which considers the subject of the essay in a pastiche of the

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot: *On Poetry and Poets*, 106.

<sup>2</sup> Williams (ed.): *Victorian Narrative Verse*, vi.

<sup>3</sup> *The Image of the City*, 179.

<sup>4</sup> All three, and others, were considered by Robert Graves and Laura Riding in their *Survey of Modernist Poetry* of 1927, which was considerably more forward-looking than Williams's book, but which had little circulation.

writer's own style. I find most of these successful neither as poetry nor as criticism and I am surprised that the Oxford University Press was prepared to accept them. The one exception to this to my mind is the poem on Kipling. Here are the first two stanzas:

Caesar stood on the ramparts  
of the farthest Roman wall,  
with the camps and marches behind him  
that meant a conquered Gaul;  
and wide before him a ghostly sea:  
saying: 'And what may Britain be?'

Caesar stood on the ramparts,  
hearing how boatmen hear  
the calling ghosts at midnight  
and rise in haste and fear  
those travellers o'er the straits to row;  
saying: 'Where the ghosts go Rome may go.'

You will notice here an early version of the passage on Caesar's crossing of the channel in 'The Coming of Palomides' in *Taliessin through Logres*.

But in the main discussion there are many good things. I shall pick out a few<sup>1</sup>. Here is Williams on Hardy:

One is haunted by a sense that Hardy takes inevitable moods a little too seriously, and omits the normal reaction which is so close as to make part of the mood itself. Every lover at times sees his mistress as something less than ideal, but not every one 'worries' over it quite so much. Every one at times feels that the eternal beauty he remembers and desires and adores is not quite adequately manifested in his particular young lady. (6-7)

He says also of Hardy:

He has done as a poet what he could not do as a philosopher; he has made the idea convincing by his emotional statement of it and his emotional revolt against it. (13)

And what Hardy has done – here I paraphrase - is to portray a universe without providence and almost without hope. Williams commends the stage directions rather than the verse of *The Dynasts*, and particularly this passage:

The nether sky opens, and Europe is disclosed as a prone and emaciated figure, the Alps shaping like a backbone, and the branching mountain-chains like ribs, the peninsular plateau of Spain forming a head. Broad and lengthy lowlands stretch from the north of France across Russia like a grey-green garment hemmed by the Ural mountains and the glistening Arctic Ocean. (15)

Here we see a germ of the idea of Europe as a body which we find later in the Taliessin poems.

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<sup>1</sup> Page references after the quotations are to *Poetry at Present*.

Similarly perceptive I find his comment on Housman. He says:

Mr Housman, who has no concern for romantic love except as a keen and often thwarted delight, has restored the love between friends to something approaching its right place. When the two books [*A Shropshire Lad* and *Last Poems*] have been read this is left in the mind as the chief satisfaction, the most enduring peace of man. (34)

Now we all know nowadays that Housman was gay and suffered for most of his life with an unrequited love for Moses Jackson. But at the time Williams wrote his essay this was unknown, the poems in which Housman was more candid about his feelings were unpublished, and homosexual activity was a criminal offence. So it was acute for Williams to deduce from internal evidence alone that love between male friends was the key issue to Housman.

To me the most interesting essays are those on W. B. Yeats and Walter de la Mare. In both of these Williams considers how each poet uses myth and magic. He distinguishes Yeats's use from that of the Elizabethan poets:

But there is a more important difference—or more important anyhow for our purpose - between Mr. Yeats and the Elizabethans, and it is in the countries they have separately explored. A still half-fabulous world provided the earlier poets with inventions, myths, and dreams. But for us all strangeness, most adventure, and in a growing sense all space, must be found within. It is rather in ideas of the world than in the world that novelty and familiarity must lie, and it is by the recognition of the inner inner in the outer that most of us find satisfaction, by the accommodation of the phenomenal world to our beliefs and consistencies. How far that world is patient of our imposed interpretations - whether they be those of ancient or modern science - is another matter, and one fortunately which need not be discussed in speaking of poetry. For we are then primarily concerned not with how just any poet's myth of the universe may be, how far we may expect to be able to make our own actualities correspond with it, but only with how he sees and states it. Elements or elementals, both are credible then (and for that matter at any other time also). (60-61)

He goes on:

But magic and faery, and those other old alchemical wisdoms in which Mr. Yeats has found interest, what is their poetic value? It is perhaps the continual suggestion of other possibilities than the normal mind is conscious of. Since this verse does not give us (as naturally it could not) instruction how to work spells and practise the true alchemy and discover faerie kingdoms, we are not concerned with it as practical doctrine; it is but the effect of these continual apostrophes, invocations, and visions, to which we look. (63)

and adds:

Nowhere is the whole purport of this desire set out more exactly than in the talk between Forgael and Aibric in *The Shadowy Waters*. (63-4)

I don't think any other early reader of Yeats realized the importance of *The Shadowy Waters*. The first academic critic to have agreed seems to be Harold Bloom, who wrote: 'It is doubtful that any later poem by him [Yeats] contains as much of the whole man, or indicates the full scope of the poet's imaginative quest'<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom: *Yeats*, 133.

I should note also that Williams seems mainly interested in Yeats's earlier work, which he quotes in the early published versions rather than in the revised versions which modern readers are used to. He quotes nothing from *The Tower*, which came out in 1928 and was Yeats's latest published volume at the time. This is generally, and I think rightly, considered to be Yeats's finest single volume; it contains such pieces as 'Sailing to Byzantium', 'Leda and the Swan' and 'Among School Children', so Williams's failure to notice its quality is a serious lapse. On the other hand he had read Yeats's book of occult wisdom *A Vision*, which had been published in its first version only in a limited edition of 600 copies, which shows that his interest in Yeats's ideas was deep.

The essay on Yeats is suggestive, but the one on de la Mare seems to me even finer, in fact the best essay in the book. There is a splendid paragraph on de la Mare's treatment of death:

It is not death understood, as it is normally understood by most of us, as a state devoid of experience and empty of realization. Whatever our intellectual beliefs may be, the word death generally suggests a 'naughting' of all that we know. We may expect to know other things and even dimly hope to know lovelier; but such expectation and hope are slender emotions. In Mr. de la Mare's poems there is a state of removed ecstasy; it is as though death had become, not a gate to experience, but itself a rich experience, a summing-up and transcending of all present beauty and richness. It is removed in two senses; first, it is - as it must be in poetry - not something to be looked forward to in time and with the natural mind, but to be felt here and with the 'holy imagination' which Blake perceived to be the Saviour of men; it is therefore something more removed than a promise, being a state which exists already within us, but into which we have not entered. And secondly, it is a state which is beyond, and beyond in the sense of including, those other experiences of fear and mistake and terror. These, which are separate poems, are elements of the whole; transforming these into beauty, Mr. de la Mare has persuaded us of an inclusive ecstasy. (85)

And for a demonstration that Williams could do close analysis when he chose, consider his discussion of *The Song of Finis*. Here is the poem:

At the edge of All the Ages  
 A Knight sate on his steed,  
 His armour red and thin with rust,  
 His soul from sorrow freed;  
 And he lifted up his visor  
 From a face of skin and bone,  
 And his horse turned head and whinnied  
 As the twain stood there alone.

