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CHARLES WILLIAMS AS A SHAKESPEAREAN CRITIC IN THE AGE OF MODERNISM

Abstract: Charles Williams, known as novelist, poet, and member of the inter-war 'Inklings' circle of writers, also contributed to Modernist critical debate, particularly in his writings on Shakespeare. He responded distinctively to contemporary critical emphases on 'Elizabethan theatrical convention' and aesthetic and poetic autonomy. He re-asserted, against contemporary tendencies, the salience in Shakespearean drama of individual choice and sequential action. Stressing the power of Shakespearean poetry to register ambiguity and to embody divided consciousness, like William Empson, he also sought to balance claims about 'character' with an emphasis on the poetic modes and energies whereby character and self-division come into existence. Williams found in Shakespeare's oeuvre a development towards a sense, first fully present in *Troilus and Cressida*, of 'division in the nature of things.' Such division, debated but philosophically unresolved in several plays, is expressed with unique force in tragic poetry which embodies the complex co-presence of disorientation, solitude, and a will to remedial but destructive action. Williams's discussions here powerfully rework Aristotelean stipulations about the nature of tragedy in general. He saw a Shakespearean resolution of, or escape from, tragedy in the late Romances, and in the prelude to them, *Antony and Cleopatra*, where 'division' was reworked in terms of a poetic acceptance and enjoyment of the simultaneous multiplicity, and the possibilities for forgiveness, within human relationships.

Key words: poetry, division, change, solitude, action

This paper offers a short introduction to the Shakespearean criticism of an English writer, Charles Williams, whose life and work coincided with the canonic period of Modernism. Williams is now best known for his involvement with the self-styled 'Inklings' authors, who regularly adopted stances opposed to both Modernism and social and technological modernity; from these associations his reputation may have lost more, in relation to the full range of his achievement, than it has gained, and some emphasis on one aspect of that range seems appropriate and overdue. After an initial presentation of Williams's oeuvre, I shall survey two accounts, by Hugh Grady and Gary Taylor, of 'Modernist' criticism of Shakespeare. These accounts, entirely ignoring Williams, nonetheless situate his work helpfully in its temporal and conceptual settings. The rest of this paper shall be devoted to an introductory consideration of Williams's own Shakespearean texts.

Charles Williams lived, in or near London, from 1886 to 1945.¹ His chief professional employment was with Oxford University Press. He never took a university degree. Alongside a substantial body of non-fiction, he wrote seven novels, eighteen plays (most of them in verse) and several books of poetry; the novels have always found devoted fans, while the dramas invite and sustain comparison with those of T.S. Eliot. Williams himself saw the poetry as his central achievement. This is the profile, clearly, of a Grub Street man. Married with one son, Williams was never comfortably off and, infectiously enthusiastic for the world of books, attempted many subjects in diverse genres. Like G.K. Chesterton, whose career in an earlier generation is comparable, Williams wrote popular biographies, some of figures from the 'Elizabethan age'. He wrote on literary topics, introducing poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins, writings by Søren Kierkegaard and an anthology of Victorian narrative poetry. One extended critical work, *Poetry at Present*, covering eighteen English poets between 1880 and 1930, written as a companion to OUP anthologies of what was at the time perceived as "modern verse", includes perceptive treatments of Hardy, Housman and Kipling, and a nicely, perhaps disingenuously, baffled but admiring treatment of T.S. Eliot's work up to *The Waste Land*; to each critical essay Williams appends a poem of his own.² Throughout his work poetry and criticism are seen as contiguous in their demands upon verbal precision, rhythmic language and semantic energy. In his last years, those of the Second World War, Williams worked mainly in Oxford (the OUP moved its premises there at this time), developing relationships there with some of the Inklings writers. C.S. Lewis in particular developed towards Williams in person his existing admiration for him as a writer, while T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, among more major writers, also came to feel in Williams a personal vibrancy, perhaps a sanctity, unique amongst their acquaintance. In this period Williams emerged as a writer of Christian theology; three significant short books, *The Descent of the Dove*, *He came down from Heaven*, and *The Forgiveness of Sins* appeared between 1938 and 1942.³

His Shakespearean work took several forms. In 1933 he published *A Short Life of Shakespeare*, abbreviating Chambers's two-volume *Life*.⁴ *A Myth of Shakespeare* is a substantial verse drama recounting the dramatist's life, in scenes between 'Shakespeare' and his contemporaries – 'Marlowe', 'Raleigh', 'Jonson', 'Queen Elizabeth' and others – and through extended extracts from plays; Williams's own writing, in dramatic blank

1 Grevel Lindop, *Charles Williams: the third Inklings* (London: Oxford University Press, 2015).

2 Charles Williams, *Poetry at Present* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930).

3 Charles Williams, *He came down from Heaven* and *The Forgiveness of Sins* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940); *The Descent of the Dove* (London: Longmans, Green, 1939).

