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Two Notions of Hell

Gwen Watkins

A lecture given at a joint meeting of the Charles Williams and George MacDonald Societies on November 24, 1990.

The subject of Hell has always been a popular one, not only for painters, writers, and speakers, but for their audiences. Dante was pointed out with a delicious frisson as the man who had actually been in the infernal regions, and the mediaeval *Arcs Moriendi* books were immensely popular largely because of their riveting descriptions of the fate awaiting the unrepentant sinner. Many of you will perhaps follow the example of the Quivering Brethren in *Cold Comfort Farm*. When Amos Starkadder bellowed at them that they were all damned, “an expression of lively interest and satisfaction passed over the faces of the Brethren, and there was a general re-arranging of arms and legs, as though they wanted to sit as comfortably as possible while listening to the bad news.”

But however enjoyable of depicting of Hell in paint or words, it is a subject with which every serious theologian must concern himself. If God exists and has created man to know Him and enjoy Him for ever, it is possible that some men will refuse this knowledge and this enjoyment; that they will separate themselves from the purpose of their creation. “Sin,” says Charles Williams, “is the name of a certain relationship between man and God. When it is fixed, if it is, into a final state, [man] gives it other names; he calls it Hell and damnation.” Now it is possible for writers, but not, I think, for painters, to represent Hell in two ways: as a place, or as a state of being. And since man is the only state of being known from the inside of man, Hell can be depicted as, or in, a person. Dante chose the first way.

[end of page 1] There are many individual sinners in his *Inferno*, but it is as a place that he describes it and we remember it. Marlowe and Milton use both modes. Mephistopheles says: “Why, this is Hell, nor am I out of it.” Satan is hurled “to bottomless perdition, there to dwell / In adamantine chains and penal fire,” but even when he is approaching Paradise he is forced to say: “Which way I fly is Hell, myself am Hell.” C.S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce* represents Hell as the Grey Town which first appears in *Letters from*

Hell, a translation from the Danish to which George MacDonald wrote an introduction. But George MacDonald and Charles Williams almost always represent Hell as a state of being—in their fiction always, I think, as a person. It is curious, but natural, that Heaven, on the other hand, is always a place, and it is easy to see why. Heaven is always a place of exchange, but Hell is a place of separation, and therefore Heaven consists of many of the blessed, Hell of the single soul drawing further and further away from its fellows into itself and finally into disintegration. The one principle of Hell is, “I am my own.”

Williams’ image of Heaven is always the City; when he opposes Hell to this he calls it “the Infamy.” When Lawrence Wentworth makes the descent described in *Descent Into Hell*, it is into himself that he really descends. When, in that great novel of the city *All Hallows Eve*, where London itself is seen as the type of the Heavenly City, Lester sees the subway entrances as the tubes and tunnels of damnation, she perceives them to be the pits of her own selfishness. When Evelyn refuses Lester’s help, and rushes with lunatic glee into the pit, it is into her own refusal to accept love and dependance that she goes, “there to wait and wander and mutter till she found what companions she could.” [2]

Lewis’ ideas about Hell, however, have less in common with MacDonald’s and Williams’ than might at first be supposed. The influence of MacDonald upon him was so great, as he himself admitted, that he quotes from MacDonald in almost every one of his books; he also regarded Charles Williams with the greatest love and reverence, and was in some ways strongly influenced by his thought. And yet on the subject of Hell, it is Lewis who is the odd man out. MacDonald never read Williams, of course, and though Williams read and liked MacDonald, I do not think he was ever influenced by anything except the Anglican liturgy and one of two books of A.E. Waite’s. “You might as well try to [influence] a Bandersnatch!” And yet these two are closer to each other, through independent thinking and feeling, than to the man who was soaked in their work.

