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### The Mythical Method of *Descent Into Hell*

#### Abstract

Considers Williams's *Descent Into Hell* as an excellent "example of the use of the mythical method [as defined by T.S. Eliot] as a metaphor of poesis, by which the fundamental forms of the imagination are catalyzed." Geometrical symbolism and the underworld journey link it to many modernist works.

#### Additional Keywords

Threshold imagery in *Descent Into Hell*; Underworld imagery in *Descent Into Hell*; Williams, Charles.  
*Descent Into Hell*—Symbolism

# The Mythical Method of Descent Into Hell

EVANS LANSING SMITH

**D**escent Into Hell, published in 1937 by Charles Williams, is a fine example of the use of the mythical method as a metaphor of poesis, by which the fundamental forms of the imagination are catalyzed. T. S. Eliot defined the "mythical method" as "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity," with the result of "giving a shape and significance . . . to the futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (681). This method yielded a wide range of Modernist works written during the late 1930's and early 1940's (such as Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Mann's *Joseph* novels and *Dr. Faustus*, Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil*, Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, and the stories in *Ficciones* by Jorge Luis Borges) which fuse realistic details with such myths as the apocalypse, the maze, and the descent to the underworld.<sup>1</sup> Several of these works use the threshold imagery of doorways, gates, windows, and staircases common to the iconography of the myths of the maze and the descent, and all of them share the central theme of the myths of the underworld and the apocalypse: i.e., the revelation of those fundamental ideas which give shape and significance to life and art, ideas for which the Modernists developed a complex variety of terms.

Eliot simply used the phrase "formal pattern" in association with the "box circle" and lotus pool of "Burnt Norton" (14). Thomas Mann used such terms as "fundamental types" ("Grundtypen") (*Doctor Faustus* 488; 647), "pious formula" ("fromme Formel") and "timeless schema" ("zeitlose Schema") ("Freud and the Future" 422; 493), and "given forms" ("gegebene Formen"), "pattern" ("Muster"), "prototype and abstract" ("Urbild und Inbegriff") and "archetype" ("Urbild") (*Joseph* 81, 123, 23; 94, 149, 29). In *The Death of Virgil*, Hermann Broch created a wide range of synonyms, such as "crystalline archetype" ("kristallische Urbild") (444; 418), "symbol of all symbols" ("Sinnbild aller Sinnbild") (89; 85), and "first image of all archetypes" ("Urbild aller bilder") (481; 453). C. G. Jung (who was much interested in the underworld and alchemy) derived his notion of the archetypes from the Platonic notion of the "eidola," a term which James Hillman has recently associated with the name Hades, and defined as "ideational forms and shapes" (51). Borges referred to these elementary ideas in fiction as "ancient forms, forms incorruptible and eternal" "formas antiguas, formas incorruptibles y eternas" (*Labyrinths* 70; *Obras* 117), while Julio Cortázar used the term "figuras" to refer to geometrical archetypes like kaleidoscopes, polyhedrons,

and crystals in his novel *Hopscotch*, a novel which relies heavily on "The nekias of today" (180) and on the "delicate alchemies" (379) involved in the reduction of material compounds to their elemental substances (429). These archetypal forms are in fact often represented in Modernism by geometrical configurations: In *A Vision*, Yeats uses the gyrating cones; in the *Joseph* novels, Mann uses the circle, the square, the triangle, and the sphere (124); Borges uses the diamond in "Death and the Compass," the wheel in "The God's Script," and the labyrinth in many stories; and, in Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent Into Hell* (a novel like Leonora Carrington's about a psychotic breakdown), these fundamental figures of the mind are evoked by the symbolism of a "circle in the square" in the center of a ruined city (54), which becomes the "inner pattern or template" of the outer city (94).