4 Charles Williams (ed), *A short life of Shakespeare, with the sources* (London: Clarendon Press, 1933).

verse, is less obscure than his later poetry, and the work might repay theatrical revival.⁵ Anne Ridler's collection of Williams's writings, *The Image of the City and other essays*, includes brief reviews of Shakespearean books by S.L. Bethell and J. Dover Wilson.⁶ Two novels, *Shadows of Ecstasy* and *Descent into Hell*, contain passages significant for Williams's sense of Shakespeare's late plays; his last theological work, *The Forgiveness of Sins*, contains a Shakespearean chapter.⁷ All these are parenthetical treatments compared with the essay in Williams's critical study *The English Poetic Mind*,⁸ whose arguments are extended and partly modified in *Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind*.⁹ Uniquely in its period, the chapter in *The English Poetic Mind* attempts a connected and cumulatively argued treatment, within eighty pages, of Shakespeare's whole dramatic oeuvre in its most important aspects – its dramatic action, character, thought, poetic form, above all its compelling psychological salience and (one could reasonably say) spiritual importance.

Before turning to these, it will be useful to consider two presentations, by Hugh Grady and Gary Taylor, of the “modernist Shakespeare” which they take English inter-war critical work on the plays to have constructed. Grady's account premises a “rise of professionalism” in the field of Shakespeare studies, following a largely non-academic 19th-century discourse, from Coleridge through Hazlitt and Swinburne to A.C. Bradley, which had focussed upon the characters of the plays and the moral commitments of individual dramas and on the oeuvre as a whole in its relationship to the elusive life of its author.¹⁰ This new modern professionalism emphasised the study of linguistic, textual, and political disciplines salient for both Shakespeare and his dramatic contemporaries, whose output could provide a crucial contrast and control for a proper sense of what, in Shakespeare, might be truly distinctive. It became customary to believe that some plays traditionally ascribed to Shakespeare might more properly be attributed to these contemporaries – the “disintegrationist” approach; while supposed Shakespearean singularity was to be supplemented by awareness of general dramatic conventions distinguishing all Elizabethan and Jacobean plays from the dramaturgy current in the period of ‘modernity’ itself, of Ibsen, Shaw, Chekhov and ‘theatrical realism.’ This line of thought, in effect, combined ‘professionalism’ with a newly astringent attitude to Shakespeare's supposed pre-eminence as author and playwright, and a general neglect

5 Williams, *Poetry at Present*.

6 Charles Williams, *Selected writings*, chosen by Anne Ridler (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

7 Charles Williams, *Shadows of ecstasy* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1933); C Williams, *Descent into hell* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1937).

8 Charles Williams, *The English Poetic Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932).

9 Charles Williams, *Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).

10 Hugh Grady, *The Modernist Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

of the Victorian focus on Shakespearean characterisation by which that pre-eminence had been upheld and defined.

Grady considers in some detail the early Shakespearean work of a major 20th-century critic, G. Wilson Knight. He sees him as exemplary for the period in applying to Shakespearean plays the interpretative modes of literary modernism, valorising artistic autonomy, and developing spatial, rather than temporal, modes of critical reading and textual constitution: “..spatial...is a category Knight constitutes by searching for intelligible patterns formed by those aspects of the play not connected with time-flow, plot, or its associated cause-and-effect structure”.¹¹ Rather than actions, Wilson Knight, in Shakespearean plays, sought and found ‘themes’. Or, rather, this is Grady’s own ‘theme’; a passage from Wilson Knight, by contrast, makes a related but different point:

Now since in Shakespeare there is this close fusion of the temporal, that is, the plot-chain of event following event, with the spatial, the omnipresent and mysterious reality brooding motionless over and within the play’s movement, it is evident that the two principles thus firmly divided in analysis are no more than provisional abstractions from the poetic unity.¹²

Given this important stipulation, Knight’s Shakespeare is not, in fact, ‘spatialized’ at the expense of ‘temporal’ plot and action; it would be better to see Knight’s Shakespeare as dominated not by ‘theme’ but by ‘counterpoint’, between themes and the ongoing dramatic actions. And issues of dramatic action remained important for other critics, older contemporaries of Wilson Knight, on whose work Taylor’s presentation lays significant emphasis.

