1983

Ways of Passage: An Approach to *Descent Into Hell*

M. E. Pitts

*Western Kentucky University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore](https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore)

Recommended Citation

Available at: [https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol10/iss2/3](https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol10/iss2/3)
Ways of Passage: An Approach to *Descent Into Hell*

**Abstract**

Compares ways of descending into Hell described in Silvestris’s *Commentary* with those in Williams’s *Descent Into Hell*.

**Additional Keywords**

Hell in Charles Williams; Silvestris, Bernardus. Commentary on the First Six Books of the Aeneid—Relation to Descent Into Hell; Vergil. Aeneid—Influence on Descent Into Hell; Williams, Charles. Descent Into Hell—Relation to Aeneid; Sarah Beach; John Schimanski
Ways of Passage: 
An Approach to Descent Into Hell 
M.E. Pitts

Of Charles Williams’ familiarity with early Christian writers there can be no doubt. In Witchcraft he refers to the Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great, to The City of God of St. Augustine, to various works of St. Thomas Aquinas, and to the career of Lucius Apuleius, an early writer on sorcery. The Image of the City includes reviews of translations of St. Augustine’s Confessions and Athanasius’ The Incarnation of the Word of God, as well as essays on the doctrine of exchange, on hierarchy, and on Arthurian mythology. Quite likely, then, Williams was familiar with the works of the twelfth-century Christian poet and commentator Bernardus Silvestris, either through his own reading or through his association with C. S. Lewis, who devotes several pages in The Allegory of Love to this leader of “the poets of the school of Chartres.” Indeed, the four methods of descending into hell enumerated in Silvestris’ Commentary on the First Six Books of the Aeneid parallel so closely what Williams accomplishes in Descent into Hell that the two invite comparison. The four methods described by Bernardus are as follows:

the first is natural, the second is virtuous, the third is sinful, the fourth is artificial. The natural descent is the birth of man: for by it the soul naturally enters this fallen region and thus descends to the underworld and thus recedes from its divinity and gradually declines into vice and assents to pleasures of the flesh; this is common to everybody. The second descent is through virtue, and it occurs when any wise person descends to mundane things through meditation, not so that he may put his desire in them, but so that, having recognized their frailty, he may thoroughly turn from the rejected things to the Creator of creatures. In this manner, Orpheus and Hercules, who are considered wise men, descended. The third is the descent of vice, which is common and by which one falls to temporal things, places his whole desire in them, serves them with his whole mind, and does not turn away from them at all. We read that Eurydice descended in this way. Her descent, however, is irreversible. The fourth descent is through artifice, when a sorcerer by necromantic operation seeks through execrable sacrifice a conference with demons and consults them about future life.

Careful examination of Williams’ novel reveals striking similarities between these ways of passing into hell and the means by which Williams’ characters come in contact with hell, which is, for them, isolation, alienation, and illusion.

The first descent, the way of nature, is shared by all people. According to Bernardus, those who descend after being born actually descend twice, as did Aeneas, “since everyone descends once through nature.” Bernardus refers to theologians who “divide the world into two parts: superior and inferior,” or aplanen, “paradise,” and inferos, “the underworld.” Like Williams, he presents a concept of hell both concrete on one level and figurative on another; and in Bernardus’ scheme, everyone descends the first time in this first manner. Williams presents a fallen world whose characters’ descent through nature is interwoven with the other ways...
of passage, as we shall see.

