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## Online Winter Seminar



### Online Winter Seminar

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Via Zoom and Discord

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### Abstract

Discusses Williams's ideas of exchange and coinherence in relation to community, particularly church. Argues that Williams's works (fiction and non-fiction) exhibit not only a theology of romantic love "but also an ecclesiology and sacramental system."

### Additional Keywords

Coinherence in Charles Williams; Williams, Charles—Church; Williams, Charles—Ecclesiology; Williams, Charles—Theology; Lisa Cowan

# EXCHANGE, COMPLEMENTARITY, CO-INHERENCE: ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY IN CHARLES WILLIAMS

SISTER MARY ANTHONY WEINIG

Exchange, complementarity, correspondence, bearing one another's burdens, substitution, co-inherence--the idea that each of these terms approaches is not just a recurrent theme or an underlying principle, but a total context in which all of Charles Williams' writings have their real significance. He comes at the notion from all sorts of angles, stressing its "naturalness" in preparation for claiming it as a means of transcendence of the merely natural order, and as a way of actualizing the articles of the Apostles' Creed that deal most literally with human relationships and with the divine reality they are analogues for: the communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins.

William's all-encompassing universe is one created and redeemed. What is created by the all-loving Father is good--hence the Way of Affirmation predominates over the *via negativa* in Williams' exhortatory mode. What is redeemed through that exemplar of co-inherence, the incarnation (and death and resurrection) of the all-compassionate Son of God and our brother is lifted to a new plane of being. On this level of grace, the gift of the Holy Spirit, mankind participates in, co-inheres in divine life. The community of the saved, the Church, is modeled upon the life of the Trinity and its mutual co-inherence, and the interrelationships of the human community, insofar as they are graced, have a supernal dimension as well as an existence on the level of human acts. And here there is a sacramental quality, a property of signs signifying higher reality, and even bringing about or enabling us to plug into what they signify, that Williams tries to show as operative in his symbolic fictions.

We are confronted in Williams, to a greater extent than is often credited, not only with a "theology of romantic love" which Mrs. Shideler writes of so well, but also with an ecclesiology and a sacramental system. Williams' personal orientation was profoundly "Church" (Alice Mary Hadfield's Introduction to Charles Williams, 1959, makes this very clear). It was way of life and category of thought; it was the stance from which he viewed experience and relationships; it was the source of order and frame of reference for his attempts to understand and to explain what came into his ken. His assumptions are those of a member of a community of believers. He does not "preach" them in his novels; he simply takes for granted that they are recognized. Sometimes he states directly in his non-fiction prose his broad view of co-inherence.

See for instance the postscript to The Descent of the Dove (1939):

At the beginning of life in the natural order is an act of substitution and co-inherence. A man can have no child unless his seed is received and carried by a woman; a woman can have no child unless she receives and carries the seed of a man--literally bearing the burden. It is not only a mutual act; it is a mutual act of substitution. The child itself

for nine months literally co-inheres in its mother; there is no human creature that has not sprung from such a period of such an interior growth. (p. 212)

This passage goes on to talk about another co-inherence "in an ancestral and contemporary guilt," about baptism and confirmation. (The page reference is to the Collins paperback.)

A 1941 pamphlet, "The Way of Exchange," which Anne Ridler includes in the Image of the City and Other Essays (1958) is particularly clear:

If this principle of exchange, substitution, and co-inherence (inhering in each other) is at all true, then it is true of the whole nature of man. If it is true, then we depend on it altogether--not as a lessening of individuality or moral duty but as the very fundamental principle of all individuality and of all moral duty . . . . So great a business of exchange and substitution fills the phrase 'bear ye one another's burdens' with a much fuller meaning than is generally ascribed to it. But that fuller meaning is no less practical than the usual meanings of being sympathetic and doing exterior acts 'of kindness and of love'. It is very proper that they should be done. But that is because we ought to be 'members one of another'--*membra*, limbs, not members of the same society. Christians are not members of a club. Men and women are not members of a club; they are 'members' of mankind, which is not a club. From childbirth to those (in Dante's phrase) 'adult in love', there is but one Nature. That Nature is not divided from grace; it is indeed (let it be said with submission to the theologians) the nature of grace. The difference, in that sense, is only a difference of power. . . .

Compacts can be made for the taking over of the suffering of troubles, and worries, and distresses, as simply and as effectually as an assent is given to the carrying of a parcel. (pp. 150-152)

Sometimes Williams cloaks or embodies his perception poetically as in his Arthurian long poems, especially The Region of the Summer Stars (posthumous 1948):

Grounded so in the Acts and pacts of the Empire,  
doctrine and image . . .  
. . . . were the wise companions.