Taylor’s picture of interwar criticism encourages a view of critics, not so much (as with Grady) collectively constituting an artistically autonomous and coherent body of authorship, but rather, each in turn, combating and correcting exaggerated claims of precursors and contemporaries - thus testifying to multiple and intertwined potentialities, in Shakespearean texts, which they sought, through aggressively ‘professional’ techniques but without complete success, to standardise and separate out from each other.¹³ His chapter coincides with one of Grady’s emphases in starting with two critics, Levin Schücking and E.E. Stoll, who ‘both insist upon interpreting Shakespeare’s characters in terms of the theatrical conventions of his own time’ – following in this some leading authors of the period, including Shaw, who had been prepared to see their own ‘Ibsenist’ drama as “a big blessed advance over the primitive conventions of the Elizabethans”.¹⁴ Such iconoclasm is a world away from Wilson Knight. Yet at this point Taylor, to incorporate Wilson Knight and others, sets up, from some texts by

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 94.

¹² George Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), 5.

¹³ Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1989).

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 234, 235.

Shaw, a dichotomy - which becomes in turn a bridge - "between the opposing worlds of Ibsen and Wagner, between argumentative prose realism and musical myth"; what Shaw thus separated, T.S. Eliot willed into new union - "a fusion of musicality and myth held together by wholly artificial theatrical conventions".¹⁵

The argument is tenuous - what has become of Ibsenian prose realism? - yet Taylor's problems here indicate the genuine diversity of inter-war Shakespearean critical practice. He passes on to the newly 'professionalised' approaches of biographers, such as Chambers, and of textual scholars - to which he might have added (a strange omission) the historical readings by E.M.W. Tillyard of Shakespeare's English Histories as vehicles for Tudor political ideology. All these disciplines - biography, textual study, and historiography - contended with basic matters of authorship and chronology; thus 'By redefining Shakespeare as a complex of problems, critics and scholars redefined themselves as problem solvers. And so goodbye to all those amateur enthusiasts...' - especially in the areas, previously so prominent, of moralising and character profiles.¹⁶ Here - a crucial event - the emergence of the 'New Criticism' deployed terminology giving supreme value to ambiguity and irony - a further professional advance for the academic study of English. By 1939, in effect, Shakespeare had recovered from his downgrading by Ibsenists, to become - here Taylor's account again joins Grady's - a prize exhibit in the field of complex textual meaning. Thus the alleged features of Elizabethan dramaturgy prominent in Shakespearean criticism up to about 1930 - exciting but illogical action, flat and/or inconsistent characters, and an absence of constructive moral thought - were, without explicit counter-argument, subordinated to the values set upon 'themes', 'image-clusters' and an inconclusive or ironic 'play of ideas'. It was in fact here, in the New Critical approach to Shakespeare, rather than in the work of Wilson Knight, that 'spatiality' came to dominate over considerations relating to what I would want to call 'character(s) in action'.

As I have said, Grady's and Taylor's narrative analyses coincide in their omission of Charles Williams. They also fail to do justice to the overall treatment of Shakespearean writing in the oeuvre of T.S. Eliot, splendidly illuminated in Anne Stillman's recent chapter - especially with regard to Eliot's poetic allusions and echoes of the dramatic texts, throughout his work, and to his 'impersonations' in such poems as 'Coriolan' and 'Marina'.¹⁷ Such achievements are indeed scarcely predictable from the rather patronising tone of Eliot's earlier Shakespearean essays, particularly his notoriously negative *obiter dicta* at the expense of Hamlet and *Hamlet*. Yet the most indefensible

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 238.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 245.

¹⁷ Anne Stillman, "T.S. Eliot" in A Poole (ed.), *Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Auden, Beckett. Great Shakespearians*, Volume XII (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), 57-104.

gap left by Grady and Taylor is their failure to represent the supreme achievement, in discussion and interpretation of Shakespearean plays and texts, of William Empson in his two inter-war masterpieces *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and *Some Versions of Pastoral*.¹⁸ There is no space for any general consideration of what was, and remains, at stake here – Michael Wood’s recent book is splendidly responsive to the greatness of ‘Empson’s Shakespeare’.¹⁹ But two abiding principles of Empson’s work are relevant for a presentation of his lesser contemporary Charles Williams.