Charles Williams developed his own vocabulary to express the revelation of fundamental forms effected by the descent into Hades. The character Wentworth, for example is preoccupied with geometrical configurations of the eidola. He develops abstract "diagrams" by which reality is "geometricized" (24), and the narrator tells us that his historical studies "reduced the world to diagrams" (35). This habit persists in Wentworth's death, which Williams presents in Madame Tussaud's House of Wax, where Wentworth struggles to rearrange the figures of history on "diagrams, squares and rectangles," looking for the "right" or the "real" diagram, which unfortunately constantly changes (217). Wentworth's journey is the most infernal in the novel, but he shares with the rather angelic Margaret Anstruther the notion that "the spirit of a man at death saw truly what he was and had been" by the "lucid power of intelligence" and "energy of knowledge" activated by death and dying (67), a process of revelation by which "another system of relations" is created (158). But it is Margaret's granddaughter Pauline who develops the most complex variety of synonyms for the fundamental forms of the soul which give shape and significance to life. With the help of the poet Stanhope, she discovers the "laws" of a universe the "very fundamentals" of which are altered by her communion with her dead martyred ancestor Struther (104). For Stanhope's Christian doctrine of "substituted love" bridges the gap between the living and the dead and contains "the hint of a new organization of all things: a shape, of incredible difficulty in the finding, of incredible simplicity found, an infinitely alien arrangement of infinitely familiar things" (150). The words "or-

ganization," "shape," and "arrangement" in this passage embody in simple and powerful terms that sense of revelation effected by the descent. During the performance of Stanhope's play, Pauline uses the phrases "fundamental thing," "essential nature of all," and "sacred order" to express her sense of a "mystery" revealed by the verse and her "communion with the dead" (180). All of these terms refer ultimately to "The central mystery of Christendom, the terrible substitution" of God's love on the Cross, which Williams calls the "root of a universal rule," rather than a "miraculous exception" (189).

This lovely vocabulary of form accords with the Modernist notion that the myth of the descent into Hades catalyzes the revelation of the root forms of the mind and soul. The underworld could be almost anywhere for the Modernists: the streets of Paris in Strindberg's *Inferno*; Byzantium in the poetry of Yeats; a pond, river, barn, or channel in Lawrence's "The Horse Dealer's Daughter," *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, or *Women in Love*; a bazaar, park where truant boys play hockey, hotel room, beach, or cemetery in Joyce's *A Portrait*, *Dubliners*, or *Ulysses*; an insane asylum in Leonora Carrington's *Down Below*; lotus pool, state stop, or streets of London in Eliot's *Four Quartets*; or Venice or Alpine sanatorium in Mann's *Death in Venice* or *The Magic Mountain*. For Charles Williams it is a little suburb of London called Battle Hill, "a haunt of alien life" (21), a "huge grave in which so many others had been dug" (69), a place of "predestined sepulchre" where "the currents of mortality had been drawn hither from long distances to some whirlpool of invisible depth" (67), and a place where the houses stood on "graves and bones, and swayed from their foundations" (74). It is, most archetypically, the mount of Cavalry, a "Hill of skulls" (25), but as a mountain in Margaret Anstruther's dream vision of death, it looks back to a long line of mythological prototypes in which the underworld is situated at the "bottoms of the mountains" (as Jonah 2: 6 puts it). For the Egyptians, the sun set into the underworld of the western mountains across the Nile in the Valley of the Kings (Budge 179), while the Sumerian word *kur* in "The Descent of Inanna" means both mountain and underworld (Wolkstein and Kramer 157).

It was also in these early mythologies that the imagery of doorways and the labyrinth were first developed to describe the journey through the underworld. The Egyptians pictured the nightly journey of the Sun God Ra as a passage through a sequence of doorways connecting the twelve chambers of the underworld domain of Osiris, with a different set of demons guarding each threshold. The climax of the journey — for Ra as well as for the departed soul — came with a vision of Osiris, Lord of the Dead, enthroned in his coffin or pillar (Budge 170f.). In the somewhat earlier Sumerian "Descent of Inanna to the Great Below," the Goddess passes through a sequence of seven gateways, shedding an article of royal clothing at each, until she stands naked in front of the Goddess of Death,

