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Judith Kollmann

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### Charles Williams and Second-Hand Paganism

#### Abstract

Argues that unlike Lewis and Tolkien, who incorporate true pagan worldviews into their works as imperfect precursors of Christianity, Williams uses superficially pagan elements that are really a product of the Judeo-Christian world. Williams's portrayal of the pagan/occult is more negative, while showing the attractiveness of such power.

#### Additional Keywords

Occult in Charles Williams; Paganism in Charles Williams; Williams, Charles. Novels—Occult symbolism; Williams, Charles. Novels—Pagan symbolism

# Charles Williams and Second-Hand Paganism

Judith Kollmann

C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien used pagan myths and legends (particularly those of Greek, Roman or Scandinavian origin) extensively, usually affirming the value of the tales or deities as precursors of Christianity and, as such, containing some genuine, although imperfect, revelation about the nature of God and His universe. For example, in *That Hideous Strength* Jane is confronted by the pagan Venus, and, upon telling Ransom about her experience, is informed that that Venus is real; she exists and is what must be if Jane does not choose the Christian revelation. Only then will the naked sexual passion that this pagan figure represents be transformed, controlled, and made a servant of Jane's; otherwise, she will be subject to the pagan goddess. Thus, Lewis does not deny the existence of the pagan goddess; however, Christianity transforms her into an entity that is in harmony with the spiritual universe -- into, in fact, an archangel. *The Silmarillion* is about the tragedy of a pre-Christian world: it is beautiful but doomed, because while God exists, he is hidden behind the Valar, and although the qualities of humility and *caritas* have entered a world in need of redemption, they have done so only imperfectly. Once again, the beauty and goodness of this pre-Christian world is not denied, nor is the truth of what the Valar are and what Elves understand about them, but the knowledge is, perforce, incomplete. Here, too, as in Lewis' work, the Valar are clearly the gods of Scandinavia, Greece, and Rome, and, as well, the angels and archangels of Judeo-Christianity.

Of all the Inklings it would appear, at first glance, that Charles Williams would make the greatest use of paganism pure and simple. It is, after all, he whose works are replete with the supernatural: with sorcery, Tarot cards, magical beasts, ghosts, and stones that transcend time and space. However the purely pagan element -- that is, myths, legends or deities of a pre-Christian culture such as Greece, Rome or Scandinavia -- is rare in his work. At times one finds a Druidic echo in the Arthurian cycle of poems, and of course the Chinese Emperor is a genuinely pagan figure. But Williams' real forte is "second-hand paganism": that is, the so-called "pagan element" might have been truly pagan at one time, but has either been transformed over many centuries by Judeo-Christian culture, or has actually been created during the Christian centuries within the Judeo-Christian world.

One can see this most clearly, I think, in the novels. The concept of human immortality, or, at any rate, longevity, as shown by Nigel Considine in *Shadows of Ecstasy*, is probably taken from H. Rider Haggard's *She*. In *War In Heaven* we have the Holy Grail and witchcraft; in *Descent into Hell*, Lilith, from the Kabbalah and the doppelganger, which is primarily a development of romantic German literature; in *Many Dimensions*, there is the Stone of Solomon, which Williams suggests is derived from Islamic tradition, but it also harks back to the medieval legends about the wisdom of Solomon. The Tarot cards in *The Greater Trumpe* cannot be traced further back in history than the thirteenth century A.D., in spite of the nineteenth century occultists who claimed the

cards were developed in ancient Egypt. The sorcerer in *All Hallows' Eve* is a Faustian renaissance magus, while the great beasts in *The Place of the Lion* (incidentally, Williams' version of the angels and archangels) come from the Neoplatonists of the third through the fifth centuries A.D. and, in particular, from the fifth century writer and mystic, Dionysius the Areopagite.

