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## The Agnostic in the Whirlwind: The Seven Novels of Charles Williams

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### The Agnostic in the Whirlwind: The Seven Novels of Charles Williams

#### Abstract

Overview of William's novels in publication order, with summaries and discussion of common themes and style.

#### Additional Keywords

Williams, Charles—Style; Williams, Charles. All Hallows' Eve; Williams, Charles. Descent Into Hell; Williams, Charles. The Greater Trumps; Williams, Charles. Many Dimensions; Williams, Charles. Novels; Williams, Charles. The Place of the Lion; Williams, Charles. Shadows of Ecstasy; Williams, Charles. War in Heaven

# The Agnostic in The Whirlwind

## THE SEVEN NOVELS OF CHARLES WILLIAMS

by Galen Peoples



"As a mere argument there's something lacking perhaps, in saying to a man who's lost his money and his house and his family and is sitting on the dustbin, all over boils, 'Look at the hippopotamus'."

"Job seemed to be impressed," the Archdeacon said mildly. —Charles Williams, *War in Heaven*

Of the triumvirate of authors to whom the Mythopoeic Society is dedicated, Charles Williams (1886-1945) is the least read and, when read, the least understood. Often, when his symbols are grasped at all, their meanings are not; this can result in a distinct feeling of uneasiness, which is not alleviated by the usual mixed reaction to religious fiction. I hope this essay will help clarify some of Williams' meanings, for those as little versed in theology as myself.

Williams shared with C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien the ability to create myth joining the devices of fantasy, science-fiction, and/or occult literature with his deep Christian faith. He was a modern mystic, and the degree to which his novels reflect actual experience, as distinct from philosophical belief, can only be guessed at. He wrote a total of seven novels, in this order: *Shadows of Ecstasy* (published in 1931); *War in Heaven* (1930); *Many Dimensions* (1931); *The Place of the Lion* (1931); *The Greater Trumps* (1932); *Descent into Hell* (1937); and *All Hallows' Eve* (1945). I would strongly recommend reading them in the order written, if one intends to read all seven; otherwise, I would advise beginning with *The Place of the Lion*. The plots of these novels are divisible into these general categories, with overlapping: The Object of Possession (the second, third, and fifth); The Summoning of Archetypes (fourth, fifth, and sixth); The New Messias (first and last); and The Meeting of the Living and the Dead (sixth and last). These will be further defined later.

Several themes recur throughout all Williams' books. Among these

are: the abuse of power; the essentialness of determined belief, and individualization of salvation; the "good" = selflessness = acceptance/for-giveness/exchange/sacrifice; the microcosm opening into the macrocosm; the fusion (or interchangeability) of natural and supernatural worlds; and the symbol become reality. The meaning and significance of each of these will become apparent in the analyses of the individual novels.

However, before these plots and themes can be understood and appreciated, the hurdle of style must be overcome. Williams' style does not change, but sharpens and improves with each book; it is not to every reader's taste, and is unique in its use of: expository dialogue (also present in Lewis, but to a lesser extent); stream-of-consciousness narrative; subjective, as opposed to objective, fantasy; and literary (theological, philosophical) allusions. With the exceptions of *The Place of the Lion* and *Descent into Hell*, in which they seem to me to be particularly important, the literary and other references will not be discussed in this paper; I will consider the other facets briefly here.

**Expository Dialogue:** Williams was a playwright in addition to a novelist, and he brought to his novels a playwright's instinct for revelatory dialogue in the British-theatre style that conveniently combines limited naturalism with bald stylization. For example, in the first chapter of the first novel, *Shadows of Ecstasy*, a character asks, "Who's Mr. Nigel Considine?" and receives a lengthy, and slightly improbable, reply. Such dialogue enabled Williams to introduce information essential to understanding of the stories: in *The Place of the Lion*, for instance, Damaris Tighe's seemingly irrelevant lecture concerning "the eidola and the angeli" explains the philosophical base on which the story rests. Some of Williams' uses are more subtle. In the same novel, the two protagonists, Anthony Durrant and Quentin Sabot, are sitting debating how best to handle the situation of a belated bus: Anthony asks, "Shall we wander along and meet it?" "Or go on and let it catch us up?" Quentin offers. Later in the



novel, it is indeed Anthony who seeks out the lion, and Quentin who flees from it. For another instance, in the first chapter of The Greater Trumps, Henry Lee remarks, "Hands are funny things. Nobody knows very much about them yet," and Lothair Coningsby, in response, describes the statue of the hand of Ramesses, which Lee calls "a hand of power." Both hand and power assume importance in the story that follows. These examples indicate that, although Williams wrote his novels in haste and at odd times, they possess a greater unity than is at first apparent.

Stream-of-Consciousness and Subjective Fantasy: However, when Williams' style is mentioned, what is usually meant is his highly individualized stream-of-consciousness technique, and the resultant subjectivizing and personalizing of the fantasy. This technique becomes more highly stylized in each successive novel. Descent into Hell, in addition, displays a tendency toward free association: "Alice in Wonderland, sweet Alice, Alice sit by the fire, the fire burned: who sat by the fire that burned a man in another's blood on the grass of a poet's house. . . a terrible good, terror and error, but the terror was error, and the error was in the terror. . ." At times, the allusions are not immediately recognizable, and the association is rather difficult to follow, which leads some readers to give up Williams altogether. I find constant attentiveness, plus a definite mental image of what is going on, to be helpful.

The resulting subjective fantasy may be initially confusing. In The Place of the Lion, one may ask, when Anthony appears to Damaris as Adam, is he in fact — in the fact of the story — become as Adam, or is this simply her personal vision? Perhaps the distinction is irrelevant: whether or not the fact is immediately apparent, Adam is in Anthony, and it would be just as accurate to say that a bystander failing to see the Adam in him is simply incapable of doing so, as to say that Damaris sees what no one else can. Each character in each of Williams' books sees his own reality, tempered by his experience and by the forces — the Graal, the Tetragrammaton — immediately acting upon him, so that to Nancy, in The Greater Trumps, a crucifix appears to be The Hanged Man of the Tarot Cards. But where is the line to be drawn? When do the figures of the Tarots become visible even to Lothair? I hope to consider these and other perplexities in the following essay. I will discuss each novel in turn, beginning with Shadows of Ecstasy.

