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"It Was Allowed to One": C.S. Lewis on the Practice of Substitution

Abstract

Examines the way C.S. Lewis adopted Charles Williams's ideas about coinherence and substitution in *Till We Have Faces* and, most poignantly, in *A Grief Observed* and his letters about his wife Joy Davidman's cancer, miraculous remission, and eventual death.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Relation to Joy Davidman; Lewis, C.S. *A Grief Observed*; Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces*; Williams, Charles—Concept of coinherence



“T WAS ALLOWED TO ONE”:
C.S. LEWIS ON THE
PRACTICE OF SUBSTITUTION

ANDREW C. STOUT

IN ADDITION TO BEING A GREAT WRITER, C.S. LEWIS was also a great promoter of his literary friends. It is possible that *The Lord of the Rings* would never have made it out of Tolkien's study had Lewis not provided much needed encouragement.¹ Though Charles Williams was already an established novelist before his friendship with Lewis blossomed, Lewis played a crucial role in helping to secure an honorary degree² and teaching opportunities for Williams when he relocated to Oxford during the war. Their mutual appreciation is well attested to, and it is no exaggeration to say that Lewis would be a very different, and I would say, a lesser writer, were it not for his appropriation of significant elements of Williams's spiritual vision. One of the issues for which Lewis took up Williams's cause was the practice of substitution. This practice, elaborated in Williams's theological and fictional works, as well as in his correspondence, speaks to the “arch-natural”³ character of a universe in which individuals can consciously and intentionally “bear one another's burdens” of fear, anxiety, and possibly even physical sickness or pain. At various points, Lewis corroborated the legitimacy of this practice in Williams's personal life, articulated and developed the practice in a literary context, and apparently came to question and refocus it in the later years of his life. Lewis's settled legacy and credibility as a spiritual, theological, and literary authority⁴ make his appropriation and

¹ “Without the persistent encouragement of his friend, Tolkien acknowledged, he would never have completed *The Lord of the Rings*. This great tale, along with the connected matter of *The Silmarillion*, would have remained merely a private hobby” (Duriez ix).

² Though Williams cited his career at Oxford University Press as the reason for bestowal of the honor (Carpenter 188).

³ Gavin Ashenden explains Williams's use of “arch-natural,” noting that this term “which is intended to avoid the polarization of natural and supernatural, draws attention to Williams's intention to find a metaphysical category that allowed him to achieve a fusion of the two categories” (132).

⁴ These categories are not always easily distinguishable of course. Lewis's status as a theologian is in large part due to the way that his theological insights are expressed in a literary mode. As Alister E. McGrath has recently pointed out, “Lewis was as adept at theological *transpositions* as he was at theological *translation*. By ‘transposition,’ I mean

critique of substitution important for the ongoing evaluation of Williams's own legacy and credibility.

ON THE REALITY OF SUBSTITUTION

The practice of substituted love, or substitution, is one of the elements of Charles Williams's thought that has helped to earn him a posthumous reputation as a sort of spiritual director, a saintly figure who was attuned to the supernatural world in such a way that the boundaries between the supernatural and the natural were hardly applicable. Grevel Lindop lays out the significance of the practice:

'Substitution' would become an important element in Williams's spiritual practice and ideas. He speculated that when we suffer, it is perhaps so that some other may benefit. When we are happy, someone else, perhaps quite unknown to us, has earned our happiness for us by their pain or effort. We live, quite literally, from and in one another; and all of us from and in God. (157)

As Lindop indicates, this was not simply an abstract principle in Williams's understanding, but a literal and intentional practice or task to be undertaken. This can be seen when he writes to Anne Bradby (later Anne Ridler), "I do think that we can literally plunk all our bothers on some-one else, and take others' in turn. And sometime I will tell you how" (qtd. in Lindop 186). Williams referred to the principles of co-inherence, exchange, and substitution more or less interchangeably to allude to the interdependence or mutual indwelling of the various parts of creation (plants need soil to grow, children are nurtured in a mother's womb, etc). This interdependence is reflective of the trinitarian doctrine of *perichoresis*, or the mutual indwelling of three persons of the Godhead. The spiritual practice of substitution is a way of participating in Christ's substitutionary act of self-sacrifice.

Williams articulated and transposed a vision for this practice or spiritual discipline in several modes, including theological essay, the novel, and poetry. This development of theological and mythic themes through imaginative fiction is, of course, one of the reasons that Williams became such an integral member of the informal Oxford literary group known as the Inklings. The more straightforward theological articulation of the principle that underlies substitution is found in *He Came Down from Heaven*: "We are to love each other *as* he loved us, laying down our lives *as* he did, that this love may be perfected.

restating ideas in a different genre" (*The Intellectual World of C.S. Lewis* 172; emphasis original). For more on Lewis's theological credentials, see Robert Banks, "Was C.S. Lewis 'Everyman's Theologian' (J.R.R. Tolkien)?"

We are to love each other, that is, by acts of substitution. We are to be substituted and to bear substitution. All life is to be vicarious—at least, all life in the kingdom of heaven is to be vicarious" (121; emphasis original). In this same book, Williams elaborates in some detail how this principle can be put into practice. Two people seeking to exchange a burden effectively need "(i) to know the burden; (ii) to give up the burden; (iii) to take up the burden" (*He Came Down* 124). Williams offers some practical points on the conditions under which a burden should be exchanged, warning that it is "necessary (a) not to take burdens too recklessly; (b) to consider exactly how far any burden, accepted to the full, is likely to conflict with other duties. There is always a necessity for intelligence" (*He Came Down* 127). However, it is Williams's fictional depiction of substitution in *Descent into Hell* which gives the clearest picture of his intention for the practice.