No bird above that steep of time  
 Sang of a livelong quest;  
 No wind breathed,  
 Rest:  
 'Lone for an end!' cried Knight to steed,  
 Loosed an eager rein -  
 Charged with his challenge into Space:  
 And quiet did quiet remain.

Williams's comment concentrates on the last line:

'And quiet did quiet remain.' We are - to put it clumsily - *there* even to experience that quiet, and yet we are *not* there; nothing is there. The single image has vanished into space ; we are, for a moment, in a state beyond images, and therefore beyond intellect. Poetry has many ways of doing this but it rarely does it so simply and finally as here. (89)<sup>1</sup>

He also has a very suggestive account of what might be called mysticism:

If all theological connotation, all dogma, all ordinary piety, could be emptied out of the word religion, then this poetry might be called religious poetry. If the word mystical were not used nowadays for every cheap sensation and every indolent thought, it might almost be called mystical poetry; and if magic could ever lead to mysticism one would be tempted to say it had done so here. In an unnatural and fascinating labour we might even attempt to arrange these poems in some order of their soft movement from state to state of that little-explored world. (91)

You will have noticed that all these passages suggest some of Williams's own poetic aims.

The essay on Masfield almost makes me want to have another look at him, and there is a fine passage on romanticism:

The romantic mind is that which wholly abandons itself to some intense experience, and normally does not stabilize that by others. But this is the interior and greater romanticism. There exists also a lesser kind which has the trappings of that greater romance without its intensity. The decorations of death, the ornamentations of love, hide the thing itself, and sometimes hide it very beautifully. The substitution may be rich and lovely, but it is a substitution. Spenser, in *The Faerie Queene*, is full of it; the whole poem is a substitution of loveliness for intensity. And Mr. Masfield's long poems are of the same kind. (116-7)

But the essay on Eliot is, as he acknowledges in the preface, a failure. He cannot engage with Eliot's poetry and resorts to epigram:

Whatever his more difficult poems mean, his simpler nearly always mean Hell pure and simple. But not in any prejudiced or invented mode. Mr. Eliot's poetic experience of life would seem to be Hell varied by intense poetry. It is also, largely, our experience. It is also, generally, our experience of Mr. Eliot's poetry. (116)

Williams's own judgement on *Poetry at Present* only a few years later was 'this pathetic effort of my immaturity'<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless it went into a second edition the year after publication. It was not subsequently reprinted because in 1932 it was superseded by a successful rival. This was Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry*. Leavis was of course the leader of the *Scrutiny* group. The strengths and weaknesses of his book are almost opposite to those of Williams: Leavis has a clear grip on Eliot and his discussion of *The Waste Land* is often reprinted separately. He struggles with Yeats, is impatient with de la Mare and dismissive of Bridges, whom Williams treats with great respect. He also has a chapter on Gerard Manley Hopkins as the great nineteenth

<sup>1</sup> Williams might also have noted the echo of Coleridge's 'The Knight's Tomb'.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Kenneth Sisam, 20 June 1935, quoted Hadfield, *Exploration*, 80.



century precursor of the moderns. The irony is that the edition of Hopkins Leavis relies on is the one which Williams edited in 1930, the same year as *Poetry at Present*, together with an excellent introduction which has never been reprinted – it is, I think, far more interesting than the essay on Hopkins Anne Ridler chose for *The Image of the City*. Leavis, as one might expect, cites it only to disagree with it<sup>1</sup>. And Hopkins, in Williams's edition, became the great Victorian exemplar to poets of the thirties<sup>2</sup>, but thanks to Leavis and not to Williams himself.

But the root reason for the success of Leavis's book is that he argued an anti-romantic line consistently, whereas Williams could not articulate his pro-romantic line coherently enough, and it was lost among the large number of minor figures to whom he felt obliged to give respectful attention. Because of this Williams's book was forgotten, whereas Leavis's became the standard reference for the next fifty years at least and indeed has remained in print.

With this in mind I can half discern the ghost of the book Williams might have written had he been bolder. The great modern exemplar would have been Yeats rather than Eliot, and the great Victorian precursor would have been Coventry Patmore rather than Hopkins. The key American to be introduced would have been Wallace Stevens rather than Ezra Pound, and the hope for the future would have been in W. H. Auden rather than Ronald Bottrall, whose misfortune it has been to be remembered only as Leavis's hot tip.

We come now to the two books on the poetic mind, *The English Poetic Mind* of 1932 and its successor *Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind* of the following year. The fundamental idea behind these books is to treat English poetry as if it were a single individual, articulated in diverse forms such as Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth and Keats, but retaining a fundamental identity beneath these forms. It is an idea quite close to Eliot's sense of tradition. You will remember that Eliot says:

The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.<sup>3</sup>

The problem which Williams summons the resources of English poetry to solve is that of the divided consciousness, as expressed above all by Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*<sup>4</sup>:

The crisis which Troilus endured is one common to all men; it is in a sense the only interior crisis worth talking about. It is that in which every nerve of the body, every consciousness of the mind, shrieks that

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<sup>1</sup> Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry*, 137.

<sup>2</sup> The influential *Faber Book of Modern Verse* of 1936 begins with Hopkins.

<sup>3</sup> Eliot, 'Traditional and the Individual Talent', *The Sacred Wood*, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Page references after the quotations are to *The English Poetic Mind*.

something cannot be. Only it is.

Cressida *cannot* be playing with Diomed. But she is. The Queen *cannot* have married Claudius. But she has. Desdemona *cannot* love Cassio. But she does. Daughters *cannot* hate their father and benefactor. But they do. The British Government *cannot* have declared war on the Revolution. But it has. The whole being of the victim denies the fact; the fact outrages his whole being. This is indeed change, and it was this change with which Shakespeare's genius was concerned.

This she ? no, this is Diomed's Cressida.  
 If beauty have a soul, this is not she;  
 If souls guide vows, if vows be sanctimony,  
 If sanctimony be the gods' delight,  
 If there be rule in unity itself,  
 This is not she. O madness of discourse,  
 That cause sets up with and against itself;  
 Bi-fold authority! where reason can revolt  
 Without perdition, and loss assume all reason  
 Without revolt: this is, and is not, Cressid..  
 Within my soul there doth conduce a fight  
 Of this strange nature, that a thing inseparate  
 Divides more wider than the sky and earth;  
 And yet the spacious breadth of this division  
 Admits no orifice for a point as subtle  
 As Ariachne's broken woof to enter.  
 Instance, O instance! strong as Pluto's gates;  
 Cressid is mine, tied with the bonds of heaven:  
 Instance, O instance! strong as heaven itself;  
 The bonds of heaven are slipp'd, dissolv'd and loos'd;  
 And with another knot, five-finger-tied,  
 The fractions of her faith, orts of her love,  
 The fragments, scraps, the bits, and greasy reliques  
 Of her o'er-eaten faith, are bound to Diomed.