Firstly, Empson never abandoned the idea that a certain ‘type of ambiguity’ (for him, ‘the seventh’) in a text embodied a situation where “the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer’s mind”.²⁰ He remarks further that “the simplest way for the two opposites defined by the context to be suggested to the reader is by some disorder in the action of the negative...” – a thought amply developed in Williams’s insistence on ‘the negative’ in the context of a well-known line of Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, “This she? No, this is Diomed’s Cressida” (*Troilus and Cressida* 5.2.137).²¹ Moreover, in practice Empson’s development of his own maxim, in its applications to Shakespearean and other dramatic texts, readily and plausibly attributes “fundamental division” to the mind not so much of Shakespeare as of the fictive stage speaker of a text; this crucial point entails, for Empson, an intense focus upon the situations, in the social and interpersonal setting and the sequential narrative process of a drama, within which the ambiguous and revelatory utterances of a character are to be rendered more or less intelligible.

The second Empsonian principle can thus be encapsulated in the maxim “Read for the plot”; yet this might wrongly impute to him the ‘Aristotelean’ priority, ‘action’ above ‘character’.²² Rather he is concerned with the responsibility of the reader to attend at once to ‘character’, the kind of person a character is, and to ‘action’, what a character does. In his great *King Lear* essay he writes of “...the Victorian assumption that the characters ought to be followed...”²³ Despite the apparent scare-adjective, this is indeed what he does; he considers Lear and others in terms of how their positive actions, and their responses to the others’ actions, are related to their thoughts as these are expressed in their utterances. He treats, then, Shakespearean dramatic language

18 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd, 1930); W. Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1935).

19 Michael Wood, *On Empson* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017).

20 Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 192.

21 *Ibidem*, 205.

22 Samuel Henry Butcher, *Aristotle’s theory of poetry and fine art*. (London: Dover Publications, Inc, 1951), 25-29.

23 William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951), 155-56.

as spoken in definable and usually complex interpersonal situations, upon which the speaking 'characters' bring to bear both feeling and thought. The best single expression of this is found early on in his oeuvre:

...the process of understanding one's friends must always be riddled with such indecisions... People, often, cannot have done both of two things, but they must have been in some way prepared to have done either; whichever they did, they will still have lingering in their minds the way they would have preserved their self-respect if they had acted differently; they are only to be understood by bearing both possibilities in mind.²⁴

What people do and what they understand; how, amidst immense pressures making for fundamental change, they preserve, or fail or refuse to preserve, their distinctive identity and self-respect; how they choose to act and how their actions may be understood – these central concerns are found, also, in the Shakespearean writings of Charles Williams. Showing some general awareness of 'modernist' trends, Williams rarely responds to them directly, accepting at most some sense of limitation (but, also, consequent positive qualities) in the earlier plays. Overall, he is unusual in his responsiveness to a range of topics – of action, thought, poetic language, psychology, and what one might simply call human truth – rarely drawn together, except by Empson, in contemporary criticism.

I shall focus, in what follows, on *The English Poetic Mind*. Before this more detailed consideration, Williams's other Shakespearean texts deserve brief mention. His response to the possible trajectory of Shakespeare's life and work is best seen in *A Myth of Shakespeare*. Here Williams accepts familiar milestones – departure from Stratford in search of fame and fortune, encounters with fellow-playwrights and poets and with the court of Queen Elizabeth, peace at the last – while laying structural emphasis, within his own drama, upon a mid-career crisis at once of life and of thought, voiced by 'Shakespeare' thus –

For I too can be spleenful, out of heart
With this absurdity which is the world.

– and again –

O now forget
To know thyself, my Reason, and be dark
And quite immured!²⁵

The terms of 'Shakespeare' 's rhetorical self-awareness here are taken up in Williams's later critical treatment, in *The English Poetic Mind*, of *Troilus and Cressida*, as a play

²⁴ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 44.

²⁵ Charles Williams, *A Myth of Shakespeare* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), 83, 85.

centred upon an experience of reason in crisis which cannot, by the techniques of reason, be dispelled or resolved. The essay's two climaxes, its treatments of *Antony and Cleopatra* and of the last plays, are also paralleled by passages in Williams's novels. The protagonist of *Shadows of Ecstasy*, Nigel Considine, remarks – with reference, overtly, to Roman history, but clearly also to Shakespeare's play – that “[Antony] could have destroyed Octavian and he and the Queen of Egypt in their love could have presented the capacities of love to a high stage before the nations. But they wasted themselves and each other on the lesser delights.”²⁶

In *Descent into Hell* the narrator claims, of a play written by the fictive poet Peter Stanhope, that “...like the Dirge in *Cymbeline* or the songs of Ariel in *The Tempest* it possessed only the pure perfection of fact, rising in rhythms of sound that seemed inhuman because they were free from desire or fear or distress.”²⁷