*Shadows of Ecstasy*, the first novel written although not the first to be published, may not be Williams' finest piece of craftsmanship, but it is a germinal novel as far as his major themes are concerned, and it is, therefore, useful to examine this novel in some detail. Each of Williams' novels deals with some supernatural force that attracts people to it and that proves unwise for humanity to meddle with. In the case of *Shadows* this force is human immortality, as represented by Nigel Considine, who claims to have lived for two hundred years. He does not pretend to be, as yet, immortal, acknowledging that it is necessary to experience death first. However, he insists that unaided by any divine help, he can conquer death by dying and returning through his own will to his body, thereby creating his own resurrection.

But Considine is more than a long-liver expressing a theory; he is also a catalyst for action. Immensely wealthy, highly intelligent and an adept among adepts, on the international level he throws Africa into war with Europe in a battle of ideologies, in which passion confronts intellect, forcing intellectual Europe to experience the intense emotions of fear, anger and hatred. On the personal level he makes each character assess his or her own *raison d'être*, the significant value by which that particular individual defines the fulfillment and meaning of his or her life.

For one of the characters, Sir Bernard, who is a retired surgeon, this value consists of a fusion of skepticism and a delight in observing life. As the man of science, he is the objective onlooker who denies nothing and affirms very little, whose skepticism "forbids incredulity",<sup>1</sup> but who believes in the human intellect. When he finds that he, as a child, took a photograph of Considine fifty years ago and that Considine appeared then to be the same as he is at present, Sir Bernard concludes, "if a man's nerves and stomach were sound . . . and if he kept himself fit, and had no accidents -- on my word, mightn't he look fifty when he was really a hundred?" (p. 20), and when Considine informs him of his real age, Sir Bernard's response is "He wouldn't deny that he was looking at a man of two hundred years . . . it might be -- it was unusual but it might be" (p. 85).

Most of the other characters are more emotional than intellectual, and therefore for them value lies in something more emotionally based -- in something that is a shadow of ecstasy. Phillip, for example, Sir Bernard's son, is an engineer and not especially intellectual or artistic. But he is in love with Rosamond, and for him, the epitome of significance is what she represents -- the beauty of the feminine:



She leant forward to pass a plate to her sister; somehow that arm always made him think of the Downs against the sky. There was a line, a curved beauty, a thing that was there for ever. And Rosamond? Rosamond was like them, she was there for ever. Well, after all, Rosamond was only human, she couldn't be absolutely perfect. And then as she stretched out her arm again he cried out that she was perfect, she was more than perfect; the movement of her arm was something frightfully important, and now it was gone. He had seen the verge of a great conclusion of mortal things and then it had vanished. Over that white curve he had looked into incredible space; abysses of intelligence lay beyond it. (p. 56)

For Roger Ingram, the professor of Applied Literature who finds a shadow of the ecstasy he is searching for in his love for his wife, Isabel, as well as in great verse, something is lacking. Partly it is that Roger takes poetry seriously, which he finds very few people do, and despises himself for watering down his consuming passion for the casual interest of the general public; and partly it is because he is aware that his own understanding of great literature is but a shadow of what verse is. Of all the characters, it is to him that Considine appeals most, and he becomes a near-convert to Considine's band of adepts. The only thing that saves him from total commitment is the accident of Considine's death. Inkamasi the Zulu, Christian, scholar and poet, a king without a country, finds that his kingship is what makes his faith and knowledge meaningful, and decides that, if he cannot achieve his kingdom his alternative must be death. Rosenberg the financier found his joy in decorating his wife with jewels, and his life fell into despair when she died; Matreux, Considine's right-hand man and Judas-like betrayer, discovers that he wants these same jewels literally more than life itself, while Rosenberg's heirs, who are students of the mystic Kabbalah, want the stones in order to give them to their consuming passion -- the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Isabel Ingram finds her value in loving Roger selflessly and in encouraging him to follow Considine in order to search for his own fulfillment while she stays in London and persuades Sir Bernard into helping the refugees from Considine's mock-attack on the city. Her form of ecstasy is the only one that recognizes pain as an intrinsic component of it. When Sir Bernard questions her about her letting Roger go with Considine, she can only reply:

"Don't you see I couldn't want it because of him? He Roger -- somehow he wanted it in me. O I don't know. I'm not as intelligent as you, but I know it was the one thing I had to have to make me happy."