#### SHADOWS OF ECSTASY: LONDON VS. AFRICA

Williams' earliest novel, Shadows of Ecstasy, is a study in conflicting philosophies, and the most direct exposition of the importance which he attached to the determination of belief. It introduces several characters, each representing a devotion to one of life's passions, and one to the dispassion of intellect: among them Roger Ingram, a professor of literature, whose vocation requires him to clinically dissect poetry; his wife, Isabel; their friend, Sir Bernard Travers, servant of the intellect and, by extension, of civilization; his son Philip; Rosamond Murchison, with whom he is hopelessly in love, and engaged to be married; Vicar Ian Caithness, Philip's godfather, and representative of organized religion; the Jewish financier Ezekiel Rosenberg; and King Inkamasi, late of Africa. All these are exposed to the "new theology" of the story's central character, Nigel Considine, and their respective decisions whether to act in alliance with or in opposition to him, and their resultant actions, accord with their respective beliefs.

As the story progresses, it becomes apparent that Considine is closer to two hundred years old than to one hundred; that he rarely eats or sleeps; that he does not indulge any habits requiring the dispersal of his energy; that as far as possible, all passions and emotions, he channels inward, the ultimate end in mind being the one conquest so far unimaginable to man: "He that has mastered love has mastered the world, and he that masters death is lord of that other. Also as the delights of mere bodily love are but shadows beside the rich joys of the revivifying imagination, so this itself is nothing compared to the revivifying intoxication of the passage from life to death and from death to life." This is the meaning of the title of the book: love, lust, hatred, sorrow, however fulfilling they may seem, are only shadows of the ecstasy to be derived from the ultimate imaginable act: living beyond life. The danger which this represents to its adherents lacking the self-discipline to subdue their passions to it is typified by the character of Motreux, one of Considine's disciples, whose greed becomes a fixation and finally, an intoxication which brings about Considine's downfall as well as his own.

The subject matter of this novel parallels in part that of one other, All Hallows' Eve: the attempted founding of a "new order" by a self-proclaimed Messiah (a variant spelling of "Messiah"). Shortly, Considine is identified as the High Executive of the African Allies, who has united all the African republics in a common missionary zeal by converting them to his religion. Throughout the novel, particularly through the thoughts of Bernard Travers, Africa is equated with the non-intellectual passions, not yet subdued by the ordering of civilization; it is for this reason the Africans represent a threat to that order, disproportionate with the

physical force they represent. The invasion of London, with its tribal dances, symbolizes the triumph of emotion over reason, of passion over intellect.

Of the characters mentioned above, three flatly reject Considine's propositions; only one entirely accepts them. The shallowness of these, Rosamond, pursues a mythical ideal of "order" which excludes passions, Negroes, and Considine, and leads her to reject Philip. Caithness, in his zeal, becomes the unwitting accessory to Motreux's murder of Considine; Travers regards him as "a good deal too like Considine." Travers refuses to allow passion to obscure clarity of intellect. Philip, acting on his love for Rosamond, finds himself both acknowledging the truth and rejecting the fact of Considine's theory: he is instinctively compelled to it by his recognition of love, but repulsed by the necessity which Considine requires, of denying it. Roger, despite himself, discovers in Considine an unequalled comprehension of poetry, which leads him to re-discover his own dedication to it. Isabel's concern is not with Considine at all, but with Roger. Rosenberg is offered no alternative to Considine but the anti-Semitic prejudices of a London mob, and is in addition promised the opportunity to re-build his temple in Jerusalem. Inkamasi becomes the object of struggle between Considine and Caithness, one of whom recognizes the kingship in him, and the other the Christian. Inkamasi chooses the former; although as a Christian he cannot accept Considine as Messiah, yet Considine recognizes majesty — Inkamasi's personal star. Williams does not explicitly differentiate between the respective validities of each chosen path: the "alien government of sterile sayings" which Sir Bernard defends, which is best typified perhaps by the gorilla-like representative of the Foreign Office, is not necessarily more worthy of preservation than is Considine's gospel of extension.

Central to all of Williams' novels is the concept that man is intended to have power, under the protection of, and within the limits ascribed to him by God; that in fact, as part of God, he must inherit power. Each of the novels deals either with the misuse of that power, or with an attempt to appropriate to man power rightly reserved to Heaven, or a combination of both. This novel falls into the last category. Considine, utilizing his passions in a certain way, discovers a property available to man; however, it is not feasible for man to have it. Roger is helpless before it as before any revelation; Motreux demonstrates the folly of yielding to the imagination without exercising controlling intelligence. It represents an imbalance, like the unleashing of the angelicals without protective Divine intelligence in The Place of the Lion. In balance, only Philip, through his love for Rosamond, is able to appreciate Considine's virtues and faults; however, because Considine offends less against the way of exchange than the propriety of the universe, the virtues of acceptance, exchange, and sacrifice so necessary to the actions of the other novels, are not primarily required here. The central message of the novel is one which continues into War in Heaven, as stated by the character of the Archdeacon in that novel:

"You are sure now that it was — it?"

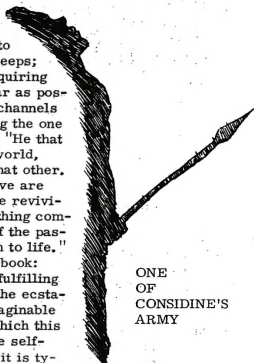
"No. . . but I have decided in my own mind that I will believe that. No-one can possibly do more than decide what to believe."

