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Jennifer Raimundo
Signum University

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Native Language in a Strange Country: Death and Rebirth in the Friendship of C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams

by Jennifer Raimundo

Jennifer Raimundo has been an Inklings enthusiast for the better part of her life. She is now pursuing an M.A. in Language and Literature at Signum University. She also serves as Institutional Planning Lead at the University.

A book sometimes crosses one's path which is so like the sounds of one's native language in a strange country that it feels almost uncivil not to wave some kind of flag in answer. I have just read your Place of the Lion and it is to me one of the major literary events of my life—comparable to my first discovery of George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton, or Wm. Morris.

—C.S. Lewis, Letter to Charles Williams

That was *The Meeting*. It happened in the Spring of 1936, and it began a most odd but fruitful friendship between two great literary minds: C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams. Although Lewis originally reached out to Williams as to a fellow countryman in foreign lands, their earliest exchange of letters quickly shows at least Lewis that, if Williams and Lewis are from the same country — that place called Romance, they are definitely not from the same province. Williams from the beginning is conceptually lavish where Lewis tends to be most comfortable and homely. But they still remain friends, and very mutually edifying friends. How did this friendship last? Lewis, I believe, answers that question before the friendship even got well on its way. While scrambling for common ground after discovering Williams's very different view of Romantic Theology (whatever that was), Lewis writes: “[W]e touch here: the death and re-birth motive being of the very essence of my kind of romanticism” (*Collected Letters*).

“His kind of romanticism?” What is Lewis talking about? In the letter-writing that flurried over the next few weeks between Lewis and Williams, we find that Lewis was deeply convicted by the heroine of *The Place of the Lion*, Damaris, who, along with her “man,” Anthony, undergoes a spiritual transformation through a death by humility to the rebirth of true selfhood and joy. That sounds pretty Lewis, doesn't it? On the other hand, Williams, probably ecstatic after reading

certain passages of *The Allegory of Love*, writes Lewis about Romantic Theology—a death and rebirth to be sure, but of a very different kind than the one Lewis loved in *The Place of the Lion*. What we find, then, is that two potential friends have written about the other person’s kind of romantic death and rebirth. Basically, their friendship was based on a mistake. But it is a mistake that kept them together, because instead of finding the mirror of themselves like they were expecting, they found in each other iron minds that would sharpen their spiritual and literary lives. Better understanding what romantic death and rebirth was to each friend will help us better understand how it kept the friendship alive. To start, we shall take a quick jaunt through death and rebirth in each of these men’s lives just before *The Meeting* happened.

DEATH AND RE-BIRTH BEFORE *THE MEETING*

We begin with Williams and his “Beatrician experience.” This experience is fundamental to Williams as a human and to his literature as a theology. It is part of his larger Romantic Theology which he had been developing for some time before meeting Lewis. In essence, it says that the erotic experience of falling in love is a manifestation of divine love, God’s love, on earth, within the little “church” of the union. It is based on Dante’s vision of Beatrice, which brought his understanding of love closer to God’s. Williams’s Beatrician experience goes hand in hand with his theology of incarnation and substitutionary love. Christ’s incarnation is the defining moment and happening of the Christian life, and so the Christian life is itself an incarnation of Christ. These two ideas do not sound so very unorthodox when stated as such, but put them together and you get Williams’s Romantic Theology: the erotic relationship of a man with a woman is an incarnation of God’s love and is glorious with all the glory of Christ. In this context, the death and rebirth element is embodied both in the intellectual surrender and recreation of two lovers with each other and in the sexual act itself. Prior to reading *The Allegory of Love*, Williams had begun to write on this subject, both in poetry (his *Poems of Conformity*) and prose (his *Outlines of Romantic Theology*). These are, in fact, the two works that Williams suggested Lewis read in his first letter to Lewis because Romantic Theology is the idea that first got Williams excited about Lewis. Surprised?

But what about Lewis’s death and rebirth before *The Meeting*? Unlike Williams, Lewis had developed no formal theology regarding

death and rebirth apart from his own experience of conversion and his ongoing, run of the mill, experience of sanctification in daily life. The latter is well-expressed in a letter from Lewis to Dom Bede Griffiths, written just before his first letter to Williams: “[E]very return to ones own situation involves action: or to speak more plainly, obedience. That appears to me more and more the whole business of life, the only road to love and peace—the cross and crown in one” (*Collected Letters*).