Sir Bernard looked at her again, very steadily. "And does it make you happy?"

"Utterly," Isabel said. "O of course it's dreadfully painful, but -- yes, utterly."

On that rich and final word they fell into silence. Irony, even loving irony, could say no more. The mind accepted a fact which was a contradiction in terms, and knew itself defeated by that triumphant contradiction. (p. 163)

There is also Gaithness, who, like Sir Bernard, elects a more intellectual value. As a priest, he sees Christianity as expressed in the ritual of the Anglican Church as the sole means of grace and salvation.

Not all the characters find their values; some are merely thrown into inner turmoil, as is Rosamond, who is attracted by the primitive qualities and emotions Inkamasi exudes. She is frightened and repulsed by these emotions, fighting against not only herself but everyone else as well.

And finally, at the extreme pole of opposition to not only Considine but to all other characters, is Suydler, the Prime Minister, the modern statesman who is a political gorilla, abrogating all thought, all ecstasy, all human potential. Sir Bernard envisions himself giving documents salvaged from Considine's house to Suydler as a "Portrait of Gallio presenting the manuscript of the Evangelists to the Missing Link" (p. 219).

Thus, *Shadows* becomes a testing ground for all the things man has treasured -- love, beauty, gems, music, poetry. But above all, the novel is a testing ground for the validity of humanism, for that is what Considine represents: he is the Messiah of Human Potential. He has succeeded in living for two hundred years because he has turned his energies into himself rather than outward; those who turn energy out are the people who create. They love, compose music, write poetry, wear diamonds or weave glowing tapestries. All this Considine has denied in a new form of asceticism -- he has acknowledged all these things to be good, but refuses to allow them supremacy in order that he can be free to use his energies to the greater end of an indefinitely extended life, and for the ultimate purpose of overcoming death. Therefore he hardly needs, any longer, to eat or sleep; his house by the sea is cold because the door is open and his followers do not notice the cold; and although hot showers and breakfasts are provided, when Roger awakes as a guest in the house he finds the small, homely comforts are absent:

he opened his eyes, and almost immediately

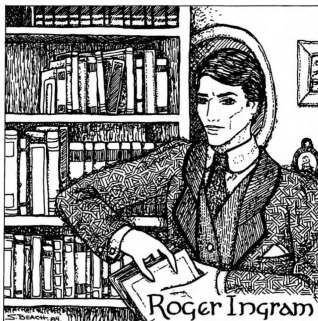
realized that his chance of tea was very small. At least, he rather doubted whether Considine's household provided early cups of tea, and the doubt was justified. None appeared. Roger, telling himself that he didn't mind, wondered for a second whether cups of tea at reasonable times weren't actually more important than lines of poetry, or at least whether the two were entirely incompatible. Nobody objected to wine, and if he had to choose for the rest of his life between wine and tea he had no kind of doubt where the choice would rest. Poetry and such things could give him all the wine he wanted, whereas tea was unique. . . . (p. 169-70)

In Considine, passion and intellect are fused and balanced; he has joined Europe and Africa in himself. Moreover, he is the master of time and space, and lives in a state that is much less the shadow, and much more the reality, of ecstasy, than any of the other characters. Thus, when he looks at the jewels for which he has been an executor and which he is about to give to their owner,

if Roger had been there he might have thought that the heap of jewels and the human figure reflected each other, and that intense life leapt and re-leapt between them. The man's form seemed to hold in itself depths of mysterious tints; so clear and mysterious was the corporeal presence, disciplined and purged and nourished through many decades by supreme passion. The deep smile broke out again as he gazed, exulting in the joy of beauty, absorbing it, and almost visibly transmuting it into his own dominating awareness of it. He stretched out his hand and picked up one or two, and a whole diadem of splendor faded by the unparalleled delicacy of consummated mortality which held it. (p. 192)