#### WAR IN HEAVEN: THE PROTECTORS VS. THE POSSESSORS

Williams' second novel, War in Heaven, which derives its title from both Milton and Revelation, deals with one battle in the perpetual confrontation of good and evil: a struggle for possession of the holy object, the Graal (again, a variant spelling). Alternating with the account of this struggle is a rare example, in Williams, of a concession to popular taste: a murder mystery, centering on the efforts of Inspector Colquhoun, the representative of temporal justice, to solve the case of an unknown man found dead in a publishing house. Colquhoun is only incidentally involved in the supernatural encounter which occupies the rest of the book.

Julian Davenant, the Archdeacon of a little village called Pardles, discovers that the chalice in his possession is the Graal itself, and is obliged to protect it from Gregory Persimmons, owner of the publishing house mentioned above, who intends to use it in the service of Satan. First one side, then the other, takes possession of the Graal: Persimmons steals it; the Archdeacon recovers it; Persimmons' associates, Dmitri and Manasseh, attempt to destroy it spiritually; it is saved by a company of protectors — a modern counterpart of the Arthurian fellowship — consisting of Davenant, an Anglican; the Duke of the North Ridings, a Catholic; and Kenneth Mornington, an agnostic spurred by romance into belief. The villains are similarly differentiated: Persimmons represents the desire for power; Dmitri has "looked into the bottomless pit" and been robbed of all passion; and Manasseh acts upon a fantasy of total destruction: "One day . . . we shall breathe against the heavens and they shall fall." A final character, Lionel Rackstraw, a clerk at the publishing house, cares little for either side, but it is he, through his wife Barbara, who is stricken: she provides the means for Gregory to obtain the Graal. Also, paradoxically, it is Rackstraw alone who defeats Gregory philosophically: the horrors which the latter has inflicted on everyone near him return to him with Lionel's assertion: "There is no way to delight in the horrible. . . Let us pray only that immortality is a dream," then, more gloomily, "But I don't suppose it is." Even Lionel, although bleakly, acknowledges and subordinates himself to the nature of the universe.

Finally, because the Graal is imperiled and possibly because the struggle is uneven, Prester John, the mythical protector of the Graal, descends to Earth. Symbolically, he is the Graal, and also God — and



ONE  
OF  
CONSIDINE'S  
ARMY



yet, as Williams characteristically adds, neither. Through him, reward is granted each of the characters according to his acts. Mornington is sacrificed in battle with Dmitri; the marriage of the Rackstraws is solidified, and their child Adrian, who was to be used by the satanists "to get at another (child)," is redeemed in service to Prester John. Persimmons is delivered into the hands of temporal justice, the Archdeacon is taken up into Paradise, and the murdered man at the beginning of the novel is saved from the mutual torment planned for him and the Archdeacon.

War in Heaven, like all the novels except *Shadows of Ecstasy* and *Many Dimensions*, operates in a microcosm, and concludes with a catastrophic or eucatastrophic shift to encompass the reflected macrocosm, within the same symbolic reference. War in Heaven alternates geographically between the small religious community (as far as we see it) of Fardles, and London, home both of the satanists with whom Persimmons confers and Colquhoun, the representative of law. By entering London at the climax of the story, the protectors of the Graal pass into the sphere of earthly law, to which Persimmons is rendered up. However, the novel concludes with the salvation of the Archdeacon, and expands to incorporate the hurting planets of the universe.

The abuse of power theme is evident here: the attempt to misuse an object of power that, intentionally or not, has passed into human keeping. As the character of Persimmons demonstrates, humans are no more to be trusted with the receptacles of potency than with the power itself. Even Manasseh, who is religious in every sense except that he chooses to worship the wrong god, tells Persimmons: "Keep it for this, keep it for that . . . you are not wholly ours." The evil of Manasseh and Dmitri, like that of Wentworth in *Descent into Hell*, stems from another kind of abuse, the wastage of whatever virtues they were endowed with. Similarly, Sir Giles Tumulty, in this book and the next, demonstrates the perversion of the power of intellect: all his passions are subordinated to the clinical observation of others' destruction. Prester John warns him, "There is a place in the pit where I shall be found, but there is no place for you who do not enter the pit, though you thrust others in."

Although Williams was not a Universalist, the broad philosophical base which underlies all his fiction allowed him to extend grace further than Lewis: all his characters, at one point or another, are given the opportunity of salvation, and not always by traditional theological means. With the negligible exception of Caithness, Davenant is the only clergyman among Williams' protagonists. In Williams' universe, doctrine is important only inasmuch as it reflects the nature of that universe; it is resigning to that nature, and allowing it to work through you, that is essential. Prester John, again, describes church as "one of the means. But perhaps the best for most, and for some almost the only one. . . If you do not use it, it is a pity to bother about it; if you do, it is a pity not to use it." The means and the end are equally important, for the end corresponds to the means used, as "God, even God, can give only in those conditions which are Himself." Persimmons "desired greatly the God of all sacrifice, and he finds Him now. . . the door that opens on annihilation opens only on the annihilation which is God." This immutable nature of God, through which all searchers receive precisely what they seek, is made clearer by the character of Giles Tumulty himself in Williams' next novel, *Many Dimensions*.

#### MANY DIMENSIONS: BELIEF VS. GREED

As the object of possession in *War in Heaven* is the Graal, so in *Many Dimensions* is it the Crown of Suleiman (Solomon), which lodges a multi-propriety stone. It has been obtained, more or less illegally, by Sir Giles Tumulty from an initiate of Islam in Persia. Tumulty and the surrounding characters discover first that it can transport them through space; then, through time; then, that it can prevent death for an indefinite length of time; finally, that it can destroy, when bidden in the proper fashion, those who attempt its theft. In addition, it has the virtue of multiplying endless times with no diminution to any of the copies. For all these reasons, several characters strive to possess the Stone — and, with it in their possession, to retain it and to possess as well all the other copies in existence: among them Tumulty and his scientific associate, Abel Paliser; Angus Sheldrake, an American millionaire, and his shallow wife Cecilia; and the English and Persian governments through their various representatives, official and otherwise. The Stone, which contains the

#### THE SABBATH

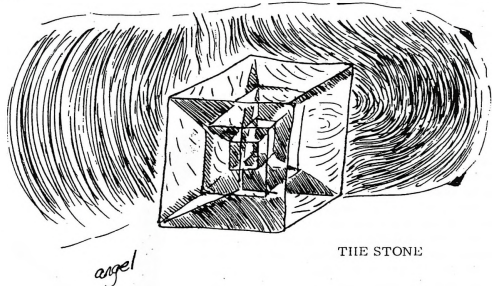


Tetragrammaton, the name of God, again represents power delivered wrongly into mortal hands: it grants humans capacities beyond their desert. And each of its powers is in turn misused: transport through space becomes the financial concern of the transportation industry, both union and management; transport through time becomes the plaything of Tumulty, who attempts to send a human guinea-pig permanently into the past; its miraculous curative powers, predictably, cause a furor among the infirm of the world.

