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A Briefing for Briefing: Charles Williams' *Descent Into Hell* and Doris Lessing's *Briefing For a Descent into Hell*

**Abstract**
Asserts that “Doris Lessing’s naming of her book and its protagonist was both intentional and ironic, and that it acknowledges her indebtedness to the form of Williams’ fiction and her [...] futile gesture toward the Romantic amalgam of appearance and reality.”

**Additional Keywords**
Lessing, Doris. Briefing For a Descent Into Hell; Williams, Charles. Descent Into Hell
FOR YEARS I have thought it odd that no one has ever publi-cly compared Doris Lessing's Briefing For a Descent Into Hell to Charles Williams' Descent Into Hell. Who could resist the tantalizing clues of the echoed title, the male protagonist (her first) whose first name is Charles and last initial W, a Cambridge don whose personal magnetism, attested to by Rosemary Baines, is as irresistible and inexplicable as was Charles Williams' for his Oxford colleagues?1

Determined to follow these clues where they might lead, I recently re-read both books and discovered why no one had thought to compare them. Superficially they are utterly dissimilar. Williams' tale has to do with a doppelganger, a succubus, and a revenant. Its hero is a Christian poet, obviously modelled on T. S. Eliot—or perhaps Williams himself—who propounds a doctrine of "substituted love" which restates the orthodox Christian dogmas of incarnation and atonement. Lessing's "inner space fiction" derives, it would seem, from Kingsley Hall rather than Canterbury; her dogmas are of the Philadelphia Association rather than of the Holy Catholic Church. Lessing's Briefing neither refashions Williams' plot nor reincarnates his characters. The similarities of title must be accidental.

But no one who named the protagonist of a five-volume bildungsroman Martha Quest can be suspected of casual naming. And Martha, who "read like a bird collecting twigs for a nest," exemplifies Lessing's own scavenging relationship to books. "There is only one way to read," announces Lessing, "which is to browse in libraries and bookshops, picking up books that attract you, reading only those, dropping them when they bore you, skipping the parts that drag.... The book which bores you when you are twenty or thirty will open doors for you when you are forty or fifty."2 Fifty-year-old Martha filled laundry baskets with books from Jimmy Wood's 'potted library' of "Rosicrucianism and the alchemists; Buddhist books and the dozen or so varieties of Yoga...Zoroastrianism and esoteric Christianity; tracts on the I Ching; Zen, witchcraft, magic, astrology and vampirism; scholarly treatises on Sufism; the works of the Christian mystics." Following Lessing's advice, she "went through that process of ripping the heart, the pith, out of a subject, when she was ready for that subject" and "emerged" with the conclusion that "all these different faiths, or sets of ideas, were talking about the same processes, the same psychological truths. She was reading different languages, or dialects, describing the same thing. This was true of all of them from the poems of St. John of the Cross to states of mind described in the Upanishads" (The Four-Gated City, p. 488).

I believe that the laundry basket which produced Briefing For a Descent Into Hell contained Charles Williams as well as R. D. Laing, esoteric Christianity as well as science fiction. The question of literary indebtedness is complicated by Lessing's mode of acquiring facts. Compelled by her own needs and vision, she must read as Martha does, "taking a fragment here and a sentence there, and [building] them into her mind." Like Martha, she has "in fact" not read any author, "if reading means to take from an author what he intends to convey."3 But in naming her book Briefing For a Descent Into Hell and its hero Charles Watkins, Lessing was, I believe, acknowledging a particular affinity between the interests that brought her to read Williams and what she found in Descent Into Hell. However slender my justification for reading Lessing's Briefing in the light of Williams' Descent may be, I have found his book invaluable in attempting to corral that maverick of the Lessing canon. Descent Into Hell functions in a reading of Briefing much in the way that, according to Robert Scholes, the titles of certain contemporary novels function. Writing of The Lime Twig and The Unicorn, Scholes says, "Interestingly, both these works, in their titles encourage ideation by naming objects which do not appear in the narratives. There is no lime twig in Hawkes's story and no unicorn in Iris Murdoch's. Both images offer us concepts..."4