From the perspective of Christian theology, Considine's claim that man can conquer death by redeeming and resurrecting himself is the apogee of Satanic pride; furthermore, Isabel sees at once that his philosophy, which states that man is victorious through victory alone, is the opposite of Christianity, which maintains that man can never be victorious in himself alone, nor until he has known total defeat. Moreover, ethically Considine has allowed untold numbers of his followers to commit suicide, has been responsible for the deaths of thousands, and the reader is a witness to his manner of working in regard to Inkamasi, whom Considine wants dead, and to whom he offers what appears to be choices; yet the choices are couched in such a way that the Zulu king's mind is swayed toward Considine's wishes. Therefore, one of the most difficult questions Williams poses in this novel is the value of humanism, for, as Considine represents it, humanism is the height of post-Christian paganism; he is the man who might redeem and resurrect himself, and Williams sustains a deliberately ambiguous attitude toward this character. Theologically he is wrong and ethically he is a killer, if not a murderer. Yet the jury remains out on the question of Nigel Considine: is he a Christ figure, or an Anti-Christ, or is he purely the self-fulfillment of man's potential, which is what he himself says?

Thus, unlike Lewis and Tolkien, who were interested in demonstrating that pre-Christian paganism had



its own revelation of truth, however imperfect, Williams is involved with post-Christian, modern paganism such as this super-man figure who advocates man-as-god. However, in no other novel does Williams so completely recognize the attractiveness of the pagan concept. In the other six novels the pagan, or heretical, force is much easier to judge as unlawful for humanity because the power unleashed by the persons seeking it begins to work against them; the characters are too weak and the power too great. For example, in *The Place of the Lion*, Foster desires the brute strength represented by the Angel of Strength so he can destroy his enemies, and although he obtains the requisite strength, the power brutalizes him until he begins to speak in snarls and to scabble with his hands. Eventually he is crushed by the power he sought. Miss Wilmot, in the same work, wants subtle wisdom, and the Archangel, who is that power, and who should materialize as a gigantic python, is unable to find a large snake in suburban England, takes the next best substitute: Miss Wilmot. It then uses her mind, which is not capable of sustaining infinitely rapid and complex thought. Shortly the Archangel breaks out of her body, destroying her, not because the power is evil but because it is obeying the rules of the universe which govern it.

The difference between the other novels and *Shadows* is that Considine is the master of his power; nothing controls him. He is killed because "The violence against which he had never pretended to be secure, but which had avoided him so long, had struck him at last" (p. 212), and we never do know whether death has defeated him or whether he achieved his own resurrection. It is the strongest recognition Charles Williams ever made of man's dreams of fulfilling his own potential -- of living forever, of being not only master of time and space, but, above all, of himself. However, all the novels recognize the attractiveness of the supernatural powers which their characters try to obtain, and it is this open-mindedness toward these "second-hand paganism" of the twentieth century, in which hopes and dreams about the power of occult

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Narnia are metaphors for religious experience (which, on the deepest levels, they are seen to be), then Lewis is subtly reminding those who are most responsive to these experiences that the real world awaits, that such experiences are not a matter for boasting, and that there are others who share the same secret.

The device by which Lewis succeeds in his attempt, in this book, to present the elements of the Christian gospel "in their real potency," is that of compiling a literary collage into which he has gathered familiar characters such as Father Christmas and the White Witch, (who surely is a development of Hans Christian Andersen's character, the Snow Queen; making use of the same literary archetype of the long winter which probably refers ultimately to distant memories of an ice age). From Classical mythology Lewis has drawn the faun, the nymphs and the naiads, the centaurs, unicorns and the satyrs. In Narnia, an unfallen world, these mythical characters are subjects of Aslan and an illustrious Lewis' view the pagan myths contain "real but unfocused gleams of Divine truth," and that "Myth is the mountain whence all the different streams arise which become truths down here in the valley; in hae valle abstractionis"<sup>20</sup>. Nevertheless, Lewis maintained that the truths conveyed by these myths was only partial; the incarnation of Christ, the "myth became fact," transcended and encompassed all the other myths of divine intervention on the earth. (Ibid.). In the *Narnian Chronicles*, Lewis is careful to show the mythic characters in the service of Aslan so that the Christ figure is always given pre-eminence.