Lewis’ clearest exposition of the doctrine of Hell as he sees it is given in the chapter entitled “Hell” in *The Problem of Pain*. He says there that the lost soul is “eternally fixed in its diabolical attitude.” Lewis argues on behalf of an everlasting Hell skillfully and even passionately, and appears to hold to the idea as a personal belief, not merely as a dogma to be defended by scholarly means. But MacDonald and Williams nowhere express any such belief. In *Robert Falconer*, one of MacDonald’s early novels (though

written when he was forty-four, so a product of his mature thought), the old grandmother continually mourns for her son, who, if he is dead, is inevitably suffering the agonies of the damned, according to the Calvinistic religious beliefs from which MacDonald broke away. ““Them ‘at gangs there, their doom is fixed, and noething can alter ‘t.”” But Robert is not prepared to believe this of God or man. He has been thinking, he tells his appalled grandmother, of a plan to empty Hell. After the Day of Judgement, when all the Elect are sitting at the Lamb’s Supper, [3] he will call on them to take over the sins of the damned, for ““it’ll be some sair upo’ them to sit there aitin’ an’ drinkin’ an’ talkin’ awa’ an’ enjoyin’ themsel’s, whan ilka noo an’ than there’ll come a sough o’ wailin’ up frae the ill place, an’ a smell o’ burnin’ ill to bide.”” The grandmother says that only the sinless can take over the sins of others, but Robert replies triumphantly that the Elect will have had all their sins washed away in the blood of the Lamb.

This note of salvation even in the depths of Hell recurs constantly in MacDonald’s work. In his introduction to *Letters From Hell*, he comments on the “faint, all but inaudible tone of possible hope” in its pages. Even in his books for children the same thought recurs. When Curdie and the old Princess are discussing the way in which human beings may grow downwards into beasts, Curdie asks of such a one:

“And is there no hope for him? Can nothing be done? It’s so awful to think of going down, down, down like that.”

“Even when it is with his own will?”

“That’s what seems to make it worst of all,”

says Curdie, but the Princess’s only answer is to call up a shockingly hideous animal and place its paw in Curdie’s hand. Instead of the hide and claws, he feels the soft hand of a child. It is clear that humans may grow not only down but up again.

In *Robert Falconer*, Shargar’s mother, a thief, drunkard, and harlot, who has sold her little daughter into prostitution and abused and neglected her son, has, according to MacDonald, a hope of salvation she neither knows nor cares about, and which Calvinism would deny her. “She too was eternal—and surely not to be fixed for ever in a bewilderment of sin and ignorance—a wild-eyed soul staring about in hellfire for want of something it could not understand and had never beheld [4] —by the changeless mandate of the love of God.” And in *Lilith*, MacDonald’s final statement of belief, so many times redrafted and rewritten, there is a scene in which Mr Vane sees the dancing skeletons whose remaining rags of flesh are hanging from their

bones, their lidless, living eyes gleaming in their sockets. Is this Hell? No, these ghastly figures are growing human again. They are centuries ahead of the two bare skeletons he sees in a coach, hating and loathing each other, only able to reject or injure each other. These two are in Hell, says the Raven, but adds: ““They must at last grow weary of their mutual repugnance and begin to love one another!”” And when we last seem [sic] them, they are not only beginning to help each other, but are on good terms with the Little Ones, who are the touchstone for everything good.

The one principle of Hell, says MacDonald, is “I am my own.” Charles Williams agrees. Hell is the place of those spirits who wish to have their necessity in themselves. Since this is contrary to the holy Fact of creation, those who believe it possible are irrational. All those who believe in illusion are in danger of Hell. In his introduction to the World’s Classics edition of Milton’s poems, Williams observes that “Milton thought pride, egoism and a sense of one’s own rights the greatest of all temptations . . . and he thought it led straight to inaccuracy and malice, and finally to idiocy and Hell.”

All the characters in Williams’ plays and novels who seem to be on the road to damnation cling to some illusion. Foster and Miss Wilmot in *The Place of the Lion* live in fantasies of power and revenge. Sir Giles Tumulty lives in the illusion that he can cause or observe suffering in others without himself being involved, but he is told that he shall scrabble in the universe as an ant scrabbles against the side of [5] a cup, “and none shall pick you out or deliver you for ever.” Wentworth is one of those who “beget themselves on their adoration of themselves,” and refuses to accept the facts of creation: that frustration and pain may be aspects of the mercy of God. All these characters may seem to be on the way to, or already in, Hell, but it is the hell of themselves they are descending into, rather than some Dantean Inferno. Lester, in *All Hallows Eve*, is described after a fit of anger as being “in a trance of horror at herself or hell, or at both, being one.” It is into his own illusion that Wentworth finally slips off the rope of time. In the short story “Et in Aeternum Pereant,” there is a ladder down into the smoking pit of anger; but a ladder can be climbed up as well as down.