1 He was a man, according to R. J. Reilly, who "seems to have impressed his friends in a way not really susceptible of analysis." Romantic Religion: A Study of Barfield, Lewis, Williams, and Tolkien (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971), 149. Similarly, for Rosemary Baines, Charles Watkins' lecture "was a catalyst, touched a spring, something like that.... It is hard indeed to define it." Doris Lessing, Briefing For a Descent Into Hell (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 173.


5 Martha Quest, 220.
that help to organize our perceptions into appropriate structures.15 Similarly, Lessing's title encourages ideation. Descent Into Hell organizes our perception of life. It provides a referential context for defining the form or genre to which Lessing's strange book belongs. More important, it animates the thematic concerns which are rebuffed in Lessing's form. And finally, it suggests a way of defining Lessing's relation to the Romantic tradition to which Charles Williams belongs.

Most readers, coming to Briefing either from The Golden Notebook (the one Lessing novel everyone has read) or from The Four-Gated City, its immediate chronological predecessor, find it bizarre, untypical. Not only is its protagonist not the familiar Lessing woman, free or yearning to be free, he is hardly a "character" in the sense of being both fully dimensional and particular. He is anonymous and homonymous. Since Peter, Jason, Namcy's Charlie, and Benito Cereno, as several critics have noted, his adventures are psychic rather than social, following a paradigm described by R. D. Laing in The Politics of Experience.16 The reader expecting a novel comes away from Briefing as having read a play. His is the mind of a critic. His is compounded of those elements which, as Charles Williams' Battle Hill dramatic society, who cannot comprehend Peter Stanhope's latest play:

To begin with, it had no title beyond A Pastoral. That was unsatisfactory. Then the plot was incredibly loose. It was of no particular time and no particular place, and to any cultured listener it seemed to have little bits of everything and everybody put in at odd moments. The verse was undoubtedly Stanhope's own, of his latest, most heightened, and most epigrammatic style, but now and then all kinds of reminiscences moved in out of...the unconscious floated through Mrs. Parry's mind.8

Peter Stanhope, however, is well aware of the genre to which his play belongs. It is a romance, in the style of Shakespeare's last plays, as his title, cast of characters, and numerous references to Cymbeline and The Tempest make clear.

In fact, Descent Into Hall is a romance within a romance, Stanhope's play being an emblem of Williams' fiction. If Pauline Anstruther's name evokes St. Paul, it does so by way of Paulina in A Winter's Tale. Descent Into Hell is compounded of those elements which, as several critics have noted, Williams' recognition of Lillith midway through the book) for Pauline's allure; Wentworth the bad historian is contrasted to the Aston Moffat the good. Pauline's doppelganger is Adela Hunt's—the succubus who comes at Wentworth's whistle—clearly evil. Even visions have their opposites: Margaret Anstruther's dream mountain (p. 72) is a true image of Eden; Lawrence Wentworth's imagined wood a false one, as Williams' use of the conditional makes clear: "He might be back again in Eden, and she [the succubus] be Eve" (p. 85). If Frye is correct in locating the "essential difference between novel and romance...in the concept of characterisation" whereby the romanizer "does not attempt to create 'real people' so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes" (Anatomy of Criticism, p. 304), then by that criterion alone, Briefing for a Descent Into Hell—like Williams' Descent Into Hell and Peter Stanhope's Faustus—is a romance. But it stands between its opposites the romance. Charles Watkins' adventures are a psychic quest, what Douglass Bolling has called "the archetypal voyage into the core of his being."13 This quest takes place at an hallucinatory level as an actual voyage, at the psychological as a return to primal images and myths, among them the myth of Eden.12

Surrounding and competing over Charles Watkins are pairs of characters, good and bad, white and black: Dr. Y and Dr. X, Felicity and Violet. Sometimes the pairing of opposites cuts through a different dimension, as when the real and living Miles Bovey contradicts the dead hero of Watkins' fantasy, or the devoted wife and mother who is the real Felicity is mocked by the maenad of Watkins' dreams.

