C.S. Lewis's Debt to Dante: The Voyage of the "Dawn Trader" and Purgatorio

Mattison Schuknecht
Independent Scholar

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C.S. Lewis's Debt to Dante: *The Voyage of the "Dawn Trader"* and *Purgatorio*

**Abstract**
Comparing imagery of sun and water in *Voyage* and *Purgatorio*; contrasts the horizontal structure of *Voyage* with the vertical orientation of *Purgatorio*. This essay is meant to be read with Martin, Thomas L. “Seven for Seven” in the same issue, as each comments on the other.

**Additional Keywords**
Lewis, C.S. The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”—Sources; Lewis, C.S. The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”—Symbolism; Seven deadly sins in the Chronicles of Narnia; Dante. Purgatory—Influence on C.S. Lewis
C.S. Lewis’s work as a medieval scholar is still a rich subfield for literary critics to explore. Witness Marsha Daigle-Williamson’s recent book, *Reflecting the Eternal: Dante’s Divine Comedy in the Novels of C.S. Lewis*, which examines Lewis’s fiction in light of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Critics have long recognized Lewis’s literary debt to the Italian poet, most often pointing out similarities between Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Lewis’s *The Great Divorce*. For instance, Robert Boenig reads the novel as a dream vision about Hell made in the vein of iconic medieval works (97-98), and Joe R. Christopher argues that Dante’s *Divine Comedy* serves as the novel’s primary structural inspiration (“Dantean” 77). While Christopher and other scholars have scouted for traces of Dante in Lewis’s works outside of *The Great Divorce*, Daigle-Williamson’s book is the first comprehensive assessment of this relationship across all of Lewis’s fictions. Extending this recent study by Daigle-Williamson, and combining it with Thomas Martin’s work on the Seven Deadly Sins, I aim to show how deep Lewis’s debt is to Dante in *The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader.”*

Daigle-Williamson concludes that traces of Dante’s epic poem are most concentrated in two novels of the seven book series. She remarks that *The Silver Chair* contains elements from *Inferno*, while *Voyage* parallels both *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Although Daigle-Williamson’s contribution to Lewis

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1 For a more comprehensive look at the relationship between the Middle Ages and Lewis’s work, see Robert Boenig’s *C.S. Lewis and the Middle Ages*.

2 Joe R. Christopher’s “Mount Purgatory Arises near Narnia” examines images of garden and pool spaces atop mountains as they appear in both *Purgatorio* and The Chronicles of Narnia, while Jay Ruud reads Aslan’s sacrifice in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as a typological narrative commonly used by Dante and other medieval writers. Kathryn Lindskoog has explored Lewis’s literary and theological interest in Dante. See “C.S. Lewis and Dante’s *Paradise*” for her analysis of *Paradiso*’s influence on Lewis’s fictional and nonfictional works. While all three critics cover a number of Lewis’s texts, they do not offer an analysis of Dante’s influence on *Voyage*.

3 Daigle-Williamson makes similar claims in an earlier article she previously published under the name “Marsha Ann Daigle.” She expands on many of her arguments from this
studies is significant, she misses several important allusions and structural elements adopted from Dante's *Purgatorio* in *Voyage*. By focusing solely on these two texts in my analysis, I suggest that a more intricate relationship exists between *Purgatorio* and *Voyage*. Moreover, I take into account Martin's recent proposal that the seven missing Narnian lords whom Prince Caspian and his party search for in *Voyage* are realized on the order of the Seven Deadly Sins. Each of the lords falls victim to a particular vice that prevents him from completing his quest to "explore the unknown Eastern Seas beyond the Lone Islands" (Lewis 20-21). Readers of *Purgatorio* will recall that Dante structures this middle third of his epic poem around the Seven Deadly Sins: the seven terraces of Mount Purgatory that Dante climbs on his ascent towards Heaven represent the capital vices.\(^4\)

In contrast to Martin, Daigle-Williamson finds that aside from three minor exceptions in *Voyage*, "Lewis does not duplicate Dante's purgatorial scheme of the seven cardinal sins in this children's book" (164), an assessment challenged in the present essay. I do not intend to repeat Martin's argument in full nor supply additional examples of the Seven Deadly Sins in *Voyage*; instead, I expand upon the thesis. Lewis borrows more from Dante's *Divine Comedy* than just the capital vices: he also reinvents the narrative model of *Purgatorio* in *Voyage* while simultaneously recycling images, scenes, and themes directly from Dante's original poem. I argue that Lewis consciously derives this pattern of the Seven Deadly Sins from *Purgatorio*. While Dante's influence could be explored throughout The Chronicles of Narnia, it remains the strongest in *Voyage*.