A later passage of narrative comment, again addressed to Stanhope's evidently ‘Shakespearean’ play in its eventual staging, marks Williams's closest approach to the ‘modernist’ criticism of Wilson Knight:

Now the process of the theatre was wholly reversed, for stillness cast up the verse and the verse flung out the actors...It was not sequence that mattered, more than as a definition of the edge of the circle, and that relation which was the exhibition of the eternal. Relation in the story, in the plot, was only an accident of need.²⁸

As will be shown, Williams's essay claims, by comparison, a greater weight than this for the concept, and the presentation by Shakespeare's plays, of dramatic sequential action – albeit in relation to the tragedies rather than, as by implication in the novel, the late dramas.

On these Romances the *Forgiveness* essay also dwells, without neglecting earlier work. Thus, Williams writes, in earlier comedies “there is always a reach-me-down forgiveness at hand. Shakespeare was not yet interested in what happens when men [sic] forgive”; and “In the tragedies the question of forgiveness does not arise. It may be said that this is one reason why they are tragedies”.²⁹ Here, in apparently neglecting the great encounter of Lear and Cordelia late in *King Lear*, Williams interestingly anticipates a remark in Empson's later essay – “One cannot speak of trust, because if she has poison for him Lear will drink it; there is no need for trust”.³⁰ But in the last plays Williams finds, alongside some “pardons...of a more distant kind and... more formally expressed”, a will to forgiveness that “is so swift that it seems almost to create the

²⁶ Williams, *Shadows of ecstasy*, 92

²⁷ Williams, *Descent into hell*, 66.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 185.

²⁹ Williams, *He came down*, 111, 113.

³⁰ Empson, *Structure of complex words*, 146.

love to which it responds”.³¹ His emphasis here - he is considering, above all, Innogen in relation to Posthumus in *Cymbeline* - is on the properties, as much dramaturgic and poetic as psychological, of ‘realism’ and ‘speed’. It is worth adding, in the light of Williams’s ‘Inklings’ connections, that he goes out of his way to argue that Shakespeare gave this power of instant unargued forgiveness “to personages in whom he implied no touch of what the theologians call grace”.³²

Turning now to the extended Shakespearean chapter in the *English Poetic Mind* (the book also considers Milton and Wordsworth in detail), one is struck, given its relative brevity, by the scale of its ambition; it touches upon almost every drama of the First Folio - exceptions are 1 and 2 *Henry VI*, which he perhaps followed many contemporaries in supposing largely non-Shakespearean.³³ Williams makes no use of the *Sonnets*, which offer ample material for his central theme of “contradictory experience”; he may have felt some reasonable uncertainty about their dating and sequence. His account, in fact, rests much on sequentiality; its purpose, simply expressed, is “... to consider the changes in Shakespeare’s way of dealing with things in his poetry”.³⁴ Considerable substance is added, to this foregrounded notion of ‘poetry’, as the essay proceeds; but the next paragraph opens up another major topic.

Every poet, like every man, sets out to enjoy himself...Of this early delight Shakespeare had his full share. The diction of the plays is part of it....³⁵

There follows a reference to “the dance of words, the puns and the rhymes, for instance in the antiphon between Luciana and Antipholus in the *Comedy of Errors*”.

And even more than in the diction this enjoyment is felt in the manner of emotional apprehension. The bodies in *Titus Andronicus*, the proclaimed villainy of Richard III, the reckless and unconvincing pardon of Proteus in *Two Gentlemen*, are all examples of Shakespeare “having a good time”...There is no malice and no injustice, except by chance. Quarrels do break out; letters do go wrong; appointments are missed; and death happens. What can one do about it? Nothing but enjoy.³⁶

The last three or four sentences here refer to *Romeo and Juliet*; but their implications should also cover the “proclaimed villainy” of Richard of Gloucester, such evident cases of ‘malice’ as Don John in *Much Ado*, and the injustices and ‘quarrels’ of civil war (as in both sequences of English Histories). This seems problematic, even bizarre, and Williams’s case is not helped by his total omission of Shylock from the treatment of *The Merchant of Venice*. What can be said for it? Three things, perhaps.

31 Williams, *He came down*, 115, 114.

32 *Ibidem*, 117.

33 Williams, *The English poetic mind*, 29-109.

34 *Ibidem*, 29.

35 *Ibidem*, 30.

36 *Ibidem*, 30-31.