Williams' romance is concerned with the reparative power of fact and the conflict between fact and illusion. The facts are one and they are many; the central fact in this Christian tale is the mutual interdependence of all men, what Williams calls "co-inherence."14 We are our brother's keeper because we are one another through our common participation in the life of Christ, across time and space. Thus "the past is in the web of life" (Descent, p. 77) equally with the present and Battle Hill is a palimpsest of all the lives that have ever been lived there, from prophesy through the Wars of the Roses, to the near past when the workman whose

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11 Stanhope renames Pauline Anstruther, who is to play the Chorus, "Pereil," a portmanteau of Ariel and Perdita.
ghost haunts the pages of *Descent Into Hell* committed suicide in the house where Lawrence Wentworth now lives.

Wentworth refuses to acknowledge this Fact: he "had never acknowledged the unity" (p. 76). A historian, he has no sense of the living past, because he will not participate in the communal web of the present. His blindness to Fact is abetted by his carelessness in other facts. His mannerisms and manipulates facts in order to justify his own conclusions, thus damming himself as a scholar and paradigmizing his damnation as a human soul.

As Wentworth is willing to adjust historical facts to justify his own thesis, so he turns away from the facts about his relationship to Adela Hunt—that she is young, shallow, vain, and increasingly attracted to young Hugh Prescott—and invents a phantasm. Preferring the false Adela, his succubus, to the real, he retreats even further from the facts and his neighbors, in the system of correspondences which underlies Williams' narrative, "he had got right away from the road which was the shape of the Adam outstretched in the sleep precedent to the creation of fact, the separation of Eden, the making of things other than the self" (p. 89).

All facts are important because of the central Fact, which modifies all facts. The fact of dreads can be separated from the fact of the doppleganger's appearance because of the Fact of Substitution.

Charles Watkins has a vision, in the center of his psychic quest, of the nature of reality, a vision whose images uncannily echo Williams'. Attempting to articulate his own idea of co-inherence, Watkins first thinks of himself and his universe as "faceted" and "inner sections of the "outside" of the Crystal, the mysterious UFO which sweeps in and out of his dream adventure (p. 106). They are then "fishes in a school, cells in honeycomb, flames in fire" as he continues to grope for the appropriate metaphor. Finally he finds it in Watkins' web "this spiral fulcrum which spin like a web, every strand is linked and vibrates with every other" (p. 107). Watkins' vision is of "notes or niters of humanity" (p. 109) enclosed in a shimmering web of ecological relationship, a vision no less mystical than any Christian's. The wholeness and interdependence of all living things—this is Watkins' vision of reality. Man's tragedy lies in his inability to perceive this central Fact that "I am not this, but part of a whole composed of other human beings as they are of me" (p. 120).

In the **briefing**, which is the central episode in Lessing's inner space fiction, Merck Ury confidently predicts that "an ability to see things as they are, in their multifarious relations—in other words, Truth—will be part of humanity's new, soon-to-be-developed equipment" (p. 143). Charles Watkins, who identifies himself with all sea voyagers, historic and mythic, sees things as they are. Harassed by the doctors who want him to make distinctions between fact and fantasy, biography and romance, memory and imagination, Watkins wonders, "Why do you say so? And is more like it... It is neither or at all, it's and, and, and, and, and, and, and, and, and, and" (p. 165).

Peter Stanhope insists that he and Pauline are one "in the place of the Omnipotence" (*Descent*, p. 102). Charles Watkins says, "I think I am my friends. And they are—in the name of the Crystal. Yes. A unit. Unity." (*Briefing*, p. 171).