Troilus sways between two worlds. His reason, without ceasing to be reason, tells him that this appearance of Cressida is not true; yet his loss is reasonable and cannot protest because this is the nature of things. Entire union and absolute division are experienced at once: heaven and the bonds of heaven are at odds. All this is in his speech, but it is also in one line. There is a world where our mothers are unsoiled and Cressida is his; there is a world where our mothers are soiled and Cressida is given to Diomed. What connexion have those two worlds ?

Nothing at all, unless that this were she.

It might be too much to say that the line is the first place in which that special kind of greatness occurs in Shakespeare; but it is, I think, true to say that never before in his work had such complexity of experience been fashioned into such a full and final line. It is his power entering into a new freedom. (59-60, 61)

It is worth adding at this point that Williams later devised a specific term for this predicament: he called it an Impossibility: 'something that could not be, and yet was'<sup>1</sup>

It is worth comparing Williams' analysis of this passage with the later one by I. A. Richards, the founding father of the New Criticism<sup>2</sup>. Richards is very close to

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction to *Letters of Evelyn Underhill*, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Richards, I. A.: 'Troilus and Cressida and Plato' first published 1948, collected in *Speculative Instruments*.

Williams – I wonder whether he had read *The English Poetic Mind* – but where Williams says ‘Entire union and absolute division are experienced at once: heaven and the bonds of heaven are at odds’ Richards says ‘When the valuations become irreconcilable and insuperable, the thing splits and the thinker (or thinger) then has to remain *one* (if he can) himself’. In other words Williams’ emphasis is on the contradictory perception, Richards’ on the internal split in the perceiver<sup>1</sup>.

Williams goes on to suggest that in *Antony and Cleopatra* the contradiction is resolved:

The crisis of Troilus and Cressida is wholly reversed and resolved. The domination of that thing inseparate is turned back, and is dominated by the mind of man, and poetry which explores the mind of man. The world which cannot be and which is is here united with the world which is and which cannot be . . . The supreme thing in that scene [the closing scene] is the consummation of the poetic mind which here manages to know those two worlds as one; discovering that knowledge by expressing it. (97-8)

The rest of the book works this idea out in other poets. In *Paradise Lost* Satan embodies the contradiction in himself, as is summed up in his speech on Niphates’ top at the beginning of Book IV which ends:

So farewell, Hope, and with hope, farewell Fear;  
Farewell, Remorse; all good to me is lost;  
Evil, be thou my good; by thee at least  
Divided empire with heaven’s king I hold.<sup>2</sup>

Williams says ‘The divided empire means double consciousness within him for ever. His own self-consciousness accepts and includes that.’ (124)

I have to say, however, that I find *The English Poetic Mind* a difficult book. Much of it seems at first like paraphrase, and then one comes to dense and difficult passages. The central idea, which I have just attempted to expound, is clear, but not the details. I do wonder whether this is wholly my fault. I think Williams is exploring something of great importance, on the borderland between literature and something else. The something else is sometimes theology, but as often philosophy or psychology. And I do think the fact that he lacked a philosophical education – you will remember that both Eliot and C. S. Lewis had that advantage – hampered his ability to articulate his thought. What is really needed is a clear exposition of his argument. Even Mary McDermot Shideler, in what I think is the best exposition of Williams’s ideas that I know<sup>3</sup>, eschewed offering an account of Williams’s ideas on the nature and function of poetry. So the task remains.

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<sup>1</sup> Williams has to give a point to Richards in that he did not pick up the fusion of images implied by ‘Ariachne’s broken woof’ which combines both Arachne and Ariadne with their associated myths: ‘An escape from a labyrinth containing a devouring monster, with an ensuing betrayal; a penalty for *hubris* with a horrible transformation’, *Speculative Instruments*, 210.

<sup>2</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IV 108-111.

<sup>3</sup> *The Theology of Romantic Love: A Study in the Writings of Charles Williams*.

In the place of that I would like to make two comments. The first is that Williams's interpretation of Shakespeare is paralleled by that of the poet Ted Hughes. He also has noticed the divided consciousness, though he has a different explanation for it. But this passage might be by Williams:

Hamlet, looking at Ophelia, sees his mother in bed with his uncle and goes mad; Othello, looking at his pure wife, sees Cassio's whore, and goes mad; Macbeth, looking at the throne of Scotland, and listening to his wife, hears the witches, the three faces of Hecate, and the invitation of Hell, and goes mad; Lear, looking at Cordelia, sees Goneril and Regan and goes mad; Antony, looking at his precious queen, sees the ribaudred nag of Egypt betraying him 'to the very heart of loss' and goes—in a sense—mad; Timon, looking at his loving friends, sees the wolfpack of Athenian creditors and greedy whores and goes mad; Coriolanus, looking at his wife and mother, sees the Roman mob who want to tear him to pieces, and begins to act like a madman; Leontes, looking at his wife, sees Polixenes's whore and begins to act like a madman; Posthumous, looking at his bride, who of his 'lawful pleasure oft restrained' him, sees the one Iachimo mounted 'like a full-acorned boar' and begins to act like a madman.

Shakespearean lust, this boar of blackness, emerging to do murder, accompanied—as a rule—by various signs of a hellish apparition, and leagued with everything forbidden,

'Perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,  
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust. . . .'

combines with the puritan mind - a mind desensitized to the true nature of nature - and produced this strange new being: Richard III, Tarquin, Hamlet, Angelo, Othello, Macbeth - men of chaos.<sup>1</sup>

And Hughes's view of how the mature Shakespeare plays relate to one another is very similar to that of Williams.

The second is a recent encomium by the poet Geoffrey Hill. He praises Williams as a critic highly and sees *The English Poetic Mind* as his critical masterpiece. However, he also does not engage with the detailed argument but instead particularly commends Williams's aphorisms, such as:

The chief impulse of a poet is, not to communicate a thing to others, but to shape a thing, to make an immortality for its own sake.

and

Poetry has to do all its own work; in return it has all its own authority<sup>2</sup>.

He goes on to deplore the obscurity into which *The English Poetic Mind* fell in contrast to the warm reception given the following year to Eliot's *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. Many people have been hard on that book by Eliot, starting

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Hughes: Note to *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*, 192-3. Note that the revised 1991 edition does not contain this essay in this form. It is, however, included in Hughes's *Winter Pollen* as 'The Great Theme: Notes on Shakespeare'. Hughes elaborated his thesis in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Hill: *Collected Critical Writings*, 563. The aphorisms by Williams come in *The English Poetic Mind*, 5 and 167.

with its author, who called it 'an unnecessary book' in the preface. But it is much easier reading than *The English Poetic Mind* and it contains some famous passages.

*Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind* is, however, rather easier going. Not again, for the main argument, which again eludes me, except to say that, to the extent that I understand it, the title of the book should really be *Reason, Beauty and Power in the Poetic Mind*, as we shall see. But it has some powerful and sustained discussions of individual writers.

I want to concentrate on two sections of the book. The first is the close analysis of Keats's 'Ode to a nightingale'. I have said that Williams could do close analysis when he chose to, and this is a bravura example of it. Here is the analysis of the first two stanzas<sup>1</sup>:

The poem opens with six important and correlated words - 'aches', 'drowsy numbness', 'hemlock', 'opiate', 'Lethe'. They discover in us a sense of our capacity for sleep and death and oblivion. Whether we are conscious of it or not two other memories of hemlock are never far from the English imagination when the word is used - the cell of Athens and the gardens of Elsinore. Socrates is near, but the elder Hamlet and the poison entering 'the porches of his ears' are perhaps nearer. The memory of them encourages the lines to take us ; a sleepy death is summoned.

