

**Gavin Ashenden, *Charles Williams: Alchemy and Integration*,  
Review by Glen Cavaliero  
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*Charles Williams: Alchemy and Integration.* By Gavin Ashenden.  
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87338-781-3.

Charles Williams' close involvement with occult studies has been a cause of some concern among his admirers; and indeed his membership of A.E. Waite's Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, between 1917 and the late 1920's, presents a challenge to those who would vindicate his Catholic orthodoxy. Gavin Ashenden embraces that challenge by exploring 'both the history that lay behind the myths and metaphysics Williams was to make his own, and the hermetic culture that influenced him' (p. vii). He contends that Williams was deliberately aiming at a synthesis between apophatic or 'negative' discourse and an 'affirmative' ideology that emphasises the indwelling presence of God in the material order. His purpose was to make use of alchemical insights as an antidote to a dualism to which he was temperamentally and intellectually opposed and to which traditional Christian orthodoxy was always liable. As Dr Ashenden observes, it was a journey Williams made 'from the gravitational pull of the Waitean hermetic underworld to a more intellectually evolved and poetically polished use of hermetic culture'. He points out that it was by this means that Williams was to create 'a mythical framework that enabled him to create a culture in which co-inherence, exchange, and the interpenetration of spirit and matter could flourish without any hint of dualism' (p. 183). That purpose was to be fulfilled in his mature Arthurian verse.

Williams was always first and foremost a poet. Far from being a systematic or polemical apologist he was a meditative one, whose writings contemplate and comment upon the spiritual and imaginative propositions codified in theological formularies. These he explored in true hermetic style, both literary and methodological, assuming a correspondence between the categories of matter and of spirit. His occasionally gnomic prose style derived in part from his hermetic studies, most evidently in his first theological publication, *He Came Down from Heaven* (1938), which expounds the Christian creeds and scriptures rather as though they were themselves hermetic texts, a method highly stimulating to those on his imaginative wavelength but potentially baffling to the uninitiated.

Dr Ashenden's three opening chapters provide a valuable exposition of the historic and philosophical background to alchemical hermeticism and the Jewish Q'abalah, while the five that follow it oscillate between accounts of Williams' theological

ideas and those of such writers as W.B. Yeats, Coventry Patmore and the 17th-century alchemist Thomas Vaughan; these are interlaced with discussions of certain specific texts in Williams' *oeuvre*, notably the novels *Shadows of Ecstasy*, *Descent into Hell*, and *All Hallows' Eve*, and also his generally neglected study *Witchcraft*, where useful points are made as to the distinguishing elements in the goetic, the theurgical and the hermetic or wisdom traditions; these are followed by a discussion of the imagery in the Taliessin poems. The problem with reading this portion of the book lies in determining in which direction we are supposed to be going: the alternation of theory and exposition is in places difficult to follow. Information about Williams' sources gets swamped in a virtual re-writing of what he has to say (always a temptation for his expositors), while the footnotes are so extensive and full of matter that one seems to be reading two books simultaneously.

Dr Ashenden mentions, but does not elaborate upon, the influence on Williams of Duns Scotus' teaching that the Incarnation is itself the reason for the created order, a doctrine which is at the heart of his theological outlook. For him, Creation and Redemption constitute a single reality: the Incarnation is no mere consequence of the Fall. His presentation of the Atonement is thus spatial as much as chronological, and there is little mention in his writings of Protestant soteriology, for salvation in the hermetic tradition is a matter of conformity with the operative laws of the Divine Will rather than the establishing of a relation to a personal Saviour. In this connection the impact of Kierkegaard on Williams' development is important. It has recently been examined in Stephen Dunning's *The Crisis and the Quest* (2000), a book of which Gavin Ashenden would seem to be unaware: there is no mention of it in the bibliography, although it traces Williams' evolution from a belief in spiritual transmutation into an acceptance of a transfigured existence through the medium of divine grace—a progress which *Alchemy and Integration* charts from rather different premises.

This book's final chapter concerns Williams' attempt to reconcile hermetic theory with actuality as it affected a crisis in his private life. It describes the painful situation that arose in his marriage when he fell in love with a woman colleague at the Oxford University Press - a love which was not reciprocated in kind and which his religious convictions forbade him to attempt to consummate. His efforts to achieve a balance, not to say unification, of opposites may have energised his imaginative and literary gifts; but it played havoc with his emotions. In this connection one has to remember that Williams had a constitutional tendency to depression, one to which he responded through the healing scepticism of what he called 'The Quality of Disbelief'. Not least of his strengths as a religious apologist

is the wry sophisticated humour that may well have preserved his sanity as much as did any determination to reconcile irreconcilables.

Dr Ashenden makes extensive use in this chapter of the letters Williams wrote to his beloved 'Celia', together with the poems he wrote for her. The interest of these is largely psychological; his inability to control the situation exposes the inadequacy of the kind of spiritual *gnosis* he had imbibed from his hermetic studies. At the human level he was in a situation which was to be resolved as much by circumstance and nervous exhaustion as by any spiritual mastery; while the incoherence of his letters and the ineptitude of many of his poems are in painful contrast with the wit and intellectual rigour of his theological writings and the linguistic energy of his mature Arthurian verse. This final chapter really belongs to Williams' biography, and in the context of the present book it only serves to distract from the thrust of the author's argument.

*Alchemy and Integration* has clearly been a long time in the making, and although most handsomely produced it shows signs of cuts and alterations, matters made more confusing not only by some slipshod copy-editing but, I would guess, by resort to the treacherous facilities of a computer: how else explain the incorporating into the body of the text on p. 70, without attribution or quotation marks, whole phrases from a fellow critic's book? There are a number of misquotations from Williams himself which an attentive reader will readily spot; but one from his wife, in a letter to myself, ought in justice to be corrected. Commenting on the 'Celia' affair, she refers to 'Charles' seven year itch with the virgin tart', but instead of 'the', the author prints 'that'. The slip is easily made, but there is a world of difference between a definite article that conveys the sense of a cult being caustically observed from the outside, and the merely abusive rancour of 'that'. The question of tone is all-important here.

*Alchemy and Integration* is a book that all Charles Williams' admirers will benefit from reading. It opens up many questions as to his intentions and achievement, and there is much in it to ponder. The fifth chapter, on 'Alchemy and Metanarrative', is especially rewarding. Dr Ashenden's account of the four of Williams' novels that he does discuss at length is so enlightening that one feels the lack of any detailed exposition of the other three, especially where their hermetic symbolism is concerned. This author is at his best when he has particular texts on which to focus as he grapples with the various problematic aspects of their interpretation. His approach is blessedly free from reverential pseudo-piety and restrictive moralising. He can also raise a smile, as when he remarks of St Augustine that he was 'distinctly hampered by the burden of his carrying the suppressed baggage of the ghost of Mani

after his long period as a disciple' (p. 59). That might have come from the author of *The Descent of the Dove*.

Charles Williams was to develop from being a secret hermeticist into a humorous and companionable spiritual exemplar, and a man whom the friends who knew him greatly loved. He is indeed the kind of complex human being of whom no single account can hope to be exhaustive; but *Alchemy and Integration* does enable one to appreciate dimensions of his experience and thought of which previous commentators had been insufficiently aware. For such a contribution to understanding, Williams' admirers can be grateful to Gavin Ashenden for the time and thought he has devoted to this particular undertaking.

Glen Cavaliero