That Lewis would structure a narrative based around the Seven Deadly Sins is the strongest point of comparison between *Purgatorio* and *Voyage*. Nevertheless, I must qualify that this does not necessitate a clear one-to-one correspondence between all elements of the two stories. Lewis's *Voyage* is therefore not a direct allegorical retelling of the *Purgatorio*. For example, Lewis does not maintain the same order of the Seven Deadly Sins that Dante

\(^4\) A number of other works of medieval and Renaissance literature also make use of the Seven Deadly Sins. When Red Cross Knight and a disguised Duessa arrive at Lucifera's castle early in the first book of *The Faerie Queene*, they encounter a procession of the Seven Deadly Sins who ride on various beasts that reflect their character. In Spenser's epic, the personified Seven Deadly Sins serve Lucifera as her personal advisors. In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Lucifer creates a pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins as personified vices he parades before a delighted Faustus. Although the Seven Deadly Sins are present in other works of literature outside of *Purgatorio*, Dante remains Lewis's primary source in *Voyage*.
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uses in Purgatorio: whereas Dante begins with pride and ends with lust, Lewis begins with lust and ends with gluttony, sloth, and wrath, with the remaining sins in a jumble of their original order. Martin warns in his essay that “it is important to realize that the most direct one-to-one correspondence or diagrammatic precision in such matters of literary analysis is likely never desirable for the critic reading the work—nor for the author fashioning it in the first place” (44). He suggests that Lewis’s narrative invention manages to “refresh the list of sins, draw from an earlier vocabulary of human behavior, fine tune our understanding of moral truths, and put a new face on them for his audience” (50). If so, then it seems more likely that Lewis adapts themes, images, and general patterns from Purgatorio as opposed to specific characters or precise narrative details such as the order of the Seven Deadly Sins. Therefore we should not read Voyage expecting to find an allegorical equivalent of Virgil, Dante, Beatrice, or Statius in one of the five heroes of Caspian’s party. As I will discuss in a later section of this essay, literary connections between some of Lewis’s and Dante’s characters do exist; however, as Daigle-Williamson suggests, these characters work on a typological as opposed to an allegorical scale (160). It would therefore be a more fruitful to look at Lewis’s novel in general and see if any sites of textual connection can illuminate our understanding of the two works.

Perhaps the simplest way to consider the two stories is to read both as narratives about man’s ascent to God. Those familiar with the personal details of Dante’s life will recall that the poet wrote the Divine Comedy after his politically motivated exile from Florence. Separated from family, friends, and associates in his home city, Dante turned towards fostering a relationship with Providence. His Divine Comedy highlights this internal spiritual growth in the face of external adversity. Dante’s journey in the three-part epic begins in Hell, proceeds to Purgatory, and finally ends in Paradise where he meets God face to face. The same pattern is present in Voyage through the character of Reepicheep.

When Reepicheep was a newborn mouse, a dryad stood over his cradle and spoke the prophecy:

Where sky and water meet,
Where the waves grow sweet,
Doubt not, Reepicheep,
To find all you seek,
There is the utter East. (Lewis 22)

Reepicheep adds that he “[does] not know what it means. But the spell of it has been on [him] all [his] life” (22). While both Reepicheep and Dante fulfill their desires to reach the divine at the conclusion of their respective stories, the fact
that both *Purgatorio* and *Voyage* are narratives about finding God does not necessarily mean that Lewis drew from Dante’s poem when writing his fantasy novel. A great number of stories throughout the Western Canon detail the growth of an individual’s relationship with God, but what is remarkable about *Purgatorio’s* and *Voyage’s* respective portrayals of this divine-mortal connection is that both rely on the same image to figure man’s growing relationship with his Creator: movement toward the light of the sun.