Ereshkigal (Wolkstein and Kramer 52-61). This archaic notion of the underworld as a labyrinthine mansion of many chambers also recurs in Virgil's Halls of Dis and in the illuminated manuscript traditions, which picture the gateway into Hell as the gaping jaws of the devil leading into an infernal palace. This imagery persists in Medieval and Renaissance paintings of the "Harrowing of Hell," in which we often see Jesus standing at the doorway into Hell, and sometimes, as in Dürer, beneath an archway, to rescue the souls of Adam and Eve. Dante has his famous gateway superscribed by the words "Abandon all Hope Ye Who Enter Here," while Blake often used doorways into caves to depict the journey of the soul. In Modernism, threshold imagery is central in the descents depicted in such works as *Death in Venice*, *The Death of Virgil*, "The Garden of Forking Paths," or, for that matter *Gravity's Rainbow*, or *Hopscotch*. The descent through a sequence of doorways is also invoked in such films as Murnau's *Nosferatu*, Cocteau's *Belle et Bête* and *Orphée*, and Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*.<sup>2</sup>

We find such doorway and gate motifs throughout *Descent into Hell*, in which Williams persistently uses threshold imagery to evoke the transition between worlds. There are several occasional uses of doorway imagery. The dying Margaret Anstruther sees Pauline "coming over the rock through a door of great stones like Stonehenge" (121), and the dead man descends "through the door" of the room where he hung himself in Wentworth's home, "down the stairs" to the "front door," which opens "of itself before him" (156), and on to the window of Margaret Anstruther's home. Wentworth himself descends to the bottom of the Hill to a "secret gate" where he will find his phantom Adela (85), and then passes on through "his door" into a "sealed garden" (85) which swings shut "after him" when he leaves (90). Williams calls this garden Wentworth's Eden, only it is another manifestation of Lilith, not Eve, with whom he mates. Pauline too has her first encounter with Lily Sammile at the "gate" in her garden to which we first see her run to escape her "doppelgänger" (22). It is at this gate that Lily surprises and tempts her later in the novel, when Pauline initially swings "the gate more wide" (110) to admit Lily, but then flings it shut where Lily stands "at the gate — of garden or world or soul — leaning to but not over it" (111).

The most consistent threshold imagery is in fact reserved for the encounters with Lily Sammile, who as the Lilith of the novel stands at the gateway to Gomorrah and to the underworld. The gate and doorway imagery becomes a kind of leit-motif in these scenes. Pauline's ultimate conquest of Lily will occur at the "door" of the cemetery shed (194), where Lily appears as an "ancient witch" (206) to tempt Adela Hunt, when she visits the graveyard with Hugh, after the performance of Stanhope's play. The couple stands before the "rough swinging door" of the shed with Adela "holding on to a bar of the gate" (194), before a terrible groan unleashes the whirlwind

which seems to liberate the dead from their graves. Before the terrible sound ceases, Lily had "jerked from the gate, and thrown herself at the dark shed, and disappeared within, and the swinging door fell to behind her" (196). Adela then breaks free of Hugh and runs wildly up the road to Wentworth's house, where she collapses at the window, terrified by the sight of her own *doppelgänger* within, Hugh's phantom Adela (199). Wentworth must then drag her down through "the gate" leading from his home into the road, where he leaves Adela lying unconscious on the road (199). She comes to later, quite sick and "at death's door" (201).

