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Review of The Celian Moment and Other Essays

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opposed to thinking about it by stepping outside of immediate experience), inventing experiences (stories) that we personally have never lived and even magical, fantastical experiences that no one has ever lived, as well as a longing for the transcendent. These claims center the imagination as the faculty that creates, enjoys, and finds meaning in myth. Citing Owen Barfield's *Poetic Diction*, Starr also describes myth as the union of thinking and experiencing simultaneously, the type of "mythic knowing" that belonged to humans in Eden and will belong to them again in heaven (122). "The agent of this commingling in the human mind—the place within which myth can enter with immediate, intuitive understanding—is the imagination" (123). There is much, much more in this chapter, such as imagination and myth's relation to education, language, faith, love, scriptural interpretation as well as the limits of imagination itself—all of it good.

Ultimately, Starr's subtitle is "Lewis on Why Myth Matters," not "What Myth Is"; nevertheless, a more direct, less artficed approach to the topic would have benefited the discussion. Still, this is an important book on the subject of Lewis and myth.

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Charles Williams, *The Celian Moment and Other Essays*, ed. by Stephen Barber (Carterton, West Oxfordshire: The Greystones Press, 2017). xxvii + 127 pages. \$17.43. ISBN 9781911122111.

This new collection of essays and other occasional pieces by Charles Williams is essential reading for the serious scholar of his work. Thanks are due to Stephen Barber for gathering and editing the ten short texts in this nicely-designed volume. *The Celian Moment and Other Essays* is one of the first books published by The Greystones Press, founded by Barber and his wife, novelist Mary Hoffman. Barber is a Williams scholar and served as treasurer of the Charles Williams Society. His expertise appears in the apt epigraphs about Williams as literary critic and in the introduction, the selection and arrangement of the essays, and the helpful footnotes.

Williams's holistic, systematizing mind transcended boundaries of genre and of orthodoxy; Barber captures this unifying sense in his introduction as he surveys the volume's themes. While the pieces comment on Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, and others, they are perhaps more interesting as commentaries on Williams's own writing, as they explore his quintessential themes of romantic theology, the crisis of schism, and geometrical patterns in poetry. To read this little book, then, is to learn more about what Williams was attempting in his own poetry, plays, and novels, as well as in his theological works and his other literary criticism. The selections are quite varied in length and purpose: there are five book introductions, a pamphlet, an essay that may have been intended as part of a longer work, two book reviews, and a political article.

Barber contextualizes each piece, tactfully providing the minimum information necessary to understand the title's reference to "Celia"—which was Williams's nickname for Phyllis Jones, "his second love" (x). Barber characterizes their love as a "long, tormented and unconsummated relationship," referring the reader to Grevel Lindop's biography, *Charles Williams: The Third Inkling*, for more information (x). Barber is not playing to prurient curiosity here because Williams's love for Jones reverberates through all of these pieces, integral as it was to his interwoven literary and theological theories.

Indeed, if there is one thread running through the ten disparate pieces in *The Celian Moment*, it is Williams's signature idea that romantic love—specifically sexual desire—is a revelation of the Divine. This is an odd concept for works that are advertised as literary criticism, but to Williams, literature was primarily an exploration of that revelation. Hence the title. "The Celian Moment," according to the eponymous essay, 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. It is the moment of passion. . ." (20). This definition is far from clear; some familiarity with Williams's other works can help illuminate it. In *Outlines of Romantic Theology* (written around 1924 but published posthumously), he defined "romantic theology" as the idea that "sexual love between and man and a woman . . . is capable of being assumed into sacramental and transcendental heights" (7, 9). In *The Figure of Beatrice*, his final statement on the matter, he writes about love as an

image or symbol that can bring the lover to Christ. In short, “the Celian moment” is the first stage of romantic love, when the beloved appears as if unfallen or glorified. The history of poetry seen through this lens is an attempt to communicate revelations of this type appearing via human love, nature, or visions of orderly civilizations.

Romantic theology is, of course, not the only theme throughout these pieces, and it is ostensibly only the topic of two (“The Celian Moment” and “Religion and Love in Dante”). Yet it is related to the others by means of the *Via Affirmativa*. That Way animates the approach to poetry in “The Office of Criticism.” Each of the poets William considers are ceremonious; their verse has a high style, driven by strong rhythms and musical consonance that lift it above ordinary speech. This, too, is an affirmation that could reveal the Divine. These authors also confront negation, in the form of Death in “Shakespeare’s *Henry V*” and in the form of Despair in “Gerard Manley Hopkins.” Yeats sees visions of an orderly universe patterned on the human form; Eliot takes the negative way and dwells in the dark night of the soul. Even the final essay in the collection—the only political work, a commentary on the Russian revolution—uses coinherence and the Way of Exchange to offer hope in the worst crisis of negation: poverty. According to Williams, poverty (particularly hunger) is “the worst experience of man” besides “extreme physical pain”; “broken hearts are nothing to it” (123). As someone who had endured all three of these agonies, he was qualified to judge. But even this article ends in hope: the hope that Europe might “be noble, fed, and free, even yet” (127).

The Celian Moment is an important companion to the larger essay collection *The Image of the City* edited by Anne Ridler in 1958. It does have a few flaws. There are numerous typographical errors throughout, such as missing spaces, misspellings, and word-substitutions (including the frequent ‘he’ for ‘be’). The first essay, “The Office of Criticism,” was published under Phyllis Jones’s name, but Barber claims that it “bear[s] all the marks of Williams and [is] consistent with the rest of his work” (ix). Barber is most likely correct—the diction and syntax are characteristic of Williams’s distinctive style; however, detailed discussion would have helped support the editor’s confidence that this piece is certainly by Williams. More significantly, the piece entitled “Gerard Manley Hopkins” omits the first page of the 1930 introduction that it reproduces, in which Williams

discusses the reason for this edition and the arrangement of poems in it. A footnote would have been useful to explain this omission.

These matters are insignificant, however, compared to this book's valuable contribution to Williams studies. One hopes that in the near future there will be many volumes of the "Complete" works—*The Complete Poems*, *The Complete Plays*, *The Complete Essays*, and so forth—but until then, this slim collection of short prose essays is an essential appendix to *The Image of the City*, packed with important insights into Williams's distinctive ideas on many subjects.

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