The sun plays a primary role in both *Purgatorio* and *Voyage* as it represents both the physical and spiritual paths Reepicheep and Dante undertake on their quests. Both Reepicheep’s and Dante’s journeys in the physical world end with their arrival near the sun’s exceeding brightness but pass through it as a boundary to their relative worlds. In *Purgatorio*, Dante’s journey is a vertical one where he must climb the terraces of Mount Purgatory before he can reach the top to ascend with Beatrice to Heaven. As Dante scales the mountain, he grows physically closer to the sun above his head and spiritually closer to God. Of course, the sun is not the ultimate goal for either Dante or Reepicheep; both undertake new spiritual journeys after their adventures in the physical world conclude. Dante ascends to Heaven with Beatrice only to discover that the sun is actually the fourth Heaven of Paradise with six more Heavens located beyond it. In order to reach God, Dante must travel beyond the sun to reach the Empyrean Heaven. Lewis mirrors the cosmology of Dante in his description of Aslan’s Country, the story’s place of the blessed: “What they saw—eastward, beyond the sun—was a range of mountains. It was so high that either they never saw the top of it or they forgot it. None of them remembers seeing any sky in that direction” (265). Lewis curiously writes that the mountains of Aslan’s Country are located beyond the sun as opposed to sun being behind the mountains. This suggests that Reepicheep also must journey beyond the sun to find Aslan in his country. Although the sun may not be the true end of either Reepicheep’s or Dante’s journeys, it marks a passing beyond this world and provides each with a general sense of the pathway to Heaven.

The image of the sun also allows Lewis to modify the vertical scale of *Purgatorio* to a horizontal one in *Voyage.* Dante constantly looks upward, and the audience with him as he ends each part of the *Divine Comedy* with the word *stars.*

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5 Daigle-Williamson also recognizes this switch from the vertical to the horizontal as “each of the next six islands is located farther and farther east, thus recalling on a horizontal level the vertical design of Dante’s mountain ledges located higher and higher up” (163). Yet she does not ask why Lewis consciously adjusts Dante’s original model as opposed to maintaining the original directional orientation. I readdress Lewis’s switching from the vertical to the horizontal in order to ask and answer this question.
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From those most holy waters
I came away remade, as are new plants
renewed with new-sprung leaves,
pure and prepared to rise up to the stars. (33.142-45)

Dante in the Divine Comedy continuously looks upward for both the sun and God. Reepicheep also looks toward the sun and Aslan in Voyage. While Dante looks upwards to the meridian sun, the diminutive knight of Aslan looks out towards the ascending sun in the east. In place of the vertical movement of Dante climbing up the mountain in Purgatorio, Lewis replaces this upward motion with Reepicheep and company’s journey across the horizon towards the islands east of Narnia:

While I can, I sail east in the Dawn Treader. When she fails me, I paddle east in my coracle. When she sinks, I shall swim east with my four paws. And when I can swim no longer, if I have not reached Aslan’s country, or shot over the edge of the world in some vast cataract, I shall sink with my nose to the sunrise and Peepiceek will be head of the talking mice in Narnia. (231)

Reepicheep vows he will sail east towards the sun and continue in his journey until he reaches the end of the world and finds Aslan’s Country waiting for him. In this sense, Reepicheep’s journey is the same as Dante’s: both would travel towards the sun to gain access to Heaven and the eternal presence of God. The primary difference between the two is that Dante’s journey is a vertical ascent while Reepicheep’s quest involves a trek across the horizon.

In both Purgatorio and Voyage, the sun marks the passage of time and how close the heroes of both stories are to moving beyond time and completing their quests. In Purgatorio, the rising and setting of the sun determines how long Dante has spent on Mount Purgatory, but the presence of the sun above Dante also reminds the Pilgrim of his own mortality. Only the living can cast shadows:

As soon as those in front could see the light
upon the ground was broken to my right, so that
my shadow stretched up to the cliff,

they stopped, drew back a little,
and all the rest that came behind,
not knowing why, did just the same. (3.88-93)

Dante the sundial stands out from the penitent Christians on Mount Purgatory because he has a shadow, and consequently the shades know that he has not
yet died. Not only does the setting and rising of the sun let Dante know that his journey towards Heaven is progressing, but his lengthening shadow reminds him his life is passing as well.