In *Descent into Hell*, in a chapter entitled "The Doctrine of Substituted Love," Peter Stanhope offers to "carry" the fear of Pauline Anstruther. Stanhope, a playwright and informal spiritual director modeled after Williams himself,⁵ explains the practice of substitution to Pauline, a young woman plagued by fear and anxiety:

We all know what fear and trouble are. Very well—when you leave here you'll think of yourself that I've taken this particular trouble over instead of you. You'd do as much for me if I needed it, or for any one. And I will give myself to it. I'll think of what comes to you, and imagine it, and know it, and be afraid of it. And then, you see, you won't. (*Descent* 97)

A bit later, Pauline questions the possibility of Stanhope's proposal, prompting him to offer a further elucidation:

"Haven't you heard it said that we ought to bear one another's burdens?"

"But that means—" she began, and stopped.

"I know," Stanhope said. "It means listening sympathetically, and thinking unselfishly, and being anxious about, and so on. Well, I don't say a word against all that; no doubt it helps. But I think when Christ or St. Paul, or whoever said *bear* [...] he meant something much more like carrying a parcel instead of someone else. To bear a burden is precisely to carry it instead of. If you're still carrying yours, I'm not carrying it for you—however sympathetic I may be. And anyhow there's no need to

⁵ Though the character is a much more successful writer than Williams, there can be no doubt that Stanhope is largely a self-portrait. Williams used "Peter Stanhope" as a *non de plume* for the play *Judgement at Chelmsford*, and Grevel Lindop refers to the character of Stanhope as "an idealized version of Williams" (276).

introduce Christ, unless you wish. It's a fact of experience. If you give a weight to me, you can't be carrying it yourself; all I'm asking you to do is to notice that blazing truth. It doesn't sound very difficult." (*Descent* 98)

Here we see a depiction of a real world practice which serves to make the natural principle of exchange and human interdependence a lived experience between a spiritual master and a disciple, hinting at the substitutionary death of Christ. Williams practiced these sorts of exchanges in the context of an informal group of disciples which he called the Companions of the Co-inherence.⁶

This exchange from *Descent into Hell* is the quintessential example of Williams's principle of substitution.⁷ Lewis listed the novel as one of the ten books that influenced him most, and he noted the coherence of Williams's methodological explanation of the practice in *He Came Down from Heaven* and its depiction in *Descent into Hell*. In his correspondence, Lewis notes the seriousness with which Williams presented the idea in both works: "The stuff about Substitution comes in all C.W.'s books but most clearly I think, in *He Came Down from Heaven* and *Descent into Hell*. It was all meant to be practical & he wd. not have admitted your contrast of 'practical' and 'poetical'" (*Collected Letters* II.805-806). Holly Ordway notes the influence of *Descent into Hell*—and specifically its depiction of substitution—on Lewis's fiction: "Lewis refines and purifies Williams' ideas in the process of drawing them into his own work" (194).

C.S. Lewis played no small part in establishing Williams's image as a spiritual luminary. Lewis's comments regarding his reaction to Williams's death create the impression of an individual who bridges the spheres of flesh and spirit: "No event has so corroborated my faith in the next world as Williams did simply by dying. When the idea of death and the idea of Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that was changed" (Preface xiv). Writing to his friend Arthur Greeves, Lewis gives this portrait of Williams: "He is [...] of humble origin (there are still traces of Cockney in his voice), ugly as a chimpanzee but so radiant (he emanates more *love* than any man I have ever known) that as soon as he begins talking he is transfigured and looks like an angel. He sweeps some people quite off their feet and has many disciples" (qtd. in Carpenter 101). One of the disciplines in which he instructed these disciples,

⁶ As Williams envisioned it, this group functioned as an order within the Church to promote the apprehension of co-inherence and the practice of substitution. The seven-point constitution which Williams composed for the order is reproduced in Hadfield (173-174).

⁷ For more on Williams's treatment of substitution in *Descent into Hell* and the seriousness of Williams's ideas about the practice of substitution, see my "It Can Be Done, You Know."

mostly young women, was that of substitution.⁸ Lewis’s respect for Williams led him to take the notion seriously. Referring to the supposed ability of individuals to carry each other’s burdens, Lewis offered this opinion: “This Williams most seriously maintained, and I have reason to believe that he spoke from experimental knowledge” (*Arthurian Torso* 307).⁹ For Lewis, Williams was a friend and a like-minded literary companion—but he was also an experienced and reliable spiritual guide. Lewis found in Williams’s writing and conversation a world in which the natural was revealed to be a theater of spiritual realities. More than that, Williams embodied this arch-natural vision of the world in his own person. The practice of substitution was a demonstration of the reality of this vision, and one which Lewis, though he seems to have maintained personal distance from engagement with the practice during Williams’s lifetime, was willing to acknowledge as legitimate and powerful.