The second method of descent, through virtue, is exemplified in the novel by Peter Stanhope and by Pauline Anstruther. Peter Stanhope is clearly the “wise person” who, by meditation, “descends to mundane things . . . so that, having recognized their frailty, he may thoroughly turn from the rejected things to the invisible things and acknowledge more clearly in thought the Creator of creatures.” Metaphorically, Peter “descends,” for he does come in contact with Williams’ conception of hell; and, like Christ, he is willing to bear another’s burden in his descent, for he tells Pauline of the “doctrine of substituted love”:

if you will be part of the best of us, and live and laugh and be ashamed with us, then you must be content to be helped. You must give your burden up to someone else, and you must carry someone else’s burden, . . . and not to give up your parcel is as much to rebel as not to carry another’s.5

Stanhope—significantly named Peter and fulfilling the Biblical allusion to the “rock” as well as the role of Peter as representative of Christ—is with Pauline on the night her grandmother sends her out into the road near Wentworth’s house, for Pauline telephones him for reassurance. Pauline’s contact with hell comes when she goes into the road and, isolated and afraid, meets the hanged man, but is able to say to him, “Go in peace!” (p. 176)—something she can say only after she has received Stanhope’s counsel. Then when she encounters her tormented ancestor, Pauline is able to say, “Give it to me, John Struther,” and to hear her ancestor, over the span of four hundred years, say, “I have seen the salvation of my God” (p. 170). Pauline’s contact with hell—with isolation and alienation—is, of course, her own; but Peter Stanhope is the one who has insisted that she offer to take her ancestor’s burden. Then as Pauline returns home from her terrifying but enlightening experience, she meets Stanhope, who has come out into the night to ask, “It’s done, then?” (p. 173). By both teaching and observing the doctrine of substituted burdens, then Stanhope in effect descends with Pauline, shares her experience, and saves her from her own terror.

Pauline’s actual encounter with her terror and separation—which constitute hell—is especially dramatic. Like Stanhope, she experiences her descent—and her survival and awakening to joy—through virtue. Like the Biblical Saul, who became Paul, she has an encounter in the road. The Biblical Saul, living in darkness, had to experience terror to achieve enlightenment and to become Paul; similarly, Pauline, living in fear and darkness, must experience terror and isolation and must encounter a figure from another world before she can find peace and joy and enlightenment. Having given of herself to the hanged man (with Stanhope’s help), Pauline discovers that her action has “opened to her the City itself, the place of the present and all the past” (p. 169). Then when she has taken the burden of her ancestor, she can face the doppelganger without fear:

She whirled on the thing she had so long avoided, and the glorious creature looked past her at the shouting martyr beyond . . . One element coordinated original and translation: that element way joy. Joy had filled her that afternoon, and it was in the power of such joy that she had been brought to this closest propinquity to herself . . . (p. 171)

Now Pauline can understand the meaning of her descent: “. . . her incapacity for joy had admitted fear, and fear had imposed separation. She knew now that all acts of love are the measure of capacity for joy . . .” (p. 171). Looking back on the immolation of her ancestors, Pauline smells the smoke and again hears his cry of acceptance, and “He dead and she living were made one with peace. Her way was haunted no more” (p. 173), for “the vision of herself had closed with herself” (p. 180). “To descend to the underworld is easy,” says Bernardus, “but it is difficult to return;” still, three kinds of people return—“Those whom Jupiter loves, those whom virtue raises high, and those who are demigods.” (Silvestris, p. 56.) Jupiter (“father of law,” “helping father,” and “universal strength”) is reputed, according to Bernardus, to love especially “those persons whom he has drawn unconquered from temporal things, such as Paul.” (Ibid.) Although Pauline has almost doubted on the road to Wentworth’s, she has experienced, as did the Biblical Paul, “The Tryst of the Worlds.” As a virtuous person she has descended and has emerged triumphant, joyful; like Paul, she has been “drawn unconquered from temporal things.”

