



mythLORE A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 17  
Number 4

Article 7

Summer 7-15-1991

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### Recommended Citation

Kenny, Stuart (1991) "The Now of Salvation: Thoughts on Charles Williams' "*Et In Sempiternum Pereant*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 17 : No. 4 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol17/iss4/7>

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



### Abstract

Analysis of Williams's short story, noting how the symbolism of time is connected to salvation or damnation.

### Additional Keywords

Damnation in "Et in Sempiternum Pereant"; Eternity in "Et in Sempiternum Pereant"; Salvation in "Et in Sempiternum Pereant"; Time in "Et in Sempiternum Pereant"; Williams, Charles. "Et in Sempiternum Pereant" (short story)

# The Now of Salvation

## Thoughts on Charles Williams' "Et In Sempiternum Pereant"

Stuart Kenny

In the fiction of Charles Williams, the struggle between salvation and damnation takes place in the minds of the characters as they respond to the whirl of supernatural events which surround them. This stream of consciousness approach is similar to much modern fiction, but Williams has a spiritual agenda which transforms whatever genre he utilizes into a medium for expressing his idiosyncratic approach to theology. Williams' only short story is a brief, yet intense, look into the mind of a single character as he is brought into an awareness of sin and redemption through an encounter which takes place on the outskirts of the English countryside, but, more significantly, on the outskirts of time itself.

One can imagine Charles Williams reading St. Paul's statement about now being the day of salvation and taking it literally — mulling it over until he had gotten to the essential meaning of each word. It is from some thought process that this, his only short story, "Et in Sempiternum Pereant," must have been born, because it shows how a character finds his salvation by resting his awareness on the eternal now. Thus Williams changes a simple exhortation from St. Paul into a discussion of the metaphysics of time and the soul. Real time is part of orthodoxy since it is in real time that we find our way to God; whatever distorts our awareness of time is heresy since it pulls us away from our understanding of God. In this unique story we have Lord Arglay, who also appears in the novel *Many Dimensions*, search for his salvation in a country house where time is completely out of joint.

One problem which has concerned Christians for centuries is the nature of time, in particular, the relationship between God's time and our time. St. Peter declares that a day to the Lord is like a thousand years to us; this opens up many questions of the experience of humans have of duration. St. Augustine discusses the problem of time and duration in the twelfth book of his confessions: "O Lord, since you are outside time in eternity, are you unaware of the things I tell you? Or do you see in time the things that occur in it? (253). He then goes on to wonder about the nature of eternal and temporal existence. The Christian mystics also talk about the timelessness of their experience with God; Julian of Norwich speaks of being unaware of time during the "shewings" she received from Christ.

Williams' ideas about time have much in common with the speculations of his friend and poet, T.S. Elliot, who begins *Four Quartets* with the meditation: "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future is contain in time past" (13). The rest of the poem wrestles with the nature of time seeing the

Incarnation as the "Still point of the turning world," a place where eternity and time interconnect.

Fantasy writers attempt to come to terms with the nature of time as well. C.S. Lewis makes it clear that time in Narnia is not the same time as in our world. The four children of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* grows up and rule as kings and queens for many years in Narnia, but when they walk back through the wardrobe, they are only moments older. Madeliene L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, and the rest of the books in the "Time series, defines the difference in time this way:

"Chronos": our wristwatch and alarm clock time.  
 "Kairos": God's time, real time. Jesus took John and James and Peter up the mountain in ordinary, daily chronos; during the glory of the Transfiguration, they were dwelling in Kairos. (93)

Williams' story takes place in a realm between chronos and kairos. The mystery of the Incarnation is that it is both historical and present at once — in the same way, salvation is both inside and outside of time. L'Engle continues her definition this way:

Kairos. Real Time. God's time. That time which breaks through chronos with a shock of joy, that time we do not recognize while we are experiencing it, but only afterwards, because kairos has nothing to do with chronological time. (98)

When Arglay enters the story, he is on a journey from temporal to eternal time. Arglay is a scholar, and his goal is to reach a country house where there are some papers on Lord Bacon which he needs to look at. Like Damaris Tighe in *The Place of the Lion*, he is not aware of the spiritual dimension of what he is studying. Bacon's religious and sexual ambiguity, for instance, should remind Arglay that there are moral laws which govern the universe. These laws, like time, cannot be changed, but only acknowledged and adhered to. Arglay is stepping out of that universe — he looks at his watch and notices that the time it reads is different from the time he is experiencing. He remarks that rather than making a long time of walking, his walking was "making time rather long." He goes on to speculate on the nature of roads: perhaps each road exists in a different relationship to time, and the time spent on one road would not be time spent on another.

