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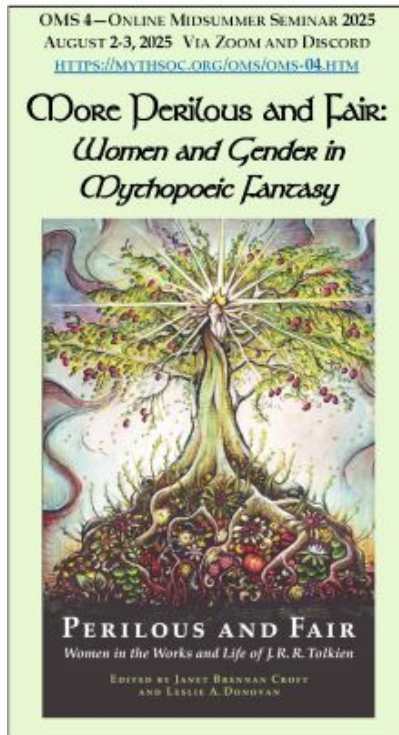
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Abstract

Cites examples of Williams's notions of coinherence and exchange in both his works and those of Lewis.

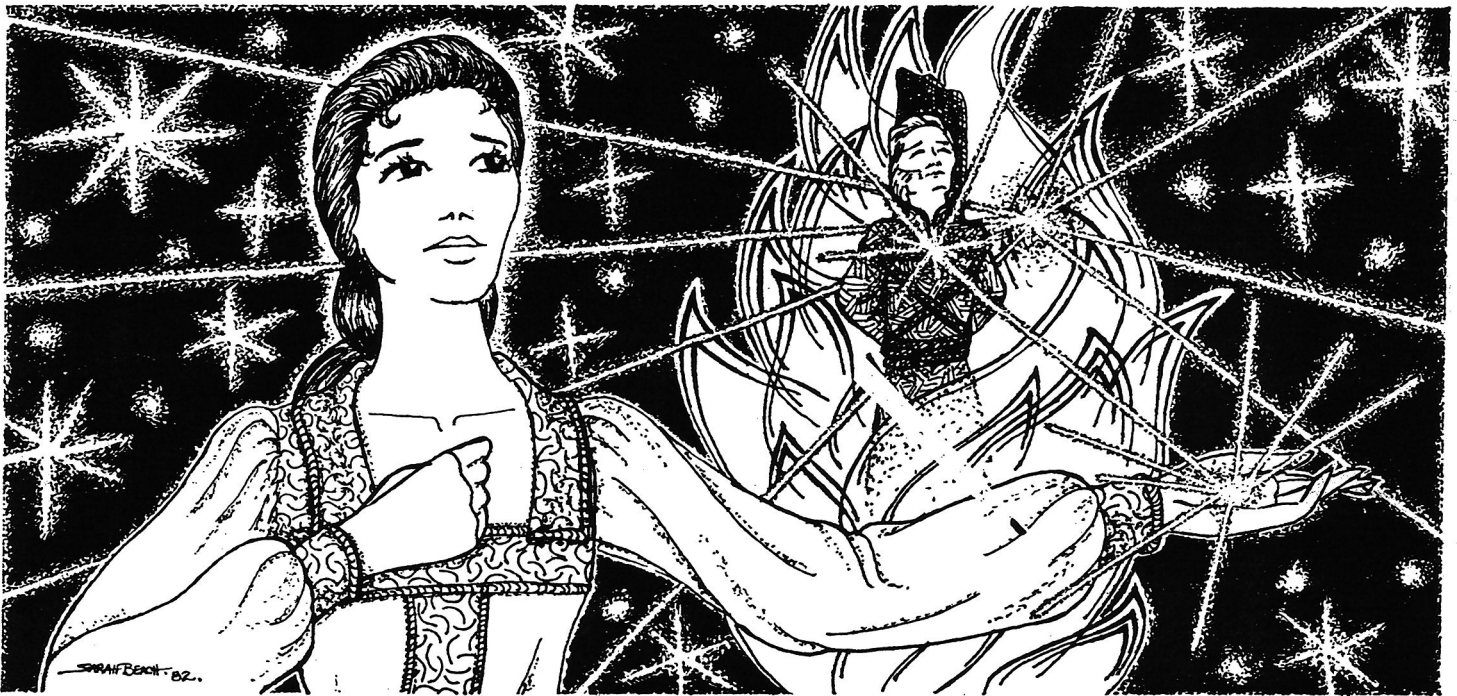
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The Excellent Absurdity: Substitution and Co-Inherence in C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams Nancy C. Hanger