The Chief Justice of England, Lord Christopher Arglay, and his secretary, Miss Chloe Burnett, drawn by their professions into the matter of the Stone, become increasingly annoyed with the universal greed attached to it, and determine between themselves that they will, at least for the time, believe in God — or in such a God as may be in the Stone. In so doing, they are conforming their actions to the nature of the universe and putting their selves aside in favor of more overwhelming considerations. In Williams' novels, this putting-aside of self may take one of several forms, which overlap: acceptance of, or resignation to, God and/or nature (in *Shadows of Ecstasy*, poetry, love, intellect); exchange with others (which is more fully explored in the later novels); forgiveness and repentance (which occurs between Lester Furnival and Betty Wallingford in *All Hallows' Eve*); and, finally, sacrifice to whatever one has chosen to believe in. This is necessary at moments of crisis, in which self must be abandoned in favor of preservation of a part of Heaven, rather than for the immediate presence of God in man (and, through man, in human affairs); the resulting interaction between souls; or spiritual healing.

Chloe and Arglay soon realize that they are the only humans willing to let the Stone act through them. Chloe, in submitting to the Stone, submits also to attempted robbery and physical danger; eventually, to paralysis and death. She discovers the way of sacrifice. Arglay, representative of legal justice, and Hajji Ibrahim, representative of religious justice, watch her sacrifice herself so that all the Stones may be made one again. Yet even after her sacrifice, Lord Arglay retains his agnosticism, and will only acknowledge that "certain things have emerged from illusion."

Tumulty, the perverter of intellect, unlike his counterpart Wentworth in *Descent into Hell*, retains at least an active malice, whereas Wentworth sinks into lethargy beyond even hatred. His greed leads him to an inevitable destruction: he receives the mystery of the Stone that he has desired, and is found "lying on the floor . . . twisted in every limb, and pierced and burnt all over as if by innumerable needle-points of fire." On a pragmatic level, his experiments to uncover the nature of the Stone are futile, because the virtues of the Stone are beyond analysis. Herein, perhaps, lies the symbolic significance of Arglay's book explaining the nature of organic law — the theory declaring that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.



THE STONE

Each of Williams' novels contains supernatural passages, in which unfamiliar worlds and states of consciousness intersect with the familiar. In most cases, these are too obvious to require mention; however, the supernatural of this novel is what was, is, or will be natural: the past; the future; the contemporaneous elsewhere. Also common to all of Williams' novels is the bringing-to-life of a symbol or myth: in *Shadows of Ecstasy*, conquest of the grave; in *War in Heaven*, the Graal and its keeper; in this novel, the Tetragrammaton. Williams' subsequent books are more explicit in their treatment of the revivification of symbol, and the interaction of symbol and reality. The first and most straightforward exposition of this theme — symbol becoming reality, and reality becoming symbol — occurs in Williams' next novel, *The Place of the Lion*.

#### THE PLACE OF THE LION: MAN VS. THE ANGELS

Of the categories of plot mentioned earlier, *The Place of the Lion* is Williams' first treatment of the "summoning of archetypes" motif. Like his subsequent novel, *The Greater Trumps*, it deals with the bringing of mythical, archetypal symbols into the sphere of human existence. In *The Greater Trumps*, these symbols are visible only to the initiates or visionaries until, once unleashed through greed, they become universally observable. In *The Place of the Lion*, each angelic archetype is visible to all humans who share the particular virtue it typifies, as long as they are within its sphere of influence; however, as the story progresses, these spheres widen.



This novel is set in a little English village called Smetham—the micromosm. Interspersed with the major action are scenes in London, which acts as a contrast to the chaos, and possibly is representative of the intellectual removal necessary to Anthony Durrant's climactic action. In Smetham, an esoteric philosophical or religious society, whose exact nature is never made clear, but which borders on Platonism, becomes obsessed with the Platonic archetypes from which the virtues of this world are supposed to have been derived: strength, beauty, celerity, subtlety or craft (in both senses of both words), and so forth. Inexplicable occurrences multiply: an escaped lioness is transformed into a magnificent golden lion; a gigantic, multi-colored butterfly appears, and with it, thousands of smaller butterflies which are apparently swallowed up into it. Soon the truth becomes apparent: the cult has somehow succeeded in removing the barrier interposed between these great animals and Earth.



ANTHONY MEETS THE LION

Each of the beasts is the ultimate expression of a quality found, although considerably diminished, in its earthly counterparts, and in humans: the lion, strength; the serpent, subtlety; the butterfly, beauty; the eagle, wisdom; the horse, swiftness; the unicorn, the continuity of man and God; the phoenix, regeneration; the lamb, love. They also correspond to the nine orders of angels, of whom the ninth, as Anthony seems to discover, is man, symbolizing perfect balance. But they are not the flaccid figures of Victorian art; they are genuine celestial powers, "the principles of the tiger and the volcano and the flaming suns of space," Divine strength unleashed without the preventative of Divine intelligence: i.e., God. And their nature is such that they reclaim all traces of their respective virtues that fall under their sway.