Arglay continues his speculations on the nature of time and considers his life experience, such as growing old: "(H)e felt suddenly that time had outmarched and out-twisted him" and that one result of ageing was this experience of time: "I am losing my sense of duration." His age,

and the presence of death, give him a sense of the eternal time in which he is going to be judged. The one thing he notices about the house as he nears it is the “growing oppression of duration. Things *lasted*.” In eternity, he will experience the duration of things which happened in time. His breathing, which marks time, becomes labored.

Williams emphasizes his character’s experience of time in order to make a theological point. For Williams, this is one of the central acts of creation, and one of the things which the Incarnation reminds us about:

(One must speak in terms of time. Certainly, He acted altogether. He created and redeemed and judged and executed all at once. But it seems that, as far as we are concerned, He also in that act created process and therefore time. . . (*Image*, 77).

Arglay notices the chimney. There is smoke coming out, but there is no sense of motion. As he looks closer, the chimney itself seems to be made out of smoke. The smoke expressed an emptiness: “There was no sign of life anywhere, and the smoke continued to mount the lifeless sky.” It is an image of the fires of damnation.

Where is Arglay’s sin? For Williams, the image of salvation is the City: “The principle of that City, and the gates of it, are the nature of Christ as the Holy Ghost exhibits it and inducts us into it; it is the doctrine that no man lives to himself or indeed from himself” (104). Arglay mockingly refers to his sin as an inability to handle responsibility and be helpful to the human race. But as he enters the house, we see the roots are deeper: “There had been people he had come very near to hating, hating with a fury of selfish rage and detestation.” He thinks of his brother-in-law who is now dead. Arglay regrets the death, not because he wants to apologize, but because he wants to “provoke” and “torment” him. His damnation reflects Christ’s warning about anger in the heart.

As he enters the house, he sees the fireplace, or “a place for a fire” as he tellingly puts it. There is a door open to a cellar, and it is clear from the imagery that it is a door to hell. The smoke from the fire goes up through the chimney “over those roads where men crawled infinitely though the small measurement of time.” Arglay thinks, “There is no smoke without fire. . . One lives and learns. Unless indeed this is the place where one lives without learning.”

A figure in a black coat comes into the room: “It was emaciated beyond imagination: It was astonishing at the appalling degree of hunger revealed.” The eyes were the eyes of a madman. “They sought something — food, life, or perhaps only a form and something to hate.” Its hunger is a self-consuming desire. Arglay sees scars on the creature’s wrists: “They were teeth marks; they were bites; the mouth closed on the wrist and gnawed.” The creature existed out of time. The breath which marked time for Arglay was different in the creature: “so light, that only in the utter stillness of time could it be felt, so hot that it might have been the inner fire from which the

pillar of smoke formed outward to the world.”

The battle between damnation and salvation is spelled out in this story through the subtle interplay of these images: time, smoke, breathing, flesh. The choice before Arglay is what is real, what exists and what brings him back into the community without hate and resentment. As Williams in another place says, “There is no final idea for us but the glory of God in the redeemed and universal union — call it *Man or the Church or the City*” (*Image*, 102). He goes on to say in the same essay, “The opposite of the Infamy is the City. There is, in the end, no compromise between the two; there is only one choice. The choice exists everywhere, at every minute” (103).

Arglay must make the choice within himself between Infamy and the City. He closes his eyes — for a second? for eternity? — and looks again at the creature with new awareness. The creature is himself, in eternity. This is self-consuming hate, burning in the fires of damnation: “The smoke burned his eyes and choked his mouth; he clutched at it, at images within it, at his greedy loves and greedy hates — at the cloud of sin in his life. . .” Damnation is wrestling with the smoke, unable to grasp it or even for a moment see it clearly.

Another writer might have had Arglay find his salvation by crying out “Lord save me!” but we have seen that salvation comes, for Williams, in a return to God’s reality, which in this story is represented by the movement of time. Time is a fundamental human experience which connects the whole race — to return to time is to return to the City. Damnation is movement without the passage of time. Thus, to be saved, Arglay shouts the word which connects him with God: “Now — now was the only possible other fact, choice, act. He cried out, defying infinity, “Now!” This is echoed in Eliot’s line, “Only through time is conquered.” (“Burnt Norton,” *Four Quartets*, 90)

Arglay has found a place “where past and future are gathered.” (63-4) He has a hard time facing himself while in time because, as Eliot says, “the enchantment of past and future / Woven in the weakness of the changing body / Protects mankind from heaven and damnation / which flesh cannot endure.” (83) “Now” returns Arglay to the City, and his change in attitude is reflected in how he looks over his shoulder at the creature, not with hate, but with pity.

Arglay cries out, “Now is God! Now is glory in God” and runs back to the road. He sees a bus — an important messenger, symbolizing community and also time, since it must run according to schedule. Buy entering the bus, Arglay completes his journey out of the Inferno. “Arglay instinctively made a sign.” A sign of the cross? A signal to the driver? If both are messengers to God, then it does not matter. The final quote from Dante, in which Arglay moves out of his Inferno and sees the stars, indicates he is free to move ahead in his journey. ☛

present situation (although this may form part of our priorities, however banal it may sound; rather, the challenge that we face in such times of crisis is how our study and criticism of literature is to be made *answerable* to that situation.