They measured the angle of creation; in three  
degrees  
along the hazel they mounted the mathematics  
of the soul,  
no wisdom separate but for the convenience of  
naming  
and the claiming by the intellectual art of  
its part

in the common union. So, at the first station,  
 were those who lived by a frankness of honourable exchange,  
 labour in the kingdom, devotion in the Church, the need  
 each had of other; this was the measurement and motion  
 of process--the seed of all civil polity among Esquimaux or Hottentots, and in any turbulent tribe  
 the ceasing of strife; . . .  
 . . . 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; duty so and debonair freedom mingled,  
 taking and giving being the living of largesse, and in less than this the kingdom having no saving.

The Company's second mode bore farther the labour and fruition; it exchanged the proper self  
 and wherever need was drew breath daily in another's place, according to the grace of the Spirit  
 'dying each other's life, living each other's death'.  
 Terrible and lovely is the general substitution of souls  
 the Flesh-taking ordained for its mortal images  
 in its first creation, and now in Its sublime self  
 shows, since It deigned to be dead in the stead of each man.  
 This to be practised the hidden contemplatives knew  
 throughout the Empire, and daily slew and were slain;  
 this to be practised the whole Company believed and gently and sweetly received in the shining air  
 even at Camelot; . . . .

Few--and that hardly--entered on the third station, where the full salvation of all souls is seen, and their co-inhering, as when the Trinity  
 first made man in Their image, and now restored by the one adored substitution; . . . .  
 (pp. 37-39)

Sometimes, and here he seems most extravagant, Williams employs myth of his own devising, as in the novels. Incidentally, these further exemplify the web of interdependence by their links with and borrowings from a wide range of lore and letters. The Grail, the Tarot figures, the neo-Platonic archetypes move along in their own grooves, but reassert the order which must govern our concerns and the ways of giving which bring it about. Charles Moorman makes some useful observations and distinctions in the last chapter of Arthurian Triptych (1960):

The language of myth proceeds simultaneously on two levels of discourse [the symbolic and the real], using the terms of both indiscriminately. . . . [Something similar] is discernible in the structure of metaphorical language. The nonsacramentalist poet states his point and then proceeds to illustrate it in metaphorical terms. The sacramentalist poet, on the other hand, can make an identification of symbol and object so complete that the dialectic of the poem may proceed in either sym-

bolic or denotative terms, in the language of either vehicle or tenor.

Charles Williams finds in the Arthurian myth an "objective correlative" perfectly adapted to his particular conceptions of the nature of society and religion. . . . by placing his main emphasis on the Grail quest section of the myth and by envisioning the whole myth as the story of a civilization destroyed by its failure to act upon religious rather than secular values, Williams is able to identify the failures of the Arthurian civilization with those of his own . . . expressing his concern at the dissolution of religious values in his own time. The themes of Williams' re-made Arthurian myth thus stem from and are reapplicable to contemporary problems. It is clear that Williams could never have succeeded in expressing these themes directly in terms of a contemporary setting; his early novels, it seems to me, are partial failures for just this reason. (pp. 150, 151-152)

This is not the place to pass judgment on the quality of the novels, but simply to point out the method in Williams' symbolic narratives. In content, the Descent into Hell is of course the clearest example of the principle of exchange, but in all the order which is restored is that of the community Williams has described more explicitly elsewhere.

A very rich field for discovering Williams' bent and resolution is his analysis and interpretation of the work of others. In formal studies and odd essays his reading is both revealing and idiosyncratic. His treatment of Dante is well known. Williams' at-homeness in the polysemous structure goes without saying. The links he forges with lesser poets may be subtler but are no less meaningful. Coventry Patmore, for instance, is not given sustained attention anywhere in Williams' critical prose, but his name recurs constantly, as if Williams believes that we are (of course) acquainted with the Victorian poet of nuptial love. Williams' own early poems have their uxorious aspects, but it is probably Patmore's reiterated dictum that the love of man and woman in marriage is an analogue for the relation of Christ to the Church that most gripped Williams. For years Williams worked side by side at Oxford University Press with Frederick Page, an ardent enthusiast and a serious student of his theory and practice.<sup>1</sup> We could assume that some of Page's interest in Patmore would rub off on Williams, or find a willing sharer, even without the following unpublished letter to the biographer of Patmore's daughter:

Twelfth Night, 1915

Dear Mother St. Ignatius,

You are quite welcome to keep those Patmore essays you have: I am sure you would let me have them back again if I had any opportunity of printing them. But I care as little to make a noise on Patmore's behalf as he did on his own: it is enough to impregnate Williams, and to reinforce your pleasure in him, and anybody else's whom a similar chance brings in my way.