This, again, signifies power beyond human comprehension or control. Of the Platonic group, Foster and Miss Wilmot direct their efforts toward gaining personal power from the archetypes; it develops rather than the powers are using them, and in the end, destroy them. Foster himself best describes the divergence of reaction demonstrated by the novel's various characters: "Some men will welcome it... as I shall do. And they will be joined to that Power which each of them best serves. Some will disbelieve in it — as I think Damaris Tighe does; but they will find then what they do believe. Some will hate it, and run from it — as you (Quentin Sabot) do... they will be hunted. For nothing will escape." Quentin, Anthony's friend, does indeed flee from the lion, as personified by Foster. Damaris, Anthony's girlfriend, finds her cynicism shattered when confronted by a pterodactyl, the symbol of intellectual pride and moral stagnation. It reflects her over-emphasis on temporal trivialities, which has become disproportionate with her duty to Anthony and her father. The latter resigns fatally to the beauty of the butterfly — to which, as an entomologist, he has dedicated his life, as, in *Shadows of Ecstasy*, Roger Ingram dedicated his to poetry. A final character, Richardson, allies with the unicorn, "the Angel of the Return," and seeks out the quickest path to reunion with God. Only Anthony acts on the unity between himself and the beasts, between virtue and like virtue, between God and God, a unity of which the Platonists are unaware. This allows him to achieve the power that they have sought in the wrong way, as Chloe Burnett in *Many Dimensions* rejoins the Stones; as Sybil in *The Greater Trumps*, acting within the symbolic universe created, "plays God" and restores order. This is the nature of the power which man is intended to tap, in awareness of the created order, and acting within "the Tao" that Lewis defines in *The Abolition of Man* (Macmillan, 1965).

Of the alternative forms of transcendence of self mentioned earlier, the least demanding, in terms of spiritual development, might be thought to be acceptance; but the term "acceptance" includes also acceptance of high duty, like the "call of Adam" to which Anthony responds. In so doing, he inherits the power necessary to command the angelicals to return whence they came; the countryside becomes a primeval Eden, and the house through which the beasts entered becomes a symbolic pillar of fire. Anthony's love for Damaris leads him naturally to the way of exchange, through which he rescues her from the pterodactyl; in return, she saves Quentin from his private fear — a foreshadowing of the more explicit rendering of the same process in *Descent into Hell*.

In this novel, the supernatural which intersects with the natural opens two ways — outward, to expand and incorporate all the residents of Smetham; inward, to a personal vision available only to Anthony, through the eagle of wisdom. He alone is granted a view of prehistoric, angelic earth, as well as the harmony of the present earth; he alone, in his acknowledgment of unity, can both comprehend and utilize the nature of the universe. Lastly, the literary and theological allusions here are particularly noteworthy. Damaris Tighe's lecture about Plato explains the central concept of the novel, although Williams' visualization of the beasts

does not derive from Plato, and the treatise of Marcellus Victorinus, which he introduces to specify the correlation between the beasts and angels, is apparently imaginary. Abelard, the object of Damaris' intellectual interest, is particularly significant because, philosophically, he represents a transitional key to Damaris' conversion from over-confidence in pure intellect to the way of exchange. Finally, it is interesting that Williams cites in this novel the passage from Revelation which also served for the title of *War in Heaven*: "Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and his angels, and the dragon was cast out." His subsequent novel, *The Greater Trumps*, describes a last "war in heaven," and precedes his two final definitive studies of salvation and damnation, *Descent into Hell* and *All Hallows' Eve*.

#### THE GREATER TRUMPS: LOVE VS. POWER

The plot of Williams' fifth novel, *The Greater Trumps*, is a synthesis of "object of possession" and "summoning of archetypes," in which the object is a set of Tarot cards — the first, original deck — and the archetypes, the figures embellishing the Major Arcana, or "greater trumps," of same. In fact, the Tarots are supposed to have originated in France, but for the sake of his story, and the enabled parallel between Christ and Horus/Osiris, Williams proposes that they were Egyptian in origin; that in ancient times, while in the keeping of Egyptian occultists, the cards were separated from the identical set of carved figures that should rightly accompany them. The figures have remained in the protection of the "gypsies," and are now in the possession of Aaron Lee and his grandson Henry; the cards have passed into the hands of a minor government official, Lothair Coningsby, whose daughter Nancy is by chance engaged to be married to Henry Lee.

The two families introduced in this novel, the Lees and the Coningsbys, are set in precise contrast to one another, member for member: Lothair and Aaron; their respective sisters, Sybil and Joanna; Nancy and Henry; Nancy's brother Ralph, and Joanna's companion, who calls her "grandmother," Stephen. Lothair and Aaron both typify wrong kinds of fear, personified in their minds at least partially by their sisters. Lothair, ostensibly Anglican but too obsessed with imagined threats "to his temporal security to be genuinely religious, regards the Lees — and to some degree, Nancy and Sybil — as possible threats, and therefore, objects of fear. Aaron's fear of Joanna stems from the possibility that she may prevent his gaining the power which he and Henry seek. His priestliness and asceticism, symbolized by The Hermit of the Tarots and the opposite of Lothair's worldly preoccupations, are virtues directed to a wrong end, like those of Simon Leclerc in *All Hallows' Eve*, but to a lesser degree. The holy end of rejoining the cards to the figures is negated by the desire to use the linkage between them for personal gain. And the web of fears evident in these two characters seems to be an inescapable adjunct to selfish preservation of goods or power: Aaron is no less terrified of Joanna than Lothair is of him.