By answerability I mean a recognition of the fact that, as a discourse, the mythopoeic is not a sublimely sealed off domain as Tolkien, Lewis and others would have it, but it is in fact *also* a constitutive element of the dystopic realities with which we are today confronted. To be “answerable” to this fact does not simply mean disclaiming something like the ideology of Bush’s neocolonialism as the “misuse” of an otherwise pure mythopoeic realm of affectivity (although it may very well include such a denunciation). As a discourse and an experience, the mythical is not necessarily automatically predisposed to emancipatory consequences; on the contrary, it is impossible to fully appreciate a mythopoeic aesthetic without appreciating its insertion into a particular aesthetic ideology as an integral condition of its existence. It is only when this dimension of the texts which we take as *our* proper focus as a society is made a conscious part of our study and discussion, that a basis for the critique of such non-literary appropriations of mythical narrative will be at all convincing (to ourselves as well as to others) as a “relevant” priority.

(Your comments are quite tangential to the point of the editorial, which was that war makes the awareness of mortality as unavoidable, and asks what is the value of learning when death may be so near? I would recommend you read Lewis’ essay “Learning in Wartime” in its entirety, as you have misunderstood his purpose as well — although this may come from the short quotations taken from it. The editorial took no political position on the war, because Mythlore is not meant to be a political journal. I leave others to comment on the points of your letter, particularly those on Tolkien and Lewis. —GG)

#### Notes to “Fantasy Characterization,” pp. 37-41

1. Like the study of literature generally, the study of fantasy has mushroomed during our time: so much so that there is not even room here for an accurate summary of the variety of theories and positions. Those interested in the subject may consult Lynette Hunter, *Modern Allegory and Fantasy: Rhetorical Stances of Contemporary Writing* (New York, 1989). While her prose is forbidding, her overview of the subject is thorough.
2. Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, ed. Edith J. Morley (London, 1911), p. 138.
3. J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston, 1984), p. 139.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 148. The other satisfactions of fantasy, named in this same passage, are Recovery and Consolation.
7. James Joyce, *Ulysses: The Corrected Text*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (New York, 1986), p. 42.
8. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Hawthorne’s Works: The House of the Seven Gables*, (Boston, 1900), p. xxi.
9. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, p. 116.
10. T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth*, (Boston, 1983), p. 104.
11. The irony is all the greater since Shippey is responding to critics who deny moral depth, complexity, or significance in Tolkien’s works. The

lapse, however, is uncharacteristic, and I should add that Shippey does a superb job of showing the many sides of Tolkien’s complex view of evil.

12. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, p. 153.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
14. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings I*, “Lothlorien.” I shall identify subsequent quotations from *The Lord of the Rings* parenthetically within the text. Because of the large number of editions readers may be using, I shall not cite pages but only book numbers and chapter titles.
15. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, p. 153.
16. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, p. 113.
17. Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston, 1981), pp. 106-107.

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- . *The Image of the City*, ed. Ann Ridler. London: Oxford University Press, 1958.

## ○ IN MEMORIUM ○

**Taum Santoski**, scholar, linguist, advisor to *Mythlore*, died in the morning of August 19th. I regret that I did not know him better. Our love of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien brought us together eight summers ago and bound us in friendship. But we saw each other rarely, heedless, as only the young can be, of speeding time. We did not have the grace of Lórien, and in these mortal lands the cup of our parting was drunk much too soon.

Taum was not as well known in Tolkien studies as he deserved. This was his way: smiling and good-natured among friends, as a scholar he was quiet and unassuming, even timid. In fact, he was one of the foremost authorities on Tolkien’s manuscripts, having studied the Marquette papers at length. Careful readers will have seen his name acknowledged by Christopher Tolkien in *The History of Middle-earth*. He was an expert on J.R.R. Tolkien’s difficult handwriting, as well as on his texts, his invented languages, and his art.

At his death from cancer Taum left unfinished a number of Tolkien-related projects, most important among them an authorized history of the writing of *The Hobbit*. Others now will carry on his work, honoring the memory of their friend. We hope that Taum will approve our efforts, wherever he may be beyond the circles of the world.

— Wayne Hammond

**Chad Walsh**, poet and literary critic, died on 16 January 1991. Born on 10 May 1914, he was the first person to write a book on C.S. Lewis in 1949: *C.S. Lewis: Apostle to the Sceptics*. His interest in Lewis continued, and in 1979 he wrote *The Literary Legacy of C.S. Lewis*. Walsh taught for 32 year at Beloit College.