From the Edge of Eternity: The Role of Stanhope in Charles Williams' Descent Into Hell.

Andrew Green

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From the Edge of Eternity: The Role of Stanhope in Charles Williams' *Descent Into Hell*

by

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Professor in Charge

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Abstract

Descent into Hell is a didactic novel. So skillfully is it constructed, however, that it succeeds as a novel as well as it does a vehicle for the transmission of certain elements of Christian theology, notably the doctrine of substitution. Largely responsible for the success of this work is Williams' adroit use of the character Peter Stanhope, a figure who has been almost entirely ignored by critics. This paper offers for the first time a thorough analysis of the structural, functional, and stylistic aspects of Stanhope's role in the novel.

Through narrative assertion, the reflections of other characters, and the statements of Stanhope himself, Williams painstakingly establishes Stanhope's credentials until it becomes clear that this character is more than a mere genius. He is a playwright of Shakespearean caliber; he is omniscient; and he is the possessor of enormous power. He can, in fact, function convincingly as an oracle.

Much in contrast to Williams' usual characters in progress toward either damnation of salvation, Stanhope is a static figure who closely resembles the anonymous third person narrator of Descent into Hell. Although there are some minor differences between them, on im-
portant issues of theology and morality, as well as in language and tone, Stanhope and the narrator are virtually interchangeable. With an understanding of such matters as damnation, redemption, good and evil, and substitution that equals the narrator's own, Stanhope is able to render assertions about the nature of the cosmos that are as credible as are those of the narrator. The only real difference between the two is that as a character, Stanhope addresses his statements of theological fact to other characters in the work, while the narrator speaks directly to the reader.

Williams often has Stanhope use his insights into the nature of reality to explicate independently the novel's many supernatural occurrences; it is, however, when the poet's knowledge is used in direct, almost synergetic conjunction with that of the narrator—as in the case of the articulation of the crucial doctrine of substitution—that *Descent into Hell* is most successful both as a work of art and as a religious tract.
Introduction

Although in recent years the novels of Charles Williams have attracted an increasing amount of scholarly attention, no critic has yet seen fit to undertake a specific and thorough study of the all-important role of Peter Stanhope, the poet in *Descent into Hell*. The tendency of Williams scholarship has been to shy away from anything approaching stylistic and technical analyses, in favor of discussion of the novels' theological and moral "messages." Thus, such matters as "coinherence," "exchange," "substitution," "the Beatricean vision," the nature of damnation, and the like, have been examined and re-examined. An understanding of these is admittedly essential to a thorough understanding of Williams' novels, and several studies concerning these matters, notably those of Robert Reilly, Mary Shideler, and Anne Ridler,¹


are especially worthwhile. Most critics, though, do not place their discussions of Williams' theology in any kind of a detailed textual context vis-a-vis the novels themselves. They are concerned primarily with the theology and only secondarily, if at all, with the technical manner of its expression.

If, however, one is to talk about Williams as a novelist as well as a theologian and philosopher, one must deal also with the stylistic elements of his novels. The transmission of religious truths through the novels is, to a large extent, dependent upon the success or failure of the techniques by which they are presented. To ignore this fact and to read the books as religious tracts first and novels second, instead of as the exquisitely blended compounds of theology and fiction that they at times are, is seriously to undervalue them as works of art.

It is generally agreed by most of those Williams' critics who, in however limited ways, deal with the novelistic in addition to the theological aspects of his works, that Descent into Hell and All Hallows' Eve constitute his finest efforts. According to George Winship Parker, "In Descent into Hell, Charles Williams has . . . . . achieved what one of the characters calls a 'terrible good.' The occult elements play some part in the story but comparatively little in the terror. Like good
naturalistic art, the book presents credible disaster."\(^2\)

Barbara MacMichael comments that "In The Place of the Lion, Descent into Hell, and All Hallow's Eve, Williams does manage to merge form and content into a unified whole, creating for his reader a vivid experience of both story and idea. Their unified effect is achieved partially because Williams' characters in these novels are more adequately realized than in the other four."\(^3\)

Douglas Carmichael, without explaining why, states that Descent into Hell is "often considered Williams' masterpiece."\(^4\)

And finally, Patricia Meyer Spacks maintains that Descent into Hell and All Hallows' Eve differ from and are superior to Williams' other works because "the plot does not center, as in the preceding books, on symbolic objects or on a symbolic event. Instead a total vision . . . is the heart of these novels."\(^5\)


\(^3\)Barbara MacMichael, "Hell is Oneself: An Examination of the Concept of Damnation in Charles Williams' Descent into Hell," Studies in the Literary Imagination, 5, No. 1 (1968), 59.


It is the premise of this thesis that one of the primary reasons for the success of *Descent into Hell* as a work in which "form and content [have merged] into a unified whole," is Williams' masterful use of the character of the poet, Peter Stanhope. In support of that premise, the paper will: examine the extent to which Stanhope's identity as an artist is a critical factor in the way he functions in the novel; compare Stanhope with other characters in the Williams canon who resemble him; and analyze in detail the similarities between Stanhope and the omniscient, anonymous narrator of *Descent into Hell*, with a discussion of techniques by which Williams successfully uses the combination of narrator and character as his most important and effective tool for the transmission of theological and moral dicta.
Chapter One
Survey of Criticism

It is surprising, given his obviously crucial role in *Descent into Hell*, how little attention has been paid to Peter Stanhope by students of Charles Williams. Indeed, the narrator's early assertion that "never negligible, Stanhope was often neglected,"¹ is apparently true not just of the literary public that Stanhope must contend with in the novel, but of the novel's critics as well. Among the characters in *Descent into Hell*, Pauline and Wentworth have garnered the bulk of critical attention, and while Stanhope is usually not completely ignored, too often he is discussed with a brevity more appropriate to a secondary character.

Although no extended discussion of Stanhope's role in *Descent into Hell* exists, a few critics do accord the poet something of his correct stature in the novel. None of these, however, address themselves in any thorough or substantive way to that fundamental notion which is Stanhope's identity as an artist. Nor do they even so much as intimate that they perceive any similarities between Stanhope and the narrator.

¹Charles Williams, *Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1937), p.11. Subsequent references to this work will appear parenthetically in the text.
An incredible omission of specific reference to Stanhope occurs in Charles Huttar's article, "Charles Williams, Novelist and Prophet." Purporting to discuss substitution in *Descent into Hell*, Huttar writes:

> . . . now she [Pauline] lives in constant expectation and . . . terror of meeting herself. The concern shown by a friend [emphasis mine] encourages the frightened girl to tell what is troubling her. The friend offers to take her fear upon himself and to her amazement explains that a psychic burden, like a physical one, can be given to a willing substitute to carry . . . . None of this exchanging is done humanly; it is all "in the Omnipotence."  

Like many Williams critics, Huttar seems to believe that a summary of the plot may serve as a "substitute" for analysis. But how can one give even a summary of the plot of *Descent into Hell* without so much as mentioning that the anonymous "friend" of Pauline is in reality Stanhope, who is a great poet, and whose play is being produced by the "restless talent of Battle Hill" (p. 9). Obviously one cannot, and while Huttar's abbreviated account of substitution may, in an inadequate way, retell the bare facts of the situation, he has hardly done the novel justice. For Huttar, *Descent into Hell* "has two central characters . . . Lawrence Wentworth . . . [and] . . . Pauline Anstruther."  

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In his reading of the work, Stanhope apparently does not exist as anything more than a nameless "friend" of Pauline who, it seems from Huttar's description, suddenly and almost casually "offers to take her fear upon himself."\(^4\)

Doris T. Meyers in her otherwise excellent article, "Brave New World: That Status of Women According to Tolkien, Lewis and Williams," also fails to say anything about Stanhope as an artist, but she does better than Huttar in that at least she mentions his name.

For Williams, the principle of hierarchy is modified . . . by a literal practice of the Biblical injunction to "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." This practice, which Williams called "the doctrine of co-inherence," [actually he called it "substitution;" "co-inherence" is necessary for substitution but is not the same thing] is dramatized in . . . Descent into Hell. The heroine, Pauline Anstruther, is haunted by a fear of meeting her double. Peter Stanhope offers to suffer the fear for her, so that if she meets the apparition she need not be afraid of it.\(^5\)

And that is the extent of Meyers' analysis of Stanhope's role in the novel. In all fairness, however, it must be

\(^4\)Huttar, p. 72.

stated that a detailed discussion of *Descent into Hell* is not within the scope of Meyers' article. Its main concern is Williams' depiction of the relationship between the sexes: "In Williams' novels women often save men, but men are also subject to women. It all depends on the circumstances."  

Douglas Carmichael does somewhat better than the others in that he identifies Stanhope as "the poet Peter Stanhope [emphasis mine]," to whom Pauline "mentions her fear."  
Carmichael also notes that the name "Stanhope" is one Williams himself used from time to time as a pseudonym.  
Although he seems to imply an identification between Williams and Stanhope, Carmichael draws no inferences from this and discusses the matter no further. As for Stanhope the character, Carmichael's reference to him as a poet is the extent of this critic's acknowledgment of his role as an artist. Nor does Carmichael mention the production of Stanhope's play that forms the central secular event of the novel. Carmichael makes the situation in which Stanhope offers to relieve Pauline of

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6 Meyers, p. 17.

7 Carmichael, p. 18.

8 Carmichael, p. 18.
her fear seem too casual: Pauline does not just "mention" her fear to Stanhope as if in the course of an ordinary conversation; the admission must be drawn from her. And once it is, it takes all of Stanhope's considerable powers of argument and persuasion to convince her to choose to allow him to take her burden. Carmichael, noting the relative ease with which Stanhope accomplishes the actual substitution--once he had Pauline's cooperation--says that the poet "apparently is a master of the art." But the critic makes no attempt to relate this mastery of substitution to Stanhope's identity as a poet.

Carmichael concludes his article by offering a little hierarchy of Williams characters. "Morally," he avers, "it might be said that Williams divides the human race into five categories: the saints like Betty [in All Hallows' Eve] and Sybil [in The Greater Trumps], the good who are sure of themselves like Stanhope, the unsure but generally good like Lester and Pauline [in All Hallows' Eve and Descent into Hell], the unsure but generally bad like Wentworth and Evelyn [in Descent into Hell and All

\[9\text{Carmichael, p. 18.}\]

\[10\text{Carmichael, p. 18.}\]
Hallows' Eve], and the deliberately wicked like Persimmons [in War in Heaven]."\(^{11}\)

These rankings seem incorrect to this writer: Stanhope should be not on the second rung, but the first, slightly above even Sybil. As this paper will demonstrate, Sybil is one of the characters in the Williams canon who most resemble Stanhope. But while they are equals in saintliness, Stanhope surpasses Sybil in the purely intellectual ability to articulate, both in his art and in his interpersonal relationships, theological statements of great profundity. To place, as Carmichael does, Betty Wallingford on the same level of sainthood as Sybil, and ahead of Stanhope, is inaccurate. Betty, to be sure, is a "good" character, and she ultimately performs real miracles, but for much of All Hallows' Eve she is weak and owes her very survival to the agency of others. Lester's substitution for her during a necromantic spell and an impromptu baptism given her in her infancy by an old nanny, are all that save Betty from destruction. Characters like Stanhope and Sybil, on the other hand, never are in this kind of danger: it is their function, in a variety of ways, to rescue and redeem others.