The Tarot card with which Sybil is most regularly identified is The High Priestess, the earthly harbinger of Divine wisdom and beneficence. The character of Sybil typifies still another sense of the word "acceptance" mentioned above: the conscious maintenance of placidity, even in the face of the whirlwind, which precedes her capacity for interchange with others. She alone, in her acceptance of universal exchange and harmony, is capable of fully comprehending the meaning of the golden figures which correspond to the images on the Tarots. These figures engage in an endless and ever-changing dance, symbolizing life's balance and perpetuity. Among them, God is specifically represented by both The Juggler and The Fool. The Juggler signifies the apparent maintaining of harmony and balance: "the Juggler who danced continuously round the edge of the circle, tossing little balls up and catching them again." The Fool represents the mysteries of love, interchange, the incarnation, the Unity, the Trinity — all the mysteries beyond observability, which not only maintain but define that harmony: the same factors which escape the pragmatism of Sir Giles, as regards the Stone, in *Many Dimensions*. Only Sybil can see the movement of The Fool in the dance. Additionally, Sybil's name is symbolic: she is the sibyl, or prophetess, of Christianity. Joanna, al-





ternatively, is the priestess of Osiris, the resurrected Horus; in her madness she identifies (as Williams puts it) her long-dead baby with the long-dead god, and herself with the mother-goddess Isis; but her fantasy can be fulfilled only through Christianity, manifested to her through the intercession of Sybil and the incarnation of love in Nancy, by which she recognizes the Messiah she has sought.

Henry's recognition of love is flawed by his determination to exploit it for self-gain — another example of the abuse of personal power. Against his grandfather's wishes, he attempts to obtain the cards through Nancy, initiates her into their mystery, and envisions rising to power on the wings of their love. To this end, he invites the Coningsbys to spend Christmas week at Aaron's isolated house, around and within which the symbols from the Greater Trumps (The Sun, The Moon, The Tower, The Children) come to appear. The set of dancing figures thus becomes a microcosm within a microcosm. Here Henry raises a storm to destroy Lothair and gain possession of the cards, and, in a reiteration of another of Williams' recurrent themes, receives exactly what he sought, in being exposed to the storm; later, in his repentance, to the hands symbolic of human power that restrain him.

Nancy proceeds in the opposite direction from Henry: at first unaware of the love or power available to her, she is gradually exposed by her aunt to its Christian ramifications. In Williams' later novels, theological doctrine becomes increasingly important. Here, for example, a phrase from an old hymn, "Rise to adore the mystery of love," leads Nancy to re-discover her faith: "What on earth were they doing, singing about the mystery of love in church? They couldn't possibly be meaning it. Or were they meaning it, and had she misunderstood the whole thing?" On the strength of this conversion, Nancy is enabled — indeed, obliged — to rescue Henry from his own exertions. As in Williams' other novels, the power which is sought in denial of unity is made available to one who affirms the unity, and utilizes the power accordingly. The positions of Nancy and Henry are thus, ironically, reversed.

In addition to the Greater Trumps, Williams identifies the Minor Arcana, the four suits, with the elements: the shuffling of the Coins, or Deniers, is equated with earth; the pattering of the Cups, rain; the beating of the Staffs or Sceptres, wind; and the pointing of the Swords, fire. Through this correspondence, Nancy is able to create earth in her hands; Henry unleashes the storm; finally, at the novel's climax, Joanna initiates a near-conflagration when the fourth suit reaches her hands. Lothair is saved by Sybil, as Henry by Nancy, and Joanna is protected by The Fool. This conclusion is uncharacteristic in that it contains no revelatory opening-up, but almost a sense of diminution, as the microcosm and the macrocosm, "the search within and the search without," are joined. The essential virtue which is extolled here is exchange — a concept which is further explored in Williams' second-to-last book, *Descent into Hell*.

#### DESCENT INTO HELL: STANHOPE VS. LILITH

Williams' two final novels inhabit the same universe: *Descent into Hell* is both geographically and philosophically peripheral to *All Hallows' Eve*, and the microcosms of the two are distinctly related. The Hill of the first, like the City of the second, is the home of both the living and the dead, who at certain times and points, by virtue of the spiritual proximity of certain souls, are enabled to meet, and their spheres to impinge on one another. This is the ultimate expression of the fusion of natural and supernatural worlds mentioned earlier. The word "fusion" is perhaps not accurate; "identicalness" or "unity" might be more so. *Descent into Hell* is in addition a final treatment of the "summoning of archetypes" concept, the mythical figure in this case being the primordial succubus Lilith, whom Talmudic tradition says to have been Adam's first wife, and whose attraction to the Hill is tentatively explained by its history of bloodshed.

The setting of the book is a suburb of London, Battle Hill, an economic and social symbol of England and possibly, the world: a long-embattled rise of land from whose social structure the poor are "as far as possible" omitted. The theme is exchange, "the doctrine of substituted love," elsewhere called "the pure mathematics of the spirit." The subject is the interchange between the living and the living; the living and the once-alive, co-existent in eternity; and the living and the dead — in which respect it foreshadows *All Hallows' Eve*. These various relationships are contrasted to the lonely acts of a soul refusing exchange: Lawrence Wentworth, a military historian and one of the Hill's two famous inhabitants.

The other is the mystic and poet Peter Stanhope, whose verse play *A Pastoral*, is in production on the Hill. During rehearsals, one of the actresses, Pauline Anstruther, confesses to Stanhope her private fear: encountering the doppelgänger, her exact image, a reflection of heightened self-awareness, like Damaris Tighe's pterodactyl in *The Place of the Lion*. Stanhope offers, despite her incredulity, to lift the burden of fear: "To bear a burden is precisely to carry it instead of... 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." Simultaneously, Pauline's grandmother, Margaret, having consciously resigned to the fact of death, is on its brink, and therefore able to communicate with the newly dead — both parties equidistant from the point of transition. She offers a recent suicide, denied the opportunity for salvation in his earthly life, his first encounter with love, and eventually succeeds in restoring him to life. Acting upon the lessons of these tutors, Pauline returns to what would ordinarily be called "the past" and helps her own ancestor; John Struther, one of the Hill's two martyrs, to endure his suffering — as Damaris Tighe, once freed, runs to free Quentin.