Lewis revises Dante’s technique of using the sun to portray the passage of time to create an alternative model in *Voyage*. It is not from the setting of the sun that Caspian’s party knows they are nearing the end of their quest, but the increasing size of the sun as they sail eastward:

And now the winds which had so long been from the northwest began to blow from the west itself and every morning when the sun rose out of the sea the curved prow of the *Dawn Treader* stood up right across the middle of the sun. Some thought that the sun looked larger than it looked from Narnia, but others disagreed. (139)

Although the crew at first disagrees if the sun is increasing in size as they move east, the party soon discovers that the sun is growing: “Another thing was the light. There was too much of it. The sun when it came up each morning looked twice, if not three times, its usual size” (237). Unlike with Dante whose life grows shorter with the passing of each day, as the *Dawn Treader* sails east, the sunlight fills the people onboard with the spirit and vibrancy of increased life: “Every day and every hour the light became more brilliant and still they could bear it. […] And one or two of the sailors who had been oldish men when the voyage began now grew younger every day” (255). The imagery of east meeting west, end meeting beginning, suggests a circle of eternity. Whereas the sun in *Purgatorio* reminds Dante of his mortality and the certain end of his life on the Earth, the sun in *Voyage* reminds those aboard the *Dawn Treader* of a promise beyond. As the *Dawn Treader* moves closer to Aslan’s Country in the east, the ship’s crew gets an early taste of eternal life.

Both Dante and Lewis also use the image of the sun as a guiding light in their heroes’ respective journeys. In *Purgatorio*, Dante and Virgil may only ascend the mountain during the day; at night they must rest in order to wait for the sun to rise again the next day: “But see, already day is waning / And we may not ascend by night. / Now is the time to choose a resting place” (7.43-45). Dante needs the light of God in order to scale the mountain of Purgatory and reach heavenly Paradise. Although the *Dawn Treader* always moves due east, Lewis makes it clear that the party still needs light lest they lose their way.

We can best see this need for light in *Voyage* during the scene involving the Dark Island. Caspian’s party spies a mass of darkness surrounding an island at sea. Most of those on the ship wish to avoid the darkness, but Reepicheep encourages them to be brave and seek out adventure. The party enters the darkness and comes across one of the lost Narnian lords, Rhoop. Rhoop warns the party to leave the “island where
dreams come true” as soon as they can. At first the party is shocked that the lord would suggest they should leave such a place where their wildest dreams could become reality, but Rhoop reveals that dreams are not the only things that find material substance on the island: nightmares come alive, too. At this revelation, the party hastens a retreat, as Caspian orders the crew to take up the oars and row out.

The party then tries to sail out of the island’s reach, but the darkness disorients them. In their greatest time of need, Lucy calls on Aslan for help, who arrives in the form of a bright beacon the ship follows out of the nightmarish horrors: “There was a tiny speck of light ahead, and while they watched a broad beam of light fell from it upon the ship. It did not alter the surrounding darkness, but the whole ship was lit up as if by a searchlight” (200). The light transforms into several shapes before resolving in an albatross. The voice calls out to Lucy saying, “‘Courage, dear heart,’ and the voice, she felt sure, was Aslan’s, and with the voice a delicious smell breathed in her face” (201). Aslan, in the form of the albatross, leads the Dawn Treader out of the darkness and into the safety of the sun. In both Purgatorio and Voyage, the sun serves as an extension of God’s guiding presence. The powerful light of the sun guides both Dante and Caspian’s party along their respective quests.

As we have seen, Lewis uses the image to reconfigure Purgatorio’s primarily vertical story to a horizontal scale. He simultaneously takes the circular terraces of Mount Purgatory and transforms them into the circular islands east off of Narnia’s coast. Whereas Dante uses the separate terraces of Mount Purgatory to represent a specific cardinal sin, Lewis moves the individual sins to the seven Narnian lords who are situated on different islands. In other words, Dante journeys upwards while Caspian and his crew travel across the horizon. So the question we must then ask is why does Lewis transfer the original story from the vertical to the horizontal? What literary purpose might his alteration of the geography of Purgatorio in Voyage serve?