There it is—death and rebirth: the only road to love and peace is obedience, the cross and crown in one. The obvious explication of death and rebirth in Lewis’s conversion story, though, is *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. There we find John undergoing many little deaths—his abandonment of the brown girls, the *Zeitgeist*, less interested companions, fear of killing the dragon, false doctrines—in order, finally, to encounter redemption, real life, in his encounter of Christ and beholding of the real Island. Of course, now that he has found the source of true Joy, the island does not matter so much anymore. Lewis finds the death of himself and his seekings in the life of Christ, and he finds that it brings him back to life. Should we be surprised that *The Pilgrim’s Regress* is the work Lewis first suggests to Williams as the expression of his view of romantic death and rebirth? Not at all.

So, here we have Williams, steeped in the development of his Romantic theology, on one hand, and Lewis, a man swept up in the recent discovery of Christ’s satisfaction of all his deepest longings, on the other. They have each unconsciously written to the other person’s romanticism and have each just stumbled across just the right sample writing to spark a friendship. With this in hand, we are now ready to plunge into *The Meeting* itself.

THE MEETING (PART ONE): DEATH AND REBIRTH AS SURRENDER AND JOY IN *THE PLACE OF THE LION*

I will start with *The Meeting* (Part One), which is Lewis discovering his own peculiar sense of romantic death and rebirth in *The Place of the Lion*. What are the elements of death and rebirth that, considering who Lewis was, attracted him so strongly to *The Place of the Lion*? A few examples drawn from the story of Damaris and Anthony will prove sufficient to answer these questions.

Actually, the entire book is a timeline of the death of Anthony into his new life as the one who exerts his human dominion over the archetypes governing creation and therefore as the Second Adam who names the animals. To come into this new life, he must first undergo

self-surrender. The book describes his struggle: “Was he really proposing to govern the principles of creation? . . . It was hopeless, it was insane, and yet the attempt had to be made” (*The Place of the Lion*). Anthony knows he may well die, but it doesn’t matter because in a sense he knows he’s already begun his death process anyway. The surrendering is even more explicit when he takes on the form of the Eagle for the first time. His life flashes before his eyes like a man about to die—all the good and all the bad he’s done—and as he gives himself to this momentary journey of self-knowledge and overpowering, he finds his real identity and new life: “[W]ith an inrush of surpassing happiness he knew that he was himself offering himself to the state he had so long desired” (*The Place of the Lion*).

Anthony then goes on to become the superhero of the book, Damaris, and majestically names the animals, carrying his personal redemption into the redemption of creation in general—just like man ought to have done from the beginning. Here we have a taste of that death and rebirth which had moved Lewis so greatly in his own conversion experience and would continue to move him for the remainder of his life. But Anthony’s story is just the beginning. Even more clearly do we see death and rebirth in the character of Damaris, with whom Lewis tells Williams he identifies perfectly. After all, Damaris is a rather stuck-up, self-centered intellectual prig. She has devoted her life to studying the Neo-Platonists and Abelard and angels without ever once thinking that they and their ideas actually had an impact on real life, and especially her own life. Anthony’s reprimand of Damaris for her way of thinking is the beginning of her death:

“O I know such things must be . . . man must use his mind. But you’ve done more than use it, you’ve loved it for your own. You’ve loved it and you’ve lost it. And pray God you’ve lost it before it was too late, before it decayed in you and sent up that stink which you smelt, or before the knowledge of life turned to the knowledge of death. Somewhere in you there was something that loved truth, and if ever you studied anything you’d better study that now. For perhaps you won’t get another chance.” (*The Place of the Lion*)

Can you not see Lewis writhing and sympathizing and cheering as he reads this? The humility, the obedience, the cross that Lewis was just writing to Dom Bede Griffiths about comes alive in this passage. And the crown is soon to follow, for after Damaris sees Quentin’s at long-last restful face filled with “beauty of innocence” and realizes that the lamb must take the place of the lion, she undergoes her own

inner struggle where all her old selfishness rages against her new spirit of service that wants to discover the “thing” Anthony had already discovered. In pursuit of that thing, she resolves:

to be savage with herself. . . . A fierce conquest, an innocent obedience—these were to be her signs. . . . The sound of her name still echoed through her spirit when, recovered from her inner struggle, she looked again upon the glade of the garden where the image of Adam named the beasts, and naming ruled them.

After her struggle, after her death, after the surrender of all the rights she once thought hers, and in the midst of the Adamic redemption of creation, Damaris hears her name and is alive again. She joins Anthony in a symbolic rebirth of the world.

This strongly echoes Lewis’s recount in *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. It also appeals to his natural love of nature and the way its own story reflects the larger redemptive narrative. There is hardly anything in *The Place of the Lion* that Lewis would not like, and it is little surprise that he should jump at the opportunity to write to the book’s author. After all, the novel is a romantic expression of death and rebirth.