Barbara MacMichael is a critic who purports to dis-

\(^{11}\)Carmichael, p. 22.
cuss *Descent into Hell*, but she does not so much as allude
to Stanhope. She does quote the poet at length on the
subject of Gomorrah to prove a point about Wentworth's
damnation, but without identifying the speaker. Indeed,
she makes it sound as if Williams himself is speaking:
"There is a downward progression in hell. Wentworth
makes this progression because he has insisted, in
Williams' phrase [emphasis mine] on Gomorrah." Then she
quotes Stanhope's speech beginning: "The Lord's glory
fell on the cities of the plain, on Sodom and another . .
. .,"

MacMichael's use of Stanhope's statement as an ex-
pression of the values of *Descent into Hell* indicates that
she is aware of the poet's importance in the novel. For
some reason, however, she does not deem the identity of
the speaker of the quotation she uses significant enough
to be mentioned. She overlooks thereby the fact that it
is Williams' use specifically of Stanhope and not some
other character, which gives the discussion of Gomorrah
its credibility. In similar fashion MacMichael also
speaks of Pauline's facing the "need for reconciliation"
and of her discovering "the unity of eternity" without

12MacMichael, p. 67.

13MacMichael, p. 68.
even alluding to Stanhope's crucial role in bringing her
to these insights.

George Winship Parker, although he grants Stanhope's role in the novel some of its actual importance, resembles MacMichael in quoting the poet without credit. Attempting to describe the spiritual ambience of Battle Hill, Parker states that "It is as if one of the vials of the Apocalypse were being tentatively unstoppered,"\(^\text{14}\) with no indication that this is a paraphrase of Stanhope's statement to Pauline: "'If it's what my grandmother would have called it, one of the vials of the Apocalypse . . .''(p. 211). Parker then, without identifying the source, sums up his description of Battle Hill in the throes of spiritual crisis by quoting one of Stanhope's characteristically direct assertions of cosmic fact: "'Something is stealing from us our dreams and deceptions and everything but actuality.'"\(^\text{15}\)

Later in his article Parker again employs a statement of Stanhope's without mentioning that the notion alluded to constitutes one of the poet's most significant moral insights and consequently forms the basic moral premise of the novel. "In Descent into Hell," Parker writes,

\(^{14}\)Parker, p. 293.

\(^{15}\)Descent into Hell, p. 212, cited by Parker, p. 294.
"Charles Williams has, I believe, achieved what one of the characters [emphasis mine] calls a 'terrible good.'"16

Parker does somewhat better when he discusses Stanhope's play and the substitution and at least implies, if he does not state explicitly, that they are somehow connected: "The cultivated people of Battle Hill are putting on a play, a pastoral in verse with profound and mysterious overtones . . . . The well-to-do suburbanites chatter of costumes, intonations, and the technicalities of rehearsal, but the literature they speak affects them unawares and they slip beyond trivialities."17 While one might quarrel with the idea that the conscious reflections on the significance of the play of such insightful characters as Pauline and her grandmother constitute being affected "unawares," at least Parker sees that the play and thus its author are somehow linked to a body of knowledge that is "profound and mysterious."18

16Parker, pp. 295-296.
17Parker, p. 294.
18Parker, p. 294.
Parker makes the important and related observation that Pauline's "lines of verse are one source of her salvation," but this is not, as he avers, "simply [emphasis mine] because they give her something to think about besides herself." Another more important reason why her part in the play helps save Pauline is that the verse she speaks is a manifestation of just those "profound and mysterious" elements that Parker previously mentions. They indeed take her out of herself, but they also provide a solid connection with those forces of the universe that are working toward her salvation. Parker continues his discussion with a slight bow in Stanhope's direction. "But the poet, Peter Stanhope," he observes, "performs a more personal and more symbolic service for her. Learning of the burden he carries, he asks, 'You have friends; haven't you asked one of them to carry your fear?' And to her relieved astonishment, he simply does so."  

In an article on All Hallows' Eve, Clifford Davidson makes no attempt to analyze Descent into Hell, but he does, although almost in passing, mention both the spiritual aspects of Stanhope's function in the novel,

19 Parker, p. 294.
20 Parker, p. 294.
and his play itself: "Peter Stanhope, in Descent into Hell, speaks of the spiritual necessity for uniting the sound and the sense of words, and in the production of his play that takes place, Pauline Anstruther feels that the words of the drama 'were no longer separated from the living stillness' of eternal meaning. The sound has become the incarnation of meaning.'"21

Galen Peoples has probed more deeply into the role of Stanhope than any of the critics previously discussed, yet he too does not go far enough. In his study, "The Agnostic in the Whirlwind: The Seven Novels of Charles Williams," Peoples has headed the analysis of each work with what he no doubt feels to be a quintessential subtitle indicating the basic conflict of the novel. Thus, for The Place of the Lion he offers "Man Vs. the Angels"; for War in Heaven, "The Protectors Vs. the Possessors"; and for Descent into Hell, "Stanhope Vs. Lilith."22 Peoples does not develop the antitheses he poses to any great extent. His contribution to the tiny field of "Stanhope studies" is that he realizes that if Descent


into Hell were reduced to a battle of two principles, these would be embodied in the novel by Stanhope and Lilith. Peoples makes no mention of the facts that Stanhope articulates views identical to the narrator's and works in consonance with him, or that the phantasm Lilith is not much of a match for the combined power of these two. Nevertheless, his brief study is a movement in the right direction.

While most critics are content to identify Stanhope as simply "the poet Stanhope," Peoples provides the not insignificant service of introducing him as "the mystic [emphasis mine] and poet Peter Stanhope."23 (He would, in the opinion of this writer, be more accurate if, instead of saying "mystic and poet," he used the hyphenated form "mystic-poet" to describe Stanhope. The two are, it seems clear, inextricably linked.) Peoples alone, of the critics encountered, makes note of that all-important identification between Stanhope and Shakespeare. He does not pursue the novel's recurring motif of comparisons between Stanhope's play, A Pastoral, and Shakespeare's The Tempest, but he does allude to it. In fact, Peoples avers that the Shakespeare motif is one of the major "allusions" in the novel. "Three allusions in

this novel," he states, "are of particular interest: The Republic . . . Gomorrah . . . 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 signaling the start of the play." Peoples neglects to mention Stanhope's importance in the articulation of the "allusions" to Gomorrah, but he manages to put his finger on another very important aspect of Stanhope's role in the novel—that having to do with the "divinity" of his verse (and thus, by extrapolation, of his other utterances as well).

Finally, Sister M. La Lande deal with Stanhope's role in Descent into Hell in the most perceptive manner of any of these critics. Like Peoples, Sister La Lande sees a kind of antimony existing between Stanhope and Lilith's manifestation, Lily Sammile. In the novel itself no real confrontation occurs between these two: Lily tries to "bait" Stanhope, but he always reacts with unflagging politeness, to say nothing of solicitude. They are, however, obviously symbolic antitheses.

"Pauline," writes Sister La Lande, "must struggle for salvation and bring salvation to others in the pull

between two forces that would shape her life: Stanhope with his advice of 'clarity, speed, courage, and humility,' and Mrs. Sammile with her theory of 'enjoy yourself.' The transfer of her fears to Stanhope by substitution initiates Pauline into the path of love."²⁵ La Lande's major perception about Stanhope is, however, that his "ideas seem somehow to embody the timelessness of God Himself."²⁶ She believes, in fact, that the poet is "the god-image in the novel, [and] has omniscience in a reserved degree in addition to powers of forgiveness, sympathy, care, providence."²⁷

One might argue with the assertion that Stanhope is a "god-image"; his utterances must be seen as serving the purposes of the "Omnipotence," but to claim that he is a "god-image"²⁸ is perhaps overstating the case. Unfortu-

²⁶La Lande, p. 92.
²⁷La Lande, p. 92.
²⁸La Lande, p. 92.
nately, La Lande does not in any way elaborate her notion of this. Instead, she simply asserts the intriguing idea as a kind of corollary to her main thesis—which is a discussion of time in this novel—and then immediately abandons it. It is hard to fathom, too, just what La Lande means by attributing to Stanhope "omniscience in a reserved degree."²⁹ Is his omniscience incomplete or is he reserved about expressing it? Neither seems true. While it is impossible to determine the limits of Stanhope's wisdom, he is sufficiently omniscient to understand everything that occurs in the novel. Nor is he reserved in the least about making pronouncements of cosmic significance.

Although Sister La Lande is aware of the power of Stanhope's play ("It seems to be," she says, "the very drama of life itself"³⁰), she does not attempt to relate the "omniscience" of this poet who is a "god-image" to the nature of his art. Perhaps she considers the relationship to be implicit. Sister La Lande also does not try to draw any parallels between the omniscience of Stanhope and that of the narrator. Still, with her observation that Stanhope is not just an ordinary charac-

²⁹La Lande, p. 92.
³⁰La Lande, p. 92.
ter, but one whose "ideas . . . embody the timelessness of God Himself," Sister La Lande has made a not unimportant contribution to the study of Descent into Hell.

From the brevity of this survey of the pertinent criticism, it can be seen how very little has been done regarding the role of Stanhope in Descent into Hell. Such neglect is difficult to account for. As succeeding chapters of this thesis will show, an understanding of the way in which Stanhope functions as a character provides a vital key to comprehending the way in which crucial (to Williams) theological information is transmitted by this novel.
Chapter Two

Stanhope, Other Williams Characters, and the Power of Art

It would no doubt be possible to discover several similarities between Charles Williams and his creation, Peter Stanhope. To one critic, John Heath-Stubbs, Stanhope is "a persona of Williams,"¹ and Williams did, in fact, write the play *Judgement at Chelmsford* under the pseudonym Peter Stanhope.² While such correspondences between author and character are in a psychological and biographical sense fascinating, they are, however, finally not completely germane to the textual focus of this thesis. Still, it should be said that Williams' adoring portrait of Stanhope seems to be not so much a projection of the author (if it were, truly it would constitute an incredible exercise in self-aggrandizement), as it is a kind of paean to the way of life of the artist. Stanhope is not really Williams, but an apotheosis, an


idealization of the true artist as envisioned by Williams, and as such, perhaps a sort of personified wish fulfillment of what Williams might have wanted to be.

Certainly this is the case in Williams' ascribing to Stanhope a financial success solely on the basis of artistic output. Anne Ridler notes that Williams "would maintain that the need to earn money is the natural mainspring of creative writing . . . [and that] . . . Williams's [sic] one real grievance against his lot was that no one would pay him for writing poetry."\(^3\) Accordingly, the narrator of *Descent into Hell* early on announces as a kind of supreme accolade, that Stanhope "was so much after the style of his greatest predecessor that he made money out of poetry" (emphasis mine) (p. 10).

Of more importance to the purposes of this paper, however, are the definite similarities between Stanhope and the third person omniscient, anonymous narrator in *Descent into Hell*. So alike are these two in matters of theology, morality, pedagogy, and even imagery, that one can be quite safe in asserting that had *Descent into Hell* been a first person narrative with Stanhope as its narrator, the novel would not be substantially different either

\(^3\)Ridler, p. xi.
in theological content or in tone from the form in which we have it. Because a first person narrator would not be able to deal with the subplots in the same manner as a third person omniscient narrator, the scope would, however, be necessarily altered.

Stanhope and the narrator are not, of course, exactly identical in every detail. Although they use the same images (as in the development of a sequence of allusions to Gomorrah, which will be discussed later) and their assured tone in asserting matters of cosmic significance is very similar, their language is not always exactly alike, nor in every case are their sentiments or judgments of secular matters.