For all of Lewis’s enthusiasm towards Williams, it is also important to note that Lewis was not uncritical in his attitude toward his friend. Lewis, who of course was a communicator of remarkable clarity and precision, faulted Williams for the obscurity of much of his work. Even in the early 1940s, when Williams’s evacuation from London to Oxford made him a regular fixture at meetings of the Inklings, Lewis could write of Williams, “He has an undisciplined mind and sometimes admits into his theology ideas whose proper place is in his romances” (*Collected Letters* II.618). It is important to note this early criticism of Williams on Lewis’s part in order to establish that the truly profound influence which Williams exerted on Lewis was always tempered by critical reception. As we look at what appears to be a substantive reorientation of Williams’s theological concept later in Lewis’s life, it is important to see that Lewis always had a sort of uncomfortable relationship with Williams’s practice of substitution. It fueled his imagination and helped to make sense of the nature of interpersonal relationships, and yet the theological legitimacy of the concept employed as a *practice* was never something that Lewis could endorse wholesale. In a later section, we will see this ambivalence expressed directly in a letter to Sheldon Vanauken. We now turn to look at how this concept found expression in his fiction, focusing specifically on the characters of Orual and Psyche in *Till We Have Faces*.

⁸ For an investigation of how Williams instructed his disciples in the practice of substitution and how he depicted this practice in his novels see Newman (1-26). Newman draws out the way that Williams’s hermetic practices helped to shape the charismatic and saintly personality that Lewis and others attested to in him (4-5).

⁹ Lewis also noted in correspondence that “I believe he had had actual experience of something like the practice of ‘Substitution’ or ‘exchange’” (*Collected Letters* III.465).

SUBSTITUTION IN *TILL WE HAVE FACES*

Williams's influence on Lewis's fiction could be traced through any number of examples. In fact, it might seem most obvious, especially in light of its focus on substitution, to begin with Lewis's final installment of his Ransom Cycle, *That Hideous Strength*. Rowan Williams expresses a common judgement when he notes that it is in this novel that "the influence of Charles Williams is most apparent in Lewis's work" (99). It features the company of St. Anne's-on-the-Hill, a group centered around the Williams-like figure of Ransom who perform acts of exchange among one another. In fact, it is interesting to note that Williams expressed notes of resentment toward Lewis's appropriation of substitution in *That Hideous Strength*. Writing to Anne Renwick, Williams complained that "Lewis is becoming a mere disciple; he is now collecting the doctrine of exchange in the last chapter of the new novel. 'That,' he says, 'is all yours'—I do not deny it, but no-one else will think so; I shall be thought his follower everywhere" (qtd. in Lindop 360). Lindop makes explicit Williams's complaint in the letter: "the problem with having a famous disciple was that the disciple might get credit for the ideas; and Williams was tired of his own relative obscurity" (360). Though Williams's characterization of Lewis as a "disciple" is probably tongue-in-cheek, there is no doubt that his influence on Lewis was significant and that the direction of the influence was bound to be read in reverse due to Lewis's fame.

While Williams's influence on Lewis is most explicit in *That Hideous Strength*, it is not the best place to turn for Lewis's mature appropriation of Williams's influence. Rowan Williams argues "that *That Hideous Strength* is inferior to *Till We Have Faces* in sheer psychological penetration. And I think it's also inferior theologically to *Till We Have Faces*, offering a less fully 'converted' model than the later book" (91). This psychological and theological maturity is evident in Lewis's handling of substitution in *Till We Have Faces*. In many ways, *That Hideous Strength* reads as an imitation of Williams's style, while *Till We Have Faces* more fully integrates Williams's principle of substitution with Lewis's own voice as a novelist. This difference makes *Till We Have Faces* the best option for assessing Lewis's fictive portrayal of substitution.

One of the distinguishing features of the Inklings as a literary group was the commitment of its participants to exploring the capacity of stories rooted in myth to convey truth about reality. It should be no surprise then that one of the places we see Lewis's appropriation of Williams's ideas most clearly is through a fictional depiction of characters engaged in a practice which reveals the supernatural inherent in the natural world. *Till We Have Faces* is a retelling of the classical myth of Cupid and Psyche which gives flesh to Lewis's understanding of the nature and forms of love and the relation of human beings to the divine. Lewis's book *The Four Loves*, written shortly after publication of

Till We Have Faces and also a book which bears the distinct mark of Williams's influence, "can be read as a commentary on the novel, as it is a study of Love in its four manifestations—Affection, Friendship, Eros, and Charity—and offers an indirect analysis of the failure of the novel's main character [Orual] to love properly those she is surrounded by" (Rowe 136-137).

We receive the account of *Till We Have Faces* through Orual, the ugly sister of the beautiful Psyche. Orual loves Psyche, but her love is possessive. This affection is so stunted that Orual would rather believe that Psyche is delusional than that she has actually been visited by and fallen in love with the Shadow Brute, the mysterious god of the mountain. After much sorrow and a lifetime of hardships and trials, Orual comes to understand that Psyche was not delusional, but that her selfless love made her the type of person who could perceive and accept divinity. All of Orual's petty loves eventually give way, and she goes through a gradual transformation which enables her to exemplify sacrificial love. Through a series of visions, she assists Psyche in accomplishing the arduous tasks that the goddess Ungit, the Brute's mother, has set before Psyche as the condition for reconciliation with her lover.

During a time of famine and drought, the Priest of Ungit demands that Psyche be offered to the son of the local nature goddess.¹⁰ Psyche is tied to a holy tree on a mountain, and when Orual later goes to recover her sister's body she finds Psyche alive and in rags, convinced that she has been given robes and a palace by her husband, the "god of the Mountain" (159). Orual, complaining against the gods and jealous for Psyche, manipulates her sister, persuading her to transgress her husband's command and light a lantern in order to see his face. Psyche is exiled as a result, and Orual, catching a glimpse of Psyche's husband, hears this rebuke: "Now Psyche goes out in exile. Now she must hunger and thirst and tread hard roads. Those against whom I cannot fight must do their will upon her. You, woman, shall know yourself and your work. You also shall be Psyche" (173-174). This cryptic pronouncement, "You also shall be Psyche," torments Orual for the rest of the novel.