"It is silly, sooth," he answered, "and dallies with the innocence of love."¹

To speak of the acts of substitution and exchange is to speak of coinherence. Because of their very nature, these glorious actions must go together; and in such union, bring about the state of mind which has been thematically sought by the writers of modern myths. This, the "Excellent Absurdity," can be traced through such acts of exchange and co-inherence in the stories and poetry of C. S. Lewis (particularly the Space Trilogy and Till We Have Faces) and Charles Williams (the Arthurian Cycle, All Hallows Eve and Descent Into Hell).

Substitution is, as would seem, the act of putting oneself in another's place, or carrying another's burden (whether visible or invisible). Exchange is of the same nature--from the gloriously mysterious exchange of the Eucharist, to the concrete exchange of money or goods in human affairs. But together, when lived in a life of exchanges, the fellowship of co-inherence enters in. This state of giving and taking, holding and being held, is seen best in C. S. Lewis' description of the household of St. Anne's in That Hideous Strength. None are servants, yet no one ranks higher than another--in the final sense of the hierarchical notion. They live not only in single acts of substitution, but also in the totality of co-inherent exchange. The author-

ity of Ransom is unmistakably absolute, but is also seen in the light of co-inherence. Here then, is the Excellent Absurdity: Ransom is needed, yet also superfluous. In The Region of the Summer Stars, Williams shows a parallel Company (perhaps autobiographical of his own experience), headed by Taliessin who, in speaking to Dinadan, acknowledges his superfluosity:

Dinadan said: "Well encountered, lieutenant (they call you) of God's new grace in the streets of Camelot."

Taliessin answered: "What should I do, calling myself a master, and falling so to P'o-l'u? ..."

Catch as catch can--but the higher caught in the lower, the lower in the higher; any buyer of souls is bought himself by his purchase; take the lieutenancy for the sake of the shyness the excellent absurdity holds."²

Lewis' Space Trilogy illustrates these themes through the character of Ransom. During his long interior dialogue on Perelandra, Ransom discovers the paradoxical co-inherence of his name--the name for a payment that delivers, an exchange. Not only is he a Ransom, but He who sent him (Maleldil) is also named Ransom--"the world's ransom, his own ransom,

well he knew."³ And yet, the excellent absurdity is still upheld. If Ransom did not succeed, another would. His was, and wasn't, the responsibility. The recognition of superfluousness freed him to perform the act of substituting himself in the fate of Perelandra against evil, and succeed.

The very theme of That Hideous Strength illustrates exchange and co-inherence in the form of matrimony: "Mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other." (p. 13) Thus set in the theme on page one, the character of Jane becomes a focus for co-inherence. St. Anne's Company carries salvation to Jane, who is in turn carried by it and carries it to her husband Mark (akin to the "theotokos" of the Virgin Mary). The name St. Anne is a clue in itself--Anne being the mother of Mary, the archetype of co-inherence in Christianity's story. The household of St. Anne's is an excellent model of what Charles Williams called the "first station" of exchange:

...those who lived by a frankness of honourable exchange...
 ...servitude itself
 was sweetly fee'd or freed by the willing proffer
 of itself to another, the taking of another to itself
 in degree, the making of a mutual beauty in exchange,
 be the exchange dutiful or freely debonair.
 (RSS, p. 156.)

The absolute freedom from hierarchy and "democracy" in this household is shown in the fact that they have no servants, yet everyone does have a place. There is no hierarchical order, yet Ransom is the Director/Pendragon. So, in an atmosphere of sheer substitution and co-inherent life, absolute freedom comes from absolute obedience. Yet, even the Director is superfluous under Maleldil Himself!