Like the speeches of the Grand Duke in his play, Stanhope's utterances almost always contain a "gnomic wisdom"(p. 147). And, as befits a poet who writes verse that is, in the words of one of the novel's most reliable characters, Margaret Anstruther, the essence of "simplification and purity"(p. 66), Stanhope's aphoristic conversational style is extremely lucid. Stanhope never indulges in the often overblown poetical style of rhetoric which becomes characteristic of the narrator in the later portions of the novel and which Patricia Spacks
has aptly labeled "false lyricism."  

Towards the middle of the novel, Stanhope's speeches to his disciple Pauline Anstruther do, it must be admitted, begin to assume a rather odd kind of ecstatic preciousness. "It is silly sooth," he tells her in a characteristic utterance, "and dallies with the innocence of love. Real sooth, real innocence, real love. Go with God" (p. 100). Or "O blessed, blessed . . . . Go in peace. Would you like me to come?" (p. 163). But even though the language is "strange," the sense remains clear. The narrator, on the other hand, is given to "poetic" utterances of such tortured syntactical construction as " . . . dazzling flashes which now and then and here and there lit the sky, as if silver machines of air above the world moved in escort of expected power" (p. 163).

In addition to these variations in language, the narrator and Stanhope can express different attitudes towards the other figures in the novel. While Stanhope may occasionally poke gentle fun at a particularly inane character, the narrator is an often vicious and uncompro-

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mising satirist and ironist. Though their judgments of Battle Hill culture may in the end coincide—as witnessed by the fact that they both compare this prestigious suburb with the biblical city of Gomorrah—they, at least early in the novel, express their sentiments quite differently. Their initial reactions to Myrtle Fox, surely one of the most pathetic and absurd characters in the novel, provide a good case in point.

Myrtle is plagued by the whimsical notions that nature is good, trees are "friendly" (p. 16), the clouds exist to help man, art is "consoling" (p. 62), and so on. She debases romanticism by equating her ideas with those of Wordsworth (who, incidentally, is one of Williams' favorite poets), and perhaps worst of all, she uses words imprecisely—especially, she uses "terribly" to mean "very" (p. 16). Generally Williams simply lets her make herself look ridiculous by presenting her speeches without extended comment by the narrator. But what the narrator does say is unusually acid. To begin with, he tells us that Myrtle expresses her ludicrous sentiments with, of all things, "a trill of pleasure" (p. 15). Then, because she draws a parallel between the costuming of Stanhope's chorus and the paintings of Watteau, he, withholding her name for two pages, effectively reduces her to the absurdity of her own iterations by mockingly refer-
ring to her only as "Watteau" or "the Watteau young lady" (pp. 15-16).

Stanhope, by contrast, is patient with Myrtle and appears to be genuinely interested in teaching her how to properly use the word "terribly." And when she is unable to understand what he means by "a dreadful goodness" (p. 16), and even goes so far as to address him "with a shade of resentment" (p. 16), Stanhope, while not giving an inch on the point, still responds with unflappable good humor: "'It was you who said 'terribly'," Stanhope reminded her with a smile [emphasis mine], 'I only agreed'" (p. 16).

But these variances between the narrator and Stanhope are minor when compared to the overwhelming similarities between the two. Stanhope and the narrator are beings who seem equally knowledgeable about the workings of what they both refer to as "the Omnipotence." Incidentally, the Grand Duke in Stanhope's play, with his so-called "gnomic wisdom" (p. 147), is also almost certainly connected with knowledge of the same sort. With an understanding of such matters as "substitution" and the nature of damnation and salvation that equals the narrator's, Stanhope is able to function as a kind of projection of the narrator's sort of awareness, if not the actual persona of the narrator, into the action of the
novel itself. Thus, as will be demonstrated later in this paper, the type of knowledge possessed by the narrator is permitted to accomplish more than a purely commentary function and to play an actual and powerful role in events that occur in the plot of the work.

Unlike so many other of the characters in Williams' novels, Stanhope appears in *Descent into Hell*, like the narrator, already in possession of his immense knowledge. Williams' other characters very often do attain a kind of sainthood, but they are essentially creatures in progress, usually rather "ordinary bemused human beings" who must, because of the terrible exigencies of the uncanny situations in which they find themselves, win their way through to salvation.

Anthony Durrant in *The Place of the Lion*, Chloe Burnett in *Many Dimensions*, Lester Furvinal in *All Hallows' Eve*, Nancy Coningsby in *The Greater Trump*, and Pauline Anstruther in *Descent into Hell* are all characters of this sort. They all in the end attain a degree of understanding that may begin to approximate Stanhope's own, but they acquire this only by undergoing regorous supernatural ordeals.

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Anthony Durrant must control the archetypal powers of the angelicals who have been loosed by magic; Nancy Coningsby must subdue the storm created by abuse of the power of the Tarot; Lester Furnival must substitute herself for Betty Wallingford to protect her from a death by necromancy; Chloe Burnett must control the power of the Stone of Solomon; and Pauline Anstruther must assume a burden of fear for her ancestor, a martyr to the Marian terror of the sixteenth century. But Stanhope, a static character, is never tested in a confrontation with the supernatural; his ability to perform an act of "substitution" is, although an occurrence that would normally be deemed supernatural, hardly a test. In the course of the novel, he does not progress from one level of awareness to another, but remains exactly the same from beginning to end.

Stanhope's function in Descent into Hell is to teach, to comment, to observe, and to interpret supernatural and theological phenomena for the benefit both of the reader and of the novel's other characters. If he has undergone a supernatural test experience of the sort that Williams has demanded of his usual characters, it has occurred long in the past and is never explicitly referred to in the novel. Margaret Anstruther does assert to Pauline that "Peter Stanhope must have been
frightened many times"(p. 158). Margaret is sufficiently trustworthy as a character for her statement to hold considerable credence, but her allusion to Stanhope's fear is developed no further. Certainly Stanhope, in the entire course of the novel, shows no sign of being afraid.

Stanhope's poetry is somehow, though, intimately connected with that world of supernatural experience. Writing of the wanderings of the dead laborer, the narrator says,

He had come again into the peculiar territory of the dead . . . . He did not think of snakes or leaves, nor of the dead leaves of a great forest, the still-existent nothingness of life. Those who had known the green trees were tangled and torn in the dry [sic]. The tragedies of Peter Stanhope carried the image of that pain-piercing nothing (p. 153).

And reflecting not on the tragedies (which are only mentioned that one time), but on Stanhope's pastoral, Pauline thinks,

Supposing, supposing--that in this last act Peter Stanhope had seen and imagined something more awful even than a vision of himself: Supposing he had contemplated the nature of the world in which such visions could be, and that the entwined loveliness of his verse was a mirror of its being (p. 94).

It is impossible to determine exactly how Stanhope has been able to see into "the nature of the world" of
the supernatural and the sacred, but the vision seems to be inextricably connected to his identity as an artist. Which comes first, however, the understanding of the universe or the great poetry, can not be fathomed from the novel alone. Perhaps the two develop together; in any case, the process appears, as Pauline observes, to have been an intellectual one in which the other world is "contemplated," but not "actually" realized.

Williams' non-fiction work The English Poetic Mind affords some help in understanding the nature of Stanhope's insight in that it shows that Williams considers it possible for a poet, as a fact of his being a poet, to attain a kind of supreme perception into the mysterious nature of the universe:

... an undetermined sense of unknown modes of being may be with them [poets] at their commencement, as with all of us. The difference in our developments is between those who lose that sense altogether ..., those who keep it but cannot of themselves deal with it ..., and those who are able to do something about it—and these are the poets. For their business is to discover and express, more and more exactly, those unknown modes of being.6

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The paintings of Jonathan Drayton in *All Hallows' Eve* give additional support to the notion that Williams believes that the artist can, sometimes unconsciously, perceive and reproduce transcendent reality "simply" through the process of creating. Drayton is the only other full-fledged artist to appear in Williams' novels. He is, while not a minor character, not nearly so important in his novel as is Stanhope in *Descent into Hell*. Nor is Drayton, who is still a young man, as great a painter as Stanhope is a poet. Although he is clearly a very good painter, Drayton is not compared favorably to painting's greatest, say Michelangelo or Leonardo, as Stanhope constantly is to Shakespeare. His paintings, in the opinion of Clifford Davidson, are reminiscent of "Stanley Spencer."7

Drayton also differs from Stanhope in that he gains knowledge as the novel progresses. Entirely caught up in the action of *All Hallows' Eve*, he is not, like Stanhope, an observer and a teacher, but an active combatant in what amounts to a crusade to deliver his fiancee Betty Wallingford from the power of the evil magus, Simon the Clerk.

7Davidson, p. 861.
While Stanhope does not resemble Drayton except in that they are both artists (with all of the ramifications of the fact), there are real similarities between Stanhope and just two other Williams characters: Sybil Coningsby, the seer of *The Greater Trumps* and Prester John, the supernatural visitant and rescuer of the grail in *War in Heaven*. (One is also tempted to include Margaret Anstruther of *Descent into Hell* in this group, but on close examination it can be seen that she really does not qualify. In matters of age, sex, and essential serenity Margaret very much resembles Sybil, but she is too much a character in progress. Margaret has a great deal of knowledge when she makes her appearance, but her "story" is one of pilgrimage toward ever greater insights into the nature of the universe, and her attainment of these is the natural corollary of the physical process of her dying.)

Sybil Coningsby is shown in *The Greater Trumps* as Stanhope is in *Descent into Hell*, to possess an awesome prior knowledge of the world. With a wisdom more intuitive and pragmatic than explicitly intellectual, Sybil is no great artist, but a rather unprepossessing elderly spinster whom no one really takes very seriously. Williams believes, however, that there are many ways to
Yet despite the differences between Stanhope and Drayton, the paintings of Drayton afford, just as do the plays of Stanhope, a vision of the infinite. In Drayton's case this is accomplished through what he refers to as "'plain observation and common understanding.'"\(^8\) In one of the two Drayton paintings that figure in *All Hallows' Eve*, the evil nature of Clerk Simon and the likeness to insects of his followers are revealed, and in the other work which, as a study of light is the antithesis of the Simon picture, a vision of the City of God emerges. Unlike Stanhope's chorus, which, as he explains, represents a conscious attempt to "experiment" with a "non-human" order of existence that is "alive, but a different life"(p. 15), the revelations in Drayton's paintings are not effects that have been planned by the artist. Rather, they seem the result of a fine talent and a superior perception working on the subject. But whether the effects are planned, as in Stanhope's case, or unconscious, as in Drayton's, the conclusion is inevitable: Williams believes that the artist has the power to pierce the facade of normal reality and to reveal the supernatural

approach God, and the fact that this woman can simply by
living a virtuous, loving, and unselfish life, amass a
store of holy insight that approaches Stanhope's is en-
tirely in keeping with his thinking.

Like Stanhope, Sybil is a modified ascetic, a being
poised between what Williams calls the Way of Rejection
and the Way of Affirmation. The Way of Rejection is the
traditional path of the mystic, a denial of the material
world. The Way of Affirmation is its opposite, a glori-
ification of the world as God's handiwork. Three Williams
scholars claim that the poet's way is that of Affirma-
tion. Stanhope, however, who is called a "contempla-
tive" by the narrator, seems to be a character as much
in the realm of the sacred as in the secular world and,
as befits a poet in whose work there is "no contention be-
tween the presences of life and death"(p. 10), at home in
both. Like Stanhope, too, the aptly named Sybil func-
tions as a kind of teacher and guide, pointing the way
for her niece Nancy both to redeem herself and to save a
threatened world. Unlike Stanhope, she is forced to take
a much more active role in the events of the plot: en-

9 Heath-Stubbs, Charles Williams, p. 16.
gaging in a mission of rescue that is physical (she has to venture out into a magical blizzard, the kind of ordeal Stanhope does not experience, to find her brother); helping to barricade a storm ravaged house; and the like. But again, both she and Stanhope are essentially static characters. Like Stanhope, Sybil does not attain knowledge, rather she draws upon her ample store of it to meet the supernatural crisis of the novel. Her strength—and in this, too, she resembles Stanhope—is that she does not change. She is an ever dependable bulwark against the forces of chaos.

