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BREAKING THE CODE

The Image of the City. By Charles Williams. Essays selected by Anne Ridler with a Critical Introduction. (O.U.P., 25s.)

Mrs. Ridler, in her introduction, has a good deal to say about Williams's poetry, and it is clear that a large part of her claim for him rests on it. But the passages quoted only confirm one's previous impression of the author of *Taliessin through Logres*. Williams's verse is a solemn game, or rote, or ritual. In order to be interested in it, you have to share Williams's own kind of interest in it: he has nothing else to offer. Mrs. Ridler, and Williams himself (in various notes reprinted here), offer some assistance in breaking the code, but the antecedent critical question—why bother?—goes begging.

Williams in prose is less pretentious and boring than in his poetry, and these reprinted essays and reviews show that he was a clever man, with something to say. But they also show some of the faults which make his verse tedious and his fiction unpleasant. They have often an air of patronising superiority, a flavour of the *chappelle*. Thus we find him writing of D. H. Lawrence, 'he was a man, he was a writer, he might have been a leader—had he any idea of precisely where to lead or exactly how, *had he heard of the way Affirmation of Images*' (italics mine). A little later he speaks of Lawrence, in a matter-of-course way, as 'ignorant of Christianity.' This tone is displeasing, especially when associated with Christianity; it is too much the tone of one who is cosily 'inside,' the tone of this comment on the Fourth Gospel: 'it could always be used as a blanket through which the heavenly John cried to the not-nearly-so-heavenly Paul, busily engaged on his work of complicating the simple spiritual Gospel, "Hold ! Hold!" Not that Paul did.' The knowingness of that last phrase is representative. The trouble with Williams is that he permitted his cleverness to subserve, and his piety to consecrate, too many immaturities. There are signs that he was aware of this, for example that tell-tale sentence quoted by Mrs. Ridler from *He came down from Heaven* : the devil, if he is a fact, has been an indulgence.' This fairly

suggests something of the nature of Williams's own interest in Evil. Perhaps his games with diablerie, his flirtation with the Order of the Golden Dawn and the like, may be dismissed as harmless foibles. Many greater writers have played with such things; and, in a world full of real and terrible evil, perhaps they don't matter much. But they are too closely intertwined with Williams's better preoccupations to be disregarded by a critic who takes him seriously. And they must have a painful effect on the reader who can see that Williams was not only a charming person but a good man. How could someone with the standards Williams set himself have gone anywhere near the ethos of **Aleister Crowley**?

Some of the solemn nonsense Williams commits himself to may be ascribed to his curious sense of humour, which seems to go on and off at precisely the wrong places. But so equivocal is the habit of his irony that we often cannot make out whether or not he knows he is being absurd. 'Those poor despised things, the buttocks . . . are at the bottom of the sober dignity of judges; the grace of a throned woman; the hierarchical session of the Pope himself reposes upon them: into even greater images and phrases we need not now go.' Mrs. Ridler at one point compares Williams with Montaigne. I wish I could feel that what he meant there was the same as what Montaigne meant when he reminds us, '*au plus eslevé throne du monde ne sommes assis que sus nostre cul.*'

A large part of this volume is literary criticism. As a critic Williams has similar merits and defects to those of G. K. Chesterton, whose influence is seen clearly in several of the essays. Intelligent and sometimes cogent arguments are interrupted by attitude-striking and paradoxical antics. Williams's jokes dissipate attention instead of concentrating it. Christians should think deeply before recommending, as healthy and morally improving, a writer who so often compels the conviction that he is not really in earnest, not really about the matter in hand.

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