Lewis continues to expand on the theme of substitution in a more specific manner in Till We Have Faces. Here, exchange upon exchange is made, the sacrificer becomes the sacrifice, and co-inherence reigns. Orual seems to have an identity by being identified with others: "You shall also be Psyche."⁴ "I am Ungit" (p. 276). Her life consists of one substitution for another; though usually her wishes for substitution are unacceptably selfish, while she unwittingly substitutes for her sister in a correct manner. Psyche's label of the Great Offering is that of the traditional scapegoat, or paschal lamb, a pure victim to atone for the people. However, the Offering's relationship with the Brute carries echoes of Christianity in its co-inherent nature. The priest of Ungit explains its paradoxical form:

In the Great Offering, the victim must be perfect. For, in holy language, a man so offered is said to be Ungit's husband, and woman is said to be the bride of Ungit's son. And both are called the Brute's Supper. ...Some say the loving and the devouring are all the same thing. (p. 48)

As in our story, the great co-inherent mystery takes place in a god who is One, but not one. The Trinity, undoubtedly, is the well-spring of all co-inherence in any Christian myth.

Orual's wish to be substituted for Psyche as the Great Offering cannot be accepted, because of her selfish intentions. She does not yet have a face--her entire identity lies in possessing Psyche--hence, her ugliness. This offer of exchange isn't accepted, but another begins to form in the pain of Orual's side. This pain is the pain of Glome, carried by Orual, finally to be cured by her service as Queen. So, another unwitting substitution and co-inherence is made. As Orual begins to realize what had been meant by the god's "You shall also be Psyche," more obvious exchange takes place. The "impossible" tasks Ungit (or Venus) has set for Psyche to perform are unwittingly aided by Orual, in a vision. She causes the sheep to rush at her, leaving their golden fleece on bushes for Psyche to easily gather. She calls to Psyche (or herself, as it seems in retrospect) to save her from drowning. She carries the bowl of beauty from the Underworld across burning sands, instead of Psyche. Such substitution is explained to Orual by the Fox:

"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." (pp. 300-1)

Finally, in the glory of co-inherence, identity between the two sisters becomes superfluous. "You also are Psyche," takes on a true meaning now. Orual has borne and been borne:

"And Psyche, in that old terrible time when I thought her cruel...she suffered more than I, perhaps?"
 "She bore much for you then. You have borne something for her since." (p. 304)

Orual is also now truly Ungit, accepting the gift of beauty she thought she had borne for another. Through painful substitution, a life (or death) of co-inherent nature has come true for Orual.

The themes of substitution and exchange are at the very core of Charles Williams' literature--the Acts of the City are indeed these very things. All Hallows Eve deals, then, with the progressive salvation of two women through substitution and co-inherence. A constant intertwining of delightful dependence takes place: "each in turn the Holder and the Held."⁵

Lester's lessons in co-inherence begin in simple dependence upon others, such as needing Richard's handkerchief.⁶ Then, she yields to Evelyn's need of her, unpleasant though it may be for Lester.⁷ The city of London is soon seen as a visionary City in Williams' books. Jonathan's painting of Light holding, yet being held by the sun in the City, creates an interesting motif. The Acts of the City, the Body of co-inherent souls, is this very substitution that is illustrated here. The Virgin Mary is used as a perfect example of co-inherence: "Redeemed from all division in herself, whole and identical in body and and soul and spirit, she uttered the Word and the Word became flesh in her." (p. 62) Theotokos: borne by and bearing God.

Betty's "errands" in the City for Simon take on a joyous air, simply because they are for another: "her salvation was his peril." (p. 83) Equally joyous is her help for herself, a simple exchange of carefree joy: "Helping herself was almost like helping another, and helping another was very much like helping yourself." (p. 80) Helping others, however, completes the substitutive act for Betty and Lester. Lester's need of exchanged forgiveness with Betty brings her to Highgate, and also saves her from Simon, whose evil ignorance cannot see redemptive acts.⁸ "Where she had once refused to help, she was now left to need help." (p. 123) Betty, already schooled in such ways, offers immediately: "Can I do anything?" (p. 129) This phrase is an earmark of Williams--an act of exchange or substitution is about to take place. In remembering all that Lester once did to her, Betty is able to forgive and free her to enter into the Acts of the City. Lester's co-inherence is evident: "She was, and must be now, the victim of her victim." (p. 131) Forgiven, they both enter into joy--a serious laughter, a lordly loveliness. This freedom gained by a realization of the excellent absurdity of it all comes to Jonathan and Richard also, illustrating the "second station" of substitution of Williams:

Wary of much chatter, yet when they kissed
or pressed hands, they claimed and were
claimed at once,
neither ashamed of taking nor chary of
giving,

love becoming fate to dedicate souls.
(RSS, p. 156)

A false exchange of such fellowship is seen when Simon and Evelyn "smile" at each other through the barrier of death. It is, as Richard put it, blasphemy.