There was, [Lord Arglay] remembered, a way in, therefore a path out. He had only to walk along it. But also there was a way still farther in From every gate of hell there was a way to Heaven, yes, and in every way to Heaven there was a gate to deeper hell.

We must never forget that Williams himself claimed that *All Hallows Eve* began where *Descent Into Hell* left off.

Lewis may have been disingenuous in his defence of an irreversible Hell in a way that MacDonald and Williams never are in their rejection of such a concept. Lewis says that if a soul will not, ultimately, repent, “it is better for the creature itself, even if it never becomes good, that it should know itself for a failure, a mistake,” and that that knowledge, made permanent, would be what we call Hell. To ask otherwise, he says, to ask that God should, by whatever means, save the soul He created from infinite suffering, is to cancel out the miracle of an Omnipotence which agrees to be defeated by its own creature. But [6] even to use the word defeat is to bring in the imagery of war; and God is not at war with his people. MacDonald sees no vanquished God, but a God whose love is inexorable, and whose fires may not be the fires of Hell but of redemption. He thinks it false to believe that if Hell is not everlasting, there is no Hell at all.

I see no hope for many, no way for the divine love to reach them save through a very ghastly Hell.” “The Lord never came to deliver men from the consequences of their sins while yet those sins remained No man is safe from Hell until he is free from his sins If Hell be needful to save him, Hell will blaze until he takes refuge in the will of the Father.” “The children will rush inside the centre of the life-giving fire whose outer circles burn.

Another of Lewis’ arguments is that the doctrine of a final Hell “has the full support of Scripture, and, specially, of our Lord’s own words.” But Christ ways (Matt. 5, 26) ““Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.”” And what does MacDonald say?

Herein is the Bible greatly wronged. It nowhere lays claim to be the Word, the Way, the Truth. The Bible leads us to Jesus, the inexhaustible, the ever unfolding Revelation of God. [It is Christ] in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, not the Bible, save as leading to Him

God has not cared that we should anywhere have assurance of His very words Even Christ must depend for being understood upon the spirit of his disciple. Seeing it could not give life, the letter should not be throned with power to kill.

MacDonald and Williams agree in allowing the possibility of a final Hell, but both continually express an intuitive conviction of its [7] impossibility,

Williams because of eternal Justice, and MacDonald because of eternal Love. (These are, of course, the very reasons that Dante gives for the creation of his Hell—"Justice moved my great Maker . . . and the primal Love supernal.") "It is certain," says Williams, "that if they have the power of choosing joy in Him, they must have the power of choosing the opposite of joy in Him. But it is not credible that a finite choice should result in an infinite distress."

Williams wrote in a letter to a friend towards the end of his life:

I am convinced that there must be a Redemption of Sin . . . I believe that every soul experiences and understands fully the entire and living justice of the universe. I believe that justice to be a living, responsive and intelligent Existence—and one with Almighty Love. And I believe It makes Itself clear to every soul in the way that the soul chooses . . . because Justice-In-Love exists, I believe in a Judgement, an Accounting.

And MacDonald:

If at last it should prove possible for a created being to see good and evil as they are, and choose the evil, then, and only then, there would, I presume, be nothing left for God but to set His foot on him and crush him, as you crush a noxious insect. But God is deeper in us than our own life.

Both authors reach, not by dogma but through a lifelong exploration of the ways and the love of God, the same conclusion as that given us by one whom they would both agree to be immeasurably greater than themselves, the Lady Julian of Norwich. Holy Church taught her to believe that some men should be damned to Hell without end, and because of this:

Methought it was impossible that all manner of thing should be [8] well. And as to this, I had no other answer in Shewing of our Lord God but this: "That which is impossible to thee is not impossible to Me: I shall save my word in all things and I shall make all things well."

For this is the great deed that our Lord shall do; in which Deed he shall save his word in all thing, and He shall make all well that is not well.

It was this great deed in which George MacDonald and Charles Williams so profoundly believed. [9]