In the years following Psyche's exile, Orual's sleep is troubled by dreams that she cannot understand but cause her anguish. In one vision she finds before her "a huge, hopeless pile of seeds, wheat, barley, poppy, rye, millet, what not? and I must sort them out and make separate piles, each all of one kind," knowing intuitively that "infinite punishment would fall upon me if I rested a moment from my labour or if, when all was done, a single seed were in the wrong pile" (256). Later, and deeper in despair, Orual wanders outside the city and faints from weariness by a river. She apparently recovers enough to

¹⁰ For a discussion of the pagan, Hebrew, and Christian notions of sacrifice which inform the novel, see Mackay (77-89).

bind her feet in an attempt to drown herself, but before she has the chance to enter the water, she hears a divine voice from beyond the river command her, "Do not do it" (279). Haunted by the command of the voice she recognized from years before, she returns home unsure if this experience was dream or reality. These visions continue with a growing sense of reality as Orual, in her chamber but not having lain down, finds herself on the bank of a great river in a luminous country. The bank is covered with golden-fleeced rams, and Orual, drawn by their beauty and desiring a flock of wool, walks towards the rams only to be trampled by these remarkable creatures. After the glory of the stampede has passed, Orual notices a woman picking flecks of fleece from the hedges. She observes, "What I had sought in vain by meeting the joyous and terrible brutes, she took at her leisure. She won without effort what utmost effort would not win for me" (284). Finally, Orual is presented with a vision in which she travels across burning sands, knowing that she is required to bring a bowl of the water of death from the deadlands to present to Ungit unspilled. "I was Ungit's slave or prisoner, and if I did all the tasks she set me perhaps she would let me go free" (286).

The completion of these tasks brings Orual to the court of the gods to present her complaint. She unleashes her vitriol against the deities who have separated her from Psyche and in the process reveals the clinging selfishness of her love for Psyche: "Those we love best— whoever's most worth loving—those are the very ones you'll pick out. [...] We'd rather they were ours and dead than yours and made immortal. [...] The girl was mine. What right had you to steal her away into your dreadful heights?" (290-291). After her tirade against the gods, Orual's deceased friend and teacher, the Fox (whom she affectionately calls Grandfather), comes to her as a comforting and instructive figure. In the midst of this grand and frightening vision, he shows Orual a painting which depicts the journey that Psyche has undertaken since she was banished by Ungit. Every trial, lived or dreamed, that Orual has undergone is revealed to have played a part in Psyche's journey to be reunited with her divine husband. Orual sees Psyche sitting by a river with her feet tethered, ready to drown, and now it is Orual who calls out "Do not do it. Do not do it" (298). She sees Psyche chained and sorting out seeds, but peaceful and free of despair as she is helped by an army of ants. She realizes that Psyche was troubling over how she could retrieve a fleck of the ram's fleece, and that her own withstanding of the divine stampede allowed Psyche to gather the golden wool. In the final picture she sees herself and Psyche toiling together against the burning sands to deliver the water to Ungit. Orual looks to the Fox to confirm what these pictures reveal:

"But how could she—did she really—do such things and go to such places—and not . . . ? Grandfather, she was all but unscathed. She was almost happy."

"Another bore nearly all the anguish."

"I? Is it possible?"

"That was one of the true things I used to say to you. Don't you remember? We're all limbs and parts of one Whole. Hence, of each other. Men, and gods, flow in and out and mingle."

"Oh, I give thanks! I bless the gods. Then it was really I—"

"Who bore the anguish. But she achieved the tasks. Would you rather have had justice?" (300-301)

Orual's love for Psyche has been transformed into an act of sacrificial substitution. The exchange that takes place between them restores Psyche to her husband and finally reveals to Orual what that divine figure had meant when he told her "You also shall be Psyche."¹¹

The scenes depicted here bear the mark of Williams's influence. The exchange between Orual and the Fox sounds very much like the conversation between Stanhope and Pauline in *Descent into Hell* which we looked at above. The Fox's description of the unity formed by men and gods describes Williams's understanding of the co-inherent nature of the universe. Written in the later years of Lewis's life, *Till We Have Faces* is in part a product of Williams's insights regarding romantic love, which clearly took root in Lewis's imagination. This influence extends even to the specific practice of substituted love as Orual takes on the suffering of Psyche. It is important to note the realism that Lewis intends to depict through his adaptation of this mythic story. Doris T. Myers sees this realism as an essential feature of the novel, noting "It cannot be overemphasized, then, that *Till We Have Faces* is not allegory, but a realistic modern novel written according to the expectations of the first half of the twentieth century" (4), further arguing that to appreciate the novel, "one must tentatively accept the story as something that really happened in a specific time and place" (5).¹² Like Williams, Lewis affirms that substituted love is a phenomenon that occurs in the world in which we live; it is not only a fictional illustration of a spiritual principle.

¹¹ For an excellent study of Orual's transformation from virtuous, yet possessive, pagan to selfless and charitable semi-divine figure through her participation in the trials and suffering of Psyche, see Hood (43-82).