THE MEETING (PART TWO): ROMANTIC THEOLOGY IN THE ALLEGORY OF LOVE

But the enthusiastic letter exchange goes on, and in his reply to Lewis, Williams completely overlooks Lewis’s joyous exclamations over Damaris’s death of humility and surrender into her new life of joy and selfhood. Instead, Williams plunges into an equally enthusiastic description of his Romantic Theology as he sees it in *The Allegory of Love*. This is Part Two of The Meeting. What is it that Williams saw in *The Allegory of Love* that made him so sure Lewis would agree with his very carnal interpretation of the Incarnation in erotic love? What is the death and rebirth motive in *The Allegory of Love* that made Williams feel like he had found a kindred spirit?

One read of *The Allegory of Love* shows that Williams was justified in his assumption that he and Lewis shared his Romantic Theology. When speaking of Andreas, Lewis writes that the aim of love is fruition inspired by visible beauty, even though true love is not sensuality but rather a “‘kind of chastity’ in virtue of its severe standard fidelity to a single object” (*The Allegory of Love*). He talks about the “reduplication of experience” and “proportion sum” of divine love to secular love: “*cordis affectio* is to the acts of love as charity is to

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good works” (*The Allegory of Love*). Can you hear Williams’s squeals of delight?

But that is just the beginning. When Lewis moves into Chaucer, he pauses to marvel at “how Chaucer can so triumphantly celebrate the flesh” without becoming delirious or pornographic. Chaucer’s secret, says Lewis, lies in his concreteness:

Lust is more abstract than logic: it seeks . . . for some purely sexual, hence purely imaginary, conjunction of an impossible maleness with an impossible femaleness... But with Chaucer we are rooted in the purifying complexities of the real world. Behind the lovers—who are people, ‘rational substances,’ as well as lovers—lies the whole history of their love. . . . (*The Allegory of Love*)

Therefore, Lewis claims that Chaucer brought what was once adulterous romance into modern marital romance; that he began to reconcile the conflict between Carbonek and Camelot. That imagery comes straight from Lewis. Thus we have Williams, a grail-seeker, Arthurian fanboy, and founder of Romantic Theology, reading the basics of Romantic Theology in Lewis’s Arthurian allusions! Dare we guess that he was excited?

And then Lewis launches into Thomas Usk, saying that Usk uses courtly love as a symbol of divine love, but not in a such a way that courtly love in itself is disregarded. Indeed, one could argue that Lewis’s whole thesis in *The Allegory of Love* is that allegory allowed the thing signified (divine love) to at last happily coexist with the signifier (erotic love) in marriage. In Lewis’s own words from this passage: “It is a mischievous error to suppose that in an allegory the author is ‘really’ talking about the thing symbolized, and not at all about the thing that symbolizes; the very essence of art is to talk about both” (*Allegory*). When applied to the realm of romantic love, which is exactly what Lewis does here, this passage could be taken as the banner of Williams’s Romantic Theology, the combination of the Beatrician experience and the Incarnation among Christians.

Speaking of the Beatrician experience and the Incarnation, Lewis throughout *The Allegory of Love* obliquely references the fact that of the few medieval poets who attempted to reconcile heavenly and earthy love the only one who succeeded was Dante, the poet who inspired Williams’s whole idea of the Beatrician experience in the first place. Beside this touchpoint there is the closing chapter of Lewis’s work, the chapter on *The Fairie Queen*. Lewis concentrates on the contrast Spenser makes between the Bower of Bliss and the Garden

of Adonis—one being full of pleasure presented through metal and artifice, the other full of pleasure presented through leaves, flowers, fruit, in the flesh. Lewis on Spenser states that pleasure is not bad but that real pleasure is presented in real life on earth: “Like a true Platonist [Spenser] shows us the Form of the virtue he is studying not only in its transcendental unity (which comes at the allegorical core of the book) but also ‘becoming Many in the world of phenomena’” (*Allegory*).

In the context of love, this sounds like the Incarnational element of Romantic Theology. And, of course, the death and rebirth of the gods is exactly where Lewis started his *Allegory*. Allegory at all and the allegory of love in particular was made possible through the dying of the ancient gods into symbols, so that the inner life of humans could be examined through the new allegory that was being born. As Lewis says:

[If the old marvelous is not so stored up but is allowed to perish], then the imagination is impoverished. Such a sleeping-place was provided for the gods by allegory. Allegory may seem, at first, to have killed them; but it killed only as the sower kills, for gods, like other creatures, must die to live. (*Allegory*)

So there we have it, straight from Lewis’s pen: Medieval love-lore to modern times has been a history of divine love being reconciled to human love through a series of allegories that involved the death of the gods to be reborn into a new, Christian psychomachia. Of course, this death and rebirth extends beyond erotic love and into the realms of Poesie and Myth themselves. Williams, the developer of Romantic Theology, has just met the consummate romantic, Lewis.