But the next two lines, the fifth and sixth, define the sensation intellectually. It is not through envy, through a grudge at happiness which arises in a conscious unhappiness, but through an excess of happiness itself. The poet has entered into the felicity of the bird's enjoyment; hemlock and the opiate and Lethe are the details of being too happy', and that over-happiness is the awareness of a song with its own elements of detail - the light-winged Dryad, the trees, the melodious plot, the beechen green, the shadows, the song of summer, the full-throated ease. And immediately on those words the poem turns off to speak of wine. Why ? Why does the thought of the beaker with beaded bubbles occur now ? It is no doubt realistic enough, one might well wish for a draught of wine in those admirable circumstances, but natural logic in a great poem will have a poetic logic to support or perhaps to suggest it, and the poetic logic is here. The draught of wine corresponds to the earlier draught of hemlock; it even carries on the idea of full-throated. Indeed it is on that very word that the poem has turned. The bird's throat full of song becomes the poet's feeling the wine, and has therefore transmuted his hearing into the much closer experience of tasting. Taste is more immediate than sight or hearing, and drinking a more physically intimate thing than listening to a song. But though the change in the kind of experience suggested is deeper, we are still brought back again to the theme ; only by that process, that introduction of the richer experience of wine, we are now easily introduced to new details of a similar kind to those of\* the first stanza, but themselves richer. Beechen green becomes country green ; melodious plot becomes dance and Provençal song and sunburnt mirth, shadows numberless become the hinted dark of the deep-delved earth, and the Dryad has become the more mature and majestic Flora. And all these things in turn prepare us for an excursion - to the plot? or even the place of sunburnt mirth? no, but to a deeper richness of which the plot itself is but an open glade, to the forest dim. The bird's song is to fade away into *that*; the song and Keats and we are about to, enter together into a grander and greater imagery. (63-5)

And so on for eleven pages. I think it is superb. But to understand what Williams is concerned about, compare his analysis with that of Leavis who analyzes the same poem in his *Revaluation*, published in 1936:

It starts Lethe-wards, with a heavy drugged movement (drowsy', 'numb', 'dull') down to 'sunk'. The part played by the first line-division is worth noting – the difference the division makes to the phrase 'a drowsy numbness pains my sense'. In the fifth and sixth lines, with the reiterated

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<sup>1</sup> Page references after the quotations are to *Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind*.

'happy', the direction changes, and in the next line comes the key-word, 'light-winged'. The stanza now moves buoyantly towards life, the fresh air, and the sunlight (shadows numberless') – the thought of happy, self-sufficient vitality provides the impulse, The common medium, so to speak, in which the shift of direction takes place with such unobtrusive effectiveness, the pervasive sense of luxury, is given explicitly in the closing phrase of the stanza, 'full-throated ease'.

Down the throat (now the poet's) flows, in the next stanza, the 'draught of vintage,'

Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,

the coolness (having banished the drowsy fever) playing voluptuously against the warmth of 'the warm South'. The sensuous luxury keeps its element of the 'light-winged' : there are the 'beaded bubbles winking at the brim'. This second stanza reverses the movement of the first ; until the last two lines it moves towards life and the stirring human world,

Dance and Provençal song and sunburnt mirth.

But the optative 'O' changes direction, as if with the changing effect (now no longer excitation) of the wine, and the stanza ends on the desire to

leave the world unseen  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim<sup>1</sup>.

Now I do not want to disparage Leavis's analysis. It comes from what I think is his best book. But see how close he keeps to the verbal sense and the texture of the poem, whereas Williams opens doors, for example to 'the cell of Athens and the gardens of Elsinore'. Leavis, that is, is keen to demonstrate that literary criticism is a valid activity in its own right, as distinct from philosophy or anything else; Williams lets the poem draw us into strange other worlds which become progressively richer. It is obviously a riskier approach than that of Leavis, and it may not be a good model for students. But it is incomparably more revealing.

The other section I want to consider is the discussion of *Paradise Lost*, which constitutes Chapter VIII 'The Deification of Reason'. This is much longer than the discussion of Keats – about 37 pages – but fortunately Williams summarizes his argument as follows:

Those suggestions may be summed up as follows; (i) that *Paradise Lost* is read too often only as a narrative and not sufficiently as a psychological poem ; (ii) that the actual nature of the theme - which is announced to be disobedience and obedience - is not sufficiently observed, nor the nature of that obedience; (iii) that the despair of Satan and the pathos of Adam and Eve are regarded as the important achievements of Milton's imagination, whereas in fact it is the transcending of that despair and pathos which is his sublimity; (iv) that that sublimity consists - precisely as Wordsworth said it did - in an exaltation of Power, Reason, and Beauty; and in the use of his verse to express at once that Power, Reason, and Beauty, and all revolts against it with their adequate and inevitable conclusion. (92)

Incidentally it is because of this passage, and others like it, that I think Williams' title should really have been *Reason, Beauty and Power in the Poetic Mind*.

In elaborating his thesis I want to pick out Williams's discussion of obedience and love. He takes a passage spoken by the angel Raphael:

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<sup>1</sup> Leavis: *Revaluation*, 203.

Myself and all th'angelic host that stand  
 In sight of God enthron'd, our happy state  
 Hold as you yours, while our obedience holds;  
 On other surety none; freely we serve,  
 Because we freely love, as in our will  
 To love or not; in this we stand or fall. (V. 535-40)

Any one who has ever begun to envisage the nature and experience of love might, one would think, have recognized in those sublime words the poetic discovery of a simple fact of that experience. It is, surely, common knowledge that in proportion as man freely loves – *loves* - he finds himself in a state of stability. I do not say it is the only state; only that it is a mark of that particular passion, once known in the pure clarity in which it is here described. The angels are angels - in the narrative. But in the complex psychology of the universal poem, they are man achieving for a moment a realization of himself as free; they renew the idea of service which, once known, is by its very nature freedom. 'In this we stand or fall.' But the fall is a matter of experience, not merely of doctrine or legend. (99)

You will notice in this not only the characteristic movement of Williams's mind from the poem to the theology he finds in it, as well as the equally characteristic echo of the collect for peace from the *Book of Common Prayer*<sup>1</sup>. When he applies this to the fall of Adam and Eve he says:

They had been intended, they had been created, to be in a state of lordship and service at once, of domination and of subordination. They were obedient to God and lords of the world beside. But now, drunk with desire – they can hardly stop eating – they are first triumphant and indulgent, in a coarse imitation of serene mastery, and then gloomy and fearful, in a coarse imitation of serene obedience. (106-7)

He goes on to explain:

Love is a matter of the intellect and the will; sensation of beatitude is (at least in man's unfallen state: it seems somehow to be different now) a result of this. (117)

Next I want to consider Williams's discussion of Milton's portrayal of God. This has also been controversial. Williams is quite clear that:

The God of *Paradise Lost* . . . does not exist outside *Paradise Lost* any more than Macbeth exists outside *Macbeth*. (114)

This is a subtle move; indeed, it is one C. S. Lewis seems to have forgotten when he wrote: 'Many of those who say they dislike Milton's God only mean that they dislike God'<sup>2</sup>. A more typical academic approach would be to separate Milton's God from any concept the critic might have of God outside the poem. Williams, however, goes on to explore Milton's literary problem in theological terms:

It must be admitted that Milton is struggling with a problem which even his genius could hardly solve. He had to express Omnipotence and Omniscience; he had to set that of which they were

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<sup>1</sup> 'our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom'. The idea goes back to patristic times.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis: *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, 130. I realize I am simplifying Lewis's position.

qualities into relation with created beings; and he had to turn the whole thing into a dramatic narrative. It is very difficult to put Omnipotence and Omniscience into a story, because the proportions of the story are immediately destroyed. In another sense than Cleopatra's, 'the odds is gone'. It is still more difficult to make them dramatic; which is why, if Christianity were not true, it would have been necessary, for the sake of letters, to invent it. It is the only safe means by which poetry can compose the heavens, without leaving earth entirely out of the picture. The Incarnation, had it not been necessary to man's redemption, would have been necessary to his art; the rituals of the Church have omitted that important fact from their paeans. (119)

Following God there is heaven, which he reminds us 'is not a place but a state' (120) and Williams goes on to expound its qualities, summing them up by saying it is 'a state of Power and Reason and Beauty' (123) which phrase support my view that the title should really have been expanded.

With that I want to leave *Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind*. The three books we have considered were written in the comparatively short period of four years and I think Williams must have felt he had written enough critical books because he did not write another one for another ten years. However, he continued to write critical essays, usually as book reviews. I want to single out three of these, two of which, as it happens, have not been collected.

The first is his Introduction to *The New Book of English Verse*, published in 1935. If this is ever reprinted it should be called 'The Celian moment'. Celia was, of course the name he gave Phyllis Jones, his second love, and we can feel the *frisson* with which he used this name with its private associations for what he offers as a literary device, and in a book in which he acknowledged his wife's help:

The Celian moment (so to call it) had a double vocation – as love and as poetry – and retains for us a passion in both. It is the moment which contains, almost equally, the actual and the potential; it is perfect within its own limitations of subject or method, and its perfection relates it to greater things. (*New Book*, 13)

However, Williams expressly himself too cryptically to be clear. His definition is derived from Coleridge<sup>1</sup>, and it will attain its fullest exposition on the first page of *The Figure of Beatrice* some years later.

The second essay I want to consider also has a connection with Celia. In 1933 OUP issued a collection of twentieth century English Critical Essays with an introduction which is credited to Phyllis Jones. I am pretty sure this is actually by Williams: the style and the ideas are characteristic of him, and nothing we know of Phyllis Jones suggests that she could have written it herself. In it he carries further his treatment of literature as a kind of secondary revelation. He does this first in a parenthesis<sup>2</sup>:

It has been thought convenient here to except in all cases man's relation to God, which may or may not be so very different from his relation to Letters, more particularly to poetry, save that for Letters some native inborn desire may or may not exist, but for the former we must believe that a native inborn desire does exist. (Introduction, ix)

<sup>1</sup> Coleridge: *The Statesman's Manual*, cit. John Beer: *Coleridge the Visionary*, 138.

<sup>2</sup> References are to pages in the Introduction to this collection.



At the end of the essay he gives his clearest account of the function of poetry, apart from religion:

there is nothing in this life which more arouses in our souls a knowledge of their origin and their nature than the contemplation of poetry. We know things first of all in life and we know them again more fully and more clearly in poetry: in poetry it is possible to know even pain and desolation – our own pain and desolation – as fruitful rather than sterile things. (xii-xiii)

I think Williams is here very far from the New Critics and much closer to someone like Jacques Maritain, whose book *Art and Scholasticism* was much discussed in the 1930s. I take one sentence from this: ‘Artistic creation does not copy God’s creation, it continues it’<sup>1</sup>.

The third of Williams’s essays I want to mention is the introduction to the 1940 edition of Milton in the World’s Classics series and reprinted in *The Image of the City*. This is one of the few critical essays that has stayed in general literary circulation, and that is for two reasons. One is that it was extravagantly praised by C. S. Lewis, in the introduction to his own 1942 book *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, which is dedicated to Williams. He said that it was ‘the recovery of a true critical tradition after more than a hundred years of laborious misunderstanding’<sup>2</sup>. The other is that it is an important document in the Milton controversy which raged across the middle years of the last century. If you want to understand Williams’s place in that controversy I refer you to Christopher Ricks’s book *Milton’s Grand Style* which summed up and ended the controversy. But our concern is to identify what it is about Williams’s essay that so impressed Lewis.

Williams starts from the fact that Milton’s reputation has been attacked, which he considers fortunate. He says<sup>3</sup>:

The orthodox Chairs of Literature, it must be admitted, had for long professed the traditional view of an august, solemn, proud and (on the whole) unintelligent and uninteresting Milton. (26)

When they found that what they had been saying for centuries with admiration was now said with contempt they found themselves helpless. But, Williams points out, there was another possibility:

it may be put very briefly by saying that Milton was not a fool. The peculiar ignorance of Christian doctrine which distinguished most of the academic Chairs and of the unacademic journalists who had been hymning Milton had not prevented them from arguing about the subtle theological point of the Nature of the Divine Son in *Paradise Lost*. The peculiar opposition to high speculations on the nature of chastity felt in both academic and unacademic circles had prevented any serious appreciation of that great miracle of the transmutation of the flesh proposed in *Comus*. And the peculiar ignorance of morals also felt everywhere had enabled both circles to assume that Milton might be proud and that yet he might not at the same time believe that pride was wrong and foolish. It was never thought that, if he

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<sup>1</sup> Maritain: *Art and Scholasticism* and *The Frontiers of Poetry*, 60.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis: *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, v-vi.

<sup>3</sup> References are to *The Image of the City*.

sinned, he might repent, and that his repentance might be written as high in his poetry as, after another manner, Dante's in his. Finally, it was not supposed, in either of those circles, that Satan could be supposed to be Satan, and therefore a tempter; that Christ (in *Paradise Regained*) could be supposed to hold human culture a poor thing in comparison with the salvation of the soul; or that Samson, in the last great poem, could in fact reach a point of humility at which he could bring himself occasionally to protest like Job against the apparent dealings of God with the soul. (27-8)

So what Williams did was to propose that the issues the poems dealt with were real issues, and that Milton engaged with them on the territory which is at once literary, psychological and theological. He also made it clear that obedience, in *Paradise Lost* means 'the law of self-abnegation in love' (29) that Satan's self-love has landed him in hell, and 'Hell is always inaccurate' (30) and that Milton handles the very rare and difficult issue of showing the moment of choice, not only with Satan and Eve but also earlier in *Comus* and later in *Samson Agonistes*. (He does not discuss *Paradise Regained* in detail.) He also points to the delicacy and sensitivity that Milton can use and says: 'It is no doubt as a result of the long tradition of the organ-music of Milton that the shyness of some of his verse passes unnoticed' (32).