Lewis has achieved, however, by his use of legendary and mythic characters a sense of the wonderful and the faerie; his moral instructions are determined by cultural and social practice; his "good" is wise and his "evil," though attractive, is foolish. He has written a fairy tale which is completely satisfying in its own right, but he has made accessible the deeper levels of meaning to those who seek them, and even at the deepest levels, Lewis has imbued the Biblical elements with new potency by virtue of their contextual link with the fairy tale. He has succeeded in presenting the gospel elements freed from their solemn, reverential and "paralyzing" associations, and for many readers he has succeeded so well that the Scriptures themselves will now exert an appeal to the imagination as well as to the spirit.

## NOTES

- 1 C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier, 1976).
- 2 C.S. Lewis, "It All Began with a Picture" in his *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, Ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), p. 42.
- 3 C.S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories Say Best What's to be Said," in *Of Other Worlds*, p. 36.
- 4 V. Propp, *The Morphology of the Folk Tale*, Second ed., revised and edited with Preface by Louis Wagner, with new introduction by Alan Dundas (Austin & London: University of Texas Press, 1979), pp. 25-64.
- 5 C.S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories, etc." p. 38 and J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories" in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), pp. 33-46.
- 6 Edmund Leach, *Levi-Strauss* (London: Fontana, 1970), pp. 31-5.

- 7 All Biblical references in this text are taken from the Revised Standard Version.
- 8 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 16.
- 9 C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (London: The Bodley Head, 1938).
- 10 Bowers Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, Revised ed. (London: Cassell, 1936).
- 11 C.S. Lewis, "To a Lady," letter dated 29 December, 1958 in *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, Ed. W.H. Lewis (London: Bles, 1966), p. 283.
- 12 J.A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London: Deutsch, 1977).
- 13 Roger Fowler, ed., *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).
- 14 Charles Huttar, "The Heresy of Allegorizing Narnia: A Rejoinder" in *C.S.L.* Vol. 11 No. 3. January 1980. Italics his.
- 15 Martha Sammons, *A Guide Through Narnia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), p. 134.
- 16 Jane Garai, *The Book of Symbols* (London: Lorimer, 1973), pp. 46-7.
- 17 "Sometimes Fairy Stories" etc., p. 37.
- 18 O.E.D., also see Martha Sammons, *A Guide Through Narnia*, p. 132.
- 19 C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1969), p. 138.
- 20 C.S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact" in *his God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Glasgow: Fontana, 1979), p. 43.



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arcana continue to persist, that makes Williams' perspective an intensely sympathetic one. For precisely that reason his demonstration of the untenable errors in post-Christian paganism are that much more forceful, even, surprisingly, in *Shadows of Ecstasy*, because although Considine is not proven wrong, Williams maintains an ambivalent attitude toward him and, in addition, we are given alternate visions that are almost as attractive and certainly less destructive: Sir Bernard's faith in intellectual skepticism; his "faithless" dedication to the faith through which he and the Archbishop are able to sever Considine's hypnotic hold on Inkamasi; Isabel with her selfless love for Roger and her suggestion that defeat is necessary before man can become fully human; Phillip with his passion for Rosamond. Therefore, although Considine's position is not established as either wrong or right, the respective positions of these characters are also not proven to be wrong. Perhaps they are merely the shadows of ecstasy, while Considine's way is nearly the real thing; however, while wine is a very good thing, the implication is that perhaps tea should be the daily staple. One can come down from the heights of poetry and enjoy the more homely things of life, and, while one may not be ennobled, at least one will be stimulated.

## Endnotes

- 1 Charles Williams, *The Shadows of Ecstasy* (rpr. 1973, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1950), p. 74. All subsequent citations are to this text.