THE MISTAKE

Still, it was a mistake. We have only gotten through the first exchange of letters. After this first meeting, Williams and Lewis, good literary men as they are, send each other supporting material. Williams suggests a specific number of poems from his *Poems of Conformity* to Lewis so that Lewis would better understand Romantic Theology. Lewis reads the whole collection and gives a very honest opinion of the ones containing explicit Romantic Theology. Here is a stanza from Williams’s “Orthodoxy,” a poem of which Lewis blatantly states he “definitely disliked”:

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Now to thy heart the hand hath caught
The fingers of mine own,
Thy body's secret doctrines now
Are felt and proved and known:
More wisdom on thy breast I learn
Than else upon my knees:
O hark, thine honor! orthodox!
Destroyer of heresies! (47)

And here is a sample from “Churches,” a poem that also got a “didn’t like” from Lewis:

What End that is, and what the way,
What evils upon wanderers prey;
What Love indeed doth us inspire,
What doth our shrinking bodies fire
Till half a sacrifice and half
A triumph, all a sobbing laugh
Teaches how sacrifice may be
Its own exceeding ecstasy... (69)

Again, Lewis didn’t like this. At all. So much for death and rebirth in Romantic Theology. As a side note, Lewis did mention a few poems from the collection that he enjoyed. Not surprisingly, they each reflect a different aspect of humility in the soul’s quest for true happiness. Lewis was, indeed, a consistent man. In response, Lewis recommends that Williams read Lewis’s version of romantic death and rebirth in *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. But he leaves no room for error. *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, Lewis insists, is not about the death of sexual appetite or even surrender to God-given pleasures but about the death of every desire in light of the satisfaction God offers in Himself, and about how that new life informs and allows the believer to properly enjoy everything else. Lewis brings death and rebirth away from Romantic Theology and back to *The Place of the Lion*.

And there the burst of letters dies out, for our two friends finally meet in person to begin nine years of excellent, ardent friendship.

THE DIFFERENCE

So, here we have Lewis and Williams, natives in a strange country albeit from different provinces. Did these different provinces affect their work, even years into the friendship? Of course. In fact, I would say their different provinces of the Country called Romanticism

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are as different as *The Four Loves* is from *Taliessin through Logres*. One is analytical, direct, prescriptive, and told. The other is poetic, symbolized, suggestive, and shown. And the differences are more than stylistic. *The Four Loves* and *Taliessin through Logres* are both about Love gone right versus Love gone wrong, but Lewis's version has love submitted to, changed by, filled with, and sometimes stopped by God's love: agape. For Lewis, human love transformed and upheld by divine love is possible, and *The Four Loves* helps readers get to a place where that ideal can become reality. Death and rebirth here covers all categories via a redemptive process. *Taliessin*, on the other hand, frightens us with the terrors of perverted love through dark imagery and failure while inspiring us with the glory of Christ's love incarnate through sea, song, and stars. Williams leaves his readers wincing and reeling, stunned with beauty and perhaps not always quite sure what to do with it. Death and rebirth simply are; some lovers get it, others do not.

But I believe the differences in the death and rebirth motive between Lewis and Williams are their strengths, both as authors and as friends. Like Lewis, readers keep going back to Williams for the shock of expression and therefore conviction. Like Williams, readers keep going back to Lewis for clarity of thought and growth. Thus their friendship was maintained. Lewis never outgrew his ability to upbraid Williams for his at times unintelligible poetry and literary swagger. Williams never outgrew his ability to inspire Lewis with the disinterested sort of love that Lewis always strove to attain. They chiseled at each other in all the right ways, so that, in a sense, their friendship, founded on death and rebirth, was an example of that death and rebirth. They each killed little parts of each other and came out the better for it.

THE END

The Meeting happened in 1936. Williams died in 1945. Through the staff work of Omnipotence, Lewis wrote a letter to Dom Bede Griffiths on the day Williams was taken ill. The letter was about the New Creation: "I too have been v. much occupied by the idea of the New Creation. ... In the light of the New Creation all miracles are like *snowdrops*—anticipations of the full spring and high summer wh. is slowly coming over the whole wintry field of space & time" (*Collected Letters*).

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Five days later Charles Williams died. But, like New Creation and life following death, Lewis's faith was made strong. Speaking of Williams's death to his friend Owen Barfield, Lewis writes: "It has been a very *odd* experience. This, the first really severe loss I have suffered has given corroboration to my belief in immortality such as I never dreamed of.... 'Local unique sting' alright . . . and yet . . . a sort of brightness and tingling" (*Collected Letters*).

It was an end. But it was also a beginning.

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