Williams contrasts Lawrence Wentworth with Aston Moffatt in this book. How is Moffatt different from Wentworth, and what is his role in the story?

In *Descent into Hell*, Williams uses Aston Moffat’s virtues to reveal Wentworth’s vices and catalyze his wilful descent into hell. When Moffatt is first introduced, Williams contrasts Moffatt’s virtues as a scholar with Wentworth’s deficiencies. While Moffatt “derived a great deal of intellectual joy from expounding his point of view” in matters of military history, Wentworth hides the fact that what he studies is “not, in fact, worth to him the cost of a single cigar” (38). Moffatt is a “pure scholar” with a “holy and beautiful soul” while Wentworth is willing to “cheat in the evidence” to increase his reputation (38-39). Essentially, while Moffatt is willing to sacrifice his reputation and his life for the sake of the truth, Wentworth is willing to sacrifice the truth for the sake of being perceived as superior to his scholarly opponents (38-39). Thus, Wentworth and Moffatt are foils for each other. Moffatt exemplifies the proper nature of a scholar, and his virtuous qualities highlight Wentworth’s defects, specifically those defects that will lead him to hell.

Wentworth’s fatal flaw, his rejection of reality, is chronicled in the juxtaposition of the two scholars, and it becomes clear that Moffatt’s virtue as a scholar actually becomes a catalyst for Wentworth’s descent. After reading news that Moffatt has been honoured with a knighthood, Williams notes that Wentworth could have taken joy Moffatt’s acceptance of the honor “in some unselfish way for the honour of history” (80). Instead of embracing joy, Wentworth decides to
“hate the fact, and therefore facts” (81). Moffatt’s success offers Wentworth an opportunity for joy, but he would rather feel cheated than rejoice in a gain that is not his own. Wentworth’s rejection of facts is simultaneously a rejection and refusal of love and joy. Furthermore, it is after this rejection that the pseudo-Adela first appears, signalling his rapid descent and rejection of reality. While Aston Moffatt’s existence provides Wentworth the opportunity to love and enjoy truth, Wentworth would rather embrace damnation.

In the last hour of Wentworth’s demise, Aston Moffatt’s virtue becomes like a burning brand to Wentworth, driving him even further into his descent. Williams says, “The world, which Wentworth had continuously and persistently denied in favour of himself, now poured itself over him, and as if in a deluge from Heaven drove him into the depths. […] the fire […] now incarnated itself in Sir Aston Moffatt” (219). Unable to tolerate Moffatt’s gladness, Wentworth takes refuge in the oblivion of hell. Moffatt surfaces at the climax of Wentworth’s ruin to underscore Williams’ point: Wentworth’s hatred of truth leaves him so empty of redeeming virtue that even his vices are hollow, and his hatred lacks efficacy. He is damned because he can neither accept reality nor take joy in it. The character of Aston Moffatt offers the reader a coherent interpretation of Wentworth’s descent. Moffatt’s humble love of facts and unadulterated scholarship gain him recognition and drive Wentworth, in his rejection of reality and joy, to his wilful descent into hell.