

**Glen Cavaliero, *Charles Williams: Poet of Theology*,
Review by Dimitri Phillips
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Glen Cavaliero, *Charles Williams: Poet of Theology*, Eugene, OR:
Wipf & Stock, 2007. 199 pp. ISBN 9781556353734.

Despite clear personal admiration for his subject matter, the Cambridge author of *Charles Williams: Poet of Theology* has written a professional literary critical treatise, rather than a study in the “personal, expository and receptive manner” (22) that characterizes its self-educated subject’s similar work. Although it disclaims comprehensiveness, the work (a classic recently reissued by Wipf & Stock) contains, in fewer than two hundred pages, a brief biography of Charles Williams, followed by chapters treating his early poetry, criticism, biographies and plays, novels, Arthurian poems, and theology, and finally a distended conclusion. An appendix on the symbolism of Williams, Blake, and George MacDonald rounds out the volume. Replete with references to Williams’ own works as well as those of his major and minor predecessors and contemporaries, the study testifies to Cavaliero’s broad literary expertise. Three indices, one general, one for special subjects, and one of Williams’ works, render this book a particularly useful tool for anyone tracing the evolution of Williams’ work and thought.

In the perfunctory opening chapter on Williams’ life, Cavaliero allows himself a liberal, rather unrestrained voice that approaches its subject with a casual, occasionally overly familiar, perspective. This is partly a result of brevity in expression, and therefore assessment, so that, e.g., when Cavaliero writes of Williams, “His next five books ... were published by the Oxford University Press, and sold badly” (3), the final phrase, which in many arguments might represent plain fact, in this case, outside any context or clarification, remains an isolated and gratuitous remark couched in nonspecific but generally pejorative diction. Moreover, Cavaliero employs a rhetoric punctuated by pointed, often prodding questions (“Michal was to be the inspiration of his first book of poems ... The inspiration or the occasion?” (2)), meiotic omissions (“This was no ordinary personal crisis. Williams never left his wife; nor, apparently, was their relationship destroyed” (5)), interpretive *correctio* and *restrictio* (“from the start of his career he was to create a world out of material limitation. Limitation - and possibly frustration” (2)), and other figures which do not usually appear in strictly objective, impersonal biographies. However, the enigmatic overall effect contrasts with the majority of critics, whose assessments of Williams typically remain rather one-sided. The author

also includes excerpts from early biographers, comments from colleagues, and remarks from friends, e.g. Gerard Manley Hopkins' "[by] sheer force of love and enthusiasm he created about him an atmosphere that must be unique in the history of business houses" (3). Cavaliero balances his presentation by admitting more ambivalent appraisals, such as that of Lois Lang-Sims: "... He was totally identified with his own myth" (4), which prefigures but fails fully to justify Cavaliero's own conjectured equation of Simon the Clerk in *All Hallows' Eve*, whom he has already claimed to be modeled on Simon Magus, with "Williams's own image of what his spiritual authority over others could become" (92). All in all, for anyone unfamiliar with Williams' life, this succinct summary is inadequate even as background to a literary study, especially when the reader arrives at remarks like Cavaliero's concluding, "Williams's influence ... would seem to have been greater among the poets, and that more on a personal level than on a literary level" (173).

Entering the crux of the critique, Cavaliero shows more caution. Escaping the urge to dismiss William's early poetry for its roughness, he instead calls it-perhaps for that very reason-"a quarry for ideas ... which gives one the clue to much that he wrote later" (9), and proceeds with prudence: "It is not easy to determine the perspective from which these poems should be read" (5). The jumbled, jig-saw presentation ensuing could therefore be considered an unusual merit, through which the reader's sense and sensitivities are stimulated to better receive the macroscopic investigation of diverse concepts and themes running into Williams' later work. Thus, the next two chapters, covering great portions of his criticism, biographical writing, plays, and all of his novels, though retaining a little of this looseness, benefit from some more structure. Cavaliero utilizes his impressively pervasive literary knowledge to discuss innumerable authors and individual works, often digressing into incisive miniature expositions, valuable in themselves, with which to compare and contrast Williams' own; this approach assists an audience already well versed in Williams' work, though it does not readily support novices in either Williams or English literature, who may find of the author as he does of his subject, "At his worst ... Williams is pretentious and dubiously comprehensible" (37). The density of references, allusions and sheer literary data that constitute the myriad bones of this skeleton study sometimes denies even the discerning reader the substantial flesh tantalizingly hinted at in admittedly profound insights such as those about the central concepts of 'the Celian moment' and 'the Impossibility': "under these two terms Williams is mythologizing what are usually called ambiguity and irony" (29). However, Cavaliero generally commits considerable attention and weight where it is due, as in the quite comprehensive treatments of Williams' last, and probably best, novels, *Descent into Hell* and *All Hallows' Eve*. The following chapter, on the

Arthurian poems, proves the exception both to Cavaliero's appropriate attentiveness and, conversely, to the slight slackness in structure still evident even in individual expositions of the novels: stating that "Taliessin through Logres is not a narrative poem" (99), he proceeds in a sequential presentation of points based more on the plot than on the themes, leaving one to wonder if he took to heart Williams' admonition (expressed in Cavaliero's own words), "Poetry and ideas are living realities, as dangerous to play with as the Lion which breaks into the world of men in a Hertfordshire garden" (75). Ultimately, unlike his treatment of the earlier works, the author accomplishes an only satisfactory description of what may (to judge by preoccupation alone) have been for Williams what the grand tapestry of the *Silmarillion* was for Tolkien.

The heart of Cavaliero's critical study, covering the matured seed at the core of Williams' work, namely his theology, strikes a welcome balance of presentation, in which the references and allusions are always pertinent and rarely overburden the work under consideration, while the profoundest elements are more often fleshed out, as in the case of the 'superfluity of matter' (141) and 'the Way of Affirmation' (139-140). Cavaliero ties together most of Williams' various themes in this latter idea (157), based on Williams' belief that "all experience is to be gathered in" (*The Descent of the Dove*, p. 41, as cited in Cavaliero, 140), placing much of the remaining emphasis on what Williams himself, borrowing from ancient theology, called 'co-inherence', which Cavaliero discovers developing in and helping shape his subject's output from the outset. Despite the dereliction in his presentation of the Williams who wrote, e.g., the poignantly personal *The Forgiveness of Sins*, and further deficiencies in theology proper-of the Fathers, Doctors, and other great thinkers of the church, Cavaliero really only refers, and that rather minimally, to Augustine, Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Julian of Norwich and Kierkegaard-Cavaliero succeeds, or at least comes close to succeeding, in conveying his critical reading of Charles Williams as a "poet of theology", although he perhaps inadvertently raises a potential contention within his conclusion by endorsing C.S. Lewis' description of Williams "as a romantic theologian ... one who is theological about romance, not one who is romantic about theology" (172).

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