So this essay has generally been taken to be a considerable contribution to the debate about the nature of Milton's achievement. If Lewis is considered a somewhat partisan supporter I should like to mention Eliot, who singled out this essay for 'the author's warmth of feeling and his success in communicating it to the reader'<sup>1</sup>. An opposing view is offered by Leavis, who followed up Eliot's commendation and says:

Having taken the tip and looked at it I am obliged to report that I found it the merest attitudinizing and gesturing of a man who had nothing critically relevant to say<sup>2</sup>.

Before coming to *The Figure of Beatrice* I want to deal briefly with *The Figure of Arthur*. It would have been a popular introduction to the Arthurian romances. Its value in that capacity is hampered by the fact that it is unfinished and also that I think Williams appears not to have read, and may not have been able to read, the French sources in the original and so was reliant on translations and handbooks. As a popular introduction it has in any case long been superseded<sup>3</sup>. However, its value to us is that it shows the way Williams, as a creative writer, rather than as a critic, thought about the Arthurian romances and their actual and potential meaning. This is both of great value in itself and also an illumination on his own actual and proposed Arthurian poems, though one should remember that the poems we have were written first. But it does not really count as a work of literary criticism.

On coming to *The Figure of Beatrice* from reading the earlier criticism the first thing to strike one is the clarification in style. What was previously somewhat misty has come sharply into focus. There is nothing tentative; Williams's enthusiasm for his

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot: 'Milton II', in *On Poetry and Poets*. This lecture was originally delivered in 1947.

<sup>2</sup> Leavis: *The Common Pursuit*, 253. Williams makes an equally uncomplimentary reference to Leavis, though without naming him, in his essay: *The Image of the City* 27.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Cavendish: *King Arthur and the Grail* represents the kind of popular account which Williams seems to have intended. Alan Lupack: *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*, is more recent, more comprehensive and also includes a discussion of Williams.

author is, if anything, greater than before and more boldly expressed. The traces of archness and whimsicality in some of the earlier work have gone and been replaced by both a greater tenderness and a greater severity. The epigrams are no longer, as they sometimes were, merely verbal, but snap and bite and sting. Here are some of them<sup>1</sup>:

Hell is the cessation of work and the leaving of the images to be, without any function, merely themselves. (40)

The alternative to being with Love at the centre of the circle is to disorder the circumference for our own purposes. (48)

Poetry cannot possess charity; it cannot be humble. It is therefore justly presented in Virgil, who precisely lacked baptism. (111)

At the Franciscan moment the delay and the deceit have only begun; therefore their punishment – say, their choice – has in it all the good they chose as well as all the evil. (119)

The Beatrician moment is a moment of revelation and communicated conversion by means of a girl. (123)

The office and function is always to be honoured; much more those from whose functions we ourselves have lived and learnt to live; much more those whom we loved. (131)

Accuracy is fruitfulness – it is the first law of the spiritual life. (133)

The supreme achievement of hell is to make interchange impossible. (138)

Beatrice is an illumination by grace, but one could do without Beatrice; one cannot do without the City. (141)

The passage of Purgatory is a passage to justice; in sin the universe is always unfair. (148)

Beatrice, laughing and happy, is truth experienced in all ways. (153)

Nevertheless when I started on this reading of *The Figure of Beatrice*, I found myself wondering whether it was a work of literary criticism at all. A good deal of it is, rather, an exposition of the Way of Affirmation of Images – Williams's fullest and clearest such exposition – illustrated from the work of Dante. This is partly because he does not shirk exposition and paraphrase, but also because, unlike most critics, far from eschewing the theological implications of the work, he embraces them. In this way it is perhaps a riposte to Eliot, who in his book on Dante, first published in 1929, had said:

My point is that you cannot afford to *ignore* Dante's philosophical and theological beliefs, or to skip the passages which express them most clearly; but that on the other hand you are not called upon to believe them yourself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> References are to *The Figure of Beatrice*.

<sup>2</sup> Eliot: 'Dante' in *Selected Essays*, 257.

Williams, on the other hand, thought that in his beliefs what Dante thought was both important and true. Indeed, his reaction on first reading Dante, as he later told Dorothy Sayers, was to say ‘But this is *true*’<sup>1</sup>.

In fact Williams’s book took its place in a debate that was going on at the time that considered the nature of love in medieval literature and its influence on later Western culture. A full discussion of this would be another paper, if not a book, so I shall just briefly indicate the nature of the debate. It began with the Swedish Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren’s *Agape and Eros*<sup>2</sup>. This is a famous and influential book and Williams must have known of it though I am not aware of any evidence that he had read it. Nygren begins with a hard distinction between Eros, by which he means the human love for the divine, classically expressed by Plato, and the love which is a response of gratitude for the love of God, which is extolled in the New Testament and which he calls Agape. He found a synthesis of the two in what he calls *caritas* religion, which was developed by Augustine and expressed by Dante, in which the Eros trait of an upward tendency is completed with love regarded as a gift of Divine grace<sup>3</sup>. But Nygren does not so much as mention Beatrice, so Williams might well have felt stirred to assert her importance.

Next came Lewis’s *The Allegory of Love* of 1936, which promoted a view of courtly love that was widely influential<sup>4</sup>. Lewis considered that the appearance of romantic love in the poetry of the troubadours at the end of the eleventh century represented a real change in human sentiment and that its marks were humility, courtesy, adultery and the religion of love. Courtly love, in Lewis’s reconstruction, becomes a substitute or alternative religion. As is well known, Williams wrote to Lewis praising his book, saying: ‘I regard your book as practically the only one I have ever come across, since Dante, that shows the slightest understanding of what this very peculiar identity of love and religion means’<sup>5</sup>.

In 1938 John Burnaby’s *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St Augustine* included a robust rebuttal of Nygren and a different exposition of *caritas* in Augustine. He sees the dominant theme in Augustine’s conception of Christian love as *desiderium* – the ‘unsatisfied longing of the homesick heart’, which ‘corresponds to his view of the relation of this world to the next, of Christian life as a pilgrimage, and of happiness as something impossible of realisation in this life’<sup>6</sup>. Augustine’s understanding of the

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers: *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement*, 73.

<sup>2</sup> Swedish original 1930. The English translation came out in instalments between 1932 and 1939, with a complete edition not appearing until 1953.

<sup>3</sup> Nygren: *Agape and Eros*, 619-20.

<sup>4</sup> As is the way with scholarly fashions, it has now been called into question: Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 439, describes Lewis’s view as ‘seductive and profoundly misguided’.

<sup>5</sup> Williams: letter to Lewis, 12 March 1936, given in Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper: *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*, 137.

<sup>6</sup> Burnaby: *Amor Dei*, 96, 98.

love of God is not the ‘love wherewith God loves us, but that by which He makes us His lovers’<sup>1</sup>.