On one level, this horizontal transfer suggests that Purgatory is not something that one experiences solely in death: Purgatory also exists in life. The Seven Deadly Sins that Caspian’s party encounters are very real things. Eustace’s dragon form, the gold-creating waters of Deathwater Island, and terrible nightmares of the Dark Island are examples of the Seven Deadly Sins in action, not in death but in life. This suggests to Lewis’s readers that they themselves may encounter the Seven Deadly Sins in their own lives—the vices are not something one encounters only in the purifying environment of Purgatory or in the literature of fantasy. The realism of the Seven Deadly Sins is also enhanced through the narrative’s horizontal structure. The movement of Caspian’s party across the islands east of Narnia invokes the linear shape of mortal life as it is experienced in this world from beginning to end. Spiritual
lives are closer to the vertical movement of Dante's *Divine Comedy* where mankind begins low and must climb up towards God to reach eternal life. If the *Purgatorio* details how one encounters the Seven Deadly Sins in death, then *Voyage* describes how one deals with the Seven Deadly Sins in life.

Transferring the story from the vertical climb up the terraces of Mount Purgatory to the naval travel between the islands east of Narnia also allows Lewis to develop the image of the sea that Dante utilizes in the early half of the *Purgatorio*. Dante’s *Purgatorio* opens with a nautical metaphor: “To run its course through smoother water / the small bark of my wit now hoists its sail, / leaving that cruel sea behind” (1.1-3). In the opening lines of the *Purgatorio*, Dante describes his ascent from Hell and his arrival at Mount Purgatory, which is situated on an island surrounded by the ocean of the southern hemisphere. Dante has not only crossed several rivers in Hell, but he now finds himself surrounded by a new source of water. Just moments after Dante and Virgil arrive at the mountain, an angel appears on a boat carrying the souls of the dead destined for Purgatory and Paradise. In *Voyage*, Lewis expands upon this nautical opening and sets his entire story on the high seas. In the opening chapters of *Voyage*, Edmund, Lucy, and Eustace enter Narnia through a painting of the *Dawn Treader* at Eustace’s home. The magic painting comes alive, pulling the three children into the Narnian sea: “There was a second of struggling and shouting, and just as they thought they had got their balance a great blue roller surged up round them, swept them off their feet, and drew them down into the sea” (*Voyage* 10). Just as Dante and Virgil are joined in company by the angelic ferryman and his cargo of souls, Prince Caspian soon arrives on his water vessel the *Dawn Treader* to rescue the sea-stranded Edmund, Lucy, and Eustace. Whereas Dante discards most of the nautical imagery when he and Virgil begin to climb the mountain of Purgatory, Lewis fashions his narrative around it.

In addition to images of the sun and the sea, both *Purgatorio* and *Voyage* present images of penitent sinners. In Dante’s epic, these penitent sinners are the saved Christians who inhabit the seven terraces of Purgatory. The souls of the dead in each of Mount Purgatory’s terraces repent their sins by renouncing a specific cardinal sin in the particular terrace that represents this sin. For example, in the terrace of pride, sinners place giant rocks on their backs. Sinners in the terrace of gluttony give up feasting and fast instead. The most obvious examples of the repentant sinners in *Voyage* are the lords of Narnia who happen to survive falling under the influence of one of the Seven

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6 Daigle-Williamson makes a similar observation about Lewis’s reuse of the naval theme from the opening cantos of Dante’s *Purgatorio*. 

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Deadly Sins. The surviving lords subsequently renounce the vices that prevented them from fulfilling their quest to explore the east.

There are also two other examples of repentant sinners in *Voyage*. One such example is the Magician who lives on the island of the Duffers. When Caspian’s party meets Ramandu on his island, he reveals that both he and the Magician, whose real name is Coriakin, were once stars who fell from the sky. Ramandu also reveals that Coriakin had wronged Aslan and that watching over the Duffers is part of his redemption: “It was not quite as a rest that he was set to govern the Duffers. You might call it a punishment. He might have shone for thousands of years more in the southern winter sky if all had gone well” (226). Unlike Ramandu who is only a star at rest and might not be responsible for his own fall, Coriakin is clearly guilty of some act against the will of Aslan. The fact that Coriakin is a fallen star immediately evokes images of the fallen angels who allied themselves with Lucifer against God during the War in Heaven, but the specifics of Coriakin’s offence against God remain unclear. Whatever that offence may be, he is clearly not cut off from divine grace but in some stage of remediation—or redemption. Coriakin finds himself in a state similar to the sinners in Purgatory because he is working to repair his relationship with Aslan and one day again ascend to the sky as a star.