A grand act of substitution takes place as Lester offers her help to Betty when Simon tries to magically dissolve her mortality. The simple phrase, "Betty, if you want me I'm here" (p. 157) opens up the realm of Grace as Lester puts herself at her friend's total disposal. Simon, ignorant that he is speaking to Lester instead of Betty, proceeds with the dissolution. But Lester, secure in the act of substitution, finds herself on a frame of co-inherence: "Between standing and lying, she held and was held." (p. 159) Betty, in murmuring "Lester" (thus invoking the Eternal Name by yet another substitution), gives over all to exchange and allows Lester to trust more in her holding "frame", or Cross. The reverberations of such co-inherence are felt throughout the City.⁹ Lester's exchange broadens: "in her drowsiness a kind of vista of innumerable someones doing such things for innumerable someones stretched before her." (p. 163) The "third station" of co-inherence is thus attained:

where the full salvation of all souls
is seen, and their co-inhering...

...there men
were known each alone and none alone,
bearing and borne. (RSS, p. 157)

The joy of the Acts of the City are opened to Lester in a vision as she passes to Simon's house with Evelyn, for Evelyn's sake alone.¹⁰ The City is a Body, identified in their Acts: "For here citizenship meant relationship and knew it....What on earth is only in the happiest moments of friendship or love was now normal." (p. 189) The body of the dwarf-woman which is thus inhabited by Lester and Evelyn under the magic of Simon is an antithesis to the City's uniting and united Body: "through it they co-hered to each other but could not co-inhere." (p. 221) This body does perform a needed function, providing a means for Lester and Richard to meet at last and exchange forgiveness. (An interesting example of simple exchange occurs on the way, as Lester/the dwarf begs coins to make a phone call. Money, then, is not evil in itself but a symbol for that basic exchange from which it evolved.)

Simon's last magical act provides the medium for a last substitution. A voodoo-type doll of Betty is constructed, but Mrs. Wallingford unwittingly substitutes herself as its victim when she is stabbed by the pin: "She was being, by an operation which her own

will had in the beginning encouraged, slowly substituted for Betty." (p. 253)

The Acts of the City are completed in the death of Simon and exchange of Mrs. Wallingford for her daughter. Co-inherence in the Body, as is seen, comes from substitution, also opening the freedom and joy to perform it:

The organic body sang together;
the Acts of identity adored their Lord;
the song sprang and rang in Byzantium.
(TTL, p. 30)

An even more pointblank example of substitution occurs in Descent Into Hell, as the daily act of exchange is explained by Williams. Pauline's need of substitution is obvious from the start--she is seeing a doppelganger which incites undue worry and fear. Because of her constant fear, she cannot understand what it is to truly carry another's burden or what it is to give up her own:

"I wish I could have helped you...Why do you refuse to lean?"

"I don't," Pauline said bitterly, "but there's no--" She was on the point of saying "no help in leaning"; she recovered herself and changed it to "no need to lean."¹¹

Pauline, then, must learn to accept substitution in order to be able to ever perform the act herself. The background of John Struther as a martyr in her family is introduced--martyrdom being the quintessential substitutive and co-inherent act of mortals.

Wentworth, meanwhile, is slowly climbing towards Hell by disavowing the Republic (City) and all its unity. He "had neither admitted nor rejected this necessity, nor even questioned and been hurt by it; he had merely ignored it." (p. 76) T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding" comes to mind here:

There are three conditions which often
look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the
same hedgerow:
Attachment to self and to things and to
persons, detachment
From self and from things and from persons;
and, growing between them, indifference
Which resembles the others as death re-
sembles life.¹²

Apathy is, truly, a terrible sin. As is solitude springing from indifference, which is what Lily Sammile (Lilith) recommends for Wentworth: "It's good for man to be alone." (p. 86)¹³

The chapter "The Doctrine of Substituted

Love," is a guideline of precisely that. Stanhope explains quite plainly to Pauline:

To bear a burden is precisely to carry it instead of....You must be content to be helped. You must give your burden up to someone else, and you must carry someone else's burden. I haven't made the universe and it isn't my fault. But I'm sure that this is a law of the universe, and not to give up your parcel is as much to rebel as not to carry another's. You'll find it quite easy if you let yourself do it. (pp. 98-9)

A rather vivid description of Stanhope's actual act of receiving her fear follows, along with the point that it matters not when substitution occurs, but that it occurs at all. Hence, Pauline will be able to substitute herself for Struther's fear of martyrdom by fire through the four hundred intervening years. (And also a rather neat explanation for the Church's prayers for saints and the dead.)