Pauline's encounter with Lilith is more successful, and is presented to us as a Harrowing of Hell, only with a female Christ and a female devil. Those medieval paintings and manuscript illuminations which portray this legendary episode in the life of Christ during the time between the crucifixion and resurrection inevitably put Jesus at a gate, arch, or doorway which leads into Hell. He stands with staff in hand, sometimes impaling a devil at the gate, who tries to impede Christ's liberation of Adam and Eve, whom Jesus leads by the hand through the gateway out of Hell. Albrecht Dürer's Harrowings of 1510 and 1512 can be taken as representative: they show Jesus framed by an arch in the background from which devils hang while he rescues Adam and Eve at the gateway of Hell. Pauline, who must harrow Lilith's hell at Adela's sickbed request, recalls her first meeting with Lily "as something more than an old woman by a gate, or if, then a very old woman indeed by a very great gate, where many go in who choose themselves, the gate of Gomorrah in the Plain" (203). When Pauline arrives at the "rough door" of the cemetery shed after leaving Adela (205), she raps twice then lays "a hand on the door" and "gently" pushes it (206). It swings open to reveal a "very long and narrow and deep" underworld, the floor of which slides away into infinity, and the "doorway" of which is mobbed by the masses of the "occupiers of the broken-up graves" (206). These are the "people of infinite illusion," and their queen is Lilith, the "ancient witch" who sits huddled on the dirt floor inside the gate. The door swings further open to admit Pauline (207), but she refuses to enter, or to yield to the temptation of selfishness, and thrusts the door shut with such determination that the shed collapses (210).

The repeated imagery of doorways in these passages devoted to the Harrowing of Hell suggests not only the mythological background of the Sumerian, Egyptian, and Classical descents into the underworld (in which doorways are to be found in abundance), but also the iconography of the labyrinth, another motif Williams shares with many other novelists and poets of the Modernist era. In Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, for example, the maze is linked to the underworld by the portrayal of the "labyrinthine little streets, squares, canals, and bridges" "die Gäßchen, Gewässer, Brücken, Plätze des Labyrinthes" (433; 413); in *The Magic Mountain* it is the sanatorium which "becomes the Palace of Knossos (Crete), the Labyrinth

with the sign of the Double Axe, where Minos and Rhadamanthus rule and where Ariadne lives" ("Das Sanatorium wird also zum Palast auf Knossos (Kreta) wo Minos und Rhadamanth herrschen, wo Ariadne lebt, es wird zum Labyrinth mit dem Wahrzeichen der Doppelaxt") (Sandt 72); and in *Joseph and His Brothers*, it is the "Cretan Loggia" in where Pharaoh learns the Lord's Prayer from Joseph (928-931). In Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil*, we are all, and the poet especially, imprisoned in "the voice-maze, in the maze of perception, in the mazes of time," which, however, contain within them a "starry map of unity of order" created by "that symbol of all symbols" hidden within (89). Similar mazes of the underworld, time, and art are to be found in the extraordinary *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* by Kazantzakis, "The Garden of Forking Paths" by Borges, *Hopscotch* by Julio Cortázar, *Pnin* by Vladimir Nabokov, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel García Márquez. Several of these works were published around 1935, when the fourth volume of *The Palace of Minos* was published in London by Sir Arthur Evans, and when Picasso was at work (from 1934-1937) on his own Minotaur sequence (Rubin 308-346), and Williams on his *Descent Into Hell*, first published in 1937. Of these, Borges and Márquez are particularly close to Williams, for they combine the imagery of the underworld and the maze with the imagery of the mirror. In "The Library of Babel" of 1941, Borges places a mirror over the entrance into a labyrinth of "hexagonal galleries" which "feign and promise infinity" (79), while in "Death and the Compass" of 1944, the protagonist Lonrröt loses himself among the labyrinthine chambers, staircases, and "opposing mirrors" of a "desolate and symmetrical" villa called Tristele-Roy (138-39). In the later novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez portrays the death of the old patriarch, José Arcadio Buendía, as a "dream of the infinite rooms," through which he wanders, "as in a gallery of parallel mirrors," until he gets lost and is unable to find his way back to waking life (143). We also find the mirror, the maze, the dream and the underworld combined in *La Fille de Rappacini* of 1956, by Octavio Paz. In Scene 4, Giovanni's "dream takes the form of a voyage into a labyrinth of mirrors through past time into the depths of his subconscious" (Orenstein 77).