Prester John not only does not change in the course of War in Heaven, he has been the way he is, as keeper of the grail, for many centuries. Although he is a static figure in terms of his own development, Prester John is still a physically dynamic character in terms of the resolution of the plot, while Stanhope's assistance in the working out of Descent into Hell is purely intellectual. It is only through Prester John's direct intervention that the grail is rescued from the three sorcerers who have attempted to destroy it.

Like Stanhope, Prester John tends to speak in aphorisms. His utterances also resemble those of the poet and those of the narrators of all the Williams novels in
that they possess a note of absolute theological cer-
tainty. Stanhope, John, and the narrators do not engage
in speculation about matters of religion or morality:
they state pure fact. Even such a wise character as
Sybil Coningsby does not, on the other hand, pontificate
quite the way they do. Her statements seem predicated
more on a faith in the power of love than they do on to-
total intellectual assurance.

The assertion of cosmic fact is to be expected in a
being like Prester John, who not only is clearly super-
natural in origin, but may be a manifestation of Christ.
The same sort of assurance is also natural in the narra-
tors that Williams uses in his novels. Omniscience,
not just about the most minute details of the lives of
the characters whose stories they are relating, but about
the ultimate nature of the universe itself is their busi-
ness. But for a mortal character in one of the novels
both to possess such preternatural wisdom and to articu-
late his insights with the certitude that Stanhope does
is really quite remarkable.

One has only to compare a speech of Prester John's
with one of Stanhope's to see how closely the characters
resemble each other in sheer certainty. From John: "I
understand very well indeed . . . . Believe certainly
that this universe also carries its salvation in its
heart . . . . Sleep securely tonight, the gates of hell have no more power over you.\textsuperscript{10} And from Stanhope on the same subject: "... as Miss Fox so rightly told us, sleep is good, and sleep will undoubtedly be here. But sleep isn't separation in the Omnipotence" (p. 106).

The fact that both of these speeches deal in some way with sleep is pure coincidence and essentially unimportant. The crucial point of similarity between the two statements is their sheer assurance. John can categorically state that hell has no power over Barbara Rackstraw (to whom his assertion is addressed, and who has, with his help, just recovered from being drugged by goetic potion) because he is a character of divine nature and this is the sort of information such a figure would possess. The uncanny thing about the mortal Stanhope is that he, too, is able, with both equal assurance and credibility, to make similarly categorical statements about such usual matters of mystery as sleep and the ways of the Omnipotence. The manner in which Williams imparts to this human character an ability to articulate believably dicta about the sacred reality of the universe will be the subject of succeeding chapters of this thesis.

Chapter Three
Stanhope's Character Developed

Whatever Stanhope's resemblances to and differences from Williams' other static "good" characters, the author uses Stanhope's knowledge to further the moral and theological purposes of Descent into Hell. In effect, what Williams creates is a duet between the disembodied narrative voice and the promulgations of Stanhope. In the latter sections of the novel Stanhope provides a kind of springboard for the metaphysical reflections of the narrator. For instance, Stanhope will begin an important theological sequence, such as the discussion of substituted love, by introducing the subject in conversation, almost always to Pauline. The narrator will then, in sentences of straightforward assertion, expand Stanhope's ideas to their farthest dimensions. This kind of development works also in reverse fashion. The narrator, for example, makes an unexplained reference to the city of Gomorrah. Some sixty pages later Stanhope explains the allusion, after which references to Gomorrah become, along the lines of Stanhope's explanation, an increasingly important part of the narrator's moral vocabulary.

The strange development of the Gomorrah theme (which will be examined in detail later in this paper) offers
ample proof of the mystical affinity that exists between the narrator and Stanhope. But while the two seem in many ways to merge in the middle and end sections of Descent into Hell, they are early in the novel two clearly definable beings. This is especially true in the first chapter.

The initial chapter of Descent into Hell is in many ways an exemplary piece of writing. Williams has occasionally been taken to task—even by some of his admirers—for his "obtrusive" narrative technique and for his penchant for the narrative assertion of particular religious or moral "verities" without proper demonstration of them. While it is entirely true that Williams is often guilty of a heavy reliance on the factual statements of the narrator to impart crucial messages to the reader, the Jamesian criteria of the "well made" novel, wherein virtue becomes synonymous with "showing" rather than "telling,"¹ are not really applicable. Descent into Hell is obviously not a work like The Ambassadors: it is set in a highly specialized sort of sacred universe, and it is a work with very specific, and often rather eso-

teric, theological goals. The running religious and moral gloss that the typical Williams narrator provides for the action seems consonant with, and indeed necessary to, the purposes of the work.

Even a critic with a Jamesian orientation would, however, have to approve of the position of the narrator in the first chapter of Descent into Hell. In fact, Spacks and Urang, two scholars critical of Williams' narrative methods, both maintain that the novel begins convincingly.

In the opening chapter, the narrator remains scrupulously above the action. He refrains almost entirely from offering overt moral judgments. He reports the action and delineates the states of mind of his characters without any attempt to discuss the ultimate significance of his observations. Even when the first chapter switches from the secular, social world of Battle Hill to the supernatural horror of Pauline's vision of the doppelgängers, the narrator declines to discuss the meaning of

that apparition. Instead, he concentrates on reproducing the terror experienced by Pauline at both the thought and the actual manifestation of her double.

This is not to say that the narrator does not pass judgment on his characters; he does and he successfully transmits his evaluations to the reader. But generally he does so through indirect means: an often vicious irony; conversation employed in an almost drama like manner to reflect on the character of the speaker; and glimpses of the characters' thoughts through extended sequences of character point of view. In addition, he also uses some straightforward assertion, but it is, again, almost entirely free of the metaphysical, theological, and moral didacticism that typifies the narrator's statements later in the novel.

The theological burden of the first chapter is borne not by the narrator, but almost entirely by Stanhope. Indeed, were the poet not present to give the reader fleeting and often enigmatic adumbrations of the novel's ultimately cosmic preoccupations, one inexperienced with Williams' work might believe, until the appearance of the doppelgänger, that the novel he was reading was only an oddly titled, rather acid, social satire of the artistic pretensions of affluent suburbia.

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In order, however, to make Stanhope's succinct expression of transcendent wisdom carry any weight, the poet's credentials as an artist of the first rank must be concretely established. This is accomplished through both assertion and the device of looking at the poet's work by means of the consciousnesses of two of his fellow characters, Catherine Parry and Pauline Anstruther.

Stanhope is the first character who appears in Descent into Hell. In fact, he turns up in the very first sentence, and with a "gesture of presentation" (p. 9) in the second sentence, he offers his new play to the amateur players of Battle Hill. Serious characterization of Stanhope, however, does not begin until the third paragraph of the first chapter. The second paragraph is an ascerbic, satiric piece in which the narrator excoriates Battle Hill for its pretension and its callousness. While the poor are excluded from living in that community, the narrator tell us that the affluent denizens wage genteel "civil wars . . . conducted with all bourgeois propriety" between the devotees of "politics, religion, art and science" (p. 9). The partisans of the drama, mockingly referred to as "the restless talent of the Hill" (p. 9), have temporarily assumed the ascendancy since Peter Stanhope has allowed them to produce his latest play.
In the following paragraph, though, Williams has the narrator drop his ironic manner and begin to laud Stanhope. The result is most effective: since the previously ironic narrator treats Stanhope with utmost seriousness, the reader must also do the same. In the course, then, of two longish and admiring paragraphs, much is revealed about the poet. First of all, we are told that Stanhope is "so much after the style of his greatest predecessor [Shakespeare] that he made money out of poetry"(p. 10). As noted earlier, this is a factor of crucial importance to Williams. Quite simply, it means that Stanhope is free to devote himself entirely to his poetry without compromising his artistic success by having to pursue another career in order to survive, as Williams did as an editor for the Oxford University Press. We are told that Stanhope "was admired by his contemporaries and respected by the young"(p. 10). The narrator also states that "he deprecated worshippers"(p. 10), which is an indirect way of letting the reader know that Stanhope is great enough to excite worship. Stanhope's magnanimity is brought again to our attention with the assertion that "he endured the growing invasion [of the Hill by the residents of the new development] with a great deal of humour"(p. 10). Finally, we are told that his poetry deals with transcen-
dent and mysterious matters. There is, in his "latest poetry, no contention between the presences of life and death" (p. 10). The same, not so incidentally, is true also of Williams' last two novels: the one under scrutiny here, Descent into Hell, and All Hallows' Eve.

In the succeeding paragraph, which also introduces Catherine Parry, we are told both that Stanhope is the antithesis of this woman and that, most important of all, he is totally dedicated to his work: "Capacity which, in her nature, had reached the extreme of active life, seemed in him to have entered the contemplative, so much had his art become a thing of his soul" (pp. 10-11).

Having lauded Stanhope and his absolute commitment to art, Williams then proceeds to "prove" that the narrator's assertions are correct. He does this first through the reflections of Mrs. Parry upon Stanhope's new play. This is a very clever and economical technique, for it allows Williams with one stroke to characterize Mrs. Parry as something of a ninny, to demonstrate the greatness of Stanhope's play, and also to reveal something of what the play is about.

Stanhope's work, which is simply called "A Pastoral," reminds Mrs. Parry of Shakespeare's The Tempest. The reference is extremely significant because in his own non-fiction writings about the nature of poetry, Williams
several times expresses the notion that the Shakespearean romances, and especially *The Tempest*, represent the absolute apogee of poetic attainment in the English language.\(^3\)

Mrs. Parry, though, like one of those late nineteenth and early twentieth century critics who felt that the romances represented a debasement of Shakespeare's art, can make neither heads nor tails of either *The Tempest* or *A Pastoral*. Both to her are completely "higgledy-piggledy" (p. 12). The plot of *A Pastoral*, which is "incredibly loose" and set "in no particular time and no particular place" (p. 12), with its talking Bear, Grand Duke, Princess, and utterly baffling Chorus, is to Mrs. Parry both anathema and enigma. Her unflattering judgment of *A Pastoral*, however, has been undercut by her ridiculous language, by her lack of imagination, and of course, by her inability to appreciate *The Tempest*, a play in which, according to Williams, "the facts of being utter their essential nature."\(^4\)


But more important than Mrs. Parry's inadequacies as a literary critic, the associations between Stanhope and Shakespeare have now, in back-handed fashion, been firmly implanted in the reader's mind.

The references to Shakespeare continue. The Shakespearean quality of Stanhope's work is obviously one of its most important recommendations, and consequently, comparisons between The Tempest and A Pastoral form a running motif in the novel. Such references are made not just by Mrs. Parry, but by Pauline Anstruther, Margaret Anstruther, the narrator, and by Stanhope. When figures other than the poor befuddled Mrs. Parry allude to Shakespeare's romances and their similarities to the plays of Stanhope, they do so with proper reverence—as does Margaret Anstruther when she thinks, "Power was in that strange chorus over which the experts of Battle Hill culture disputed, and it lay beyond them. There was little human approach in it, though it possessed human experience; like the Dirge in Cymbeline or the songs of Ariel in The Tempest it possessed only the pure perfection of fact, rising in rhythms of sound that seemed inhuman because they were free from desire or fear or distress" (p. 66).