But while Peter Stanhope is the most respected inhabitant of Battle Hill, poor Charles Watkins is locked up in the loony bin. In Williams' romance, all facts corroborate the central Fact of Substitution, the Fact of the Unity is diagnosed as psychotic. The world of facts does not relate to the central Fact of the Unity; it opposes it. Things are seen, not as part of a whole, but as fragments (p. 128) or "facets and one at a time" (p. 142). Society, represented by Doctors X and Y, insists on "dividing off, compartmenting, pigeon-holing" (p. 142).

For Peter Stanhope, words are meaningful, just as facts are unavoidable and inexplicably bound to the central Fact. Responding to a debutante's gushing announcement that 'Nature's so terribly good. Don't you think so, Mr. Stanhope?' Peter replies, "Yes, Miss Fox. You do mean 'terribly'?" "Why, certainly," Miss Fox said. "Terribly—dreadfully—very."

"Yes," Stanhope said again. "Very. Only—you must forgive me; it comes from doing so much writing, but when I say 'terribly' I think I mean 'full of terror'. A dreadful goodness." (p. 16)

This phrase, "a terrible good," runs through *Descent Into Hell*, the words full of meaning, yet meaning precisely controlled by their identity as words. Thus Stanhope reminds Pauline, "The substantive, of course, governs the adjective; not the other way round."

The substantive" Pauline asked blankly. "Good. It contains terror, not terror good." (p. 65)

Just as there are the equivalent facts of the doppleganger and Pauline's fear, so there are equivalently real meanings for "terrible" and "good." But the fragments are related by the grammar of the central Fact. In *Briefing*, there is the Logos and there are words, and they are not related. For if the world was created with a "word" (p. 130), it was threatened by the "Master of Words" (p. 134), who is also the "God of Thieves" (p. 133) in Lessing's pannymothy, Mercury and Satan. The Eliotic refrain, "I gotta use words when I talk to you" (p. 123), jangles through Watkins' consciousness, as a summary expression of his inability to communicate the reality of his perceptions to hearers who will their own deafness. The world of *Briefing* is anticipated by Martha in *The Four-Gated City*:

"[Society] is an organism which above all is unable to think.... Anything new, whether hostile or helpful, must be stunned into immobility or at least wrapped around with poison or a cloud of distorting colour.... The process is accomplished, in this society, through words. (p. 430)

By a perverse process, words come to define reality. How is the patient Charles Watkins to know which is real life, which his fantasy? "You'll have to take my word for it, I'm afraid," the doctor tells him: "If I did have to, I'd be afraid," Watkins answers. "I can't take words for anything. Words come out of your mouth and fall on the floor. Words in exchange for? Is that it? Your dreams or your life. But it is not or, that is the point. It is an and. Everything is your dreams and your life." (pp. 167-68)

Because words distinguish between either or, and they are lies. So in her own voice, Lessing has doubted the veracity
of words. Looking at a completed fiction, she says, the writer must be dissatisfied:

How little I have managed to say of the truth, how little I have caught of all that complexity; how can this small neat thing be true when what I experienced was so rough and apparently formless and unshaped. ("On the Golden Notebook," p. 21)

I have said that the form of Descent Into Hell is a romance within a romance. In those terms, Briefing for a Descent Into Hell can be said to be a romance within an anti-romance. The elements of romance enumerated by Frye and exemplified in both Stanhope's play and Williams' fiction are all present in Charles Watkins' fantasy. But while the romantic elements of Stanhope's play are echoed and magnified in Williams' fiction, which places and judges its characters at least in part according to their response to Stanhope's play, Watkins' romance is denied admission to the surrounding world of the frame fiction. Announcing that he is Sinbad, Jason, Jonah, Odysseus, he is informed that he is deluded, that he is "Professor Charles Watkins, 15 Acacia Road, Brink, Near Cambridge" (p. 163). Remembering his Edenic interlude in Yugoslavia, he is assured that he has never been in Yugoslavia.