¹² This point is further emphasized when Myers discusses the possibility of miracles in a pagan context: "The incredible events that Psyche relates may invite us to conclude that the novel is meant as a fantasy after all. However, we will miss the point of *Till We Have Faces* if we do not accept Psyche's story as fact—history—rather than myth or allegory" (57).

Yet Lewis's rendering of this practice blurs some of the harder lines that we find in Williams's depiction. Orual and Psyche are realistic, but distant figures in the pre-Christian Hellenistic land of Glome. Lewis gives flesh and blood to the well-known myth, but there is little to suggest that Orual's bearing of Psyche's anguish is something that the reader should seek to emulate on a personal level. Instead, the mysterious nature of Orual's participation in this suffering is something of a shadowy glimpse into the divine nature that will only fully be unveiled with the coming of Christ. This marks the outer limit—or, perhaps better, the imaginative foreshadowing¹³—of the knowledge of divinity that is available in the pagan setting that Lewis depicts. In this sense, Lewis is looking at substituted love from the other side of the crucial redemptive-historical turning point.¹⁴ There is far too much of mystery here to allow Lewis to recommend similar action to his readers. Orual bears Psyche's pain through dream-like visions, claiming that "I cannot at all say whether they were what men call real or what men call dream. And for all I can tell, the only difference is that what many see we call a real thing, and what only one sees we call a dream" (277). Lewis's rendering of substituted love is certainly consistent with, even complementary to, Williams's fictional representation, but Lewis stops short of the more radical implications for real life personal relationships. It could simply be a difference of literary style; Williams is willing to interject spiritual directives into his fiction while Lewis works in a more allusive style. Possible, yes, but as we have seen, Lewis did allude to Williams's tendency to admit into his theology what should have remained in his stories.

To understand why Lewis agrees with Williams about the reality and the effectiveness of substitution and yet seems to deny, or at least avoid, the recommendation of this practice as a viable spiritual discipline for readers, it is helpful to consider Barbara Newman's critique of Williams as a spiritual director. Newman discusses the problematic nature of the control that Williams exerted over his Companions, which did not always display the innocence and restraint that he held as an ideal.¹⁵ She wonders "if Williams' spiritual direction

¹³ Thanks to an anonymous reader for this phrase.

¹⁴ Peter J. Schakel draws out the importance of the redemptive-historical context of the pre-Christian world: "By setting the story before the time of Christ, Lewis eliminates the possibility of addressing Christianity directly. He hides what is in fact a central theme. But he does include oblique references that anticipate Christianity, through lines such as 'It's only sense that one should die for many' and 'I wonder do the gods know what it feels like to be a man'. More importantly, the emphasis on sacrifice in the story, both in the pagan worship of Ungit and the personal sacrifices of the characters, points toward the sacrifice of Christ" (289).

¹⁵ For a troubling example of one such relationship between Williams and a disciple, see *Letters to Lalage: The Letters of Charles Williams to Lois Lang-Sims*. In this instance at least,

did not presume a little too far on what he would have called the courtesy of the Omnipotence" (Newman 22). This is a caution that could easily have come from Lewis.

Lewis understood Williams, in both his fiction and his person, to communicate the spiritual breadth and depth of the natural world. Lewis was inspired enough by Williams's vision to attempt a form of imitation in his own fiction. And yet, Lewis's depiction of substituted love differs from Williams's in at least one significant regard. Williams, and the spiritual adepts he depicts, like Stanhope, gave detailed instruction about the steps involved in substitution, how they are to be carried out, and to whom they are to be directed. Stanhope's suggestion to Pauline is so difficult for her to accept because it is the proposal of an intentional act which is explicitly directed toward a supernatural result. Lewis, while always acknowledging the legitimate rationale behind substitution and the reality of its effects, does not portray it as an intentional practice that can bring about any particular kind of result. While the acts of exchange that make up the climax of *Till We Have Faces* offer Lewis's most robust affirmation of substitution and the spiritual vision of Williams's novels, they are not practices that Orual intentionally enters into. Instead, she carries Psyche's pain and suffering in visions, the significance of which she is not fully aware of, only afterward realizing that an exchange had taken place between her and Psyche. Yes, the Fox offers a Stanhope-like explanation to Orual of her experience of exchange, but this is offered as an explanation of an experience already undergone, not instructions for a practice to be carried out. Substitution functions to interpret past events which bear a supernatural and sacrificial character; it is not put forth as a spiritual discipline to be pursued and mastered. This is the level on which Lewis consistently seems to deal with substitution, both in literature and in his personal life, as we shall see. Though acknowledging the effectiveness of Williams's use of the practice, Lewis's appropriation of substitution would indicate that it is too much to presume on the mystery of God's ways to turn this principle into a technique or discipline to be practiced intentionally.

The dedication to *Till We Have Faces* reads simply "To Joy Davidman," and it is this relationship which will provide us with yet further perspective on Lewis's distinctive appropriation of substitution and support claims I have made about how it differs from Williams's practice. It is to this painful period in Lewis's life that we turn to fill out his views of substitution.

Williams clearly, intentionally or not, manipulated Lang-Sims into playing a role in his own private mythology without proper regard for her own spiritual well-being. Lindop's biography has documented the sadomasochistic elements in some of Williams's relationships with disciples.