In *Descent Into Hell*, we find the notion that death is a labyrinth through which the soul wanders after death in the portrayal of the dead man's peregrinations through the "twisting maze of streets and times" on the Hill, in Wentworth following his spectral Adela "round and round in some twisting path" towards his damnation at the bottom of the Hill (84), and, most significantly, in Pauline's memory of her life, before Stanhope's help, as a dream in which "she had played hide-and-seek with herself in a maze made up of the roads of Battle Hill" (190). It is during this time that Pauline had pursued her *doppelgänger*,

some poor image of herself that fled into the houses to escape her. The dream had been long, for the houses had

opened up, as that shadow entered, into long corridors and high empty rooms, and there was one dreadful room which was all mirrors, or what was worse than mirrors, for the reflections in those mirrors were living, though they hid for a while and had no being till the shadow at last came speeding into the room, but then they were seen, and came floating out of their flickering cells, and danced the shadow into some unintelligible dissolution among them. (190)

Pauline finally catches up with this double image of herself, a "miserable fugitive" which she "sought to save" by running down "infinite halls and corridors" until, at the end of "the last long corridor," she hears a trumpet and awakens, to remember "only as a dream the division between herself and the glorious image by which the other was to be utterly ensouled" (191).

This is a most extraordinary sequence linking, the mirror, the maze, and the underworld in a way that calls to mind a series of commentaries on Gnosticism published in the *Eranos Yearbooks* in 1953 and 1963. Henry Corbin's article "Pour une Morphologie de la Spiritualité Shīte" "Towards a Morphology of Shiite Spirituality" connects the maze and the mirror to Islamic mysticism, to the so-called "miracle of the octave" referred to by Zuckerkandl, and to Leonardo da Vinci's "genial invention" of a labyrinth with an octagonal chamber of mirrors which multiply to infinity on eight sides the image of the initiate, who has traversed the "interminable paths among the tortuous turnings" to penetrate to the central sanctuary, the place of revelation, which, Corbin writes, is neither the place of combat with the monstrous Minotaur, nor the celestial Jerusalem searched for by the Medieval pilgrim traversing the labyrinths figured on the pavements of the Cathedrals (such as Chartres in France, or Ely outside of Cambridge in England). Rather, it is the place where the initiate contemplates himself as the "Donateur des Formes" the 'Giver of Forms'. "Celui qui se connaît le donateur," Corbin concludes, "n'est plus l'esclave des données" ('He who knows the giver is no longer the slave of the givens') (101-02).<sup>3</sup>

Corbin pursues the image of the mirror in his delineation of the Gnosis of Islam, which we can also see as an image ("ein Gleichnis") of the creation of consciousness during the analytical process of individuation. For Corbin, the Minotaur that we find imprisoned in the middle of the maze of mirrors is essentially the image ("Urbild") of the Self, which we see reflected in sequences of infinite regressions ("Abbilder") upon the surfaces of the octagonal "chambre aux miroirs" surrounding the center. According to the tradition of Ibn Arabi, each of these reflections represents one of the seven spheres (celestial earths) of

a world of pure imaginal perception, a world in which God has created for each soul a universe to which it corresponds, so well that when the mystic contemplates this universe, it is himself, his proper soul, which he contemplates upon there.

le monde de la pure perception imaginative, monde dans lequel Dieu a créé pour chaque âme un univers qui lui

correspond, si bien que lorsque le mystique contemple cet univers, c'est soi-même, sa propre âme, qu'il y contemple.' (62)

In each of these seven spheres we see the reflected image of the self that belongs to that particular world. All seven spheres taken together represent Hürqalyâ, the world of the archetypes, above this visible terrestrial world, into which the Self projects the forms and images of its reflections, just as a body reflects itself incorpally into a mirror:

this world of Hürqalyâ which is the *mundus archetypus*, not at all the world of Platonic Ideas, rather the intermediary world where the spiritual takes body and shape, and where the material spiritualizes itself into autonomous forms and images, which, our authors never tire of repeating, consist completely free of any other matter than their own proper light, the way images consist of the intangible reflections of the mirror. (66)

ce monde de Hürqalyâ qui est le *mundus archetypus*, non point le monde des Idées platoniciennes, mais l'intermonde où le spirituel prend corps et figure, et où le corporel se spiritualise en Formes et Images autonomes, dont nos auteurs répètent qu'elles subsistent libres de toute autre matière que leur propre lumière, à la façon des images dans le miroir.