Daigle-Williamson claims that after Caspian’s party leaves Ramandu’s island, “the second phase of the Narnian sea voyage shifts to a duplication of many features of the journey in the *Paradiso*” (167). I find no such clean break in the inspirational source at this point in the novel. Lewis does begin to employ imagery from *Paradiso* at this point in the narrative, but he does not cease to include imagery from *Purgatorio*. More importantly, he keeps the narrative structure of this second part of Dante’s epic: both *Purgatorio* and *Voyage* end with the apotheosis of their heroes: Dante ascends to Heaven with Beatrice in *Purgatorio* while Reepicheep passes over to Aslan’s Country in *Voyage*. Lewis includes images from *Purgatorio* to give his readers a taste of Heaven; unlike Dante, Lewis’s narrative does not allow its readers to experience directly the beauties of Aslan’s Country.

An image from *Purgatorio* that appears near the end of *Voyage* is the enclosed garden on top of a mountain. Readers will recall that the Garden of Eden in *Purgatorio* is located on the top of Mount Purgatory. Christopher has written on the enclosed garden and pool spaces atop mountains in *The Magician’s Nephew* and *The Last Battle,* but a comparable space also exists in *Voyage*. Yet Lewis alters this space in order to fit it into his own narrative: just as he transforms the vertical scale of the *Purgatorio* into a horizontal one for
**Voyage,** Lewis similarly inverts the garden space when he places it in an underwater valley as opposed to on a mountaintop. As Caspian’s crew enters the Last Sea, they encounter a civilization of merfolk who live under the waters of the ocean. Just as Dante was “[e]ager to explore the sacred forest’s boundaries” on the top of Mount Purgatory (28.1), Lucy spots a “submarine Purgatory” in an underwater valley: “She could even see the shafts of sunlight falling through the deep water onto the wooded valley—and, in the extreme distance, everything melting away into a dim greenness” (240). Lucy then spies a castle atop an underwater mountain, causing her to conclude that the “sea-people feel about their valleys as we do about mountains, and feel about their mountains as we feel about valleys” (241-42). Here Lewis places a forest-like garden in a low valley as opposed to on top of a high mountaintop as Dante does in *Purgatorio.* The Edenic qualities of this underwater garden are underscored by the apparent isolation of the merfolk from any other civilization: “Lucy felt sure they had never seen a ship or a human before—and how should they, in seas beyond the World’s End where no ship ever came?” (244). Here the garden space on a mountain becomes a garden space in a valley, continuing Lewis’s modified use of Dante’s *Purgatorio.*

In addition to these various images from *Purgatorio,* Lewis also mirrors the narrative structure of the second part of Dante’s poem in the final chapters of *Voyage.* As mentioned earlier, Dante and Reepicheep serve the same narrative roles, which Daigle-Williamson misses in her study. Both Reepicheep and Dante must undergo a submersion in water and drink of its sweet draughts before they can pass into Heaven. In *Purgatorio,* Dante must first be bathed in the river Lethe by Matelda in order to forget his past sins: “The lovely lady spread her arms, / then clasped my head, and plunged me under, / where I was forced to swallow water” (31.100-02).

Once Matelda washes Dante in the waters of the Lethe, he finds himself one step closer to Paradise. Reepicheep must also undergo a submersion in water. When the party aboard the *Dawn Treader* travels east after leaving Ramandu’s island, Reepicheep discovers the sweet waters of the Last Sea when he jumps overboard to challenge a merman who taunts him:

[A]t that moment two sounds were heard. One was a plop. The other was a voice from the fighting-top shouting, “Man overboard!” Then everyone was busy. Some of the sailors hurried aloft to take in the sail; others hurried below to get to the oars; and Rhince, who was on duty on the poop, began to put the helm hard over so as to come round and back to the man who had gone overboard. But by now everyone knew that it wasn’t strictly a man. It was Reepicheep. (245-46)
Reepicheep's submersion into the Last Sea, like Dante's, is evocative of the sacrament of Baptism as the heroes will start new lives once they leave the confines of their earthly bodies and ascend into Heaven to be with God.  