Pauline is utterly changed by giving up her burden, accepting the Acts of the Republic; which allows her salvation from Mrs. Sammile's promise of freedom from fellowship of others, freedom from ever having to "do anything" for anyone again. This last notion strikes a note in Pauline, reminding her of the all too recent "glory of public exchange," (p. 111) She is now ready to help others, to enter into co-inherence through substitution. In offering to help her grandmother, Mrs. Anstruther, she opens herself to aid the suicide back to life (co-inherent life) in the City, by directing him towards London. In opening herself to joy, she readies herself to carry John Struther's burden of fear.

As Pauline sees Struther, through the eternal moment of substitution, "she herself was offered, in a most certain fact, through four centuries, her place at the table of exchange." (p. 169) Unable to speak, her doppelganger accepts the martyr's burden in a moment of co-inherent action:

...this other had done what she had desired, and yet not the other, but she, for it was she who had all her life carried a fear which was not her fear but another's, until in the end it had become for her in turn not hers but another's. (p. 170)

The joy that she had lived without (seen as her double) was now not only co-inherited to Struther, but also to herself in mutual exchange.

Wentworth and Adela, however, cannot share in such an excellent absurdity--nor can Pauline help them. She cannot learn Adela's "part"--"the lord of substitution" must carry her himself.¹⁴ Wentworth, on the other hand, doesn't

want any help of exchange at all. Indeed, by the end, he has forgotten even the simplest form--he cannot recognize a coin for what it is.¹⁵ Hell is the opposite of the Excellent Absurdity in co-inherent Acts.

Thus are the Acts of the City intertwined and rejoined by exchanges of freedom by substitution, co-inherence, and yet more substitution by that freedom. All one can do is to enter into the company of such stations (exchange, substitution, and co-inherence--as Williams divided them) with "such joyous and high-restrained obeisance of laughter."¹⁶

"Arise, shine; your light is come; the glory of the Lord is risen upon you." His voice quickened: "And you'll do it well, taking prettily and giving, but the Lord's glory, Periel, will manage to keep up with you, and I shall try."¹⁷

NOTES

1. Charles Williams, Descent Into Hell. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 100. All subsequent references to this book are from this edition, indicated by page number.
2. Charles Williams, Taliessin Through Logres, The Region of the Summer Stars. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 158). All subsequent references to these poems are from this edition, indicated by page number and the following abbreviations: TTL, Taliessin Through Logres; RSS, The Region of the Summer Stars.
3. C. S. Lewis, Perelandra. (New York: MacMillan Paperbacks, 1965), p. 148.
4. C. S. Lewis, Till We Have Faces. (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1980), p. 174. All subsequent references to this book are from this edition, indicated by page number.
5. Charles Williams, RSS, p. 157.
6. Charles Williams, All Hallows Eve. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 6. All subsequent references to this book are from this edition, indicated by page number.
7. Ibid, p. 13.
8. cf: AHE, p. 124 and p. 162.
9. cf: AHE, p. 147 and p. 162.
10. Not unlike Pauline's offer to go for Adela to see Lily Sammile in DIH. (cf: Williams, DIH, p. 203.)

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11. Charles Williams, DIH, p. 57.
12. T. S. Eliot, The Four Quartets: "Little Gidding", (New York: Harbrace, 1971), p. 55.
13. cf: Genesis 2:18--"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone.'" (New English Translation)
14. Charles Williams, DIH, p. 202-3.
15. cf: Williams, TTL, p. 63:
What said Heracleitus?--and what is the City's breath?--
dying each other's life, living each other's death.
Money is a medium of exchange.
16. Charles Williams, RSS, p. 159.
17. Charles Williams, DIH, p. 174.