In the Gnosis of Iranian mystics like Sarkâr Aghâ, therefore, our incarnation into this world is comparable to the manner in which an image enters a mirror. The soul does not actually descend into the world; it simply projects its reflection into the mirror-maze of materiality:

Speaking of the manner in which souls make their entry into the world, it is necessary to understand, he says, the way an image of the human person makes his entry as an apparition into a mirror . . . . No more than the incandescent mass of the sun "descends" onto this Earth, do the souls (that is to say the selves with the bodies of their spiritual archetypes, "descend" materially into the world, "in person" so to speak. (70)

Parlant de la manière dont les âmes font leur entrée en ce monde, il nous faut la comprendre, dit-il, à la manière dont l'image de la personne humaine fait son entrée, son apparition, dans un *miroir* . . . . Pas plus que la masse incandescente du soleil ne "descend" sur cette Terre, les âmes, c'est à dire les moi-esprits avec leur corps spirituel archétype, ne "descendent" matériellement en ce monde, "en personne" pour ainsi dire.

The world, that is to say, is the mirror which reflects the archetypal forms by which the Self projects itself into the seven worlds of the *mundus archetypus*. The center of the octagonal chamber of mirrors is "the place of self contemplation" ('le lieu de la contemplation de soi-même') (101).

In Gilles Quispel's article on "Der Gnostische Anthropos und die Jüdische Tradition" ('The Gnostic Anthropos and Jewish Tradition'), he cites a Naaseen Psalm about the world soul imprisoned in the labyrinth of matter and longing for the way out: "im Labyrinth irrend / sucht vergebens sie den Ausweg" ('wandering in the Labyrinth

astray, the lost soul vainly searches for the way" (211). Another section of Quispel's article evokes the connection between the mirror and the maze. How did the soul become trapped in matter? By looking at itself in the mirror of darkness, or by projecting its reflection, an act which provokes the demonic lust of the powers residing within the gloomy deeps ("die Finsternisse") (212). From the Gnostic perspective then (as for the Christian), the labyrinth is the world in which the soul is imprisoned, and from which it seeks release. Quispel suggests that it was not the Soul itself which fell into the material world of darkness, but the image of the Soul, variously referred to as its "Eidolon" (220), reflection ("Abbild") (232), or shadow ("Schattenbild") (213). It was as if the soul of the world (Sophia or anima mundi) had briefly glimpsed her reflection in a mirror which retains her image and uses it as the basis for the creation of the world: "The Light had only thrown a glimpse into the darkness, as into a mirror. Consequently, it was only an image of the Light which came down into the darkness. The darkness had only received a glimpse, an image into its material realm" ("Das Licht hat nur einen Blick auf die Finsternisse geworfen, wie in einen Spiegel. Darum ist nur ein Bild des Lichtes unter die Finsternisse gekommen. Die Finsternisse haben nur einen Blick, ein Bild in der Materie bekommen") (232). This reflection of Sophia is torn apart, mixed with the forces of the darkness ("Schalengewalten"), and used to "shape a world which is only a likeness" ("eine Welt schaffen, welche ein Gleiches ist") (232), a symbol of the higher realm of Light. The mirror becomes the maze of the material world, shaped by the powers of the complexes of the unconscious, just as our fragile egos are formed largely by the forces from below.