First, Williams's seemingly amoral and 'delighting' Shakespeare is at once 'man' and poet – and it seems to be the poet's delight here that determines anything that can be said of the 'man'. One thinks of Yeats's resounding contemporary formulation in *Lapis Lazuli* – 'Hamlet and Lear are gay'. Closer at hand in Williams's work is a speech addressed to 'Shakespeare' by 'Marlowe' in *A Myth of Shakespeare*:

You are fortunate
 Above most men in this - never to know
 An ill so heavy or a chance so wry
 You cannot bring it still to blessedness
 By breathing it in music.³⁷

Secondly and connected, Williams's highest terms of praise for the Shakespeare of the late plays involve the claim that "[t]he preconceived ideas of the characters had vanished; and therefore the preconceived methods of approach. Things are but themselves; his genius found that nothing brought him all things."³⁸ Though the point is never made explicit, the essay's overall trajectory can be defined by the idea of an adequacy, between words, worlds and emotional thought, initially unproblematic, then thrown into crisis, only to be subsequently and far more powerfully restored and reasserted. Thus, thirdly, within this grand narrative, the "early Shakespeare" is found to be in keeping, to a large extent, with the "conventional Elizabethan dramatist" of contemporary modernist criticism, unworried by issues of morality or psychological introspection.

Be this as it may, for the early work Williams also introduces distinctions. On the one hand these separate from one another, within any individual play, genres and modes – "the poetic part and the comic part."³⁹ On another hand, beyond what one might thus see as "group action" and "impersonal poetic beauty" ("dance-music") – a separation recalling that of "prose realism" from "musical myth" promulgated by Taylor –

there appears 'the hero'; for example, Richard III and Petruchio. Action, tyrannical action (if we may abolish morality for a moment), broad tyrannical action, is their occupation and characteristic: from this seed the discoveries of Shakespeare sprang.⁴⁰

The central weight carried by 'action' in Williams's account sets it apart from 'spatialized' criticism, and this emphasis re-emerges, after subtly positive and congenial accounts of the Bastard (in *King John*) and Falstaff, in reference to *Henry V*, where

³⁷ Williams, *A myth of Shakespeare* 39-40.

³⁸ Williams, *The English poetic mind*, 103.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 31.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 32.

The speech of Henry's before Agincourt, and indeed his whole behaviour...has the final unity of the active life...All the subtlety of the outer world is in it...The ardent purpose of communal life in a world of activity and danger overrides the prospect of death.⁴¹

Again, no concern with the justice of Henry V's cause against France; more positively one notes the highly Empsonian notion of "the subtlety of the outer world". But here, for Williams, comes the central turn in Shakespeare, "...that swift, lucid, effective verse stayed, and changed".⁴² From now on, in the essay, 'the poetic part' and 'the hero', fusing with each other, assume centre stage, absorbing that concern for 'action' previously assigned to 'the comic part'; while matters of 'sorrow', of 'injustice', and of non-patriotic history emerge from the 'enjoyment' which had involved their earlier suppression. 'Enjoyment' (this is the implication of Williams's detailed treatment of *Twelfth Night*) is retrospectively to be perceived as shadowed - as a matter of multiple and complex, albeit not necessarily 'unjust', deception; the play, especially its concluding song, is "the turning-point from the light to darkness, and itself - could one bear it - a comment at once on joy and grief. It is neither comic nor tragic nor ironic, but rather poetry's own comment on all that had hitherto been done".⁴³

In Williams' next paragraph the central axis and distinction of his essay is opened out:

In *Henry V* Shakespeare had avoided opposition and contradiction by killing Falstaff. In *Twelfth Night* he brought opposition in and reconciled it by invoking a delicate and joyous deception or self-deception everywhere. In *Julius Caesar* for the first time he allows the opposition which is in the nature of things to run its course...⁴⁴

'Unknown powers' appear, from here on in; moreover "the verse of the play is continually apprehensive" and "[t]he failure of Brutus's reason is half the play... until he throws it over altogether, abandons his philosophy, and accepts the thing which is beyond philosophy"⁴⁵

'Philosophy' is an issue for Williams's Shakespeare. Here lies one emphasis of his treatment (outstanding in its time and even now) of *Troilus and Cressida*; "there are here two full-dress debates that are not paralleled elsewhere" - debates which, as he shows especially in relation to Hector's advocacy, in the "Trojan debate", of reason, are brought to a point and then abandoned.⁴⁶ Equally Williams stresses what he sees (in a way very perceptive for its time but, perhaps, not conclusive in the light of the play's

41 *Ibidem*, 44.