SUBSTITUTION AND A GRIEF OBSERVED

Lewis's relationship with Helen Joy Davidman brought, as he put it, both beauty and tragedy into his life.¹⁶ Davidman was an American writer, editor, and Christian convert who had found Lewis's books helpful in the development of her faith. After an extended correspondence with Lewis, Davidman traveled to London, and eventually Oxford, in order to meet him. The friendship grew into a kind of writing partnership, and Lewis came to value Davidman for her intelligence and her humor. Davidman helped Lewis to settle on an approach for writing *Till We Have Faces*, a work which he had for years struggled to find an appropriate expression—play, narrative poem, or novel?¹⁷ The novel bears the mark of her influence, as do other books from this late period in Lewis's career.¹⁸ He helped to support Joy and her two sons, both financially and emotionally, when they moved to England after Davidman's divorce from her husband Bill Gresham. Lewis and Davidman were married in a civil ceremony on April 23, 1956 and were later married by a Church of England priest on March 21, 1957 while Davidman was in the hospital receiving treatment for cancer. The marriage brought much joy to both, but her advanced cancer meant that it was also marked by tremendous physical and emotional suffering. Though the circumstances surrounding the marriage, and the potentially mercenary component to Davidman's motivations for seeking Lewis out in the first place,¹⁹ are a source of contention for Lewis biographers, one thing is clear; when Davidman finally succumbed to her sickness on July 13, 1960, Lewis was shaken to his core.

This later period in Lewis's life gave him an opportunity to engage in and reflect upon the experiential aspect of substituted love. What had previously been a spiritual principle which Lewis had acknowledged and developed in a literary context became a matter of immediate importance. The daily suffering of his wife drove Lewis to plead with God that her pain would

¹⁶ See a letter to Dom Bede Griffiths, in which Lewis states that "a new element of beauty as well as tragedy had entered my life. Certainly God has taken me at my word—I have for many years prayed, 'Lord, take me out of myself, to seek and serve thee in others'" (qtd. in Dorsett and Hanson 288).

¹⁷ In 1955, as he was starting work on the novel, Lewis referred to *Till We Have Faces* in a letter to Katherine Farrer as "an old, 25 year old, idea" (*Collected Letters* III.590).

¹⁸ These include *The Four Loves* and *Reflections on the Psalms*. Dorsett and Hanson note that "in *The Last Battle* Tirian refers to Jill as 'comrade,' an unnatural term for Lewis, but one that Joy had continued to use ever since her earlier affiliation with the Communist Party" (290). In *A Grief Observed*, N.W. also refers to H. as "my trusty comrade" (60).

¹⁹ In his recent biography, Alister McGrath takes a fairly negative view of Davidman's motivations, arguing that she manipulated Lewis for financial support. See McGrath (320–333). For a more sympathetic, though no less critical, look at Davidman's relationship with Lewis, see Abigail Santamaria's *Joy: Poet, Seeker, and the Woman Who Captivated C.S. Lewis*.

be relieved, even if it meant taking that pain upon himself. Lewis's experiences of substituted love and his later reflections on this experience in the aftermath of his wife's death appear to be marked by the same ambivalence that characterized his earlier considerations. By examining his letters and accounts from his friends during this period we gain a sense for how Lewis's thinking about substitution developed in the lived context of physical suffering and marital loss. His pained ruminations on substitution in *A Grief Observed* reveal a continued wrestling with the metaphysics of substitution in the face of that loss.

Davidman's aggressive cancer ensured that the couple's marriage would be brief and its ending traumatic. Yet there were periods of recovery in which they were able to enjoy married life. At the beginning of the first such period, Lewis wrote to Sheldon Vanauken in November 1957 and noted that "the cancerous bones have rebuilt themselves in a way quite unusual and Joy can now walk," observing that this event coincided with an apparent attack of osteoporosis on Lewis's part. Lewis was not satisfied to view these gains and losses of health as merely coincidental: "The intriguing thing is that while I (for no discoverable reason) was losing the calcium from my bones, Joy, who needed it much more, was gaining it in hers. One dreams of a Charles Williams substitution! Well, never was a gift more gladly given; but one must not be fanciful" (*Collected Letters* III.901). Around the same time he wrote to Sister Penelope, "I was losing calcium just about as fast as Joy was gaining it, and a bargain (if it were one) for which I'm very thankful" (qtd. in Hooper 85). Though he strikes a cautious tone in these letters, it is clear that Lewis believes that something of a miraculous nature had taken place; and that miracle might even have been an act of exchange. In conversation with Nevill Coghill, it sounds as though Lewis was more confident of the substitutionary character of Davidman's recovery and his own pain. Coghill recounts questioning Lewis on this subject, remembering that "he told me of having been allowed to accept her pain. 'You mean' (I said) 'that her pain left her, and that you felt it for her in your body?' 'Yes,' he said, 'in my legs. It was crippling. But it relieved hers'" (Coghill 63). These comments reveal just how deeply Williams's influence ran with Lewis. More than an issue of literary or imaginative influence, Lewis appropriated Williams's understanding of the spiritual structure of the world and its serious consequences for interpersonal relationships.²⁰

From what we have seen, there is little doubt that Lewis was convinced of the validity of substitution as a spiritual principle, and he gave credence to

²⁰ Though we have no indication of what Davidman herself thought of these potential instances of substitution, she did hold Williams in high regard. In a 1949 letter to Chad Walsh she notes, regarding Williams's knowledge of the occult, that "with Williams you get a queer impression that it didn't all come out of books, that the man *saw* things differently" (106; emphasis original).