As the chapter progresses, more is revealed about the personality of Stanhope and the quality of his poetry.
Stanhope's magnanimity is continually stressed, as is his concern for and compliance with the wishes of others. Above all, Stanhope is calm and serene, a still point amidst the jostling, bickering, vying for advantage, and even supernatural dread that are the concerns of the partisans of the drama involved in producing his play. During the absurd, amusing argument that Adela Hunt and Catherine Parry have over the nature of art, Stanhope, totally unaffected by their ludicrous, pretentious theories, blithely continues to execute his duties as host, proffering no less than "two kinds of sandwiches to his embattled guests" (p. 14).

Despite his good humor and his willingness to please, Stanhope can be unyielding when it comes to the presentation of the play. Since no one is quite sure how to stage the Chorus, he is willing to have it deleted. "'I should prefer it in, if you ask me,' [he says] politely. 'But not to inconvenience the production'" (p. 14). Although Stanhope will allow the Chorus to be removed, he significantly will not let it be misrepresented. Mrs. Parry wants to identify the Chorus as "Leaf-spirits" (p. 17), and Adela Hunt is afraid that Stanhope, whom she mistakenly believes to be "weak" (p. 18), will acquiesce. Stanhope, however, "in politest language," refuses "to have anything of the sort." "'Call it the Chorus,'
[he says], 'or if you like I'll try and find a name for the leader, and the rest can just dance and sing. But I'm afraid 'Leaf-spirits' would be misleading'" (p. 18).

The effect of all of this positive characterization is that when Stanhope makes the succinct statements of cosmic fact that gently nudge what appears to be the social comedy of Descent into Hell's first chapter in the direction of the sacred and transcendent, the reader takes him with utmost seriousness. Other characters, too, in this chapter make statements of what they consider to be significant fact: Adela Hunt on "symbolic mass" in art (p. 14); Mrs. Parry on "equilibrium" and "harmony" (p. 14); and Myrtle Fox on the "friendliness" of nature (p. 16). But the sentiments of these characters have all been devalued by the undercutting of the narrator. Mrs Parry is made to look ridiculous because the narrator lets us see that she doesn't understand The Tempest; Adela is, through some narrative assertion, seen to be greedy and ambitious; Myrtle is made fun of through the device of the narrator's mocking reference to her as "Watteau." Thus the notions espoused by these characters become nothing more than comic to the reader.

"A dreadful goodness" constitutes the subject of Stanhope's first statements of cosmic fact, and his brief utterances adumbrate one of the primary moral and theolo-
gical themes of the novel—the notion of "terrible good" (p. 16).

When Pauline demands of him, "' . . . if things are terrifying . . . can they be good?'" (p. 17), the poet's rather strange reply states, with superb economy, the nature of the supernatural-moral crisis she must undergo:
"'Yes, surely . . . . Are our tremors to measure the Omnipotence?'") (p. 17).

Suddenly we are dealing not just with the amusing mores of English suburbia, but with a hierarchical reality in which the ultimate goals of a finally benign "omnipotence" may not coincide with either the convenience or the happiness of mortal humans. In fact, good on the level to which Stanhope alludes may be something quite alien to the conventional ideas of what constitutes goodness.

Stanhope's reference to the kind of good connected with the Omnipotence, then, serves two functions. Metaphysically it projects the novel into a reality beyond the purely satiric one created by the contrast of the greatness of Stanhope's play and Battle Hill's half-sentient response to it. And immediately and technically it prepares the ground for Pauline's encounter with the doppelgänger.

When, after another page and a half have passed and
Descent into Hell begins its actual metamorphosis into what is sometimes rather ungracefully called a "supernatural thriller," it does so with Pauline Anstruther thinking about "Stanhope's phrases" (p. 19). Stanhope's references to "a different life" and a "terrible good" cause Pauline to wonder if these two might be "related," and she asks herself "if this Chorus over which they were spending so much trouble were indeed an effort to shape in verse a good so alien as to be terrifying" (p. 19).

This transition from social satire into a novel of the supernatural represents one of Descent into Hell's most masterful technical achievements, and it derives its power from the very matter-of-factness with which it is accomplished. At her introduction into the novel, Pauline, who has won through her intuitive understand of A Pastoral the immediate approbation of both Stanhope and the narrator, reflects on "something in her secret life" as not having any possible good (p. 19). She thinks further about the "inhumanity" of the Chorus and about the fact that Stanhope "was a great poet" (p. 19), which further reinforces the already firm notion of Stanhope's stature as an artist. But then, in a deceptively flat manner, she poses the bizarre question that literally transforms the novel: "... [W]hat would he [Stanhope] do if one
evening he met himself coming up the drive?" (p. 19).

It is Pauline who undergoes, in the last pages of the first chapter, the terrifying experience of actually seeing her double. But it is essentially Stanhope who, through his utterances about "terrible good" and by the alien quality of his verse, both points the way toward that horrifying encounter and enables the novel physically to move in convincing fashion from one level of reality to another.
Chapter Four

Stanhope in the Social Milieu

After his crucial role in the first chapter, Stanhope is largely absent from the pages that make up the remainder of what is almost the entire first half of the novel. This is because three new plot lines are introduced, and Stanhope has no real connection to two of them. In the third subplot, however, which concerns Margaret Anstruther, Stanhope does appear.

In Stanhope's absence an interesting transformation occurs in the narrator. So often ironic, dispassionate, and acid in the first chapter, he begins to assume the kind of function previously fulfilled by Stanhope. The narrative voice then becomes the primary vehicle for the expression of the novel's theological concerns. Indeed, while in the first chapter the narrator refrained almost entirely from making explicit moral judgments and giving religious interpretations, he now offers an explanation of the moral and theological significance of almost everything that occurs in the novel. One does not wish to imply that this was exactly what Stanhope did in the first chapter; the poet did not, for didactic or any other reasons, proffer interpretations of the meaning of everything that happened. Rather, he served as a kind of avatar of the sacred, pointing the way toward the no-

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vel's ultimate purposes.

The narrator, on the other hand, was decidedly un-
theological in his role in the first chapter. With the
introduction of the subplots, however, he begins to assume
that kind of function—a function that he does not relin-
quish even when Stanhope reappears in the work. Instead,
he begins to reiterate and develop Stanhope's pronuncia-
ments, whereas he offered no comment about them in the
first chapter. The narrator and Stanhope, then, can best
be thought of as the complementary halves of a team whose
major purpose is edification. The only real difference
between them is that Stanhope's attempts at elucidation
are directed, ostensibly, toward other characters in the
novel (most frequently, Pauline), while the narrator's,
obviously, are aimed directly at the reader.

Stanhope makes a brief but important appearance in
the Margaret Anstruther plot (which is related closely to
and connected with the one that focuses on her grand-
daughter Pauline), when he arrives at her house for tea.
Margaret, as was noted briefly before, is a powerful
character, almost, but not quite, on the same level as
Stanhope himself. Like the poet, Margaret Anstruther
articulates certain religious ideas which are meant to
represent "truth." Her knowledge and her perception are
similar to Stanhope's, and perforce to the narrator's own;
and the world revealed in her visions has, no doubt, many similarities to that depicted in Stanhope's play. Although Stanhope and Margaret are both utilized by Williams to state metaphysical notions that are essentially synonomous, there are significant differences in the ways that their knowledge is acquired and expressed.

Stanhope is a character who possess at his first appearance in the novel a fund of knowledge that qualifies him as virtually omniscient. While Margaret Anstruther is, to be sure, an exceptionally wise woman upon her entrance into the novel, she is a character who, through the visionary states brought about by the physical process of her death, is actively acquiring knowledge about sacred matters. The act of dying has brought Margaret to a position where, poised between the worlds of life and death, she is capable of action in both. Stanhope, on the other hand, is, through the power of his great art, able to traverse the gap between the worlds while still very much alive.

Stanhope characteristically makes factual statements of theological truths that are based on his insights into both the sacred and the secular worlds. While Margaret, too, is capable of articulating statements of metaphysical import, her major perceptions are imparted almost entirely through the depiction of her
visionary states as experienced in an ongoing process that is concluded only with her actual death. Though Stanhope's play shows him to be a kind of visionary, he is never found in the kind of ecstatic state that is so characteristic of Margaret. By contrast, all of Stanhope's cosmic postulations are of an explicitly intellectual nature, are based on prior knowledge, and are stated verbally in a succinct and lucid manner.

Margaret herself allows that her knowledge of the universe is inferior to Stanhope's. She admires Stanhope's verse and is awed by it, but she believes that only when she is dead will she be able truly to understand it (p. 67). That reflection re-emphasizes the important fact that wise as Margaret is, in Descent into Hell only Stanhope and the narrator are blessed with total, prior awareness.

When Stanhope appears for tea at the Anstruther's, he makes no startling new theological pronouncements, it enhances both Pauline's and the reader's feelings about the poet. Pauline's opinion of Stanhope becomes even more positive, a necessary condition if at the theological climax of the work, she is to allow herself to cooperate with him in his offer to relieve her of her fear of the doppelganger. Some thirty pages after the
tea party, immediately before Stanhope significantly introduces her to the crucial doctrine of substitution, Pauline reflects on this and on subsequent visits by the poet: "It was two or three weeks ago, since he had first called, and she could not remember that they had said anything memorable since except for a few dicta about poetry—but everything they said was full and simple and unafraid" (p. 93). Stanhope's unwavering fearlessness and serenity are, both to Pauline and to the reader, of maximum importance to his effectiveness as a spokesman of the Omnipotence.

The reader's already high opinion of Stanhope is also reinforced, and this is significant in helping to render credible the poet's presentation of the doctrine of substitution. Just as in the first chapter, Stanhope is seen in a social context. His courtesy, his concern for others, his gentle humor, and his impeccable manners can hardly fail to recommend him. The subject of Stanhope's unfailing politesse, though ostensibly not one of great consequence, is of more importance than it may first appear to be. As examination of the critical Gomorrah motif will eventually show, Descent into Hell posits the notion that solipsism is at the root of all evil. Stanhope's extreme courtliness in this episode, even when he is baited by Lily Sammile and exasperated by
Myrtle Fox and her continued insistence on the friendliness of nature and the consolations of art, testifies to his solid regard for the feelings of others.

In addition to reinforcing his sensibilities for an even more positive impression on Pauline and the reader, Stanhope makes some significant statements at the tea party in the areas of the aesthetic and the moral. He comments on the nature of poetry and on the desirability of making the form, by "speaking it," a part of people's reality, not only of their dreams—but for those who would engage authentically in this "speaking," he stipulates the possession of "... the four virtues, clarity, speed, humility, [and] courage" (p. 63). To Pauline in a private allusion, he makes another pronouncement explaining the concept of "terrible good." Here he says, "Good ... contains terror, not terror good" (p. 65), a reference not so startling as his first mention of the subject, for the reader has already associated him with the expression of such moral dicta. Like the depiction of Stanhope's exquisite manners, this reference illuminates the moral issue and serves, perhaps just as importantly, to bolster the reader's already formulated impressions of Stanhope as a character involved with infinite truth.

This chapter of the novel is not one that imparts any really new information either about Stanhope or his
perception of the universe. Rather, it builds upon and reaffirms the reader's--and Pauline's--earlier impressions of the poet to create a more solid vision of him as a social paradigm and as an oracle of secular, sacred, and aesthetic wisdom.
Chapter Five

Stanhope, the Narrator,
And the Doctrine of Substitution

The theological, intellectual, and philosophical climax of *Descent into Hell* occurs in the chapter called "The Doctrine of Substituted Love." Here Stanhope explains to Pauline the notion of substitution and, as a result of Williams' having carefully built up the poet's credibility through narrative assertion, the reflection of reliable characters, and the actions and utterances of Stanhope himself, the miraculous doctrine can be received as though it were positive fact.