But the way of vice remains—vividly portrayed through Wentworth and Adela. Wentworth, of the followers of vice, most certainly places his trust in things temporal. As he fears aging and desires Adela, but loses her to Hugh, Wentworth is drawn into an abyss along a rope which seems to be the very rope used by the hanged man. And he discovers an Adela of form but not of spirit. As Wentworth becomes the slave of “the complete creation that was his own” (p. 88), he finds himself unable to “conceive a way of coming that, sooner or later, she did not fulfill” (p. 131). Falling more and more under the control of his own creation, Wentworth chooses this Adela of physical pleasures and rejects the City: “. . . he would have a world in which no one went to the city” (p. 87). So absorbed is he in this succubus that he refuses to recognize the real Adela when she comes to his door. He half drags the real Adela into the road; and “as if in that effort he had slid farther down the rope of his dream, when he returned he was changed” (p. 199). By the end of the novel Wentworth, hardly recognizable now, anticipates “the last supper” (p. 215) while his Adela grows pale and weak. Then he sees the rope below him, and finally Wentworth is drawn into the complete hell, where “the little flames licked his soul, but they did not come from without . . .” (p. 221). Like Eurydice in Bernardus’ account, Wentworth is inescapably damned.

Adela, too, experiences her hell through vice, for her trust is in things temporal—in gaining fame, in controlling others. Asking Pauline to speak with Stanhope so that she can continue in his play and receive recognition, Adela says that she is concerned with others’ benefits, but Pauline asks Adela to admit the truth (p. 185). In her selfishness, Adela would neither revolt not obey nor compromise; she would deceive. Her admission to the citizenship of Gomorrah depended on the moment at which, of those four only possible alternatives for
the human soul, she refused to know which she
had chosen (p. 185).

When Adela considers marrying Hugh, her decision is to
"assent," but to "see to it that chance" will never assent (p.
185). Even when, in her terror at "The Opening of Graves," Adela runs to Wentworth's house, she searches for a person who can "restore her to her own valuation of herself" (p. 197). As she stands looking at Wentworth, knowing that he will not rescue her, "Gomorrah close[s] itself against her . . . " (p. 198); and Adela, in an ironic opposite of Pauline's triumphant union with her other self, sees, "stretched forward in the light, her own face, infinitely perfected in sensual grace and infinitely emptied of all meaning, even of evil meaning" (p. 199). Finally Adela, in her illness, is unable to give her burden to Pauline, nor is she able to recognize the unselfishness of Pauline's motives (p. 204). Adela is caught in a living hell of separation—a hell that she has devised by placing her whole trust in temporal values.

Of the way of artifice necromancy—the real practitioner is obvious: Lily Sammille, eventually revealed as Lilith (p. 204). When Pauline needs advice, Lily reaches out to her; but only after Pauline has found her strength in substituted love does Lily offer the impossible: "Give me your hand . . . You'll never have to do anything for others any more" (p. 110). Pauline, of course, recognizes this gesture as "the last touch, and false . . . " (p. 110). Not surprisingly, though, Lily is the one to whom Adela turns in her illness, so that Adela is almost drawn into necromancy. In Pauline's last contact with Lily, after she has sought the old woman at Adela's request, the artificer offers to "cure . . . anyone and everyone"; in a chant, she offers "Anything, everything . . . " (p. 209). But the collapse of the old shed by the cemetery brings the end of Lily, the artificer, who offers hell in the guise of heaven; Lilith's role in the novel is finished.

After the descents of virtue, of vice, and of artifice have been presented through Peter Stanhope and Pauline, through Wentworth and Adela, and through Lily, Williams returns the reader, near the end of the novel, to the way of nature. Earlier in the novel, Stanhope has pointed out to Pauline that she is to become one of "a few" who understand the doctrine of substituted burdens, of substituted love. After all, "birth into a fallen world" is a condition of us all. After the performance of Stanhope's play, a number of people become ill; Pauline is hustled away to London by an uncle who apparently sees her as more of a burden than a creature of joy; and Pauline remembers her experiences as one remembers a dream, a vivid dream of separation and search. She had been, it seemed, looking for a long while for someone, or perhaps some place, that was necessary to her. . . . In the dream she had played hide-and-seek with herself in a maze made up of the roads of Battle Hill, and the roads were filled with many figures who hated—neither her nor any other definite person, but hated . . . . It was the hate of those men and women who had lost humanity in their extreme love of themselves amongst humanity. They had been found in their streets by the icy air of those

moutain peaks of which she had once heard her grandmother speak, and their spirits had frozen in them. (pp. 189-190)

These people, subject to the operations of the fallen world and unaware of what Peter Stanhope and Pauline have discovered, live in their own hell of separation from one another, from the City, from God; they are ill or they are isolated, and their condition is the way of nature.