42 *Ibidem*, 42.

43 *Ibidem*, 47.

44 *Ibidem*.

45 *Ibidem*, 48, 49, 50.

46 *Ibidem*, 54.

largely subsequent performance history) as an “abandonment on the side of action” also.⁴⁷ But the defining weight of his treatment of the play, and a core idea of his whole essay, is found in his presentation of Troilus’s speech focussing on the line “This she? no, this is Diomed’s Cressida.”

The crisis which Troilus endured ...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 something cannot be. Only it is....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.⁴⁸

This, for Williams, is “the opposition which is in the nature of things”; and it is, within his presentation of Shakespeare, as ineluctable and irreducible as any or all Empsonian ambiguities. Moreover – for alongside ‘change’ and ‘crisis’ there subsists, in Williams’s discourse, a pre-eminence, as conceptual protagonist, for something else – poetry, or more precisely a ‘single line’ or phrase, in and of poetry, matures into a new achievement; writing of Troilus’s line about the ‘changed’ Cressida, “Nothing at all, unless that this were she”, he claims that

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.⁴⁹

The threads of Williams’s account of this play, and much that follows, are now drawn together; for him, initial attempts “to press deeper and deeper into the complexities of experience” “by a philosophical vocabulary” yield to, or are upstaged by, “lines so profound and intense that they cannot be analysed”.⁵⁰ Poetry, confronting situations where necessary debate does not issue in consequential action, and where action is confounded by situations so painful or unthinkable as to defy representation, can, in and as itself, at this newly Shakespearean level of ‘power’ (a word central, as may by now be evident, to all Williams’s work and thought), operate in three conjoined ways; as a register of ‘change’, as a definition and a resource of (heroic) ‘solitude’ – these two features being, as far as they go, compatible with a ‘spatial’ approach to an ‘autonomous’ text – and (Williams’s decisive extra emphasis) as a vehicle and mode of ‘action’.

These three terms, or ‘things’ – change, solitude and action, which ‘are the concern of Shakespeare’s style from *Othello* through *Lear* to *Macbeth*’ – amount, in effect, to Williams’s definition of tragedy.⁵¹ He draws no connections between these terms and

47 *Ibidem*.

48 *Ibidem*, 59.

49 *Ibidem*, 61.

50 *Ibidem*, 62.

51 *Ibidem*, 76.

those of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Yet 'solitude', incumbent on a protagonist as the one by whom 'change' is experienced and confronted, arguably relates to Aristotle's conception of tragic 'character'; while 'change' and 'action' taken together not only amount to Aristotle's 'plot' but encompass the larger Aristotelean tragic teleology of 'reversal and recognition'.⁵² In a crucial and remarkable passage, Williams spells out his full conception:

It would almost be possible to imagine Shakespeare's genius proceeding by questions - not that it is likely to have done so but as a way of making its progress clear. (1) When does man act? (2) At his deepest crisis: what is that crisis? (3) This 'thing inseparate' dividing wider than the sky and earth [the reference is to *Troilus and Cressida* 5.2.148-49]: how does he receive it? (4) He madly avenges himself on the thing which typifies that division; but if he cannot? (5) He will break under it.⁵³

The strong emphasis in all this on 'action' develops, in Williams's presentation, partly from *Hamlet*, where the essay shows its contemporary critical context most clearly in its concern to establish the fact and the explanations of the protagonist's 'delay'. But the argument relates also to *Othello*:

[Othello] has lived in one world, and now he begins to live in another; this is change...In the last scene the natural egotism of Othello has achieved in this new world the balance it thought it had achieved in the old...*What* is the cause? ...of what? [The reference is to *Othello* 5.2.1] Of the action that is immediately to ensue...The lines are spoken in a play and they are the play. They mean, they are, the discovery and the expression - the poetry - of action itself. They are action speaking of itself. They are poetry gathering up into itself all the preceding poetry...Only in the superficial movements of life is action divided from its cause; in the profounder the cause is in the action, until the action has concluded or has become habitual or has been reversed...Shakespeare is not talking metaphysics; he is talking Othello. It is not abstract cause and abstract action; it is *this* cause and *this* action...the line shuts up Othello still more dreadfully in his own solitude.⁵⁴

In abbreviating Williams's discussion here I have, I think, neither clarified nor muddied the waters of his thought; he enjoys rhetoric, he has an individual conception of verbal and syntactic rhythm, and he is dealing with formidable complexities of tragic scale and local semantic interpretation. The line opening Othello's great soliloquy, at once verbally simple and deeply obscure in reference, had already drawn from Empson the remark that "There is no primary meaning for lack of information...we are listening to a mind withdrawn upon itself, and baffled by its own agonies".⁵⁵ Where Williams's impressive general analysis of Shakespearean tragedy distinguishes 'crisis', 'avenging', and 'breaking', his treatment of *Othello* develops, from such distinction, a sense of tragedy

52 Butcher, *Aristotle's theory of poetry*, 27, 39-43.

53 Williams, *The English poetic mind*, 83-84.

54 *Ibidem*, 78-81.