Once again Stanhope assumes the position that he held in the first chapter, of being in the vanguard of theological thought. While, as noted before, in the chapters that intervene between the first and the one now under discussion, it is the narrator who has enjoyed a position of theological dominance, here it is Stanhope who initiates the discussion. The narrator's activities are limited to expansion and comment on the statements of the poet. While in the first chapter, however, the narrator allowed Stanhope to make his statements about cosmic truth without adding his own opinions of them, now he not only backs up Stanhope's utterances with a great deal of assertion about how the poet implements his promise to
bear Pauline's fear, but he also develops the significance of Stanhope's remarks and actions to their final conclusion.

Although Stanhope resumes the initiative by being the one actually to introduce the doctrine into the novel, he and the narrator are in this sequence essentially impelled by the same didactic theological purpose. The only substantive difference between them is their position in relation to the action of the novel. On the subject of substitution they are completely of one mind. Stanhope, as a character, is obviously totally within the novel, and his exhortations, couched in an almost sermon-like style, are addressed ostensibly only to Pauline. The narrator, who observes the action of the novel from a vantage point somewhere outside it, can direct his comments—which are phrased in a homiletic manner quite similar to, but perhaps more strident than Stanhope's—only to the reader.

Williams conveys the extremely important information contained in the doctrine of substitution in most convincing fashion. First Stanhope articulates the essentials of the doctrine in the form of a dialogue with Pauline. Following this is a rather lengthy sequence of statements by the narrator which both reinforce what Stanhope has said and at the same time develop and explain
them. Finally the focus shifts to Pauline: largely through her own point of view, the efficacy of Stanhope's activities in her behalf are conclusively demonstrated.

The whole sequence is initiated when Stanhope cajoles Pauline into admitting that "I have a trick . . . of meeting an exact likeness of myself in the street" (p. 96). Stanhope questions her about this and wonders why she hasn't asked someone "to carry [her] fear" (p. 96). Incredulous, Pauline believes he has misunderstood, but when she attempts to change the subject, Stanhope will have none of it and explains what he means. Patiently he tells her that he will take her fear, and that meeting the doppelgänger " . . . might be a very different business if you weren't distressed" (p. 97).

Stanhope's speeches have that ring of fact that is so characteristic of him and apparently is a hallmark of his poetry as well. Pauline begins, then, "to understand that at any rate he thought he was talking about reality" (p. 97). If the reader as well as Pauline is experiencing any qualms about the nature of what Stanhope is saying (and what he is saying is really not so uncanny in a novel in which a doppelgänger and a succubus have already made appearances), these are dealt with through a reflection of Pauline's that is also a pertinent reminder to the reader as well: "It was, after all, Peter Stanhope
who was talking to her like this. Peter Stanhope was a great poet. Were great poets liars?"(p. 97).

Although Pauline, even after this observation, speaks "very doubtfully"(p. 97), the decision to accept Stanhope's advice seems to have been made. Very significantly, it has been made on the basis of that quality which has all along been the key factor in the characterization of Stanhope as a figure gifted with virtual omniscience: his identity as a great poet.

The doctrine of substitution constitutes one of Williams' most important theological dicta and serves as the basis for primary acts of goodness in several of his novels. Stanhope's statements in Descent into Hell, however, form the clearest and most explicit articulation of the theory. Robert Reilly summarizes the theology behind Stanhope's articulation of the doctrine as follows:

The whole of this relationship between man and God, and between man and man, is describable by three of Williams' favorite terms: co-inherence, substitution, and exchange. The three terms all refer to single aspects of the same thing, and this thing may be called the universal principle of existence. The principle may be stated negatively by saying that nothing, not even God, exists alone and without reference to anything else. The pattern of all existence is to be found in the Trinity: this is the supreme example of co-inherence and exchange. And the universe, as in the neo-Platonic tradition, mirrors or adumbrates the existence of God. All
All things co-inhere in each other and in God, because, literally, that is the way existence is, that is the nature of existence, whether sacred or profane. And substitution, the model of which is the Redemption-Atonement, is a further application of this same principle. As all things co-inhere and practice exchange with each other, so all things substitute for each other. More accurately, in the case of man, who is a unity, all men substitute for each other and thereby save themselves.\(^1\)

Stanhope states it rather more simply: "You must give your burden up to someone else, and you must carry someone else's burden. I haven't made the universe and it isn't my fault. But I'm sure that this is a law of the universe, and not to give up your parcel is as much to rebel as not to carry another's"(p. 99).

Stanhope expresses the idea of substitution not as a theory but as a fact, which in the universe of the Charles Williams novel it most certainly is. To him, substitution is a "blazing truth"(p. 98), "a fact of experience"(p. 99), and "a law of the universe"(p. 99), and to resist it, as does Pauline, on the basis of existential notions which emphasize the value of the self as

\(^{1}\) Reilly, p. 154.
an isolated entity, is to "refuse the Omnipotence" (p. 99).

That combination of lecture, conversation, and sermon which comprises Stanhope's disquisition on the facts of the universe is characterized not just by a thorough knowledge of the subject at issue, but also by a remarkable mastery over its object, young Pauline Anstruther. Pauline offers resistance in varying degrees, but Stanhope triumphs over her will through a mixture of techniques. The first of these is the pure assertion of the facts of the situation: "... when you leave here you'll think of yourself that I've taken this particular trouble over instead of you" (p. 99), and the like. He also employs biblical references to "Christ or St. Paul" (p. 98), and then states that "there's no need to introduce Christ, unless you wish" (p. 98). Of course, though, Christ has already been introduced, and from that point on, Stanhope's discourse is stamped with the authority of that--for Williams--quintessential substitution, the Incarnation.

In addition, when Pauline mounts her last feeble defense by alluding to her "self respect" (p. 99), Stanhope responds with the "tender mockery" (p. 99) that such an absurd (in the Williams cosmos) notion deserves: "If you want to respect yourself, if to respect yourself you must go clean against the nature of things ... though
why you should want so extremely to respect yourself is more than I can guess. Must I apologize for suggesting anything else?"(p. 99). Then the narrator tells us, "He mocked her and was silent; for awhile she stared back, still irresolute. He held her: presently he held her at command"(p. 99).

This accomplished and the ascendancy of his will assured, Stanhope with "certainty in his voice"(p. 99) reverts to the straight-forward assertion of what amount to direct orders: "... remember that I am afraid instead of you ... "(p. 99), "... you will leave all that to me"(p. 100), and finally, "... ring me up tonight ... and tell me you are being obedient to the whole fixed nature of things"(p. 100).

Following Stanhope's dialogue with Pauline, the narrator describes at length the act of substitution itself and also further develops the concept. Like Stanhope's pronouncements, the narrator's statements are intensely didactic in nature and are characterized by a quality of absolute certainty regarding the veracity of what is being said. In addition to explicating the doctrine which Stanhope has introduced to the novel and about which the narrator is, to put it mildly, highly enthusiastic; the narrator's remarks constitute another of his paeans to the excellent and holy qualities of the poet. We are told that Stanhope
even while imagining Pauline's terror at "the ogreish world" surrounding her, still maintains "a certain super-
ficial attention"(p. 100) which "lay at the disposal of anyone who might need it"(p. 100). We are told of his "utmost goodwill," his "holy imagination," and the "lucidity of his . . . spirit"(pp. 100-101); all of which, combined, enable him to transact the business of removing Pauline's fear as easily as he does.

Using Stanhope's activities as a basis, the narrator often abandons his customary past tense descriptive mode and shifts to the present to deliver what amount to ser-
mons that advance the concept of substitution. This me-
thod is not unique to the Stanhope-narrator relationship. After the first chapter the narrator does almost exactly the same sort of thing with most of his characters; that is, he uses their actions as a kind of springboard from which to leap into his theological and moral digressions. Examples of this sort of thing abound in the novel, but a typical case occurs as early as the second chapter.

Here, where the laborer, not yet dead, is trying to commit suicide, the narrator uses the man's inept attempts to hang himself as an opportunity to engage in a discus-
sion of the marriage of flesh and spirit:

He was almost shut up in his moment, and his hope was only that the next moment might completely close him in. No dichotomy of flesh and spirit dis-
tressed or delighted him, nor did he know anything of the denial of that dichotomy by the creed of Christendom. The unity of that creed has proclaimed, against experience, against intelligence, that for the achievement of man's unity the body of his knowledge is to be raised; no other fairer stuff, no alien matter, but this—to be impregnated with holiness and transmuted by lovely passion, but still this. Scars and prints may disseminate splendour, but the body is to be the same, the very body of the very soul that are both names of the single man (p. 31).

The connection between this not uninteresting but purely didactic theological statement and the direct fate of the dead man is somewhat tenuous. As even the narrator admits, "... this man was not even terrified by that future, for he did not think of it" (p. 31).

Most Williams scholars, as noted in the introduction to this paper, devote their attention to matters of theology and generally ignore the stylistic aspects of the works they treat. Patricia Spacks, however, is annoyed by what she considers the over-didacticism of the typical Williams narrator. Spacks argues that Williams asserts meanings not naturally embodied by the events in the novels. She says that the meanings that interest Williams are not capable of demonstration. Williams' language, Spacks maintains, "is not the language of a novelist... [and] his tone becomes disagreeable as he insists on
the importance of what he tells us." Williams is "pedagogical, insistent, [and] pretentious," and the reader is made to feel that the event occurring in the novel is merely a "pretext for the sermon." What Williams says is more important than the manner in which he says it, according to Spacks, and "he sacrifices the imaginative life of his novels to purposes which are didactic rather than philosophic.\(^2\)

This sort of narration is, as one would imagine, much in evidence in a chapter with the theological importance of "The Doctrine of Substituted Love." While I do not wish to undertake a categorical defense of Williams' narrative technique (which does at time become obtrusive) in this chapter, I believe that the technique works to good effect.

In "The Doctrine," Williams is not for purely pedagogical reasons imposing religious significance on a situation that does not intrinsically contain this. Stanhope's dialogue with Pauline and the statements of the narrator are, of course, didactic in intent, but they are inextricably connected by content as well as pedagogy. The narrator's comments both advance the reader's comprehension of what Stanhope is doing and point the way to-

ward the novel's further theological developments. The information transmitted by the narrator here is not, for the most part, gratuitous; instead, it adumbrates what will be literally demonstrated in the course of the novel.

Granted, some of the notions imparted here are both superfluous and never demonstrated. While it is helpful for the reader to be aware that "[Stanhope] endured her sensitiveness but not her sin" (p. 101), it is not really necessary to his understanding of the novel that he be also told that "the substitution there, if indeed there is a substitution, is hidden in the central mystery of Christendom, which Christendom itself has never understood, nor can" (p. 101). Such information is useful in comprehending "Christendom," not Descent into Hell. In a similar manner, the narrator's statement that "there is in all (emphasis mine) holy imagination from goodwill a quality of greatness which purifies and stabilizes experience" (p. 101), is not really capable of being demonstrated. To do so would require the infinite number of examples necessary to illustrate all such experiences.

In the particular case of Stanhope's goodwill enabling him to come to grips with Pauline's fear, however, the veracity of the statement is adequately shown.