Wentworth rejects this path; yet even in his progression toward hell, to which the title of the novel refers, he is granted at least three clearly marked chances for salvation. His initial sin is jealousy, reprehensible for its excess and self-delusion, but nevertheless reflective of contact with those around him: jealousy of Hugh Prescott, for succeeding where he has failed in his relations with Adela Hunt, and of Aston Moffatt, his professional rival, for achieving knighthood. The latter fact, he might choose to enjoy, or "at least... refuse not to enjoy" — his first chance — but he fails. Acting on his frustrated desire for Adela, he creates a false image of her, a succubus, to heal his pride, and furnishes himself with a means to lussure, luxuria, the satiation of self. Drowned in it, he denies himself his sole virtue (and his second chance), pride and skill in his vocation, by approving historical costuming for Stanhope's play, knowing it to be inaccurate.



THE SUCCUBUS

Again, as in *The Greater Trumps*, Williams makes use of contrasting sets of characters: the negative counterparts of Stanhope and Pauline are Hugh and Adela. Hugh is an agnostic who lacks the beneficent universality of Lord Arglay in *Many Dimensions*. Even after the "opening of graves," he refuses to believe that anything phenomenal has happened: the agnostic in the whirlwind, he can only repeat senselessly, "The earth was loose and the wind was blowing." Adela, in her selfish pride, brings Wentworth's sin into human comprehensibility: confronted at last with the Lilith she has unknowingly been pursuing, she seeks aid from Wentworth, the one soul who is unable or unwilling (the two are by this time interchangeable) to help her: his final chance. He seals his damnation.

Three allusions in this novel are of particular interest: the Republic, identified with oppression, which is not analogous to the City but represents what today might be called "the establishment"; Gomorrah, which comes to signify self-infatuation, regarded as more sinful than "sodomy" — "Men can be in love with men, and women with women, and still be in love and make sounds and speeches, but don't you know how quiet the streets of Gomorrah are?"; and Shakespeare, with whom Stanhope's verse is repeatedly compared, to indicate its divinity. This comparison reaches its apotheosis in the sounding of the trumpet, an Elizabethan custom signalling the start of the play.

*Descent into Hell* is especially concerned with the abuse of human power: Wentworth, unaware and unworthy of the intellectual virtue granted him, denies unity between himself and others, and purposefully turns his intelligence to destructivity. One of Williams' most horrifying images is the succubus, the Lilith, that mirrors Wentworth's rapid degeneration. At the conclusion of the novel, Wentworth's terrestrial existence becomes Hell; what remnants of his life are still available to him appear as through the wrong end of a telescope. The analytical and imaginative faculties which he misused depart from him; he is "drawn, steadily, everlastingly, inward and down through the bottomless circles of the void." Both *Descent into Hell* and *All Hallows' Eve* open downward and inward into Hell, rather than the opposite, like *War in Heaven*. *All Hallows' Eve* also clarifies Williams' picture of the state and progress of the soul after death, and the interaction of all souls, living and dead.

#### ALL HALLOWS' EVE: SIMON VS. THE CITY

*All Hallows' Eve*, Williams' last novel, is a second essay in "the new Messias": here the primary figure is Simon Leclerc, or Simon the Clerk, whose name intentionally echoes that of Simon Magus in Acts. However, Williams is more importantly concerned with the contrasting spiritual development of two dead women, Mrs. Lester Furnival and Evelyn Mercer. Each becomes involved with the actions of the living, one voluntarily, one reluctantly; one attains salvation, the other damnation, as a result of her actions. Lester follows the proper succession of stages in spiritual development. Evelyn remains at a retarded level through her own obstinacy. The living characters with whom they interact include Richard Furnival, Lester's widower; his friend, a painter, Jonathan Drayton; Simon, the subject of one of Jonathan's works; Jonathan's girlfriend, Betty Wal-



lingford; and her mother, Lady Wallingford, one of Simon's disciples.

The connection established between souls is subtle and far-reaching: Lester seeks out and receives forgiveness from Betty, whom she wronged in adolescence, and is thus enabled both to escape the hell of purgatory and to free Betty from Simon's domination. Richard, through contact with Lester, is raised to a higher level of spiritual awareness; likewise Jonathan, through Betty, escapes the whirlwind. Their acts are governed, and often initiated or required, by the City, London, a symbol of divine law ("Shall there be evil in the city, and I have not done it?") and — depending on whether the soul chooses acceptance or rejection — of universal harmony or individual isolation. The souls who in their selfishness refuse this web of contact also deny the City: Simon, in his implicit belief that he is infallible; Evelyn, in her insistence on the obvious falsity that she has been continually wronged by others; Lady Wallingford, in her obsessive and unwarranted devotion to Simon.

Lester Furnival's primary interest in her earthly existence was "the apparatus of mortal life"; hence, through that, life remains available to her after death. Beyond that, she evidences a genuine, if uncontrolled, love for Richard; her first thoughts in her new world are of him. She progresses from the equivalent of earthly love to the pain of separation, to the joy of re-encounter, to the ultimate acceptance of eternal separation. The City requires that she amend her cruelty to Betty, as eventually she will be required to re-experience all her acts, before her second life can really begin. Her first act in the new life is one of tolerance and, as far as she can extend it, sympathy toward Evelyn, and, incidentally, acknowledgment of the City. When Betty, in wandering through their world, calls for Evelyn, only Lester can be summoned by the love that Betty experiences in this unaccustomed life. Betty's forgiveness is the beginning of Lester's peacefulness. In return, Lester endures the pain of the Cross to save Betty from Simon's magical exertions: "She had suffered instead of Betty, as Betty had once suffered through her; but the endurance had been short and the restoration soon, so quickly had the Name which is the City sprung to the rescue of its own." Lester further submits, for Evelyn's sake, to co-inhabiting with her a body created for that purpose by Simon. Finally, she receives her first experience of paradise as symbolized in a red rain, "exquisite and blood-roseal, delicate and enriching."