Next came Denis de Rougemont’s *Passion and Society* (French original 1939, English translation 1940), which promoted a view of passionate love as one that ‘looks forward to suffering, a death-desire, “the active passion of Night”.’ I am quoting here from Williams’s sympathetically written but very critical review, in which he goes on to say:

The great tradition of romantic love – renewed like the phoenix in every generation – is quite other than the desire of death. The passion-myth is a heresy of it: at moments a temptation; in moments of agony a very great temptation. The grand pattern of the real glory takes long to explore, and involves many opposite experiences, including boredom. It too, as in Dante, leads to politics and the City.<sup>2</sup>

This is practically a statement of the central concern of *The Figure of Beatrice*, so I think that de Rougemont’s book was also a stimulus to Williams. The year after writing his review he published the pamphlet *Religion and Love in Dante*, with the main book following two years later.

I should add here that the English edition of *Passion and Society* was published by Faber, presumably on Eliot’s initiative<sup>3</sup>, and Eliot was to go on to publish not only *The Figure of Beatrice* in 1943 but also Martin D’Arcy’s *The Mind and Heart of Love* in 1945, which effectively brought this debate, or at least this episode of it, to an end.

What was Williams’s contribution to this debate? Could courtly love be in any way reconciled with Christian love? The core of Williams’s resolution of this lies in his understanding of the significance of Dante’s apprehension of Beatrice as first expressed in the *Vita Nuova* and in particular in the canzone ‘Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore’ (‘Ladies that have intelligence in love’). Williams says about this:

What Dante sees is the glory of Beatrice as she is ‘in heaven’ – that is, as God chose her, unfallen, original; or (if better) redeemed; but at least, either way, celestial. What he sees is something real. It is not ‘realer’ than the actual Beatrice who, no doubt, had many serious faults, but it is as real. Both Beatrices are aspects of the one Beatrice. The revealed virtues are real; so is the celestial beauty. (27)<sup>4</sup>

He goes on:

Such a perfection is implicit in every human being, and (had we eyes to see) would be explicit there. The Christian religion declares as much. It is certain that many lovers have seen many ladies as Dante saw Beatrice. Dante’s great gift to us was not the vision but the ratification, by his style, of the validity of the vision. Where we ignorantly worship, there he defined<sup>5</sup>. (47-8)

<sup>1</sup> Augustine: *De Spiritu et Littera* 56, cit. Burnaby, 99.

<sup>2</sup> *Image of the City*, 161. Note the echo of Eliot from the book which was so much more warmly received than *The English Poetic Mind, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 106: ‘the boredom, and the horror, and the glory’.

<sup>3</sup> The translator was Montgomery Belgion, who was a frequent collaborator with Eliot.

<sup>4</sup> With this cf. Orsino: ‘Here comes the Countess; now heaven walks on earth’, *Twelfth Night*, V.1.91.

<sup>5</sup> Note the echo of Acts 17: 23: ‘Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you’.

To love is to love and serve the function for which the loved being was created, whatever that may mean or involve; this is the definition of the Way. (51)

The rest of the book, as indeed of Dante's life and work, can be seen as the working out of the consequences of accepting this vision as a true vision, that is as a revelation. If you do not accept this as at least possible, or if you do not accept Williams's interpretation, then the book is not going to mean much to you; Foster and Boyde, for example, in their commentary on this canzone say sternly:

Dante is still far from being the fairly careful theologian he later became, He is a young poet working rather insecurely on the borderlines between orthodox Christianity and the 'religion' of courtly love.<sup>1</sup>

However, if you do follow Williams, then *The Figure of Beatrice* becomes, as Williams intended, a guide to the Affirmative Way, and the best exposition of his Romantic Theology. It is one of those commentaries which is itself an original contribution, such as, to take examples Williams would have known, John Livingston Lowes' study of Coleridge's sources, *The Road to Xanadu*, or Karl Barth's commentary on the *Epistle to the Romans*.

But our concern is with literary criticism, and indeed there is a good deal of literary criticism in *The Figure of Beatrice*. I shall take three examples showing different kinds of approach.

Firstly, consider his account of the dark wood at the opening of the *Inferno*:

The image of a wood has appeared often enough in English verse. It has indeed appeared so often that it has gathered a good deal of verse into itself; so that it has become a great forest where, with long leagues of changing green between them, strange episodes of high poetry have place. Thus in one part there are the lovers of a midsummer night, or by day a duke and his followers, and in another men behind branches so that the wood seems moving, and in another a girl separated from her two lordly young brothers, and in another a poet listening to a nightingale but rather dreaming richly of the grand art than there exploring it, and there are other inhabitants, belonging even more closely to the wood, dryads, fairies, an enchanter's rout. The forest itself has different names in different tongues Westermain, Arden, Birnam, Broceliande; and in places there are separate trees named, such as that on the outskirts against which a young Northern poet saw a spectral wanderer leaning, or, in the unexplored centre of which only rumours reach even poetry, Igdrasil of one myth, or the Trees of Knowledge and Life of another-So that indeed the whole earth seems to become this one enormous forest, and our longest and most stable civilizations are only clearings in the midst of it. (107)

This is an exposition of the *topos* or archetype of the forest, a fine early example of myth-criticism, a passage that might have strayed out of the pages of Maud Bodkin or Northrop Frye<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenelm Foster and Patrick Boyde: *Dante's Lyric Poetry*, II, 100. I should, however, add that Foster's developed view was that Dante's poetry was that it was 'so complete an expression of a trans-sexual idea of love'. The essay from which this is taken is much closer to Williams: Foster, 'Dante and Eros', in *The Two Dantes and other studies*, 37.

<sup>2</sup> In fact a closer parallel is Chapter Two, 'Fabulous Forests' in Alexander Porteous: *The Forest*. However, Porteous does not mention any Shakespearean connections and I think Williams wrote independently.

Then let us take the issue of Virgil's exclusion from heaven, which has always been controversial. This is a matter which Williams had already treated, in the poem 'Taliessin on the death of Virgil' in *Taliessin through Logres*. This is his discussion in sober prose:

This is a convenient place to say something of the recurrent question of Virgil being shut out of heaven. It must, I think, be admitted that that exclusion does, to our differently thinking minds, a little jar - in spite of our Lord's comment on St. John the Precursor. We are intensely conscious of the personal Virgil. It should however be recognized that, so far from Dante being compelled against his poetic will to keep Virgil theologically out of heaven, Dante as a poet simply could not afford to let him in. The poetry is not in the least reluctantly acceding to a theological doctrine; it is taking every advantage of the doctrine; in a sense, we may say that, if the doctrine had not been there for Dante, then Dante would have had to invent it. To think otherwise is to miss the real point of Virgil. The figure of Beatrice alone is enough to show that Dante set no limit to the great orderly development of natural things; the eyes of Beatrice are always human. But as there is an infinite development, so there must also be an infinite division. 'This also is thou, neither is this Thou.' Neither the Affirmations nor the Rejections are allowed to forget either half of that maxim. Virgil, the image of so much, is also the image of the necessary separation - or at least willingness towards separation - from the dearest thing. The consciousness of the sighs which trouble the air of Limbo is the consciousness of our sighs when we are expected to abandon all - for ever; and what seems to us the terrible phrase of Beatrice when she says to Virgil himself 'I am made such that your misery does not touch me' (II, 92) means a division which has to be endured. But this necessary Rejection must here be justified in its particulars. Virgil is poetry, and the greatest of European poets knew the limitation of poetry. Poetry may be as 'spiritual' as its rash devotees are in the habit of calling it. In so far as it is 'spiritual', it is of the nature of those visions and locutions from which the wise are warned to be detached. Poetry cannot possess charity; it cannot be humble. It is therefore justly presented in Virgil, who precisely lacked baptism; that is, by the theological decision of the time, the capacity for infinite charity and infinite humility.' So of Virgil as philosophy, and Virgil as human learning; nay, of Virgil as the Institution itself. It is a part of the poem that Virgil should lack grace; did he not, he would be too like Beatrice herself. The *Aeneid* has *pietas* and not *caritas*; so must its author have here. (111-2)