These are but small objections, though, to minor flaws in a technique that, given the esoteric nature of
the knowledge that is being imparted, works quite well. For example, the narrator states that "... wherever there is intelligence enough for exchange and substitution to exist, there is place enough for action. Only when the desire of an obsession has carried its subject beyond the interchanges of love can the power of substituted love itself cease"(p. 102). This statement is important and illuminating in that by expanding the reader's knowledge of substitution it perforce increases his awareness of what Stanhope is actually doing. But the narrator, in the next sentence, introduces a further connection in the novel. This relates to the damnation of Wentworth and answers the reader's probably as yet unformulated question as to whether a saint like Stanhope could save a sinner like Wentworth: "It would have been small use for any adept, however much greater than Peter Stanhope, to have offered his service to Wentworth, where he sat in his own room with the secret creature of substantial illusion at his feet caressing his hand . . . "(p. 102).

The narrator also asserts that substitution is "not measured by time but by will: and that "the act of substitution was fully made, and if it had been necessarily delayed for years . . . but not by his fault, still its result would have preceded it. In the place of the Omnipotence there is neither before nor after; there is only
act" (p. 102). Like so many of the narrator's didactic statements, the conclusion of this one is couched in the present tense. This device calls attention to the fact that what is being asserted is true not just for the "inside" reality of the novel (the action of which has occurred in the past), but for the "outside" world of reader and narrator as well. Just as the other similar example of narrative assertion which was previously noted had a referent in the Wentworth subplot, so too does this pronouncement relate to the action of the novel. In this case the narrator's allusion to the non-linearity of time regarding acts of substitution both foreshadows and prepares a solid philosophical basis for Pauline's encounter with the long-dead martyr, John Struther. (Stanhope shows that, like the narrator, he too is aware of this chronological aspect of substitution when, later in the novel, he asks Pauline, of Struther, "'... mightn't his burden be carried too?'" (p. 149).

The narrator, then, is used by Williams in very much the same manner as was Stanhope in the first chapter. There, the poet's strange query, "'Are our tremors to measure the Omnipotence?'" (p. 17), adumbrated one of the prime moral premises of the novel; a premise actualized in the "terrible good" that Pauline at last fully comprehends when she turns to face her double. Now in this
later chapter, another reference to the ways of the Omnipotence (there is neither before nor after in the Omnipotence, only act) lays the ground-work for the subsequent demonstration of the way time may flow backwards. Here, then, is yet one more instance of that similarity existing between Stanhope and the narrator. In the functional sense, Stanhope is almost another narrator and the narrator is almost another Stanhope.

Stylistically, Williams could have chosen to express the notion of substitution in one of three ways: First, he could have incorporated the entire discussion into the dialogue between Stanhope and Pauline. Second, he could have attempted to accomplish everything through narrative description with no dialogue. Third, which is, of course, the way he did choose, he could have Stanhope initiate a discussion which the narrator would continue. The third way is almost certainly the best. Stanhope having begun the discussion, the intellectual concept of substitution can become literally connected with actual event in the novel. Had the narrator alone introduced this notion it would have remained only a learned commentary on that action. But even more important, Stanhope and the narrator support each other and their working together creates a kind of synergistic effect which lends tremendous verisimilitude to the whole mysterious and miraculous affair.
Patricia Spacks and Gunnar Urang believe, however, that his technique works rather too well for Descent into Hell's own dramatic good. "The theological insight," according to Spacks, "ends the drama . . . . Once Pauline understands substitution . . . the reader cannot await with real tension the next appearance of the double: as a problem, the double no longer exists."³ "Pauline's struggle," comments Urang, "actually comes to an end easily and early through the power of Peter Stanhope's exhortation; all that remains is . . . so to speak, to enact the ceremony."⁴

While these statements represent an oversimplification, they are in a sense an accurate assessment of some of the problems engendered by Stanhope's infallibility as a character. Once he delivers his lecture on substitution, the only possible suspense that can be generated comes from the question of how Stanhope will accomplish the carrying out of his promise to Pauline. The reader is not kept waiting for an answer to this question, either. The narrator addresses himself immediately to the issue with a technical and pedantic examination of Stan-

⁴Urang, p. 82.
hope's method. Proof of Stanhope's success (and proof is hardly needed) is given by the end of the chapter, where the point of view shifts to Pauline and we see her, fearless, waxing ecstatic on the beauties of creation.

This done, the action of the novel swings away from the doppelgänger to the dead man, to Margaret Anstruther, to Wentworth and his succubus, and to Pauline as she functions in the absence of terror. The next time we hear of the doppelgänger, we are at the point of reconciliation between it and Pauline. There can be little doubt that this encounter will turn out as it does. Stanhope has assured Pauline that were her fear absent, meeting the doppelgänger might well prove delightful (p. 105). He errs in degree, but not in fact. The reconciliation, in the Marian prison, between Pauline and herself is not merely "simple," "delightful," and a "pleasure" (p. 105), but ecstatic, transcendent, and magnificent. But, despite the fact that the sequence in the prison is in its own way exciting, it does have an aura of being something of a fait accompli, an anti-climax, and an "enactment of a ceremony." It is not so much of a fulfillment of a prophecy as an irrefutable "law of universe" (p. 99).

In the beginning of the novel the doppelgänger is

5Urang, p. 82.
In the beginning of the novel the *doppelgänger* is presented just as Pauline perceives it: a thing of menace, as such apparitions are usually held to be. Stanhope's assurance that meeting it will be delightful, however, drains the double of all of its danger. Once the apparition has Stanhope's approval, it can only, given his omniscience, turn out to be good indeed. This is true even if the suffering it has caused in Pauline's own life is good of the most "terrible" sort: "... it was she who had all her life [emphasis mine] carried a fear which was not her fear but another's, until in the end it had become for her in turn not her's but another's"

(p. 170). Anticipation of the *doppelgänger*’s appearances afford the first half of the novel much in the way of suspense. But just as Spacks maintains, with Stanhope's intervention the double "as a problem no longer exists."  

This is not to say, however, that as a result *Descent into Hell* is inevitably flawed. Of course Williams has sacrificed much of the dramatic effect that could potentially have been derived from the *doppelgänger* situation in favor of the theological and moral dicta articulated by Stanhope and the narrator. But such a sacrifice is consonant with the nature of the novel itself.

*Descent into Hell*, and all of Williams' novels, are

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6 Spacks, p. 152.
primarily structured not around action \textit{per se}, but around specific ideas about the nature of reality. Animating every character and behind every event in the plot, there is a definite precept. One such notion, and one which is at the root of Williams' "anti-climactic" resolution of the \textit{doppelg"{a}nger} problem, concerns the nature of good and evil.

Before examining the manner in which his ideas about this subject are shown in \textit{Descent into Hell}, it is, however, necessary first to examine Williams' underlying ideas about good and evil. Despite the contention of a critic like Stephen Dunn that Williams holds to a "belief in the existence of evil as an independent principle,"\textsuperscript{7} this is not so. Rather, good and evil both derive for Williams from the same source, which is God. Mary Shideler explains:

\begin{quote}
\ldots he has not introduced a principle of evil to account for the Fall. For him, the image of the snake represents neither a personal Satan nor an impersonal force opposed to the Omnipotent Good. He rejects the metaphysical, as well as the ethical dualism implicit in the notion of an evil power or principle of being that is outside of and contradictory to God \ldots. Is Williams making the preposterous assertion that evil does not exist? No. On the contrary, he insists upon its reality, power
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{7}Stephen Dunn, "Mr. White, Mr. Williams and the Matter of Britain," \textit{Kenyon Review}, 24, No. 93 (1962), 369.
and pervasiveness. Is he then affirming that God is the source of evil? To this the inexorable answer is yes . . . . If this God is good, then goodness is exactly what Williams, in the person of his character Peter Stanhope called it: a dreadful goodness.8

Reilly similarly maintains that:

. . . . the nature of the transcendental interlocking universe is good, as it is a divine facade. If we ask why man does not normally perceive the world as this way, why it is a vision reserved for saints and mystics, the answer lies in the nature of evil and of the Fall . . . . Evil, for Williams . . . has no positive existence; it is good warped or bent or, more accurately, good misperceived [emphasis mine] . . . . The nature of the Fall, then; may be described as man's loss of vision . . . . Man sees good as evil, awarding to evil the tenuous existence of a mode of perception, a way rather than a phenomenal existence. It follows, then, that the Redemption must consist of some way or ways of restoring the original accuracy of knowledge.9

Pauline's difficulty with the doppelgänger lies in misperception. What she sees as evil is, in reality, what it must be: a manifestation of good—"terrible good," perhaps, but good, none-the-less. To Stanhope, a redeeming figure, is allotted what Reilly calls the task of

8Shideler, pp. 51, 54.
9Reilly, pp. 156-157.
"restoring [to her] the original accuracy of knowledge." This he does by removing the burden of fear from Pauline so that she will be able to perceive the doppelgänger as he is certain it will prove to be: something "'delightful'"(p. 105). Stanhope knows that the doppelgänger will be good because he understands the fundamental "'laws of nature'"(p. 99). They have shown him that all creation, including such apparitions as a doppelgänger, is good, even though that good may temporarily manifest itself as "terrible." All that is required of Stanhope, then, is that he correct Pauline's faulty perception so that it will correspond to his own, and the doppelgänger problem can work itself out to a joyous, inexorable, and necessarily anti-climactic conclusion.

Williams' treatment of this situation in the novel coincides perfectly with his didactic aesthetic philosophy. Of art with a specific message, Williams says: "... propaganda does not destroy art ... But there is a condition and it is that the design must be the inevitable result of the art."¹⁰ In his treatment of the doppelgänger theme, Williams has achieved a near per-

fect synthesis of "propaganda" and "inevitability." The 
doppelgänger problem resolves itself inexorably as it does 
because Williams has used his omniscient character Stanhope 
to assert what will happen. Williams positions the asser-
tion where it will carry the most weight, directly after 
Stanhope's knowledge has been proven by his successful 
accomplishment of the act of substitution. What does 
happen, happens because the theological and moral dicta 
expressed by both Stanhope and the narrator are definitive 
truths about the nature of reality. Stanhope is not 
speculating when he tells Pauline that meeting her double 
will prove "delightful."

Of course, as Spacks complains, "... the theo-
logical insight ends the drama";\textsuperscript{11} it has to. Descent 
into Hell, despite all the talk of "supernatural thrill-
ers" that circulates about Williams' novels, is a novel 
of ideas, and not primarily a thriller, although much of 
it is thrilling, supernatural or otherwise. The impact 
of the combination of Stanhope's articulation of the 
doctrine of substitution and the narrator's continuation 
of the same discussion does not consitute an aesthetic 
flaw in such a novel. Rather, it is testament to

\textsuperscript{11}Spacks, "Fusions," p. 152.
its stylistic success. In a novel dedicated to the teaching of very specific metaphysical, theological, and moral notions, Williams has, for the expression of these ideas, created an almost perfect technical device. That is the combination of an omniscient character, Stanhope, and an omniscient narrator, working together in total synergistic harmony.
Chapter Six
Stanhope, the Narrator, and Gomorrah

Williams' rather unusual development of a series of allusions to the biblical city of Gomorrah offers further demonstration of the resemblance between Stanhope and the narrator. Williams initiates the sequence by having the narrator, early in the novel, make the first comparison between Battle Hill and the "Cities of the Plain" (p. 28). This occurs in a description of the laborer on his way to the spot where he will hang himself:

Under the moon he came on the Hill to a place which might have been an overthrown rather than an arising city. The chaos of that revolution which the Republic naturally refuses had rolled over it, or some greater disaster, the Vesuvian terror of Pompeii, or an invisible lava of celestial anger, as that which smote Thebes, or the self-adoring Cities of the Plain (p. 28).