We all then, it seems, like Pauline have a spiritual double, with whom we are reunited in death, a "glorious image" by which we are ensouled in this world and the next. Pauline finds this image at the center of the maze of streets and corridors and houses on Battle Hill, which is both the inferno (for Wentworth, Adela, and Lily), the purgatorial mountain (for the dead man and Pauline), and paradise (for Stanhope and Margaret Anstruther). It is a place of intersection, where the labyrinthine ways of the living and the dead cross, a place of revelation, where the archetypal forms of the Christian imagination are disclosed, and a place of redemption, where the Minotaur of self-love is transformed, by the doctrine of substituted love, into the "glorious image" of ourselves, at the center of the mirror maze of our redemption. Theologically, Williams connects this reunion of self and soul with the apocalypse, a mythic configuration often found, in Modernist works of the late 1930's and early 1940's, in association with the maze and the underworld.

At the end of *Descent Into Hell*, the poet Stanhope explains the sudden plague of illness on the Hill as "one of the vials of the Apocalypse" (211), and earlier, as Pauline had made her way into the dark night of her soul to encounter her double and to redeem her ancestor Struther from the flames of his martyrdom, she had seen "a star —

Hesper or Phospor, the planet that is both the end and the beginning, Venus, omega and alpha" (163). The phrasing here suggests first and foremost the famous words of Jesus from Revelation: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last" (22: 13). We find the same theme in Eliot's *Four Quartets*, in which the words "In my beginning is my end" become a leit-motive (23); in Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil*, especially in the last chapter, when "the ring of time had closed and the end was the beginning" (481); and in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, in which the narrator Zeitblom speaks of "the curvature of the world, which makes the last return upon the first" (376). But the fact that Williams chooses Venus as the star guiding Pauline through her dark night evokes another set of mythological associations of great interest. For the Sumerians, Venus was the star of Inanna, the Goddess whose descent into and return from the underworld is the first literary version of the nekylia we know anything about. Her symbols (found on a cylinder seal in the British Museum dating back to 3000 B.C.E.) were the eight pointed rosette of the evening and morning star, and the doorposts of the temple and the underworld (Wolkstein and Kramer 184). Attention was drawn to the mythologies of Ancient Mesopotamia in general, and of Inanna in particular, by the dramatic accounts of the excavations of the royal cemetery of Ur by Sir Charles Leonard Wooley in 1934 (three years before the publication of *Descent Into Hell*). As Joseph Campbell has suggested, the number of tombs and the nature of the burial symbolism have to do with the cycles of Venus, a planet which had "long been associated in both Classical and Near Eastern mythologies with a great goddess by that name (known also as Aphrodite, Ishtar, and Inanna) (*Atlas* 2.1.80). Inanna descends into the underworld for three nights, during which time her body is hung up to rot on a peg (the first crucifixion on record, but of a female divinity!), before being revived by the water and bread of life (Wolkstein and Kramer 67). All of this seems most apt when applied to Pauline in *Descent Into Hell*: she is associated with the planet Venus, she passes through a labyrinthine sequence of doorways to redeem herself, she harrows hell during a dark night of the soul, and she returns to life at the end of a novel richly informed by all of the central myths of Modernism. ♀

### Notes

1. See Gregory Lucente's *The Narrative of Realism and Myth* for one of many fine studies of the method. My publications discuss in detail the descent to the underworld in many of the works of Modernism, while a work in progress has chapters on the maze, the underworld, the great goddess, alchemical imagery, and the apocalypse.
2. For an image of the Medieval inferno, see, among many others, *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves* (Plate 99). See also Arnold Van Genep's discussion of the Egyptian rites of Osiris as developed in *The Book of Doors*, in which the underworld was imagined as an immense temple divided into rooms separated by doors, each door guarded by a baboon, spirit, mummy, or uraeus serpent spitting fire (157 f.).

(Note the heads puffing smoke on the capitals of the fireplace in Beatt's chateau in Cocteau's film, which I discuss in my article "Framing the Underworld").

3. All translations from the *Eranos Yearbook* are my own. I include the original citation for those readers who wish to verify them.

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