Williams's turning that principle into practice with his disciples. What's more, Lewis developed the notion of substitution in the visionary, yet realist, context of *Till We Have Faces*. For Lewis, the naming of acts of substitution is a matter of recognizing and acknowledging the working of a mysterious and effective reality in retrospect. Now, through his letters and conversations, we see a strong indication that Lewis recognized the operation of this mysterious exchange in his wife's sickness. Lyle W. Dorsett and Jake Hanson comment that "Lewis had been praying for months that he could take Joy's illness upon himself that she might live in health" (288), and they go on to describe the exchange that Lewis recounted to his friends.²¹ Elsewhere, Dorsett says, "Jack even asked God to allow him to become Joy's substitute" (*And God Came In* 139). Did Lewis abandon his reservations regarding the intentional practice of substitution between individuals? Was Williams finally able to count Lewis among his disciples?

Even taking into account the events surrounding Davidman's sickness and recovery, there is still no strong evidence for the case that Lewis took up an intentional practice of substituted love in Williams's sense. In fact, a close look at the available reflections from Lewis indicate that he maintained his own particular take on substitution throughout Davidman's sickness and recovery. His comments all come after Davidman has recovered, and they all reflect back on the exchange that could have, or that in fact did, take place. Lewis is looking back on his wife's recent recovery and his own declining health and speculating (with varying degrees of confidence, depending on whether he is writing to Vanauken or conversing with Coghill) on whether an exchange took place. He clearly desired, like most people who watch a loved one suffer from chronic pain, to be able to take the pain away at his own expense. However, we cannot say that this desire led him to engage in the discipline of substituted love in an intentional or methodological way. Lewis believed with Williams that substitution is a very real possibility, but he did not attempt to discern for himself how and with whom these burdens should be exchanged. Yes, we can see substitution at work in our lives in both mundane and in miraculous ways. However, Lewis does not appear to have Williams's confidence in attempting to direct such exchanges.

²¹ Regarding this issue, Dorsett has this to say: "I think that we cannot say with certainty what Lewis finally thought about substitution. Owen Barfield told me that Jack prayed to be able to take on Joy's pain, and Miss Jean Wakeman mentioned this as well. This strikes me as more a deep desire to help the woman he loved and who was in so much pain...I never found any evidence that Lewis advocated or at other times practiced 'substitutionary prayer'" (E-mail to author, October 3, 2013). The content of much of Dorsett's conversations with Barfield and Wakeman can be found in oral history interviews housed at The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

Of course, Davidman's astounding recovery did not change the fact that she was dying, and Lewis mournfully recognized that "There can be miraculous reprieve as well as miraculous pardon, and Lazarus was raised from the dead to die again" (*Collected Letters* III.1146). Davidman finally succumbed to cancer, and Lewis processed her death, in part, by writing *A Grief Observed*. This account of a husband's painful loss took the form of a journal and was initially published under the pseudonym "N. W. Clerk," referring to Davidman as "H."²² This book offers a vivid depiction of the grieving process, yes; but it is as much about the nature of the "arch-natural" and what death means for creatures who exist beyond mere biological life. It is a book which explores the intersection of the spheres, heavenly and earthly, supernatural and natural, through the experiences of loss, pain, and fear. It is a haunting book, and the presence of Charles Williams lingers in its pages:

After the death of a friend, years ago, I had for some time a most vivid feeling of certainty about his continued life; even his enhanced life. I have begged to be given even one hundredth part of the same assurance about H. There is no answer. Only the locked door, the iron curtain, the vacuum, absolute zero. "Them as asks don't get." I was a fool to ask. For now, even if that assurance came I should distrust it. I should think it a self-hypnosis induced by my own prayers. (20)

Lewis had mourned when Williams died, but his mourning was accompanied by a confidence that Williams had entered into the presence of God, and Lewis retained a felt sense of his presence.²³ With Davidman, his mourning consists of acute pain and a sense only of her absence.

Similarly, Lewis had been confident both of Williams's intentional practice of substitution and the modified, but no less real, experience of exchange that he had undergone with Davidman. Now, he questions that experience:

²² Readings of *A Grief Observed* range from the view that it is a fictional work informed by the experience of grief to the view that it is a straightforward and unstructured autobiographical account of Lewis's process of grieving. As in most cases, the truth is sure to lie somewhere in between. For an overview of some of these readings, see Cook (1:306-309). Also see Musacchio (73-84).

²³ Lewis attests to this sense of "continued" or "enhanced" life in his Preface to *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*. Lewis and the other members of the Inklings "verified for ourselves what so many bereaved people have reported; the ubiquitous presence of a dead man, as if he had ceased to meet us in particular places in order to meet us everywhere" (Preface xiv).

There's a limit to the "one flesh." You can't really share someone else's weakness, or fear or pain. What you may feel may be bad. It might conceivably be as bad as what the other felt, though I should distrust anyone who claimed that it was. But it would still be quite different. When I speak of fear, I mean the merely animal fear, the recoil of the organism from its destruction; the smothery feeling; the sense of being a rat in a trap. It can't be transferred. (25-26)

In the midst of his despair, Lewis doubts the reality of what he previously interpreted as a transfer of suffering from his wife to himself. Later, he continues in a similar vein, "And then one babbles—'If only I could bear it, or the worst of it, or any of it, instead of her.' But one can't tell how serious that bid is, for nothing is staked on it. If it suddenly became a real possibility, then, for the first time, we should discover how seriously we had meant it. But is it ever allowed?" (56). Again, Lewis is hesitant to attribute anything more than wishful thinking to the experience of substitution. This time, however, he leaves off with a question mark. In a question directed toward God, he asks not whether substitution *can* happen but whether such a thing is *allowed*. This question, Lewis believes, has an answer: "It was allowed to One, we are told, and I find I can believe again, that He has done vicariously whatever can be so done. He replies to our babble, 'You cannot and you dare not. I could and dared'" (56). The universe is structured according to the principle of exchange, and there is someone who intentionally and purposefully bears the pain of others. However, Lewis indicates that substitution is performed decisively and exclusively by Christ.