55 Empson, *Seven types*, 185.

involving at once formal convergence and human painful inextricability. Moreover, where Williams attributes, to the subject of this crisis, 'solitude', one might see, not so much a protagonist's isolation from other characters, but rather a willed fusion with all that bears, in the society of the play's tragic world, the weight and strain of such contradictory crisis – a crisis at once representable in terms of spatialised stasis and intelligible only in terms of antecedent and prospective temporal action.

Within Williams's essay such a contention finds its home in his treatment of *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Othello had shown solitude and action arising out of change. But in *Macbeth* the three are one; this is the inner unity of the play... if we regard *Macbeth* from one point of view we are compelled to see the others at the same time. He is changing throughout; and each change develops its action; and each action its deeper solitude... There is another cause that sets this play with *Antony*... *Macbeth* has a double centre; *Antony* a triple. Shakespeare's genius imagined a more complex origin for them, it imagined a relationship of individuals rather than an individual in relationships. The relationship in *Macbeth* is dissolved, in *Antony* it becomes more intense; this is the progression of the poetic mind discovering fresh powers of knowledge in itself, comprehending more of 'the wondrous architecture of the world'.⁵⁶

In Williams's reading of *Antony and Cleopatra*, multiplicity, rather than solitude, is central.

In the other plays we had seen everybody's point of view, but here we see the whole play from everybody's point of view... All these persons are not merely persons, they are poetic powers. They project their own potentialities upon the main theme and it is this which helps to make the complexity of the play... [Shakespeare] does here for the theme of the one play what he did throughout the plays for life itself; utters every kind of poetry about it and then carries it into a last state of simple being.⁵⁷

To put this another way, in terms Williams uses elsewhere: *Antony and Cleopatra* does not much deal in solitudes; rather it fuses multiplicities into sets of reversible relationships, regenerating political and personal clashes and antagonisms in the form of complex richness of language and perception. Where there was contradiction, there has become, now, once again, 'poetic play'. But Williams's view entails more than this. He dwells on the interpersonal relations and actions of the play's last four scenes, including as they do Antony's remarkable forgiveness of Cleopatra (who has precipitated if not caused his suicide) and, above all, what he calls 'an even further exploration', after that death, by Cleopatra:

When [Antony] is dead... [t]here is no sense of any kind of value left at all; therefore no significance. The awareness of *Macbeth* and of *Cleopatra* for a single second are in touch. But there had been a difference; *Macbeth* had been full of an intense vision of himself,

⁵⁶ Williams, *The English poetic mind*, 89.

⁵⁷ Williams, *Reason and beauty*, 159.

Cleopatra – more than she knew - of an intense vision of Antony. Macbeth's vitality recedes, but Cleopatra's enters a new state of being...Irony disappears - almost entirely - from this and all future plays...Cleopatra awakes to the elemental facts of her being... her perception... becomes the play - the clouding of it, and the clearing of it... She sees what she is and what others are...⁵⁸

Or, to recall the *Forgiveness* essay, "...the realistic style reflects a realism: this is what the loveliest pardon is – it is love renewing itself in a mutual and exchanged knowledge."⁵⁹ For Williams, in *Antony and Cleopatra* and in the Romances which follow it,

the crisis of *Troilus and Cressida* is wholly reversed and resolved. The domination of that thing inseparable [the reference is to the 'division' perceived by Williams as central to Troilus's consciousness] 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 here united with the world which is and which cannot be...Cleopatra's poetry is a thing which reconciles and unites them.⁶⁰

Williams's account of Shakespeare thus at its climax situates the central emphases, both of what is conventionally seen as 'modernist' Shakespeare (poetic coherence) and of Empsonian 'ambiguity', within a persuasive and inspiring narrative account which offers, in effect, to reconcile and accommodate the work of any or all of his contemporaries. It would be good for Shakespearean studies if his essay were better known.

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58 *Ibidem*, 164-166.

59 Williams, *He came down*, 116.

60 Williams, *The English poetic mind*, 97.

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