During the celebrations of these baptisms, both authors present their readers with images of lilies. In *Purgatorio*, Dante encounters a procession of symbols while in the Garden of Eden. In the middle of the procession, he meets twenty-four elders who are each crowned with lilies: “Beneath so fair a sky as I describe / twenty-four elders, two by two, / came crowned with lilies” (29.82-84). The image of lilies reappears in Lewis’s work when Caspian and crew arrive at the end of the Last Sea and observe a mysterious whiteness in the water. The crew investigates the phenomenon and discovers that the whiteness is actually a great number of lilies covering the surface of the ocean: “‘Lilies, your Majesty!’ shouted Rynelf, standing up in the bows. ‘What did you say?’ asked Caspian. ‘Blooming lilies, your Majesty,’ said Rynelf. ‘Same as in a pool in a garden at home’” (257). In his guide to *The Chronicles*, Peter Schakel reminds us that the lily is typically seen as a “traditional symbol of life” in most works of literature (67). Dante scholars generally identify the lilies atop of the heads of the twenty-four elders to be symbolic of their purity. In either case, the lilies in both Dante’s and Lewis’ works also evoke the image of death. The life that Schakel mentions is not earthly life, but rather eternal life. Both Lewis and Dante use the image of lilies in scenes preceding Dante’s and Reepicheep’s departures from the mortal realm. Dante and Lewis mention lilies to move their readers into their symbolism and prepare them for the otherworldly transition that is about to occur in the subsequent pages. In both their cases, these departures from the mortal world to the eternal are joyous, not tragic.

After both Dante and Reepicheep undergo their second and last water rites, they are permitted to taste of its sweetness. Dante moves to the second river on the top of Mount Purgatory, Eunoe, and drinks its sweet waters before ascending to Heaven: “If, reader, I had more ample space to write, / I should
sing at least in part the sweetness / of the drink that never would have sated me” (33.136-38). Dante, now into the final canto of the Purgatorio, does not have enough space to describe the sweet waters of Eunoe. However, Lewis allows Reepicheep to describe to readers of Voyage the experience of drinking this draught from the Last Sea: “Drinkable light. We must be very near the end of the world now” (248). After Reepicheep drinks the sweet water, he realizes that the Dawn Treader is approaching the End of the World, which means Aslan’s Country must be on the other side. Reepicheep, in what would become his final moments in Narnia with his friends, knows his next course of action. He tells Caspian and the rest of the party that he must proceed to Aslan’s Country. Although the children are sad to part from him, they sense his joy as he paddles his coracle over the wave and disappears into Aslan’s Country: “The coracle went more and more quickly, and beautifully it rushed up the wave’s side. For one split second they saw its shape and Reepicheep’s on the very top. Then it vanished, and since that moment no one can truly claim to have seen Reepicheep the Mouse” (266). Reepicheep, like the Norse heroes of old, completes his material journey and ascends to a new life on a higher plane of existence.9

Purgatorio and Voyage tell similar narratives set along the structural backdrop of the Seven Deadly Sins. Yet Lewis’s fantasy novel borrows much more from Dante than just than the structure of the cardinal sins. Lewis takes the image of the sun as God, Dante’s opening naval imagery, images of gardens on mountaintops, and the final apotheosis of the hero to an otherworldly paradise from Purgatorio to craft his own unique story that still evokes the original analogue. Yet Lewis remains cautious in all of his borrowings: what Lewis takes from Dante he often mirrors or alters. Lewis, ever the literary craftsman, has either a thematic or symbolic use for each of his borrowings from Dante. The job of the literary reader is not just to recognize allusions or references to other works, but to comment on their greater significance. From these parallels between Reepicheep in Voyage and Dante in Purgatorio, we can reasonably agree with the narrator’s final conclusion that Reepicheep “came safe to Aslan’s country and is alive there to this day” (266). Both Purgatorio and Voyage coincide in their final message: that readers of these

9 In addition to baptism, Reepicheep’s voyage on his coracle across the edge of the Last Sea into Aslan’s Country evokes images of Noah’s Ark as well as the Norse hero’s last water crossing into the next world. While the Norse hero’s final water crossing is an obvious image of death, the image of the Ark suggests the start of a new life, forever eternalized with the image of the rainbow. Lewis combines images of death and life in this scene to suggest a Christian paradox: one must die in order to achieve the eternal life offered in Paradise.
two tales might follow and one day join these celebrated travelers on their last voyage home.

Works Cited

About the Author
MATTISON SCHUKNECHT studies English Renaissance literature, especially works by Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, as well as literature of the fantastic. He is particularly interested in the surprising ways in which medieval and Renaissance works intersect with modern fantasy and science fiction.
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