How should these denials be read? It is important to recognize that *A Grief Observed* follows Lewis's thoughts through the *process* of grief. Where he is at in the beginning—emotionally, intellectually, spiritually—is not where he ends. When the wound is freshest (in terms of the chronology of the book) Lewis's sense both of God and of Davidman is that of being cut off, blocked, ignored. This is all the more painful for the comparison that he makes with the sense of immediate presence that he felt when Williams died years before. Similarly, the experiences of exchange sensed in the life of Williams and in his own relationship with Davidman now seem like sentimental rationalizations. Later, however, Lewis realizes that he cannot fully trust his spiritual sensibility in this state of acute pain, reflecting that "You can't see anything properly while your eyes are blurred with tears" (58). As he begins to focus less on his own emotions, reactions, and his inability to feel or even accurately remember Davidman's presence and instead turns to God in praise, Lewis gradually begins to become conscious of a renewed sense that God is present to him. Through God's presence, something of Davidman is present as well. Likewise, substitution had seemed to be discredited during the darkest days of Lewis's

grief. However, with a renewed trust in God comes a renewed trust in the ability of one person to bear another's pain.

Though Lewis's conviction of the viability of substitution appears to have come through a time of intense trial, it did not come through unmodified. To the question "is it ever allowed?" Lewis now responds "It was allowed to One, we are told. [...] He replies to our babble, 'You cannot and you dare not. I could and dared.'" This contrasts with Peter Stanhope's comment in *Descent into Hell*, which we looked at earlier: "And anyhow there's no need to introduce Christ, unless you wish. It's a fact of experience." For Williams, substitution is a "fact of experience," a principle that is available for anyone to see at work in the everyday world, but which finds its ultimate expression in the revelation of Christ. For Lewis in *A Grief Observed*, substitution is something found predominantly, or even exclusively, in the work of Christ. It is something we "dare not" do. It would be a mistake to try and turn these comments from Lewis into either a prohibition against acts of substitution or a denial that any act of substitution besides that of Christ's is ever possible. What these comments do show is a marked difference in Lewis's handling of substitution from that of Williams. Williams focuses on the ability of individuals to engage intentionally and methodically in the practice of exchange; such a practice can, but does not necessarily, lead to a greater realization and appreciation of Christ's archetypal substitution. Lewis instead emphasizes the divine initiation of human substitutions, and in *A Grief Observed* he shifts focus and trust entirely onto the ability of Christ himself to carry out the exchange that he knows himself to be too weak to carry out.²⁴ It is impossible to say what Lewis's final word might have been on the type of substitution that Williams engaged in, but it is clear that Lewis was imaginatively and spiritually inspired by Williams to develop the idea in a more explicitly Christocentric direction.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the relationship between Lewis and his various literary friends, Nevill Coghill claimed that Lewis and Williams "seemed to live in the same spiritual world. I believe Williams was the only one of us, except perhaps Ronald Tolkien, from whom Lewis learnt any of his thinking" (63). Lewis

²⁴ Michael Ward helps to show how Lewis's realization of his own weakness and his imperfect love of his wife actually brings him to a place of once again being able to place trust in a gracious God: "He is a weak man whose love for his wife is tragically but truly unable to accomplish what it wants to accomplish. He would not and could not dare to bear her suffering. And this realization is humiliating. Not only has she died; now he sees that his love for her is not immortally strong. All supports fall away. He plunges down at last, after two false starts, into true dereliction. That is to say, he can now share in Christ's cross and therefore in his rising" (216).

trusted Williams as a spiritual guide, even when his ideas veered in directions that others would find easy to dismiss. For Lewis, the practice of substitution and the personality of Williams were so integrated that it did not seem a stretch to believe that he could and would actually take another's suffering upon himself. The principle became an integral feature of Lewis's most subtle and powerful novel, *Till We Have Faces*. When confronted with the distress of his wife's suffering, Lewis looked to substitution as a way of making sense of her miraculous recovery. When she died, and he passed through the most emotionally trying and spiritually turbulent period of his life, Lewis questioned and finally came to a deeper resolve about the efficacy of the principle.

For all of his willingness to learn from Williams on this point, Lewis did not appropriate substitution uncritically. While he did not deny the ability of a spiritually adept practitioner like Williams to carry the burdens of others intentionally, Lewis showed a greater reticence in his own expression of the principle. He looked to substitution as a way of interpreting events which display the mysterious and miraculous character of the exchanges that can take place in a co-inherent universe. Lewis was willing to see substitution at work in the world between individuals, but his treatment of substitution in *Till We Have Faces* and especially *A Grief Observed* indicate that he reserved his confidence in its intentional and purposeful practice for the unique case of the God-man. If Christ is the embodiment and expression of the mystery of God, as the Christian tradition claims, then his substitution, his shouldering of the world's suffering, is a sacrificial act of undoubted and unequivocal efficacy. Whatever capabilities Williams had in intentional and methodological participation and imitation of the supernatural characteristics of that sacrifice, Lewis was hesitant to try and carry the same burden.



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