One hundred six pages pass without another mention either of Thebes, Pompeii, or the Cities of the Plain until the narrator offers an enigmatic but obviously significant allusion to the notorious city of Gomorrah:

For less than the time it took him [Wentworth] to find refuge with her the creature that lay there was millions of years older than the dying woman by whom Pauline watched, while the pain of a god passed outwards from the mountain depths ... . It united itself with all spiritual anguish that received and took part with it; it fell away from the closed ears in the beds of Gomorrah (p. 134).
The earlier mention of the "Cities of the Plain" is intelligible because it is expressed as a simile. The landscape of Battle Hill is in a state of disorder sufficient to resemble such sites of famous disaster as Pompeii, Thebes, and the "Cities of the Plain." This later allusion, however, is more difficult to explicate. "The ears in the beds of Gomorrah," "the pain of a god," Wentworth, Pauline and her dying grandmother, all seem somehow contemporaneous. It is impossible to determine from this image alone whether the Gomorrah referred to is the biblical city itself or perhaps some symbolic representation of it in Battle Hill.

A full forty pages pass before, in the course of a conversation with Pauline, Stanhope, not the narrator, quite suddenly and unexpectedly explains this baffling reference:

The Lord's glory fell on the cities of the plain, of Sodom and another. We know all about Sodom nowadays, but perhaps we know the other even better . . . . The lovers of Gomorrah are quite contented, Periel; they don't have to put up with our difficulties. They aren't bothered by alteration . . . . There's no distinction between lover and beloved; they beget themselves on their adoration of themselves, and they live and feed and starve themselves, and by themselves too, for creation, as my predecessor said, is the mercy of God, and they won't have the facts of creation. No, we don't talk much of Gomorrah, and perhaps it's as well and
perhaps not (p. 174).

At this point Pauline poses the question that the reader might have wished to ask when confronted by Williams' earlier image of "the closed ears in the beds of Gomorrah": "But where?" she cried." Stanhope answers, "'Where but here? When all's said and done there's only Zion or Gomorrah'" (pp. 174-175).

After Stanhope's explanation, the narrator makes frequent, and now completely comprehensible, allusions to Gomorrah. Such references figure importantly in the final chapters of the novel where they provide the narrator with an extremely effective tool for defining moral behavior. Mention of Gomorrah in regard to the activities of any character immediately shows that the narrator believes the character to be acting according to motives of total selfishness. In the moral vocabulary of the narrator, such selfishness is evil. Thus, when Adela asks Pauline, whom she has previously "patronized" (p. 182) to speak to Stanhope about securing a position for her in a London production of the play, the narrator says:

Adela was not altogether unpracticed in the gymnastics of Gomorrah. Her spirit had come near to the suburbs, and a time might follow when the full freedom of the further City of the Plain would be silently presented to her by the Prince of the City and Lilith his daughter and wife (p. 182).

Later, when Adela is thinking about how she will
"manage" (p. 189) Hugh Prescott, the narrator remarks: "Her admission to the citizenship of Gomorrah depended on the moment at which, of those four only possible alternatives for the human soul [revolt, obedience, compromise, and deception], she refused to know which she had chosen" (p. 185). Still later, after the graves have opened and Pauline has gone to confront Lily Sammile in Lily's shed by the cemetery, the narrator says of Pauline that she is unable to call Lily by name: "... she could not say the name; no name was enough for the spirit that lay in Gomorrah" (p. 203).

In the normal course of events in a novel it is logical for a character to make a significant allusion which may or may not be immediately explained by the narrator. Such is the case when Stanhope asks if "our tremors [are] to measure the Omnipotence" (p. 17). The narrator, remaining silent on the subject, adds nothing at all to the reader's immediate understanding of the remark. By contrast, when Stanhope later in the novel speaks of substitution, the narrator advances the discussion immediately. In the purely technical sense, this sort of relationship between character and narrator is quite conventional. The narrator, poised outside the action, has immediate access to everything occurring in the novel, whether it be the actual physical events of the
plot or the inmost thoughts of each character. He can comment or judge as he chooses, but the lines of communication, even when the character so closely resembles the narrator as Stanhope does, are rigidly one way. The character, despite his moral, theological, or ontological similarities to the narrator, cannot enjoy the same access to the narrator's thoughts that the narrator does with his. Indeed, there is no way that a character in such a work as this can logically be cognizant even of the existence of the narrator.

The narrator of *Descent into Hell* is a disembodied voice, one that makes no pretense to being part of the action and that offers no information about who he is or how he knows what he knows. This is not a narrator like Marlowe in the novels of Conrad, but a third person anonymous narrator of the most conventional type. Such a narrator is usually completely removed from the action of the novel he is narrating. How then, without positing the notion that communication of some type exists between the two, can one explain Stanhope's direct and exact explication of the narrator's references to Gomorrah? The narrator's allusions are too specific, and Stanhope's observations are far too explicitly connected with them for the matter to be merely a coincidence, especially since Stanhope has not, prior to his disquisi-
tion of the subject, so much as mentioned Gomorrah, nor does he allude to it again. The question of a breakdown in aesthetics must be raised here, but I think that Williams can be acquitted of the charge.

Although this problem resists definitive solution, the best answer lies in a consideration of three factors: the nature of the novel, the sort of universe in which it is set, and the relationship between Stanhope and the narrator. Despite Spack's accusation that Williams' novels fail in their attempt "to employ the conventions of the realistic novel,"¹ a work like Descent into Hell, however realistic it may occasionally appear to be, is not intrinsically a work of realism. To demand that it behave like a conventional novel in all respects is in itself unrealistic. In Williams' work, where mysticism, satire, theology, and realism frequently overlap, it is reasonable to expect that the usual "laws" governing "normal" narrator-character relationships may occasionally be abrogated.

Connected inextricably to this issue is the sort of cosmos in which Descent into Hell takes place. Reality in this novel, as in all Williams' novels, is controlled.

by a three-part principle of mutual interlocking relationships: exchange, coinherence, and substitution. Where the boundaries between life and death, between nature and supernature, to say nothing of those between individual human beings, remain fluid, information may pass between persons in virtually inexplicable ways.

Whatever the "real" explanation is for Williams' treatment of this mysterious transmission of knowledge, the development of the Gomorrah theme serves as a strong indication of the closeness of Stanhope and the narrator. The question of whether or not Stanhope has somehow gained access to the narrator's consciousness creates an intriguing metaphysical and stylistic puzzle. It is a puzzle, though, that, given the amount of information available in the novel, must remain unsolved. The answer, at any rate, is not crucial for an understanding of the novel. What is crucial is that Williams' method of expressing the Gomorrah theme conclusively shows that on matters of prime theological importance, Stanhope and the narrator are, as demonstrated by their use of identical imagery to describe a moral situation, of one mind.

Whatever the actual nature of the connection between Stanhope and the narrator may be, it is clear that somehow, on the highest levels of moral and religious per-
ception, their consciousnesses converge; and at that shared point of absolute and perfect vision, solipsism and Gomorrah are synonymous.
Chapter Seven

Stanhope's Role in the Denouement

In the final three chapters of Descent into Hell, Stanhope plays a less prominent but still vitally important role. At one point, during the production of his play, we see him through the eyes of Pauline, who by that time has attained such a state of holy rapture that her perceptions, like Stanhope's, have become equivalent to those of the narrator. Stanhope appears to her as the apotheosis of all the great poets of all time. He has actually been this all along, but the spell woven by the performance of his play makes the reality of Stanhope's nature manifest:

It was the beginning of the end; the judgement of mortality was there. She was standing aside, and she heard the voice and knew it; from the edge of eternity the poets were speaking to the world, and two modes of experience were mingled in their sole utterance. She knew the voice, and heard it; all else was still. Peter Stanhope, as he had promised, was saying a few words at the close of the play (p. 186).

When Stanhope appears to deliver his characteristically significant facts about reality, Williams does not use the narrator to confirm, continue, or expand his statements. Thus it is Stanhope in the last chapter who alone bears the burden of explaining what, in the aftermath of the presentation of the play, is happening to the
inhabitants of Battle Hill. As usual, this is accomplished by means of a conversation between the poet and his disciple Pauline. When Pauline asks Stanhope how long he thinks the "plague" which the secularly oriented denizens of the Hill believe to be caused by influenza will last, he tells her:

If it's what my grandmother would have called it, one of the vials of the Apocalypse--why perhaps a thousand years, those of the millennium before the Judgment... Something is stealing from us our dreams and deceptions and everything but actuality... But I think the plague will spread. The dead were very thick here; perhaps that was why it began here (pp. 211-212).

One great difference between this dialogue between Stanhope and Pauline and the one they have had about substitution is Stanhope's attitude toward the young woman. Earlier he has lectured her, and has "held her at command" (p. 99) so that she has had no choice but to choose to cooperate with him. Here he treats her as an equal. Pauline has risen in the "sacred order" (p. 181); she knows now almost what Stanhope does. As the poet admits to her, "'and how do I, any more than you, know what the details of Salem will be like?'" (p. 212).

Perhaps this is why the narrator can stand aloof from any metaphysical involvement in their conversation. Stanhope and Pauline are sufficient, speaking as they are,
from "the easier circle of . . . heaven" (pp. 212-213), to carry the credibility of the discussion. Stanhope has the theological initiative, but Pauline, it seems, has replaced the narrator as the voice that, secure in its knowledge, assents to his statements—although unlike the narrator, she does not expand them in any significant way.

The discussion of the plague is the penultimate vision we are permitted of Stanhope and Pauline. In our final view of them, we see them at the railroad station bidding farewell to each other and meeting Wentworth. The narrator, as before, remains apart from the scene in any moral or theological sense. He offers no interpretations of the significance of Stanhope's observations; he confines himself to telling what is going on in the scene and who is saying what. "'I think [the narrator tells us Stanhope says of Wentworth] he has seen the Gorgon's head that was hidden from Dante in Dis'" (p. 214). This, of course, is just a confirmation, poetically expressed, of what the narrator has been telling us about Wentworth all along. Significantly, Stanhope is the only character in the novel to realize that Wentworth is not simply ill, but literally damned.

The reader's last perception of Stanhope comes from the narrator, an assertion that reaffirms the saint-
liness of the poet, who is departing to fulfill his promise to "'talk Nature to Miss Fox, and Art to Miss Hunt. If they wish'"(p. 214).

From these final glimpses of Stanhope it can be seen that in a novel marked by often sensational transformations—Pauline's attainment of holiness, the redemption of the dead man, the damnation of Wentworth, the death into the second life of Margaret Anstruther, the final degradation of Lily Sammile—the poet has remained the same. Sometime prior to the start of the novel Stanhope has attained omniscience, and Williams employs the poet's statements of cosmic truth, very often in close conjunction with the similar pronouncements of the narrator, to illuminate the entire work.

Stanhope's power as an oracular character is linked intrinsically to his immutability. Amid the often hectic supernatural action of this novel, Stanhope, like the narrator, stands as a solid point of reference, an impeccable source of reliable insight. He is from the beginning of the work to the end, Williams' paradigm of ideal, holy humanity—a man who has seen through to the "terrible" heart of the cosmos and found it, in the end, to be good. Stanhope's unfailing, ongoing serenity is one important proof that Williams provides for the final benignity of the sacralized universe in his novels. Thus, at the con-
clusion of Descent into Hell we see Stanhope just as we have been seeing him all along: still interpreting the metaphysical significance of a variety of mysterious phenomena, and still, in his saintlike impartial way concerned about the well-being of everyone with whom he has come in contact.
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