Evelyn Mercer's development is the opposite of Lester's. Her devotions are centered entirely on herself, and on imagined offenses to her. She willfully rejects what of earthly life might still be available to her: "I won't see Mother. I hate Mother." As Betty fears her, she fears Betty, but unlike her submits to her fear. Not Betty's expression of love, but the reversed Tetragrammaton, the invocation of power which Simon uses, summons her from her world: she becomes its captive because Simon's pursuit of selfishness is analogous to her own. In her greed for flesh to inhabit and a being to possess, she too suffers agony, but the power to which she sacrifices herself is evil, and no Divine transcendence, as for Lester, can result. The body that Simon provides for her is a physical counterpart of her spiritual self. As Lester draws nearer to the transcending of love, Evelyn draws farther away: the only form of interaction with which she is content is necessarily limited to that purgatory through, for her, becomes hell. She insists that "sooner or later" she "can find someone else there."

The two alternate lives of Betty Wallingford represent perhaps the contrasting states of the soul before and after it acknowledges unity. The servile persona which she is required to assume at her Yorkshire house is intended by Simon to maintain his mesmeric control over her. However, all his efforts to limit her to a passionless universe are frustrated by the City, which impinges on her from all directions. Her redemption is made possible through the repeated expression of human kindness: first the act of her old governess in baptizing her and so, unknowingly, protecting her from Simon's magic; then Lester's exchange of sacrifice for forgiveness; finally the intrusion of Jonathan and Richard into Simon's attempted operation to separate her soul from her body. Lady Wallingford, in serving Simon, comes to loathe her daughter, as she inversely and increasingly mirrors her own inability to live. She finally receives an approximation of the spiritual death originally intended for Betty. Betty instead inherits the duty of love, through which she heals Simon's patients, whose infirmities return to them upon Simon's destruction.

Richard Furnival, like Lester and with her help, progresses in the understanding of love. His first meeting with her after her death stirs him to clarify his definition and practice of love for any subsequent encounter. In this way he discovers the distinction between courtesy and love, and between considering a soul only in relation to oneself and in its entirety. His heightened awareness of love enables him to see through Simon; he observes the blasphemy exchanged between him and Evelyn in the context of his own relationship with Lester. Eventually, he must accept losing her until, if such should occur, a greater reunion much later. At this point, he is commencing on the path that Lester has already taken. Jonathan, an agnostic who is nonetheless, by virtue of his profession, sensitive to the undercurrents of the City, is Richard's counterpart as regards Betty.

Simon the Clerk regresses like Evelyn, but on a more profound level. Blessed with extraordinary faculties, he turns them to selfish ends; nurturing his pride, he ultimately exceeds his own capacity. His ascetic virtues prove fruitless without the accompanying selfishness and resignation typified by Davenant in *War in Heaven*. Like Tumulty in *Many Dimensions*, Simon demands foreknowledge of the future and discovers oblivion for himself, which spurs him to hasten his attempt at domination.

His means to this domination become progressively ignoble: reduplications of himself, to convert the more distant peoples of the world; Betty, his illegitimate daughter; the debased spirit Evelyn; and finally the homuncula, his own imperfect creation. His delusions of grandeur become more illusory as his art becomes less potent, and the strength required



THE  
CELESTIAL  
ROSE

to combat it also lessens. Hatred, the result of isolation, to which his discipline succumbs, heightens the agony of his end: swallowed up in the Dantean symbol of the celestial rose, he confronts his identical forms, twin reflections of his own hatred and degeneration. Also apparent here is the likewise Dantean concept of all matter returning to its source.

Williams died in 1945, the year *All Hallows' Eve* was published.

Now, reader, I have told my dream to thee,  
See if thou canst interpret it to me. . .

—John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

Earlier, I advised reading these seven novels in order of writing. This not only provides a key to the development of Williams' philosophy and literary style, it is most convenient, as the books comprise a definite progression. *Shadows of Ecstasy*, *War in Heaven*, and *Many Dimensions* all deal in whole or in part with the importance of belief, manifested in progressively fantastic situations. *War in Heaven* and *Many Dimensions* share the character of Sir Giles Tumulty, and the events of the second are supposed to occur at some time after those of the first. *The Place of the Lion* and *The Greater Trumps* are more fantastic still; they are parallel in concept, and the second represents a refining of style and personalizing of incident. *Descent into Hell* and *All Hallows' Eve* occupy the same universe: the first is literally peripheral, the second central; the first is suburban, the second, set in the midst of London.

I have not mentioned in this article Williams' amusing wit, his pleasantly sympathetic attitude toward his characters, or his brilliant visual imagery. He is comparable to Lewis in his use of allegory that reads as non-allegorical (or, if you prefer, non-allegory that appears surprisingly allegorical). He is comparable to Tolkien in his achievement of what might be called "the quintessence effect,"<sup>18</sup> which not even Lewis achieves as regularly: *The Place of the Lion*, *The Greater Trumps*, and *Descent into Hell*, like *The Lord of the Rings*, are what it would be said they might have been if they were not what they are. They share that peculiar quality of seeming quite familiar in the reading without one's ever having seen, heard, or imagined the events or images previously. If this concept is incomprehensible to most readers, then my experience of mythopoetic literature is improbably unique.

There are several rewarding studies of Williams' literature available: Mary McDermott Shideler's pamphlet "Charles Williams" and *The Theology of Romantic Love* (both Eerdmans); Alice Mary Hadfield's *An Introduction to Charles Williams* (Hale); a section of Edmund Fuller's *Books with Men behind Them* (Random House); and one-third of *Shadows of Imagination* (S. Illinois University Press), edited by Mark R. Hillegas. I also recommend C. S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength* (with reservations) and Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*. I will not catalogue here my objections to the first; both are "Charles Williams novels" not written by Charles Williams. The first is what Williams would have written had he been C. S. Lewis; the second, had he not written fantasy. Also of interest are the contemporary reviews of Williams' novels in *Book Review Digest*, not all of them favorable by any means.

#### NOTE

\* This phrase originally read "the apotheosis effect." I am indebted to Glen GoodKnight for informing me that that word could not be used in that way, and to Dr. Robert Ellwood for suggesting the word "quintessence," which was the meaning I intended.