This characteristically shows Williams seeing the character Virgil as primarily there to serve a function and not the other way round. This is one example of the principle Williams takes from Dante's *de Monarchia*, which he also uses as the epigraph to *Taliessin through Logres*. In his translation it reads:

The proper operation (working or function) is not in existence for the sake of the being, but the being for the sake of the operation. (40)

My final example is one in which Williams demonstrates his skill in verbal analysis. This is of a passage in *Paradiso*. Dante is perplexed how, if the crucifixion was just vengeance on human sin, how could it be justly avenged. Beatrice says:

Secondo mio infallibile avviso,  
come giusta vendetta giustamente  
vengiata fosse, t'ha in pensier miso - (VII. 19-21).

Here is Williams's discussion:

'According to my infallible advisement, how a just vendetta is justly avenged, hath sent thee into thought.' The first line is the test. Most of the English translations load Beatrice's voice with some such phrase as 'according to my unerring intelligence'. On the other hand, they make her say it (since Dante did) 'with such a smile as would make a man happy though in the fire'. It follows that, if she is to show such a rich and happy delight while she speaks, it must be vital in the words; she must be enjoying them and what they mean. So, of course, she is; she is enjoying - she is amused and delighted at - this astonishing fact of her infallible knowledge. This delight the reader in general misses, so that for him

she is merely portentous. But she is not portentous, any more than the alliterations and verbal variations in the other lines are portentous. She and they are joyous. God has settled it like this; it is not her doing; ascribed to the only Omnipotence be all the glory. She is not 'putting it over' Dante, or only as much as any happy femininity would, in those celestial conditions, put it over a less quick masculinity. This union of laughter and knowledge, modesty and magnificence, humility and infallibility, may be difficult to imagine. The alternative is a cultured female psychiatrist, with an officially spiritual smile. It will not serve. Beatrice is saying - any lover to any lover - 'I know what you are thinking', only (transhumanized) she is right. The phrase is imparadised by joy; we have to learn the joy by the phrase. (201)

Where there is so much to admire, it seems churlish to find fault. However, I do have a reservation: I do not think that the comparison Williams intermittently uses between Dante and Wordsworth, and specifically *The Prelude*, achieves what he wants it to. I understand that he wanted the nearest thing to an English equivalent for poetry-loving readers who wanted to have something more familiar they could compare Dante with. The trouble is that whenever he quotes Wordsworth in this book it seems a distraction rather than an illumination, and I find myself hurrying on to get back to the main argument, something I do not want to do when I read Wordsworth for his own sake. But who else could Williams have chosen? Milton would not do, because the comparison then becomes a competition and one which Milton loses<sup>1</sup>. If Shelley had lived, *The Triumph of Life* might have provided a suitable comparison, but it is unfinished<sup>2</sup>. The only romantic poet other than Wordsworth who lived long enough and continued writing visionary works was Blake, and Blake's longer poems are much more obscure than Dante. On the other hand, Williams did not live to write his projected book on Wordsworth, *The Figure of Power*<sup>3</sup>, so these passages are perhaps valuable in giving us an idea of what that might have been like.

What then do we make of *The Figure of Beatrice*? Alice Mary Hadfield says 'For many readers it is Charles's greatest work' or at least 'the greatest of his prose works'<sup>4</sup>. Glen Cavaliero is more measured: after pointing out the book's dual nature as both expository and theological he says:

This dual nature is typical of Williams's approach, but, while it accounts for the book's enthusiasm and insight, it renders it at times didactic and oracular. Although he deprecates the fault, the author appears to be rewriting his subject's work, and the result is a feeling of imaginative oppression.<sup>5</sup>

But the greatest influence the book has had was of course on Dorothy Sayers. She read it, as she records, 'not because it was about Dante, but because it was by Charles

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<sup>1</sup> There is, however, a charming passage where Williams translates a line of Dante by a line of Milton: *Figure of Beatrice*, 110.

<sup>2</sup> Both Eliot and Lewis had drawn attention to Shelley's Dantesque qualities, particularly in this poem. See T. S. Eliot: *Selected Essays*, 264 and C. S. Lewis, 'Shelley, Dryden and Mr Eliot', first published 1939 and so available to Williams, collected in *Selected Literary Essays*; Eliot later gave a fuller encomium in 'What Dante means to me', a 1950 lecture collected in *To Criticize the Critic*.

<sup>3</sup> See Ridler in *Image of the City*, 197.

<sup>4</sup> Hadfield: *Exploration*, 211.

<sup>5</sup> Glen Cavaliero: *Charles Williams: Poet of Theology*, 151-2.



Williams'<sup>1</sup>, and it started her on her engagement with Dante which led her to produce her translation for the Penguin Classics series as well as a number of essays. On the other hand the book has not been taken on by professional Dantists; even Barbara Reynolds' recent study<sup>2</sup> does not mention it.

I should say at this point that I am unable to consider this book objectively. I came to it through reading Dante in Dorothy Sayers' translation and, as a consequence, I am quite unable to regard it simply as an interpretation of Dante since I see it rather as the last word of truth on much of what Williams considers. This is not to say that it is without minor and incidental flaws, but these disappear in the light of the radiance of the book as a whole.

In Canto 25 Dante refers to his poem as a 'poema sacro', a sacred poem, and it has been suggested<sup>3</sup> that he invited his readers to see it as a work equivalent to scripture in its authority. This suggestion does not come from Williams, but it is completely in keeping with the way that he thought, not only about Dante, but about all poetry: it was for him a secondary revelation, whose authority was no different and ultimately no less than that of scripture. Whether this takes too low a view of revelation, too high a view of poetic authority, or whether readers of poetry are inclined to grant this claim is a question for another day.

I want to finish this consideration of Williams's literary criticism by suggesting some lines of further enquiry. I think it would be worth pulling together and expounding his ideas on Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth and possibly also Coventry Patmore, who influenced him both as a poet and in his Romantic Theology. The mutually respectful but rather wary relationship that Williams had with Eliot would also be worth exploring. Even more worthwhile, but very difficult, would be a presentation of Williams's poetics, the task which Mary McDermot Shideler shied from. I think Dorothy Sayers could have done it, and she has given pointers in some of her essays. Meanwhile I commend this body of work to you, which, despite its flaws, provides a consideration of poetry mainly English which is both passionate and illuminating.

Stephen Barber

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers: ". . . And telling you a story . . ." in *Further Papers on Dante*, 1. See also Barbara Reynolds: *The Passionate Intellect*.

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