Pray believe me to be yours very sincerely,  
 Fred. Page<sup>2</sup>

The gentle Williams has not too much in common with Patmore the autocrat of the preceding generation, but shared views on love are great levelers. Alice Meynell, whom Patmore had worshipped in his last years (d.1896), was also a friend of Frederick Page, and helped the young Williams to get his first book of poems published (The Silver Stair, 1912). John Heath-Stubbs regards Williams as "belonging

to the tradition of Christian transcendentalism in English poetry--the great tradition of Spenser, Vaughan, the later Wordsworth and Coleridge, and Coventry Patmore<sup>3</sup> and adds that Williams' "outlines of Romantic Theology" aroused doubts like those leading to Patmore's suppression of *Sponsa Dei*, an unpublished work discussing mystical theology in terms of nuptial imagery. Williams' early poems, as a glance down the list of title in *Poems of Conformity* (1917), *Divorce* (1920), *Windows of Night* (1925) will show, are more churchly than erotic.

For Williams the fullest earthly realization or model of community seems consistently throughout his writing life to be Church, not necessarily triumphant, but potential, under attack, falling short it may be, though always striving for order and dependent upon mutual self-giving. His ecclesiology is of a Church *in via*, Church as people, whose ritual truly expresses their approach to the truly transcendent.

<sup>1</sup> See his *Patmore: A Study in Poetry* (London: Oxford U. Press, 1933).

<sup>2</sup> Page also edited Coventry Patmore, *Courage in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Oxford, 1921). The original of this letter is in Boston College Library's Patmore collection.

<sup>3</sup> *British Book News Supplement*, #63 (1955), p. 15.



# ORIGIN OF THE NAME "NARNIA"

ALBERT A. BELL, JR.

One of the most satisfying things about the Chronicles of Narnia is that the names fit so well with the mood and characters of the story. The bumbling giant Wimbleweather, the audacious mouse Reepicheep, the gentle faun Tumnus, the sinister Fenris Ulf, and all the rest seem made for their names or their names made especially for them. Even the name "Narnia" itself has a lilting, other-worldly quality about it, as is appropriate for this other world, which is simply somewhere else. Where did Lewis get the name? Charles A. Brady, some twenty years ago, theorized that "the name seems to echo both Angria and Narns."<sup>1</sup> But, as Marjorie E. Wright was the first to recognize<sup>2</sup>, the name "Narnia" is actually taken from the ancient Latin literature which Lewis had studied since childhood and which he loved so deeply. This fact, however, does not seem to have become widely known. Clyde Kilby refers to Wright's observation in a footnote<sup>3</sup>, but Lewis' use of Latin literature as a source deserves more attention, for he draws from authors other than Livy (the only one mentioned by Wright) and he draws more than just the word "Narnia" from these ancient writers.

Lewis' familiarity with classical literature is apparent to anyone who even glances at *Till We Have Faces*, a retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche found in the second-century Latin writer Apuleius. But his study of Latin was lifelong. He tells us in *Surprised by Joy* that he began studying the language at home with his mother, who died when he was about nine. He continued his work in school and at Malvern "rapidly found my feet in Latin and English" (p. 58). He won a classical scholarship to Malvern College in 1913 and in 1917 entered University College, Oxford, in classics.

He admits in *Surprised by Joy* (p. 144) that he reached his late fifties "without ever reading one word of Caesar," but his acquaintance with the other major Latin writers is obvious. On pp. 38-39 of *Joy*, for example, he alludes to Cicero and Martial. The references to Martial is of particular interest because in one of his poems Martial talks about

"Narnia, girded by a stream, white with its sulphurous eddies, thou whose twin peaks are scarce to be scaled" (7.93). This description is especially noteworthy because in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* the White Witch tells Edmund he can find her castle "between those two hills."

Other references to Narnia (modern Narni, about fifty miles north of Rome) appear in the works of Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 3.113; 31.51), Pliny the Younger (*Epistles* 1.4), Tacitus *Annals* 3.9, and Livy 10.10; 27.9; 27.50; 29.15). The last three passages in Livy occur in the narrative of Hannibal's war against Rome, a section which British schoolboys of Lewis' generation knew all too well. In 27.50 Livy describes "two horsemen from Narnia, who had taken part in the battle," a phrase which sounds like something straight out of the Chronicles.

It does not diminish Lewis' achievement to call attention to the origin of the name of one of his finest works. It simply makes us aware of the man's erudition. Lewis was indeed a well-read, even a bookish, man. It was inevitable that things he had read and perhaps consciously forgotten should find their way from his subconscious through his pen into his stories. The fact that the name "Narnia" has taken on a new meaning and existence which totally eclipses its origin is a measure of Lewis' genius.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Finding God in Narnia," *America* 96 (Oct. 27, 1956), 104.

<sup>2</sup> "The Cosmic Kingdom of Myth: A Study in the Myth-Philosophy of Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien" (Ph. D. dissertation, Univ. of Illinois, 1960), p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> *The Christian World of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 121n.