Williams' vision of the web of life in Descent Into Hell is realized and activated by Peter Stanhope's practice of the doctrine of substituted love. There is a correspondence, as R. J. Reilly has remarked, between the nature of reality and its manifestation in nature (Romantic Religion, p. 154). Co-inherence is asserted by Charles Watkins no less vehemently than by Charles Williams, but it is not verified in his experience. Words express meaning for Williams, diffuse and fragment it for Watkins. As Charles Huttard reminds us in his essay on Williams, the opposite of co-inherence is incoherence. Watkins' Unity is a mass of "fragments" in the world outside his fantasy (p. 128). His words are interpreted by that world as incoherent gibberish. Descent Into Hell is centrally located in the Romantic epistemology. In a recent revaluation of Romanticism, all contributors to the symposium agreed that "the reconciling, synthetic imagination is the common denominator of Romanticism." For a Romantic, the exterior world is an "objective structure" of reality, and the aesthetic act is an imaginative perception of correspondences between things and their ideas. Williams' theology is romantic, as his critics point out, precisely because "the image was central for him .... The connection between image and what is imaged is that

15 Reilly, op. cit., 55.
17 "Romanticism Re-examined," in Romanticism Reconsidered, 113.

parting was a fact; all facts are joyous; therefore parting was joyous" (Descent, p. 205). Truly and essentially, whatever is is right. What Stanhope calls "holy imagination" (p. 101) is simply seeing things as they are; and although poets may be superfluous in Salem, the City of Fact and of our God, they may fitly write songs for the redeemed to sing (p. 212).

Charles Watkins' vision of the Unity, the shimmering web, is an equally Romantic statement of the nature of reality. But not only in Briefing for a Descent Into Hell is this vision a dream vision, in the dual sense of fantasy and wish. Anna Wulf dreams of "an enormous web of beautiful fabric" (The Golden Notebook, p. 256), which is the globe on which we live. "The colours are melting and flowing into each other, indescribably beautiful so that the world becomes whole, all one beautiful glittering colour." Martha Quest continually returns, through her five-volume life, to the knowledge that "people in any sort of connection, link, connection, make up a whole" (The Four-Gated City, p. 211). But Martha's vision is contradicted by "the real truth" that "everything declined and frayed and came to pieces in one's hands ... a mass of fragments" (The Four-Gated City, p. 337). And Anna's vision "was slowly dissolving, disintegrating and flying off into fragments, all through space, so that all around me were weightless fragments drifting about, bouncing into each other and drifting away. The world had gone, and there was chaos" (The Golden Notebook, p. 256).

Lessing's novels make the Romantic gesture unsupported by the Romantic faith in correspondences. Like the Victorians of whom J. Hillis Miller has written in The Disappearance of God, Lessing perceives a world in which "what once was a unity, gathering all together, has exploded into fragments. The isolated ego faces the other dimensions of existence across an empty space. Subject, objects, words, other minds, the supernatural—each of these realms is divorced from the others, and man finds himself one of the 'poor fragments of a broken world.'" But I believe Doris Lessing's naming of her book and its protagonist was both intentional and ironic, that it acknowledges her direct indebtedness to the form of Williams' fiction and her uncontrollable but futile gesture toward the Romantic amalgam of appearance and reality. For Northrop Frye, the romance is "naturally a more revolutionary form than the novel" which depends on "the framework of a stable society" (Anatomy of Criticism, p. 305). Rejecting its apparent stability, Williams proposes in his romance to revolutionize secular society with the certainties of Christian dogmas; deprived both of those certainties and of even the apparent, if specious, stability of society, Lessing pushes her romance beyond revolution to anarchy. She is Frye's ultimate romancer, who "deals with individuality, with characters in vacuo .... Something nihilistic and untameable is likely to keep breaking out of [her] pages" (Anatomy of Criticism, p. 305). For nihilism, as Hillis Miller trenchantly observes, "is one of the possible consequences of romanticism" (Poets of Reality, p. 1).