Concerned, like Adela, with temporal things, yet unwilling to make a commitment either to temporal concerns (as Adela does) or to humanity (as Pauline does), Hugh is representative of those whose spirits are frozen. After his cold statement of agnosticism—"I like to be clear on what I know and what I don't know, and I don't like daydreams, either nice or nasty, or neither" (p. 193)—he is confronted with the opening of graves. While Adela is frightened by the experience, Hugh is as "free as Pauline herself from Lilith, but without joy" (p. 197). The difference between "the group" to which his soul belongs and that to which Pauline's soul belongs is "only that of love and joy" (p. 197). Yet only adds a note of irony: the difference between having and not having love and joy is the difference between total isolation and participation in the City. Hugh is, then, the opposite of Pauline. In his hell he will not leave "any duty unfulfilled—any duty of exterior act" (p. 201). Hugh is concerned only with externals—promising to send flowers to Adela but never feeling deeply enough to experience either Adela's pain or Pauline's triumph of love and joy and shared burdens. He remains in the hell into which he was born, and his soul is frozen.

And what of the hanged man? As he moves in and out of the plot and the ways of descending into (or creating) hell, he wants "no City, no circulars, no beggars . . . No people but his, no loves but his" (p. 88). He is isolated as Wentworth is, but he moves in a kind of limbo, following the way of nature, but not yet completely destroyed:

. . . this man had died from and in the body only. Because he had had it all but forced on him, he had had an opportunity to recover. His recovery had brought to him a chance of love . . . Because he had never had an opportunity to choose love, nor effectively heard the intolerable gospel proclaimed, he was to be offered it again, and now as salvation. But first the faint hints of damnation were permitted to appear. (p. 118)

The hanged man's way to hell, then, appears to be the way of the fallen world. But in the Christian tradition, hell is seen as the final punishment for sins, and the hanged man, dying a suicide, is definitely sinful. And the hanged man is given a chance to find a kind of redemption, even as "the faint hints of damnation" are revealed to him. Because the hanged man moves in a kind of limbo, he serves as a reminder of the possibility of Christian redemption, as well as a link among the various characters; and he provides the main metaphor, the rope, for the totally damned Wentworth.

Complex as *Descent into Hell* is, it clearly cannot be reduced to a formulaic representation of a concept; the novel presents the macrocosm of human nature and, simultaneously,
the microcosm of the individual. Yet the characterizations, as well as the structure of the novel, are richer in the light of what seem to be close parallels between Bernardus Silvestris' ways of descending into hell and the unfolding of plot and character in Williams' novel.

Notes

1Charles Williams, Witchcraft (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), pp. 13-75 passim.


3C.S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 90-98. A.M. Hadfield, in An Introduction to Charles Williams (London: Robert Hale, 1959), notes that Williams' first contact with Lewis came in 1938, when Lewis wrote to Williams at "the same moment" that Williams had planned to write to Lewis about The Allegory of Love (p. 156). Descent into Hell was first published in 1937.


5Charles Williams, Descent into Hell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1949), p. 99. Subsequent references to this work will be from this edition.

6In presenting a possible fifth way to hell, as punishment for one's sins according to the Christian tradition, Williams is not without precedent. Whether or not Williams was aware of his commentary, a later medieval writer than Bernardus, the fifteenth-century Italian Cristoforo Landino, whose first four ways of descending into hell parallel Bernardus', adds a fifth way—descent into hell as the final punishment for one's deeds in accordance with Christian doctrine. For a modern translation of Landino's account, see Thomas H. Stahel, "Cristoforo Landino's Allegorization of The Aeneid: Books III and IV of the Camaldolese Disputation," Ph.D. dissertation, The John Hopkins University, 1968.

Bibliography


